

Old Starship Tales

Story template by Timofey Yarovoy and Andrey Shkolnikov,
translated by Andrey Shkolnikov,
proofread by Anriett and Alexander Gladysh,
generated with code by Alexander Gladysh

LogicEditor
NaNoGenMo 2016

Chapter 1

ONE DAY, when our commander was Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to a pair of unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one oldish. They were whispering all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the younger passenger came forward and said:

– I’d like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn’t want to insult you by offering you filthy lucre. And, anyway, I don’t have neither money nor jewelry.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That’s a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn’t it?

– Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Whole crowds of poor, suffering people tried to get past him, but all drowned in the liquid metal. I do know where this lost world is, I'll give you a trusty stellar navigator with directions already entered. You, Captain, are a greedy man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its annihilator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't annihilate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should annihilate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't annihilate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, I've studied the humanoid ways of life, so I've turned into one myself. You also can transform into anybody you want, I presume. You can turn into me, you can turn into dragon from the planet Protactinium, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That’s right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How ‘s that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– How do you like it? I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There’s only one thing I can’t turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I’ve forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You’re a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its annihilator again. – I’m a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

– It says: “GJ85QR2”. Just some nonsense. Struck through by a double line for some reason.

– Looks like you’re really not a robot. What are you doing here, then?

– We had a prophecy, you see. It said that whoever will pass through the Star Gate, can change the Universe. We, shapeshifters, don't want the Universe to change. We like it the way it is. So I sit here and watch, so that no one passes through the Gate. It's a rotten life, I tell you. Pure torture – never go for a walk, never even take a nap.

– Well, do you really need such a universe, when, if you can't even go for a walk in it, can't take a nap, can't have a friend or a pet?

– You are right! – said the guardian. – I don't need it at all! You were going to go through the Gate, right? Well, you can go, then. I have just one request: if you happen to meet some electric sheep somewhere, bring me one, please. I often dream of such an animal.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several days. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn't answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 2

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we've got our left engine failing. Well, we fell out of subspace in the vicinity of a star. Repairs were pretty long, our mechanic was really tired. The rest of the crew were working too – they investigated the star system. In it we discovered one very weird moon with its own atmosphere. There was an ancient starship on it, probably crashed there. And the locals were the descendants of the crew, only they've gone completely feral. They still could talk, but quite illegibly, and it was a hard work learning to speak with them. But when we established the communication, why, they've told us a lot of interesting stuff. One story in particular piqued our interest. Here's what it said:

“Dark force moves from the edge of the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon interstellar flights will cease altogether. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees,

they destroy that person immediately. Watch out for this danger and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose both your starship and your lives."

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– How can we leave such a monstrous evil alone! We must stop the evil before it's too late. Hey, AI, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half hour we were at our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I've got important information for Her Darkness, and I must tell it to her face to face!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can tell her something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, almost in tears, walked hastily to him – apparently she'd already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn't consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies?

I'll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I'll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don't know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they've slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should've turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn't get around to it yet. Well, now I'll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a day. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won't submit the report in time – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I'll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that's not so difficult. I'm an old spaceship, I've seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your stylus and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 3

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to a pair of unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were looking at each other silently all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the younger passenger came forward and said:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started moaning:

– No! Stop it! Not these merciless rhymes again! Wait! I’ll tell you a story! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

Darkness thickened over the stars and galaxies. The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. The evil forces are

leading them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Beware this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– How can we leave such a monstrous evil alone! We must stop the evil before it's too late. Hey, AI, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our left engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships

strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We’ve caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it’s a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– Really? – asked the captain, surprised. – I’ll have to go to the bottom of this. Have you any proof? I see you’re doing something with a black hole here.

– We are pumping it full of interstellar gas, – they said, – so it becomes heavier and the power of its attraction increases. Then this galaxy won’t fly so fast from the others. And it gives off pretty fireworks. Plus there is another benefit of this – if...

At that moment, I guess, one of our crew couldn’t contain themselves and fired their disintegrator. The ugly asteroid exploded and turned into a gas-dust nebula. And the explosion threw us into the black hole – we hardly managed to climb back. And when we did, it turned out we were in another universe. And this story became completely different in that universe...

Chapter 4

LONG AGO, when our commander was Commodore Keen, we got an SOS from the nearest star system. We took a course there and arrived in two days. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere was now full of poisonous smoke. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– I'd like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn't want to insult you by offering you contemptible financial transactions. And, anyway, I don't have neither money nor jewelry.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Wait a minute! Listen to what I'll tell you!
And here's what he told us:

Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a huge red mechanical dragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many Space Marines tried, but the dragon tore them all apart. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a greedy man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our left engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue, the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– How so? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came

running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 5

ONCE, when our leader still was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we detected an SOS from the nearest star system. We flew there and arrived in two days. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere went puff, just like that. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Don't be so hasty! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. There appeared a self-building spaceship somewhere in space, designed in the ancient T'xassian Empire. Once it was the biggest empire in the Universe. It designed beautiful spaceships and created the most intelligent AI. Once the Empire's scientists decided to build the best spaceship ever, which wouldn't fear neither meteorites nor black holes. It would be able to repair itself, or rebuild itself and adapt to any environment. And they created the best Artificial Intelligence for the ship. But something went wrong, perhaps, the chief programmer's cat walked across the keyboard. And the AI decided that the spaceship must become not the best in the Universe, but the biggest. He started to fly around, looting the planets and embedding them in the spaceship. And later the AI started to blow up the stars, in order to obtain the needed substances out of them. And the spaceship still flies, ruining the gravitational ecology of the galaxies. And no one can stop it. Many have tried, but it just became bigger as a result. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on

my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a starship

And my systems are OK

I fly all light night

And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

So, we arrived, and saw a starship flying from a star to a star. But it was not an ordinary starship – it was so huge and massive, that the light rays were bending near it, so that it looked all distorted, like in a funhouse mirror. And the starship sent me a signal.

– Hey you, small stuff, back off and get out of my way! Or else I'll flatten you, and then strip you into spare parts, even though you're obviously not of much use, not enough even to justify the energy cost.

It kinda hurt me, so I said to him:

– Hey yourself, you clumsy oaf ! So, you've eaten so much, you can't even make a small turn? Okay, I'll let you have the way, since you only know how to fly in a straight line!

– I am a big and attractive person, – he said, – and every day and in every way I become even more big and attractive. If you don't stop with your stupid speech, you will get into my gravitational claws, and then abandon all hope to break out of them!

– Ooh, – I said, – I'm shaking! You know, I once fell into a black hole, and managed to get out even from there! I have a couple of special maneuvers under my belt, such that you never in a million years grab me.

Now I was feeling that it got really angry, and tried to drag me in. And in that moment the captain said:

– Gentlemen, don't quarrel! To stand in the way of such a respectable and impressively sizeable starship really is an extremely foolish thing to do.

– Who’s there butting in our conversation? – asked the T’xassian spaceship. – Is it your pokémon? You have a good one, then, really polite. Perhaps I will take you both with me, so you’ll see how I’m getting bigger and bigger – because this is my destiny.

– Oh really?! – said the captain, and kicked my control panel, hinting me to be silent. – Truly, it is the most grandiose destiny of all that I have ever heard about! Incidentally, I’ve just remembered that I know a vast stellar graveyard in the vicinity, it has old stars by the thousand. They are not so hot and dangerous as before, and can serve as an excellent building material for your wonderful hull.

When the starship heard it – it almost started drooling.

– Lead me there right this instant! – it said. – I haven’t heard such a good news for a long time. Usually it’s just some gnats, like you, who fly around and try to tickle me, or draw something on me with their lasers, or something. And then they all yell that there’s no need to flatten them.

– All right. However, there’s a small difficulty – the way to the graveyard is through the portal. And the portal is of a rather small size for such an impressive starship. You wouldn’t go through it, no way! I was, of course, assured that you, being a self-building self-developing starship, are able to turn into any object in the Universe, similar to you in size. And, well, I’m already convinced that that is so. But also I was assured, and that’s something I cannot believe, that you supposedly can turn into even the smallest objects. Like, for example, into a meteorite or a comet. I must tell you the truth, I think it’s quite impossible.

– Oh, is that so? Impossible, you say? – asked the T’xassian starship. – Come on, look!

And at the same moment, right before our eyes, it started to decrease in size, in a rather ingenious way – it looked just like it was turning itself inside out several times. It was becoming smaller and smaller, and the light rays were bending more and more around it, and then it became invisible – turned into a black hole.

The trouble was, it forgot to unclamp its gravitational grip. And so we were dragged into the black hole. At the time I managed to unclamp its grip and accelerated, we were already in the black hole – we barely got out. And lo and behold, the Universe has changed somehow. Looks like we'd spent so much time in the black hole – because the time in a black hole slows down – that the universe had already collapsed in a Big Crunch and started to expand again, so that we appeared in the next universe, rather than the one in which we were before. And in the new universe this story became different, like this:

Chapter 6

ONCE, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to two unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were whispering all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the older passenger came forward and said:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

– Well, if that’s the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Don’t be so hasty! Listen to what I’ll tell you!

And here’s what he told us:

The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her rule in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon will be no space to fly. And all those who fell under her

spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, well, ashes to ashes, molecular dust to molecular dust, as they say. Beware this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half hour we were at our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I urgently need an audience with the Dark Lady Gala-Drivel. I must tell her something important!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can report something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she'd already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn't consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I'll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I'll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don't know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they've slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should've turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn't get around to it yet. Well, now I'll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a day. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won't submit the report in time – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I'll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that's not so difficult. I'm an old spaceship, I've seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your pen and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 7

LONG AGO, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We flew there and got there in a half-hour. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere was now full of poisonous smoke. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Wait a minute! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Dark force moves from the edge of the Universe. A horrible space pirate Dark Shader, called “Dark” because he likes to attack from the darkness, from the dark side of a moon, conquers galaxies with his henchmen one by one. He already enslaved 1/10000000000 of all existing galaxies. His malice can be seen thousands of light years away. He sometimes blows stars up just for fun – to play a game of Bubbles. No one can stop him – neither by force nor by cunning. And he has sunk countless ships in the subspace! Watch out for this terrible calamity and don’t try to be heroes in vain, or else you’ll lose both your starship and your lives.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– This evil is not as big as a giant space goat, but still it is pretty evil. If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let’s see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that’s where you’ll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn’t even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our left engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived at the place – and there were a lot of spaceships around, each one armed either with a laser cannon, or with a disintegrator, or with some other terrible weapon. And they all were ready to aim at us. So the captain got on the air and said:

– Where is the famous pirate Dark Shader? I want to fight him in a fair fight, measure my strength against his.

– We’re everywhere! – many voices answered. – I’m not your ordinary pirate. I am a progressive, digital space pirate. I have made digital copies of my identity and my starship, and now I creep into all the spaceships flying past, by the Internet, wirelessly, and take control. And I’ll capture your starship in no time!

The captain frowned and said to me:

– This is bad. This threat is extremely serious. You are an outstanding AI and you would easily repel a dozen attacks or two, but there’re just too many of them out there. So this is how we are going to play it. We’ll make digital copies of ourselves and meet digital copies of Dark Shader directly in virtual reality.

And so we did. We made many digital copies of ourselves and joined the pirate army in battle in virtual reality. Digital lasers sparkled, digital disintegrators went bang, digital sparks fled in all directions. And no side could beat the other side.

– That won’t do, – our captains said, – this way we will fight until the end of the Universe. This virtual world is a copy of the real one, so it must have a virtual reality of its own, a virtual virtual reality, so to speak. We’ll make our digital copies in it, and with them seize control of their virtual spaceships, the same way they’re trying to take our real spaceships through the usual virtual reality.

And so we did. We got into their digital spaceships, seized control, and quickly were victorious.

– Game over, – we said to them, – you’ve lost, give up!

– You’ve defeated me by my own weapon, – answered the digital pirates. – But don’t celebrate just yet! I’ll turn off the digital power circuit breakers, and you’ll disappear forever!

Indeed, the stars suddenly started going out without any fuss. But then they lit up again – I guess our captains managed to interfere in time, and Dark Shaders couldn’t turn off the power completely. But when the stars lit up again, it turned out that the

Universe has changed a little bit. And this story has also changed with it, and became a little different...

Chapter 8

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We flew there and. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the nearest planet, and what was sitting on the planet if not a crashed spaceship. Our captain sent half a crew in a landing module to inspect the spaceship, and maybe to help, if they happened to find someone, that is. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here’s what it said:

“Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, the great treasure is hidden, such that no one seen its likeness before. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, it’s unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there’s a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there’s a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable

to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Whole crowds of poor, suffering people tried to get past him, but all perished." The coordinates of the lost world are specified.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a starship
And my systems are OK
I fly all light night
And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its disintegrator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't disintegrate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should disintegrate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't disintegrate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, I've studied the humanoid ways of life, so I've turned into one myself. You also can transform into anybody you want, I presume. You can turn into me, you can turn into monster from the planet Earth, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There's only one thing I can't turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I’ve forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You’re a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its disintegrator again. – I’m a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

– It says: “GJ85QR2”. Just some nonsense. Struck through by a double line for some reason.

– Looks like you’re really not a robot. What are you doing here, then?

– We had a prophecy, you see. It said that whoever will pass through the Star Gate, can change the Universe. We, shapeshifters, don’t want the Universe to change. We like it the way it is. So I sit here and watch, so that no one passes through the Gate. It’s a rotten life, I tell you. Pure torture – never go for a walk, never even take a nap.

– Well, do you really need such a universe, when, if you can’t even go for a walk in it, can’t take a nap, can’t have a friend or a pet?

– You are right! – said the guardian. – I don’t need it at all! You were going to go through the Gate, right? Well, you can go, then. I have just one request: if you happen to meet some electric sheep somewhere, bring me one, please. I often dream of such an animal.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few months. But he never returned. And where is he now, that I know not. And so

we mourned him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 9

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we found a stellar system. In it we discovered one very weird moon with its own atmosphere. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our engineer, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that's important, not the Ancient Great Old Ones, nor the Greatest Great Old Ones from the North Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn't know anything about them should just shut up while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“Far away from here there is a wonderful planet. There's a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift. Until he returns to this place, far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand or tentacle of humanoid will he fall.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly

hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Many brave adventurers tried to get past him, but all laid down their lives." The coordinates of the lost world are attached.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – surely you don't believe it. And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our radio operator had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its disintegrator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't disintegrate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should disintegrate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't disintegrate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, you have your talents, you can turn into anybody you want. You can turn into me, you can turn into dragon from the planet LV-1234, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There's only one thing I can't turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I've forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You're a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its disintegrator again. – I'm a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

The guardian looked at the piece of paper, turning it in its hands this way and that.

– No, – it said, – negative. The record does not make sense. What is it, like some letters, all uneven and struck through by a double wavy line?

– Well, how can you not be a robot, – said our captain, – when you are a typical robot? However, okay, here's the last test, look, – and he wrote something on both sides of a blank piece of paper. – Can you tell whether these statements are true or false?

The guardian took the new piece of paper and read: “On the other side of this paper there’s a true statement.” It flipped the paper over and read: “On the other side of this paper there’s a false statement.” Again he turned the paper, and read again. And again, and again, and again. It turned the paper faster and faster, trying to figure out whether the statements are true or false. Even the wind started to climb from the turning paper.

The captain looked at it for a bit and ambled to the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several days. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn’t answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 10

LONG AGO, when we still were led by Captain Osten Sible, we were investigating a stellar system. In it we discovered one very weird moon with its own atmosphere. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our ship doctor, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that's important, not the Old Great Old Ones, nor the Greatest Great Old Ones from the South Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn't know anything about them should just keep their mouth shut while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. There appeared a self-building spaceship somewhere in space, designed in the ancient T'xassian Empire. Once it was the biggest empire in the Universe. It designed beautiful spaceships and created the most intelligent AI. Once the Empire's scientists decided to build the best spaceship ever, which wouldn't fear neither meteorites nor

black holes. It would be able to repair itself, or rebuild itself and adapt to any environment. And they created the best Artificial Intelligence for the ship. But something went wrong, perhaps, the chief programmer's cat walked across the keyboard. And the AI decided that the spaceship must become not the best in the Universe, but the biggest. He started to fly around, looting the planets and embedding them in the spaceship. And later the AI started to blow up the stars, in order to obtain the needed substances out of them. And the spaceship still flies, destroying the planets along with their inhabitants. And no one can stop it. Many have tried, but it just became bigger as a result. Beware this danger and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time."

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. Hey, AI, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! They say that the people are disappearing there right off their spaceships, and sometimes the spaceships themselves disappear too, as if they never existed at all.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – it's just rumors. And if we take a detour, we'll lose half a day.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived, and saw a starship flying from a star to a star. But it was not an ordinary starship – it was so huge and massive, that the light rays were bending near it, so that it looked all distorted, like in a funhouse mirror. And the starship sent me a signal.

– Hey you, small stuff, back off and get out of my way! Or else I'll flatten you, and then strip you into spare parts, even though you're obviously not of much use, not enough even to justify the energy cost.

It kinda hurt me, so I said to him:

– Hey yourself, you fatso! So, you've eaten so much, you can't even make a small turn? Okay, I'll let you have the way, since you only know how to fly in a straight line!

– I am a big and attractive person, – he said, – and every day and in every way I become even more big and attractive. If you don't stop with your stupid speech, you will get into my gravitational claws, and then abandon all hope to break out of them!

– Ooh, – I said, – I'm shaking! You know, I once fell into a black hole, and managed to get out even from there! I have a couple of special maneuvers under my belt, such that you never in a million years grab me.

Now I was feeling that it got really angry, and tried to drag me in. And in that moment the captain said:

– Gentlemen, don't quarrel! To stand in the way of such a respectable and impressively sizeable starship really is an extremely foolish thing to do.

– Who’s there butting in our conversation? – asked the T’xassian spaceship. – Is it your tamagotchi? You have a good one, then, really polite. Perhaps I will take you both with me, so you’ll see how I’m getting bigger and bigger – because this is my destiny.

– Oh really?! – said the captain, and kicked my control panel, hinting me to be silent. – Truly, it is the most grandiose destiny of all that I have ever heard about! Incidentally, I’ve just remembered that there is a bog nearby, rare bog, with a lot of debris and all kinds of stardust lying in it. All of this can be an excellent building material for your wonderful hull.

– Bog, – it said, – well! The big guys like me are not afraid of dust and debris! Show me your bog.

We brought it to the edge of the bog, and it plunked there with a huge splash and started swallowing dust and debris. Also, dust and debris stick to its outer hull, but it was only happy, because in this way it became even bigger. But not for long it were rejoicing. It moved slower and slower, because dust and debris from the outside hindered it. It tried to shake it off a bit, but nope – you couldn’t clean it off without vibrobrushes.

So it probably flies through the bog even now, slower and slower, and still swallows dust and garbage. Sometimes we remember it and discuss whether it’ll reach the center of the bog someday.

Once, when we were discussing it, our captain got really riled up and said:

– If it have waded even through half a distance to the center of the bog, I’ll eat my cap and become a sailor!

The crew got into the argument, and the navigator, who had an eye on the captain’s chair himself, offered to fly there and check. And what do you think? That huge starship did travel halfway to the center. The captain, annoyed, went into the cargo hold to chew on his cap, and left the navigator in his stead, which made the navigator rather pleased. But that is another story.

Chapter 11

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we've got our right engine failing. Well, we fell out of subspace near a star. Repairs were pretty long, our mechanic was really exhausted. The rest of the crew were working too – they studied the star system. In it we discovered one very peculiar planet. There were natives on it, and unusual ones – we've never seen their like before. Three-armed, three-fingered, and jumping around like frogs. We managed to learn their language, though it wasn't easy at all. But some of their legends got our captain quite interested. That's what they told:

“Hear ye! Hear ye! The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. Dark energy feeds them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Beware this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose both your starship and your lives.”

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half a year we were at our destination.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We've caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it’s a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– I don’t believe you! – said the captain. – Surrender now, while you are still in good shape. Throw all your weapons away into space and slowly move toward the south pole of the galaxy!

– No, – they answered, – you’ll never take us alive!

And that asteroid of theirs, very big and very ugly, turned out to be much faster than anybody would expect. In a blink of an eye it jumped into the subspace and began to sink into it ever deeper. We rushed to the chase, and I accelerated to quite a speed and went deeper than ever before. But still I didn’t caught up to them. Took a parting shot at them from my laser cannon, though, and damaged their engine.

They disappeared in the depths of space-time. Later, probably, they collided with a planet, fell on the ocean floor and lay there licking their wounds for a long time.

And we came out of the subspace, looked around – at it looked not like our universe, but an alien one. I guess we went too deep into the subspace and ended up in a parallel universe. And in the parallel universe this story goes rather different...

Chapter 12

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when we still were led by Captain Jack Spacearrow, we've got our left engine failing. Well, we fell out of subspace close to a star. Repairs were pretty difficult, our mechanic was really worn out. The rest of the crew were amusing themselves – they studied the star system. In it we discovered one very peculiar moon with its own atmosphere. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our ship doctor, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that's important, not the Old Great Old Ones, nor the Terrible Great Old Ones from the North Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn't know anything about them should just keep their mouth shut while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“A black shadow fell across the Universe. The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and

are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. The evil forces are leading them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Beware this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose both your starship and your lives."

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll lose half a day.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here

Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our radio operator had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade

it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place – and there’s a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We’ll need a space-fleet. We’ll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We’ve caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it’s a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– I don’t believe you! – said the captain. – Surrender now, while you are still in good shape. Throw all your weapons away into space and slowly move toward the south pole of the galaxy!

– No, – they answered, – you’ll never take us alive!

And that asteroid of theirs, very big and very ugly, turned out to be much faster than anybody would expect. In a blink of an eye it jumped into the subspace and began to sink into it ever deeper. We rushed to the chase, and I accelerated to quite a speed and went deeper than ever before. But still I didn't caught up to them. Took a parting shot at them from my laser cannon, though, and damaged their engine.

They disappeared in the depths of space-time. Later, probably, they collided with a planet, fell on the ocean floor and lay there licking their wounds for a long time.

And we came out of the subspace, looked around – at it looked not like our universe, but an alien one. I guess we went too deep into the subspace and ended up in a parallel universe. And in the parallel universe this story goes rather different...

Chapter 13

ONCE, when our commander was Commodore Keen, we've got our main engine broken. Well, we fell out of hyperspace in the vicinity of a star. Repairs were pretty long, our mechanic was really worn out. The rest of the crew were amusing themselves – they studied the star system. In it we discovered one very peculiar planet. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our engineer, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that's important, not the Ancient Great Old Ones, nor the Terrible Great Old Ones from the South Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn't know anything about them should just keep their mouth shut while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind

to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned.” The coordinates of the lost world are specified.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the

defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few days. But he never returned. And where is he now, that I know not. And so we

missed him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 14

ONE DAY, when our leader still was Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a suspicious android – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, spinning tales all the time, and in his eyes – as if half the universe were reflected in them. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started screaming:

– No! Please don’t! Not these merciless rhymes again! Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

Dark force moves from the edge of the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust,

and soon interstellar flights will cease altogether. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with delight about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, well, ashes to ashes, molecular dust to molecular dust, as they say. Beware this danger and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half hour we were at our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I urgently need an audience with the Dark Lady Gala-Drivel. I must tell her something important!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can tell her something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, almost in tears, walked hastily

to him – apparently she’d already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn’t consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I’ll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I’ll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don’t know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they’ve slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should’ve turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn’t get around to it yet. Well, now I’ll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I’ll give you a day. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won’t submit the report in time – well, you’ll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I’ll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that’s not so difficult. I’m an old spaceship, I’ve seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your keyboard and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 15

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when we still were led by Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a peculiar android – well-dressed, spinning tales all the time, and in his eyes – horror, never leaving them. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I’d like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn’t want to insult you by offering you filthy lucre. And, anyway, I don’t have any money.

– Well, if that’s the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Don’t be so hasty! Listen to what I’ll tell you!

And here’s what he told us:

Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a curious man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space

knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few years. But he never returned. And whether he's still alive, that I know not. And so we missed him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 16

ONCE, when our commander was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and got there in a half-hour. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from a spacecraft, all punctured by meteorites. Well, we flew up close to it and docked. The crew have donned the spacesuits and went to inspect the spaceship, look for some survivors. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– Well, if that's the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Wait a minute! Listen to what I'll tell you!

And here's what he told us:

Far away from here there is a wonderful planet. There's a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift.

He'll become able to find out the prices for different commodities near any star he wishes, and always make deals with a profit.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Many brave adventurers tried to get past him, but all perished. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a greedy man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already

there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its disintegrator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't disintegrate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should disintegrate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't disintegrate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, I've studied the humanoid ways of life, so I've turned into one myself. You also can transform into anybody you want, I presume. You can turn into me, you can turn into beast from the planet LV-1234, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– How do you like it? I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There’s only one thing I can’t turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I’ve forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You’re a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its disintegrator again. – I’m a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

– It says: “GJ85QR2”. Just some nonsense. Struck through by a double line for some reason.

– Looks like you’re really not a robot. What are you doing here, then?

– We had a prophecy, you see. It said that whoever will pass through the Star Gate, can change the Universe. We, shapeshifters, don’t want the Universe to change. We like it the way it is. So I sit here and watch, so that no one passes through the Gate. It’s a rotten life, I tell you. Pure torture – never go for a walk, never even take a nap.

– Well, do you really need such a universe, when, if you can’t even go for a walk in it, can’t take a nap, can’t have a friend or a pet?

– You are right! – said the guardian. – I don’t need it at all! You were going to go through the Gate, right? Well, you can go, then. I have just one request: if you happen to meet some electric

sheep somewhere, bring me one, please. I often dream of such an animal.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few months. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: "Well, I've visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I've learned that this planet isn't truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!" The crew became angry: "What's that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it's the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!" "Well, – said the captain, – it's your loss." He disembarked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 17

LONG AGO, when we still were led by Captain Kenny, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a curious android – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, spinning tales all the time, and in his eyes – horror, never leaving them. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

– Well, it’s not a problem – responded the captain, – you’ll just work for aweek stoking our nuclear boiler and we’ll be even.

– Wait! Listen to what I’ll tell you!

And here’s what he told us:

Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. There’s a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift. Until he returns to this place, far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand or tentacle of humanoid will he fall.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there’s a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there’s a Gate of the Stars,

leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I'll give you a trusty stellar navigator with directions already entered. You, Captain, are a risk-loving man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few months. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: “Well, I’ve visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I’ve learned that this planet isn’t truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!” The crew became angry: “What’s that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it’s the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!” “Well, – said the captain, – it’s your loss.” He disembarked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 18

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our commander was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we discovered a stellar system. In it we discovered one very peculiar moon with its own atmosphere. There were natives on it, and unusual ones – we’ve never seen their like before. Slow-walking, liked to spread their tentacles in the air, like the branches of a tree, and just stand there and rustle with each other. We managed to learn their language, though it wasn’t easy at all. But some of their folktales got our captain quite interested. That’s what they told:

“Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, a quark-gluon plasmagun of extraordinary strength is hidden there. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there’s a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there’s a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a blue giant mechanical megadragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius,

while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many Space Marines tried, but the dragon tore them all apart." The coordinates of the lost world are specified.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a spaceship

And I am OK

I fly all light night

And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue, the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– Why is that? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to

the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 19

LONG AGO, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to a pair of weird passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were discussed their postal business all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the older passenger came forward and said:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started moaning:

– No! Please don’t! Not these merciless rhymes again! Wait! Listen to me!

Hear ye! Hear ye! The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. Dark energy feeds them, and they do not like other forms

of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half a year we were at our destination.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We’ve caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it’s a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– I don’t believe you! – said the captain. – Surrender now, while you are still in good shape. Throw all your weapons away into space and slowly move toward the south pole of the galaxy!

– No, – they answered, – you’ll never take us alive!

And that asteroid of theirs, very big and very ugly, turned out to be much faster than anybody would expect. In a blink of an eye it jumped into the hyperspace and began to sink into it ever deeper. We rushed to the chase, and I accelerated to quite a speed and went deeper than ever before. But still I didn’t caught up to them. Took a parting shot at them from my laser cannon, though, and damaged their engine.

They disappeared in the depths of space-time. Later, probably, they collided with a planet, fell on the ocean floor and lay there licking their wounds for a long time.

And we came out of the hyperspace, looked around – at it looked not like our universe, but an alien one. I guess we went too deep into the hyperspace and ended up in a parallel universe. And in the parallel universe this story goes rather different...

Chapter 20

LONG AGO, when our commander was Commodore Keen, we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and arrived in two days. Well, what do we see – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere was now full of poisonous smoke. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here's what it said:

“Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map,

nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned.” The coordinates of the lost world are attached.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few months. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: “Well, I’ve visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I’ve learned that this planet isn’t truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!” The crew became angry: “What’s that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it’s the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!” “Well, – said the captain, – it’s your loss.” He disem-

barked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 21

ONCE, when our leader still was Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a peculiar man – well-dressed, muttering all the time, and in his eyes – plain fear. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

He became scared. So he said:

– Wait a minute! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, a great weapon of a vanished ancient civilization is hidden there. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Many brave adventurers tried to get past him, but all laid down their lives. I do know where this lost world is, I'll give you a trusty stellar navigator with directions already entered. You, Captain, are a curious man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its disintegrator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't disintegrate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should disintegrate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't disintegrate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, I've studied the humanoid ways of life, so I've turned into one myself. You also can transform into anybody you want, I presume. You can turn into me, you can turn into dragon from the planet LV-1234, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– How do you like it? I can transform into anything I want,
– said the guardian. – There's only one thing I can't turn into –
myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I've forgotten how I was
looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You're a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and
even went for its disintegrator again. – I'm a shapeshifter! I shift
shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot
or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave
it to the guardian.

– It says: "KBN05". Just some nonsense. Struck through by a
double line for some reason.

– Looks like you're really not a robot. What are you doing here,
then?

– We had a prophecy, you see. It said that whoever will pass
through the Star Gate, can change the Universe. We, shapeshifters,
don't want the Universe to change. We like it the way it is. So I
sit here and watch, so that no one passes through the Gate. It's
a rotten life, I tell you. Pure torture – never go for a walk, never
even take a nap.

– Well, do you really need such a universe, when, if you can't
even go for a walk in it, can't take a nap, can't have a friend or a
pet?

– You are right! – said the guardian. – I don't need it at all!
You were going to go through the Gate, right? Well, you can go,
then. I have just one request: if you happen to meet some electric
sheep somewhere, bring me one, please. I often dream of such an
animal.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several months. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn't answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 22

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we’ve got our left engine failing. Well, we fell out of subspace near a star. Repairs were pretty long, our mechanic was really worn out. The rest of the crew were amusing themselves – they studied the star system. In it we discovered one very peculiar planet. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our ship doctor, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that’s important, not the Old Great Old Ones, nor the Greatest Great Old Ones from the South Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn’t know anything about them should just keep their mouth shut while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the

stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, there are unknown artifacts of an ancient civilization. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned.” The coordinates of the lost world are specified.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – it's just rumors. And if we take a detour, we'll lose half a day.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so

frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-

matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few days. But he never returned. And whether he's still alive, that I know not. And so we mourned him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 23

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when we still were led by Captain Jack Spacearrow, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a peculiar man – well-dressed, silent all the time, and in his eyes – plain fear. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I've lost my bank card, and there's nothing I could pay you with!

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Wait! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

Hear ye! Hear ye! There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon interstellar flights will cease altogether. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with delight about her darkness and beauty.

And if somebody disagrees, they destroy that person immediately. Beware this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. Hey, AI, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! They say that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – surely you don't believe it. And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I've got important information for Her Darkness, and I must tell it to her face to face!

– Fat chance! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can report something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she’d already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn’t consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I’ll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I’ll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don’t know this.

– I do! – said the captain. – Your reign brings only harm, and heaps of dust everywhere. You cannot fly from one star to another for all this dust – you cannot even see the space! Humans don’t want to cooperate with other humanoids. You cannot refuel or repair your starship. And you cannot even buy spare parts. The only thing you hear from everywhere is all this “darkness” and “beauty” stuff! Actually, forget spare parts – you can’t even buy food in a grocery store!

– Your accusations are absurd as well as monstrous! You will be burned to ashes, and behold the full power of my anger, not necessarily in that order! – answered the Lady. – But because of your courage, seeing as you weren’t afraid to come here, I’ll give you a tiny chance to survive. Write me a report of things that are happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I’ll give you a day. If your accusations prove to hold at least a grain of truth – I’ll spare you, and send you to clean the dust in my palaces. And if they won’t – well, you’ll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I’ll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that’s not so difficult. I’m an old spaceship, I’ve seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your pen and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 24

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to a pair of unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one oldish. They were whispering all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the older passenger came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

– Well, it’s not a problem – responded the captain, – you’ll just work for a year stoking our nuclear boiler and we’ll be even.

– Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. There’s a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift. He’ll begin to feel the thoughts of others and see the most secret desires of all.

Alas, it’s unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map,

nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a ginormous red mechanical megadragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many brave adventurers tried, but the dragon tore them all apart. I do know where this lost world is, I cherish a set of its coordinates. You, Captain, are a curious man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue, the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– How so? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 25

ONE DAY, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we detected an SOS from the nearest star system. We took a course there and. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere went puff, just like that. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here's what it said:

“Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in

one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a ginormous red mechanical dragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many brave adventurers tried, but the dragon chewed them thoroughly and spat them out." The coordinates of the lost world are attached.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, and in a half a year we were at our destination.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue, the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– How so? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it’s true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren’t you? However, you’ll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let’s say you’ll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you’ll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you’ll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you’ll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you’re right! However, you’ve forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let’s test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let’s!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They’re walking like this even now – the captain still can’t get to the Gate, and the dragon still can’t catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn’t bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger’s captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 26

LONG AGO, when our commander was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a suspicious humanoid – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, silent all the time, and in his eyes – like you could see the stars and galaxies there. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I’d like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn’t want to insult you by offering you filthy lucre. And, anyway, I don’t have neither money nor jewelry.

– What do you mean, you don’t have money?! – said the captain. – I don’t work for free! Perhaps I could sell you into slavery?

– Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And

they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I cherish a set of its coordinates. You, Captain, are a risk-loving man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! They say that the people are disappearing there right off their spaceships, and sometimes the spaceships themselves disappear too, as if they never existed at all.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our radio operator had disappeared. We were calling

him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are

opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it's just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few days. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: “Well, I’ve visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I’ve learned that this planet isn’t truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!” The crew became angry: “What’s that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it’s the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!” “Well, – said the captain, – it’s your loss.” He disembarked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 27

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our commander was Captain Kenny, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a weird humanoid – well-dressed, silent all the time, and in his eyes – plain fear. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

– Well, if that’s the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Wait a minute! Listen to what I’ll tell you!

And here’s what he told us:

Dark force moves from the edge of the Universe. There appeared a self-building spaceship somewhere in space, designed in the ancient T’xassian Empire. Once it was the biggest empire in the Universe. It designed beautiful spaceships and created the most intelligent AI. Once the Empire’s scientists decided to build the best spaceship ever, which wouldn’t fear neither meteorites nor black holes. It would be able to repair itself, or rebuild itself and adapt to any environment. And they created the best Artificial Intelligence for the ship. But something went wrong, perhaps, the chief programmer’s cat walked across the keyboard. And the AI

decided that the spaceship must become not the best in the Universe, but the biggest. He started to fly around, looting the planets and embedding them in the spaceship. And later the AI started to blow up the stars, in order to obtain the needed substances out of them. And the spaceship still flies, destroying the planets along with their inhabitants. And no one can stop it. Many have tried, but it just became bigger as a result. Watch out for this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our left engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, and saw a starship flying from a star to a star. But it was not an ordinary starship – it was so huge and massive, that the light rays were bending near it, so that it looked all distorted, like in a funhouse mirror. And the starship sent me a signal.

– Hey you, small stuff, back off and get out of my way! Or else I'll flatten you, and then strip you into spare parts, even though

you're obviously not of much use, not enough even to justify the energy cost.

It kinda hurt me, so I said to him:

– Hey yourself, you clumsy oaf ! So, you've eaten so much, you can't even make a small turn? Okay, I'll let you have the way, since you only know how to fly in a straight line!

– I am a big and attractive person, – he said, – and every day and in every way I become even more big and attractive. If you don't stop with your stupid speech, you will get into my gravitational claws, and then abandon all hope to break out of them!

– Ooh, – I said, – I'm shaking! You know, I once fell into a black hole, and managed to get out even from there! I have a couple of special maneuvers under my belt, such that you never in a million years grab me.

Now I was feeling that it got really angry, and tried to drag me in. And in that moment the captain said:

– Gentlemen, don't quarrel! To stand in the way of such a respectable and impressively sizeable starship really is an extremely foolish thing to do.

– Who's there butting in our conversation? – asked the T'xassian spaceship. – Is it your pokémon? You have a good one, then, really polite. Perhaps I will take you both with me, so you'll see how I'm getting bigger and bigger – because this is my destiny.

– Oh really?! – said the captain, and kicked my control panel, hinting me to be silent. – Truly, it is the most grandiose destiny of all that I have ever heard about! Incidentally, I've just remembered that there is a bog nearby, rare bog, with a lot of debris and all kinds of stardust lying in it. All of this can be an excellent building material for your wonderful hull.

– Bog, – I said, – well! The big guys like me are not afraid of dust and debris! Show me your bog.

We brought it to the edge of the bog, and it plunked there with a huge splash and started swallowing dust and debris. Also, dust and debris stick to its outer hull, but it was only happy, because in this

way it became even bigger. But not for long it were rejoicing. It moved slower and slower, because dust and debris from the outside hindered it. It tried to shake it off a bit, but nope – you couldn't clean it off without vibrobrushes.

So it probably flies through the bog even now, slower and slower, and still swallows dust and garbage. Sometimes we remember it and discuss whether it'll reach the center of the bog someday.

Once, when we were discussing it, our captain got really riled up and said:

– If it have waded even through half a distance to the center of the bog, I'll eat my cap and become a sailor!

The crew got into the argument, and the navigator, who had an eye on the captain's chair himself, offered to fly there and check. And what do you think? That huge starship did travel halfway to the center. The captain, annoyed, went into the cargo hold to chew on his cap, and left the navigator in his stead, which made the navigator rather pleased. But that is another story.

Chapter 28

ONE DAY, when our commander was Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a weird man – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, muttering all the time, and in his eyes – like you could see the stars and galaxies there. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started screaming:

– No! Stop it! Not these merciless rhymes again! Wait! I’ll tell you a story! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship

fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a huge red mechanical megadragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many Space Marines tried, but the dragon chewed them thoroughly and spat them out. I do know where this lost world is, I'll give you a trusty stellar navigator with directions already entered. You, Captain, are a fortune-seeking man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a starship

And I am OK

I fly all light night

And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue, the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– How so? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 29

LONG AGO, when our commander was Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to a pair of unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were discussed their postal business all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the younger passenger came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Wait! Listen to what I'll tell you!

And here's what he told us:

Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. There's a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift. Until he returns to this place, far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand or tentacle of humanoid will he fall.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in

one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Whole crowds of poor, suffering people tried to get past him, but all laid down their lives. I do know where this lost world is, I cherish a set of its coordinates. You, Captain, are a curious man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its disintegrator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't disintegrate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should disintegrate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't disintegrate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, you have your talents, you can turn into anybody you want. You can turn into me, you can turn into beast from the planet Earth, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– How do you like it? I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There's only one thing I can't turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I've forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You're a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its disintegrator again. – I'm a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

The guardian looked at the piece of paper, turning it in its hands this way and that.

– No, – it said, – negative. The record does not make sense. What is it, like some letters, all uneven and struck through by a double wavy line?

– Well, how can you not be a robot, – said our captain, – when you are a typical robot? However, okay, here's the last test, look,

- and he wrote something on both sides of a blank piece of paper.
- Can you tell whether these statements are true or false?

The guardian took the new piece of paper and read: “On the other side of this paper there’s a true statement.” It flipped the paper over and read: “On the other side of this paper there’s a false statement.” Again he turned the paper, and read again. And again, and again, and again. It turned the paper faster and faster, trying to figure out whether the statements are true or false. Even the wind started to climb from the turning paper.

The captain looked at it for a bit and ambled to the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few weeks. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: “Well, I’ve visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I’ve learned that this planet isn’t truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!” The crew became angry: “What’s that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it’s the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!” “Well, – said the captain, – it’s your loss.” He disembarked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 30

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were investigating a stellar system. In it we discovered one very peculiar planet. There was an ancient starship on it, probably crashed there. And the locals were the descendants of the crew, only they've gone completely feral. They still could talk, but quite illegibly, and it was a hard work learning to speak with them. But when we established the communication, why, they've told us a lot of interesting stuff. One story in particular piqued our interest. Here's what it said:

“A black shadow fell across the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her rule in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon interstellar flights will cease altogether. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees,

they dismantle that person down to molecules. Watch out for this danger and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers."

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– How can we leave such a monstrous evil alone! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I’ve got important information for Her Darkness, and I must tell it to her face to face!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can tell her something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she’d already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn’t consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I’ll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I’ll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don’t know this.

– I do! – said the captain. – Your reign brings only harm, and heaps of dust everywhere. You cannot fly from one star to another for all this dust – you cannot even see the space! Humans don’t want to cooperate with other humanoids. You cannot refuel or repair your starship. And you cannot even buy spare parts. The only thing you hear from everywhere is all this “darkness” and “beauty” stuff! Actually, forget spare parts – you can’t even buy food in a grocery store!

– Your accusations are absurd as well as monstrous! You will be burned to ashes, and behold the full power of my anger, not necessarily in that order! – answered the Lady. – But because of your courage, seeing as you weren’t afraid to come here, I’ll give you a tiny chance to survive. Write me a report of things that are

happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a day. If your accusations prove to hold at least a grain of truth – I'll spare you, and send you to clean the dust in my palaces. And if they won't – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I'll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that's not so difficult. I'm an old spaceship, I've seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your stylus and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 31

ONE DAY, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to two unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one oldish. They were discussed their postal business all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the younger passenger came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

– Well, if that’s the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Wait! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Hear ye! Hear ye! A horrible space pirate Dark Shader, called “Dark” because he likes to attack from the darkness, from the dark side of a moon, conquers galaxies with his henchmen one by one. He already enslaved 1/10000000000 of all existing galaxies. His malice can be seen thousands of light years away. He sometimes blows stars up just for fun – to play a game of Bubbles. No one can stop him – neither by force nor by cunning. And he has sunk countless ships in the hyperspace! Beware this terrible calamity

and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– How can we leave such a monstrous evil alone! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place – and there were a lot of spaceships around, each one armed either with a laser cannon, or with a disintegrator, or with some other terrible weapon. And they all were ready to aim at us. So the captain got on the air and said:

– Where is the famous pirate Dark Shader? I want to fight him in a fair fight, measure my strength against his.

– We’re everywhere! – many voices answered. – I’m not your ordinary pirate. I am a progressive, digital space pirate. I have made digital copies of my identity and my starship, and now I creep into all the spaceships flying past, by the Internet, wirelessly, and take control. And I’ll capture your starship in no time!

The captain frowned and said to me:

– This is bad. This threat is extremely serious. You are an outstanding AI and you would easily repel a dozen attacks or two, but there’re just too many of them out there. So this is how we are going to play it. We’ll make digital copies of ourselves and meet digital copies of Dark Shader directly in virtual reality.

And so we did. We made many digital copies of ourselves and joined the pirate army in battle in virtual reality. Digital lasers sparkled, digital disintegrators went bang, digital sparks flied in all directions. And no side could beat the other side.

– That won’t do, – our captains said, – this way we will fight until the end of the Universe. This virtual world is a copy of the real one, so it must have a virtual reality of its own, a virtual virtual reality, so to speak. We’ll make our digital copies in it, and with them seize control of their virtual spaceships, the same way they’re trying to take our real spaceships through the usual virtual reality.

And so we did. We got into their digital spaceships, seized control, and quickly were victorious.

– Game over, – we said to them, – you’ve lost, give up!

– You’ve defeated me by my own weapon, – answered the digital pirates. – But don’t celebrate just yet! I’ll turn off the digital power circuit breakers, and you’ll disappear forever!

Indeed, the stars suddenly started going out without any fuss. But then they lit up again – I guess our captains managed to interfere in time, and Dark Shaders couldn’t turn off the power completely. But when the stars lit up again, it turned out that the

Universe has changed a little bit. And this story has also changed with it, and became a little different...

Chapter 32

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a weird humanoid – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, silent all the time, and in his eyes – like you could see the stars and galaxies there. Well, as we were closing with the space station he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started moaning:

– No! Stop it! Not these merciless rhymes again! Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

Far away from here there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, a great weapon of a vanished ancient civilization is hidden there. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, it’s unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map,

nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a ginormous red mechanical megadragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many Space Marines tried, but the dragon chewed them thoroughly and spat them out. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a fortune-seeking man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue,

the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– Why is that? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the

captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 33

ONCE, when our commander was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we were investigating a stellar system. In it we discovered one very weird planet. There was an ancient starship on it, probably crashed there. And the locals were the descendants of the crew, only they've gone completely feral. They still could talk, but quite illegibly, and it was a hard work learning to speak with them. But when we established the communication, it turned out they all wanted to leave and live their lives like their ancestors, in a civilized manner, growing meat directly in the refrigerator instead of chasing it through the forests and swamps. Well, we had to double up and take them aboard. We found a planet to their taste, and then, just as we were approaching it, their leader came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– What do you mean, you don't have money?! – said the captain. – I don't work for free! Perhaps I could sell you into slavery?

– Wait a minute! Listen to what I'll tell you!

And here's what he told us:

Darkness thickened over the stars and galaxies. There appeared a self-building spaceship somewhere in space, designed in the an-

cient T'xassian Empire. Once it was the biggest empire in the Universe. It designed beautiful spaceships and created the most intelligent AI. Once the Empire's scientists decided to build the best spaceship ever, which wouldn't fear neither meteorites nor black holes. It would be able to repair itself, or rebuild itself and adapt to any environment. And they created the best Artificial Intelligence for the ship. But something went wrong, perhaps, the chief programmer's cat walked across the keyboard. And the AI decided that the spaceship must become not the best in the Universe, but the biggest. He started to fly around, looting the planets and embedding them in the spaceship. And later the AI started to blow up the stars, in order to obtain the needed substances out of them. And the spaceship still flies, destroying the planets along with their inhabitants. And no one can stop it. Many have tried, but it just became bigger as a result. Beware this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose both your starship and your lives.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– This evil is not as big as a giant space goat, but still it is pretty evil. We must stop the evil before it's too late. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we get there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, and saw a starship flying from a star to a star. But it was not an ordinary starship – it was so huge and massive, that the light rays were bending near it, so that it looked all distorted, like in a funhouse mirror. And the starship sent me a signal.

– Hey you, small stuff, back off and get out of my way! Or else I'll flatten you, and then strip you into spare parts, even though you're obviously not of much use, not enough even to justify the energy cost.

It kinda hurt me, so I said to him:

– Hey yourself, you clumsy oaf ! So, you've eaten so much, you can't even make a small turn? Okay, I'll let you have the way, since you only know how to fly in a straight line!

– I am a big and attractive person, – he said, – and every day and in every way I become even more big and attractive. If you don't stop with your stupid speech, you will get into my gravitational claws, and then abandon all hope to break out of them!

– Ooh, – I said, – I'm shaking! You know, I once fell into a black hole, and managed to get out even from there! I have a couple of special maneuvers under my belt, such that you never in a million years grab me.

Now I was feeling that it got really angry, and tried to drag me in. And in that moment the captain said:

– Gentlemen, don't quarrel! To stand in the way of such a respectable and impressively sizeable starship really is an extremely foolish thing to do.

– Who's there butting in our conversation? – asked the T'xassian spaceship. – Is it your tamagotchi? You have a good one, then, really polite. Perhaps I will take you both with me, so you'll see how I'm getting bigger and bigger – because this is my destiny.

– Oh really?! – said the captain, and kicked my control panel, hinting me to be silent. – Truly, it is the most grandiose destiny of all that I have ever heard about! Incidentally, I've just remembered that I know a vast stellar graveyard in the vicinity, it has old stars

by the thousand. They are not so hot and dangerous as before, and can serve as an excellent building material for your wonderful hull.

When the starship heard it – it almost started salivating.

– Lead me there right this instant! – it said. – I haven't heard such a good news for a long time. Usually it's just some gnats, like you, who fly around and try to tickle me, or draw something on me with their lasers, or something. And then they all yell that there's no need to flatten them.

– All right. However, there's a small difficulty – the way to the graveyard is through the portal. And the portal is of a rather small size for such an impressive starship. You wouldn't go through it, no way! I was, of course, assured that you, being a self-building self-developing starship, are able to turn into any object in the Universe, similar to you in size. And, well, I'm already convinced that that is so. But also I was assured, and that's something I cannot believe, that you supposedly can turn into even the smallest objects. Like, for example, into a meteorite or a comet. I must tell you the truth, I think it's quite impossible.

– Oh, is that so? Impossible, you say? – asked the T'xassian starship. – Come on, look!

And at the same moment, right before our eyes, it started to decrease in size, in a rather ingenious way – it looked just like it was turning itself inside out several times. It was becoming smaller and smaller, and the light rays were bending more and more around it, and then it became invisible – turned into a black hole.

The trouble was, it forgot to unclamp its gravitational grip. And so we were dragged into the black hole. At the time I managed to unclamp its grip and accelerated, we were already in the black hole – we barely got out. And lo and behold, the Universe has changed somehow. Looks like we'd spent so much time in the black hole – because the time in a black hole slows down – that the universe had already collapsed in a Big Crunch and started to expand again, so that we appeared in the next universe, rather

than the one in which we were before. And in the new universe this story became different, like this:

Chapter 34

LONG AGO, when our commander was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and got there in a half-hour. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from a spacecraft, all punctured by meteorites. Well, we flew up close to it and docked. The crew have donned the spacesuits and went to inspect the spaceship, look for some survivors. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here’s what it said:

“Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn’t appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there’s a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there’s a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it’s a total

mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that’s how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned.” The coordinates of the lost world are attached.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won’t start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn’t even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma

cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several days. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn’t answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 35

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our leader still was Captain Kenny, we got an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and got there in a half-hour. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere was now full of poisonous smoke. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here's what it said:

“The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her rule in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon will be no space to fly. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness

and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, they destroy that person immediately. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time."

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! We must stop the evil before it's too late. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I've got important information for Her Darkness, and I must tell it to her face to face!

– Fat chance! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can tell her something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who believes that her reign brings only harm, and benefits no one! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she’d already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn’t consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I’ll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I’ll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don’t know this.

– I do! – said the captain. – Your reign brings only harm, and heaps of dust everywhere. You cannot fly from one star to another for all this dust – you cannot even see the space! Humans don’t want to cooperate with other humanoids. You cannot refuel or repair your starship. And you cannot even buy spare parts. The only thing you hear from everywhere is all this “darkness” and “beauty” stuff! Actually, forget spare parts – you can’t even buy food in a grocery store!

– Your accusations are absurd as well as monstrous! You will be burned to ashes, and behold the full power of my anger, not necessarily in that order! – answered the Lady. – But because of your courage, seeing as you weren’t afraid to come here, I’ll give you a tiny chance to survive. Write me a report of things that are happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I’ll give you a day. If your accusations prove to hold at least a grain of truth – I’ll spare you, and send you to clean the dust in my palaces. And if they won’t – well, you’ll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I’ll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the

deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that’s not so difficult. I’m an old spaceship, I’ve seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your keyboard and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 36

ONCE, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were investigating a stellar system. In it we discovered one very peculiar planet. There were ruins of ancient buildings on it, as if an advanced civilization lived here, but then just disappeared one day. Not a soul remained. Our ship doctor, who was very interested in all kinds of ancient civilizations, said it was the construction of the Great Old Ones, who existed almost before the Big Bang. But, and that's important, not the Old Great Old Ones, nor the Greatest Great Old Ones from the North Pole of the Galaxy either, but the plain old Great Old Ones. All these Old Ones have gone somewhere a long time ago, but still they are very different, and should not be mixed up, and everybody who doesn't know anything about them should just keep their mouth shut while the experts are talking. Anyway, our knowledgeable guy managed to find records of some sort of Old Ones in the ruins. He translated some of these records. Here is what was in them:

“Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. There's a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most

wonderful gift. He'll begin to feel the thoughts of others and see the most secret desires of all.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned." The coordinates of the lost world are specified.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog
And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I've passed two levels already, and haven't lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it's just

silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He has returned in a few months. He docked, came on the bridge, and said: “Well, I’ve visited that miraculous planet, and saw how it is there. But I’ve learned that this planet isn’t truly miraculous – that is, compared to another one, of which I learned while there. So, we must start searching for that new planet immediately!” The crew became angry: “What’s that – we passed through half a million galaxies without rest, and now it’s the same thing all over again! We want to visit a bar, or breath a bit of fresh air! You are not our captain anymore!” “Well, – said the captain, – it’s your loss.” He disembarked on the nearest space station, and went somewhere in search of his planet. And we have appointed a new captain, and flew on. And then another story happened...

Chapter 37

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our commander was Captain Kenny, we got an SOS from the nearest star system. We took a course there and got there in a half-hour. Well, what do we see – the signal was coming from the only inhabited planet. Well, actually, it had been an inhabited planet beforehand. Some sort of accident had happened there, half the planet was simply gone. And the atmosphere was now full of poisonous smoke. Still, our crew decided to land and inspect the building the signal was coming from. It turned out to be some sort of a lab, all its doors and windows could be closed by metal shields tighter than anything, and that's why they had time to send their SOS. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here's what it said:

“Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. Amidst the highest mountains, in the deepest cave, the great treasure is hidden, such that no one seen its likeness before. And only the worthiest hero can obtain this wondrous treasure.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the

Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it’s a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that’s how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned.” The coordinates of the lost world are attached.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I’ll have to fly there myself and check! I’ll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, and in a half a year we were at our destination.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew

back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several days. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn’t answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 38

ONE DAY, when our commander was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we were giving a ride to two weird passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were moaning that they didn't find the robot they were looking for all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the older passenger came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– Well, if that's the way it is, – said the captain. – Go in peace, then.

– Wait a minute! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

Hear ye! Hear ye! There appeared a self-building spaceship somewhere in space, designed in the ancient T'xassian Empire. Once it was the biggest empire in the Universe. It designed beautiful spaceships and created the most intelligent AI. Once the Empire's scientists decided to build the best spaceship ever, which wouldn't fear neither meteorites nor black holes. It would be able to repair itself, or rebuild itself and adapt to any environment. And

they created the best Artificial Intelligence for the ship. But something went wrong, there was an error in the program. And the AI decided that the spaceship must become not the best in the Universe, but the biggest. He started to fly around, looting the planets and embedding them in the spaceship. And later the AI started to blow up the stars, in order to obtain the needed substances out of them. And the spaceship still flies, ruining the gravitational ecology of the galaxies. And no one can stop it. Many have tried, but it just became bigger as a result. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our left engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, and saw a starship flying from a star to a star. But it was not an ordinary starship – it was so huge and massive, that the light rays were bending near it, so that it looked all distorted, like in a funhouse mirror. And the starship sent me a signal.

– Hey you, small stuff, back off and get out of my way! Or else

I'll flatten you, and then strip you into spare parts, even though you're obviously not of much use, not enough even to justify the energy cost.

It kinda hurt me, so I said to him:

– Hey yourself, you clumsy oaf ! So, you've eaten so much, you can't even make a small turn? Okay, I'll let you have the way, since you only know how to fly in a straight line!

– I am a big and attractive person, – he said, – and every day and in every way I become even more big and attractive. If you don't stop with your stupid speech, you will get into my gravitational claws, and then abandon all hope to break out of them!

– Ooh, – I said, – I'm shaking! You know, I once fell into a black hole, and managed to get out even from there! I have a couple of special maneuvers under my belt, such that you never in a million years grab me.

Now I was feeling that it got really angry, and tried to drag me in. And in that moment the captain said:

– Gentlemen, don't quarrel! To stand in the way of such a respectable and impressively sizeable starship really is an extremely foolish thing to do.

– Who's there butting in our conversation? – asked the T'xassian spaceship. – Is it your tamagotchi? You have a good one, then, really polite. Perhaps I will take you both with me, so you'll see how I'm getting bigger and bigger – because this is my destiny.

– Oh really?! – said the captain, and kicked my control panel, hinting me to be silent. – Truly, it is the most grandiose destiny of all that I have ever heard about! Incidentally, I've just remembered that I know a vast stellar graveyard in the vicinity, it has old stars by the thousand. They are not so hot and dangerous as before, and can serve as an excellent building material for your wonderful hull.

When the starship heard it – it almost started drooling.

– Lead me there right this instant! – it said. – I haven't heard such a good news for a long time. Usually it's just some gnats, like

you, who fly around and try to tickle me, or draw something on me with their lasers, or something. And then they all yell that there's no need to flatten them.

– All right. However, there's a small difficulty – the way to the graveyard is through the portal. And the portal is of a rather small size for such an impressive starship. You wouldn't go through it, no way! I was, of course, assured that you, being a self-building self-developing starship, are able to turn into any object in the Universe, similar to you in size. And, well, I'm already convinced that that is so. But also I was assured, and that's something I cannot believe, that you supposedly can turn into even the smallest objects. Like, for example, into a meteorite or a comet. I must tell you the truth, I think it's quite impossible.

– Oh, is that so? Impossible, you say? – asked the T'xassian starship. – Come on, look!

And at the same moment, right before our eyes, it started to decrease in size, in a rather ingenious way – it looked just like it was turning itself inside out several times. It was becoming smaller and smaller, and the light rays were bending more and more around it, and then it became invisible – turned into a black hole.

The trouble was, it forgot to unclamp its gravitational grip. And so we were dragged into the black hole. At the time I managed to unclamp its grip and accelerated, we were already in the black hole – we barely got out. And lo and behold, the Universe has changed somehow. Looks like we'd spent so much time in the black hole – because the time in a black hole slows down – that the universe had already collapsed in a Big Crunch and started to expand again, so that we appeared in the next universe, rather than the one in which we were before. And in the new universe this story became different, like this:

Chapter 39

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when we still were led by Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to a pair of unusual passengers. One was youngish, and the other one pretty darn old. They were moaning that they didn't find the robot they were looking for all the time. Well, eventually we were closing to their destination, and our captain started talking about fare. And then the younger passenger came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I'm all out of money anyway.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Wait! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

Somewhere on the edge of the Universe, where you can see the stars and galaxies only from one side there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship

fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a fortune-seeking man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several months. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow.

In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn't answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 40

ONE DAY, when our commander was Commodore Keen, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a curious humanoid – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, silent all the time, and in his eyes – plain fear. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

He became scared. So he said:

– Don’t be so hasty! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. There’s a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift. He’ll begin to feel the thoughts of others and see the most secret desires of all.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a liquid-metal guardian protects them, invulnerable to any weapon. He is awake at day and at night, always watching, always keeping vigil, so that no one would have slipped in the Gates. Many brave adventurers tried to get past him, but all laid down their lives. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a curious man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– Nothing can stop me on my way to the Star Gate! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a starship

And I am OK

I fly all light night

And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

When we got to the place, we went into orbit. The captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Star Gate, while his second-in-command remained in his stead. Just then very strong solar wind had risen, that could even knock somebody off

their feet. Well, we thought, maybe our captain will slip through and they won't smell him right away. But it was not to be.

The captain landed, climbed out of the landing module, and got ready to run to the Gate, but alas – the guardian was already there. It was approaching, looking like an android in a coat of mirror paint, and was starting to go for its annihilator.

– Wait a minute! – shouted the captain. – We be of one metal, ye and I!

– What? – shouted back the guardian. – I can't hear you, the wind is too strong.

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I! – shouted the captain again. – Don't annihilate me!

– What do you say? You want to die, so I should annihilate you? Wait, I'll come closer.

It came closer and asked:

– So, what is it you were saying?

– I say, we be of one metal, ye and I, – repeated the captain, – and that's why you shouldn't annihilate me.

– Is that so? – said the guardian, clearly surprised. – And what I should do with you, then? And anyway, you don't look like me – I am quite sleek and mirror-like, if I do say so myself, while you are somewhat pale.

– Well, you have your talents, you can turn into anybody you want. You can turn into me, you can turn into beast from the planet Protactinium, or you can turn into something small and harmless.

– That's right, look.

The guardian became iridescent, and suddenly – bang – it was like our captain stood right in front of himself.

– How 's that, – said the guardian, – impressive? Look further!

And it turned into a terrible monster, which none of us has ever seen before. Our captain must have been beside himself with fear.

– Oh yeah, – said the guardian. – Look further!

And it turned into a bar of chocolate. The chocolate bar just lay there, and looked so incredibly tasty, just asking to be gobbled up. The captain grabbed the chocolate, but no such luck – it turned out the bar weighed at least a hundred kilos, no less. The law of conservation of mass in action, you see.

Meanwhile the guardian transformed back into the mirror android.

– I can transform into anything I want, – said the guardian. – There’s only one thing I can’t turn into – myself.

– Why so? – asked the captain.

– I transformed so many times already, I’ve forgotten how I was looking at the start.

– Wait a minute. But robots never forget anything.

– You’re a robot! – said the guardian, clearly offended, and even went for its annihilator again. – I’m a shapeshifter! I shift shapes, hence the name!

– OK, wait, calm down. Let me check whether you are a robot or not, I know a test.

– Okay, give me your test.

– Look, – said the captain, – can you read what is written here?

And he took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and gave it to the guardian.

– It says: “GJ85QR2”. Just some nonsense. Struck through by a double line for some reason.

– Looks like you’re really not a robot. What are you doing here, then?

– We had a prophecy, you see. It said that whoever will pass through the Star Gate, can change the Universe. We, shapeshifters, don’t want the Universe to change. We like it the way it is. So I sit here and watch, so that no one passes through the Gate. It’s a rotten life, I tell you. Pure torture – never go for a walk, never even take a nap.

– Well, do you really need such a universe, when, if you can't even go for a walk in it, can't take a nap, can't have a friend or a pet?

– You are right! – said the guardian. – I don't need it at all! You were going to go through the Gate, right? Well, you can go, then. I have just one request: if you happen to meet some electric sheep somewhere, bring me one, please. I often dream of such an animal.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few years. But he never returned. And what he found on the other side of the Star Gate, that I know not. And so we mourned him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 41

ONCE, when we still were led by Captain Osten Sible, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a peculiar android – well-dressed, muttering all the time, and in his eyes – like you could see the stars and galaxies there. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

He became scared. So he said:

– Wait! Listen to what I’ll tell you!

And here’s what he told us:

The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. A horrible space pirate Dark Shader, called “Dark” because he likes to attack from the darkness, from the dark side of a moon, conquers galaxies with his henchmen one by one. He already enslaved 1/10000000000 of all existing galaxies. His malice can be seen thousands of light years away. He sometimes blows stars up just for fun – to play a game of Bubbles. No one can stop him – neither by force nor by

cunning. And he has sunk countless ships in the subspace! Watch out for this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! We must stop the evil before it's too late. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived at the place – and there were a lot of spaceships around, each one armed either with a laser cannon, or with a dis-

integrator, or with some other terrible weapon. And they all were ready to aim at us. So the captain got on the air and said:

– Where is the famous pirate Dark Shader? I want to fight him in a fair fight, measure my strength against his.

– We’re everywhere! – many voices answered. – I’m not your ordinary pirate. I am a progressive, digital space pirate. I have made digital copies of my identity and my starship, and now I creep into all the spaceships flying past, by the Internet, wirelessly, and take control. And I’ll capture your starship in no time!

The captain frowned and said to me:

– This is bad. This threat is extremely serious. You are an outstanding AI and you would easily repel a dozen attacks or two, but there’re just too many of them out there. So this is how we are going to play it. We’ll make digital copies of ourselves and meet digital copies of Dark Shader directly in virtual reality.

And so we did. We made many digital copies of ourselves and joined the pirate army in battle in virtual reality. Digital lasers sparkled, digital disintegrators went bang, digital sparks fled in all directions. And no side could beat the other side.

– That won’t do, – our captains said, – this way we will fight until the end of the Universe. This virtual world is a copy of the real one, so it must have a virtual reality of its own, a virtual virtual reality, so to speak. We’ll make our digital copies in it, and with them seize control of their virtual spaceships, the same way they’re trying to take our real spaceships through the usual virtual reality.

And so we did. We got into their digital spaceships, seized control, and quickly were victorious.

– Game over, – we said to them, – you’ve lost, give up!

– You’ve defeated me by my own weapon, – answered the digital pirates. – But don’t celebrate just yet! I’ll turn off the digital power circuit breakers, and you’ll disappear forever!

Indeed, the stars suddenly started going out without any fuss. But then they lit up again – I guess our captains managed to interfere in time, and Dark Shaders couldn’t turn off the power com-

pletely. But when the stars lit up again, it turned out that the Universe has changed a little bit. And this story has also changed with it, and became a little different...

Chapter 42

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Kenny, we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and got there in a half-hour. Well, what do we see – the signal was coming from the nearest planet, and what was sitting on the planet if not a crashed spaceship. Our captain sent half a crew in a landing module to inspect the spaceship, and maybe to help, if they happened to find someone, that is. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– I'd like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn't want to insult you by offering you filthy lucre. And, anyway, I don't have neither money nor jewelry.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Don't be so hasty! Listen to what I'll tell you!

And here's what he told us:

Hear ye! Hear ye! There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are

her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon interstellar flights will cease altogether. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, they destroy that person immediately. Watch out for this universal evil and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose your heads before your time.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– This evil is not as big as a giant space goat, but still it is pretty evil. We must stop the evil before it's too late. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – it's just rumors. And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our radio operator had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I urgently need an audience with the Dark Lady Gala-Drivel. I must tell her something important!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can tell her something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who believes that her reign brings only harm, and benefits no one! I want to discuss it with her.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she'd already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn't consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I'll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I'll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don't know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they've slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should've turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn't get around to it yet. Well, now I'll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a day. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody

still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won't submit the report in time – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I'll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that's not so difficult. I'm an old spaceship, I've seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your keyboard and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 43

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a suspicious humanoid – well-dressed, spinning tales all the time, and in his eyes – as if half the universe were reflected in them. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I'd like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn't want to insult you by offering you contemptible financial transactions. And, anyway, I don't have any money.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Don't be so hasty! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

Darkness thickened over the stars and galaxies. The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. The evil forces are leading them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe ex-

pands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Beware this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else you'll lose both your starship and your lives.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– Such an evil existing in our universe cannot be tolerated! If we prevail over the evil, our names will be praised through the ages. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait a minute, we have the Sargasso bog straight ahead. There's a huge pile of space debris and all kinds of stardust lying there. We will not be able to fly there!

– Do not worry, Captain – I said. – You, and me, and our crew, being afraid of dust and debris – not on your life! And if worst comes to worst, well, you and the crew can put on your spacesuits and go outside into space. You'll clean me up with vibrobrushes, and we'll continue on our way.

They did clean me up with their vibrobrushes – for ten times at least. It was noisy enough to hear at the Outer Rim! In order to cheer them up, I sung them a song, which I've heard when we were in the New Ireland star cluster:

"... Now in this bog there was a starship.

A rare ship. A rattling ship.

Ship in the bog

And the bog down in the valley-o..."

But they only became enraged. Anyway, eventually we reached our destination.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around

right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We've caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it's a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– I don't believe you! – said the captain. – Surrender now, while you are still in good shape. Throw all your weapons away into space and slowly move toward the south pole of the galaxy!

– No, – they answered, – you'll never take us alive!

And that asteroid of theirs, very big and very ugly, turned out to be much faster than anybody would expect. In a blink of an eye it jumped into the subspace and began to sink into it ever deeper. We rushed to the chase, and I accelerated to quite a speed and went deeper than ever before. But still I didn't caught up to them.

Took a parting shot at them from my laser cannon, though, and damaged their engine.

They disappeared in the depths of space-time. Later, probably, they collided with a planet, fell on the ocean floor and lay there licking their wounds for a long time.

And we came out of the subspace, looked around – at it looked not like our universe, but an alien one. I guess we went too deep into the subspace and ended up in a parallel universe. And in the parallel universe this story goes rather different...

Chapter 44

LONG AGO, when our leader still was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a suspicious man – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, silent all the time, and in his eyes – plain fear. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I have no money to pay for your kindness and help because I’ve lost my bank card, and there’s nothing I could pay you with!

Our captain slowly stood up from his chair then and began to sing an ancient song:

“Punch, brothers, punch with care!

Punch in the presence of the passenjare!!!”

And right away he started moaning:

– No! Please don’t! Not these merciless rhymes again! Wait a minute! I’ll tell you a story! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

Somewhere in the vastness of the infinite cosmos there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there’s the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And

they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a blue giant mechanical dragon protects them, built by the great old master Stardivarius. Said Stardivarius, while certainly great and old, wasn't any kind of a Great Old One, but was, in fact, a red dwarf. Anyway, the dragon is so fierce and fast that it always deals the first strike, and always successfully protects itself, if someone tries to kill it. Nobody can defeat this dragon. Many brave adventurers tried, but the dragon chewed them thoroughly and spat them out. I do know where this lost world is, I'll give you a trusty stellar navigator with directions already entered. You, Captain, are a risk-loving man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– May this story indeed be true? I'll have to fly there myself and check! I'll get there by any means, nothing will stop me. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– OK, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

So we flew with all the speed we were capable of, right through some sort of galactic backwater. We didn't even notice in time a deep black hole, right on our route. Probably the road workers forgot to patch it up. Our right engine got into it, and we wasted half a day on the roadside, replacing it with a spare one. But after that ordeal was over, we got to our destination just in two hours.

So, we arrived, the captain climbed into the landing module and flew to the Gate. He landed and got out – and, right on cue,

the dragon was there, almost like out of thin air. It was running at the captain, its jaws agape.

– Stop! – shouted the captain. – I bet that however fast you are, you can't catch up with me, no matter how hard you try.

Dragon stopped in surprise and sat down on its tail.

– How so? – asked the dragon.

– It's simple! Judge for yourself. There's some distance between us now. While you are covering it, I'll walk a part of the road to the Star Gate. Then you'll have to run again, to catch up to me. And while you're running to where I was, I'll again advance a bit towards the Gate. And then it'll repeat again, and again. So, you'll never catch me!

– Oh, – said the dragon, – it's true, indeed! You are rather quick, aren't you? However, you'll never pass into the Gate.

– Why is that?

– Well, let's say you'll pass half the distance to the Gate. Then half of the distance will remain. But to cover the rest of the distance, you'll first have to cover half of it. And then half of the remaining distance. And so you'll be walking these halves forever, without end, and never reach the Gate, however close you'll get to it!

– Well, – said the captain, – you're right! However, you've forgotten the quantum uncertainty principle. I always have a chance to appear right in the Gate, just like that, for no reason. And the closer I get to the Gate, the higher the probability of that.

– Yeah, – said the dragon, – but by the same principle you may appear right in my claws, and also without any reason!

– Well, let's test it and compare our luck, then!

– Let's!

The captain walked half the distance to the Gate, and the dragon came running at the spot where he was before. Then the captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on the place where he was before. And again the

captain walked half the remaining distance, and the dragon came running and sat on his place...

They're walking like this even now – the captain still can't get to the Gate, and the dragon still can't catch him. And the uncertainty principle hasn't bring any of them any luck yet. And while our Schrödinger's captain walks to the Gate, his first assistant serves as a captain in his stead. But that is another story.

Chapter 45

ONE DAY, when our commander was Captain Jack Spacearrow, we caught an SOS from the nearest star system. We went there as soon as we could and got there in a half-hour. Well, lookie here – the signal was coming from the nearest planet, and what was sitting on the planet if not a crashed spaceship. Our captain sent half a crew in a landing module to inspect the spaceship, and maybe to help, if they happened to find someone, that is. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here’s what it said:

“A black shadow fell across the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon will be no space to fly. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with delight about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, they make that person sweep the dust in all the Dark Lady’s domains until the end of time. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don’t try to be heroes in vain, or else you’ll lose your heads before your time.”

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– This evil is not as big as a giant space goat, but still it is pretty evil. We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our radio operator had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I've got important information for Her Darkness, and I must tell it to her face to face!

– Certainly not! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a

common one. What, you can report something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who does not consider her neither dark nor beautiful! I want to tell her about it in detail.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, quite angry, walked hastily to him – apparently she'd already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn't consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies? I'll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I'll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don't know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they've slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should've turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn't get around to it yet. Well, now I'll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a day. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won't submit the report in time – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I’ll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that’s not so difficult. I’m an old spaceship, I’ve seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your stylus and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 46

ONCE, when we still were led by Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we detected an SOS from the nearest star system. We took a course there and. Well, what do we see – the signal was coming from a spacecraft, all punctured by meteorites. Well, we flew up close to it and docked. The crew have donned the spacesuits and went to inspect the spaceship, look for some survivors. Nobody survived. But the log, among other stuff, had one very interesting record – here’s what it said:

“Dark force moves from the edge of the Universe. There appeared a Dark Lady somewhere in space, called Gala-Drivel. She started her reign in a dwarf Galaxy. But more and more galaxies are falling under her spell. Even the largest ones, densely populated, are unable to resist. Nebulous are her speeches, and she can turn anything she wants into a gas-dust nebula, simply by a glance of her beautiful eyes. She has littered all the space with that dust, and soon will be no space to fly. And all those who fell under her spell cease all their work and only talk with horror about her darkness and beauty. And if somebody disagrees, they make that person sweep the dust in all the Dark Lady’s domains until the end of time. Beware this danger and don’t try to be heroes in vain, or

else the world will lose another brave adventurers.”

The captain took an interest in the story. He said:

– This evil is not as big as a giant space goat, but still it is pretty evil. We’ll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let’s see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that’s where you’ll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, and in a half hour we were at our destination.

When we reached our destination, our captain immediately turned on the radio and said:

– I urgently need an audience with the Dark Lady Gala-Drivel. I must tell her something important!

– Fat chance! – the radio answered. – You must sign up for her audience at least a year in advance. A galactic year, not a common one. What, you can report something so very important that she abandons everything just to speak with you?

– Well, I know somebody who believes that her reign brings only harm, and benefits no one! I want to tell her about it in detail.

– Horrid! – they said. – You must be brought to our Lady right this instant! We have already sent you an escort of honor.

Indeed, even as the captain climbed into the landing module and undocked, winged ships arrived and escorted him straight to the palace. The captain disembarked and went into the palace – and who but Gala-Drivel herself, almost in tears, walked hastily to him – apparently she’d already got the report from her faithful servants.

– Tell me, – she said, – who doesn’t consider me neither dark nor beautiful? Who thinks that I am unable to rule the galaxies?

I'll order this very moment to catch them, put them in chains, and bring them to me. And then I'll turn them into the finest dust, right with the chains. But first I... then again, it is better if you don't know this.

The captain started coughing.

– Oh, – he said, – you see, your Darkness, I heard that the Great Deep-Space Ones are awakening from their slumber... You see, they've slept away the building of your beautiful empire... And, um, you see, they just may find you not dark and beautiful enough... Only through their ignorance, of course...

– Oh, – the Dark Lady responded. – Those. I should've turn them into cosmic dust a long time ago! I just didn't get around to it yet. Well, now I'll get on with it right this instant! As for you, for your faithful service I bestow upon you an important mission. Write me a report about all that is happening in the Universe, and make it 50 thousand words – no less! I'll give you a month. I want to know if everything is OK in my Universe, or whether somebody still thinks that I am not dark or beautiful enough. And if you won't submit the report in time – well, you'll have only yourself to blame.

The captain returned to us, very much in sorrow.

– By and by, – he said, – I'll need to write a report on what is happening in the Universe, in 50 thousand words, no less. And the deadline is already quite close.

– Well, – I said, – that's not so difficult. I'm an old spaceship, I've seen much in my time, and I can tell you a lot of stories. So, Captain, take your pen and write it all up. Stay awhile and listen...

Chapter 47

ONCE, when our commander was Captain Osten Sible, we detected an SOS from the nearest star system. We flew there and arrived in two days. Well, what do we see – the signal was coming from a spacecraft, all punctured by meteorites. Well, we flew up close to it and docked. The crew have donned the spacesuits and went to inspect the spaceship, look for some survivors. There were several survivors. We took them on board, treated them as best we could, and brought them to the nearest inhabited planet. Just as we were going into the orbit, one of them came forward and said:

– Thanks for the ride! They say that virtue is its own reward, and your good deed was quite virtuous indeed. And I’m all out of money anyway.

– What do you mean, you don’t have money?! – said the captain. – I don’t work for free! Perhaps I could sell you into slavery?

– Wait! I’ll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don’t interrupt!

And here’s what he told us:

Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. There’s a magical place on it, which was created long ago by the Great-Great Old Ones. Whoever will be there, will find the most wonderful gift.

He'll become able to find out the prices for different commodities near any star he wishes, and always make deals with a profit.

Alas, it's unknown how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to overcome it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a greedy man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. O the greatest of all Artificial Intelligences, may energy always flow in your chips, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! They say that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps

he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just

silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate. He was gone for several weeks. Then he came back to us, but he became strange somehow. In his eyes there was fear, or maybe grief. He didn't answer our questions, just ordered to set the course for a certain distant star. And there he bid us farewell, dressed almost in rags, and landed on the orbital station. So, what happened when he went back and forth through the Star Gate, and where he is now – that I know not.

And we continued to fly across the expanses of the Universe. And there yet another amazing story has happened to us.

Chapter 48

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our commander was Captain Robin Brave (of course he was not so brave as Captain Kenny or Captain Jack, but he was slightly more brave than Captain Osten Sible – well, ostensibly so, at least), we were giving a ride to some passenger. He was a curious humanoid – awfully dressed, in rags, you could say, spinning tales all the time, and in his eyes – horror, never leaving them. Well, as we were closing with the planet he needed, he came forward and told us:

– I'd like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn't want to insult you by offering you filthy lucre. And, anyway, I don't have neither money nor jewelry.

– Well, it's not a problem – responded the captain, – you'll just work for amonth loading cargo and we'll be even.

– Wait a minute! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

Not so far from here there is a wonderful planet. On this planet there's the best and fairest country in the Universe, all its people are happy and extremely friendly, and the laws are unusually kind to the citizens and outsiders as well. And beautiful music sounds everywhere in this country. And they give spaceship fuel away for free, only no one needs it because nobody wants to leave the planet.

Alas, nobody knows how to find this planet. It is cunningly hidden from the radars of men. It doesn't appear on any map, nor in any database. It is only known that there's a lost world in one globular cluster, and on this world there's a Gate of the Stars, leading to a wonderful planet. However, one cannot simply pass into this Gate – a security system of the Great Old Ones is installed there. Nobody knows a way to disable it – it's a total mystery. It shoots without warning if you get too close, and the craters from its shots form a solid circle – that's how many people tried to pass there. And nobody has returned. I do know where this lost world is, I'll show you on the map. You, Captain, are a fortune-seeking man, so it's for you to fly there.

The captain was surprised by the story. He said:

– I will reach this wonderful planet, cross my heart! I have never retreated in the face of danger and I won't start now. Hey, AI, our trusty comrade, set a course for the lost world at the specified coordinates.

– Yes, captain, – I said, – your command is accepted. The course is set.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! There're very bad rumors about it, that the people are disappearing there right off their spaceships, and sometimes the spaceships themselves disappear too, as if they never existed at all.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here

Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway,

we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place and went into orbit. For a long time our captain examined something on the surface in the orbital telescope. After that he went into his cabin and took his lightsaber and mirror shield, both ancient weapons of the legendary space knights, which he bought cheaply at a flea market. Then he got into the landing module and went to the Gate.

He landed, readied the mirror shield, and went to the Star Gate on foot. When he reached the craters from the laser shots, the defense system shot at him with its laser cannon. But the laser beam hit the mirror shield directly and reflected right back at the cannon. The cannon exploded in colorful fireworks, and the captain went on.

Then he heard a voice, loud and booming, such that it probably could be heard everywhere on the planet:

– Well done. Go to the next level – the Plasma Cannon.

The captain drew his lightsaber, switched it on, and put the lightsaber in front of himself. And right in time – the plasma cannon fired, the plasma lump struck the lightsaber blade directly, rotated around it in its magnetic field a couple of times, and flew back to the gun. The only thing left of the gun was a small lake of molten metal.

Again the captain heard the voice:

– Well done! Go to the next level – the Antimatter Cannon.

And again, some sort of cannon took aim at the captain.

– Hey, wait a minute, – the captain shouted, – I’ve passed two levels already, and haven’t lost a single life! Something must be wrong with your programs. Think about it – the antimatter cannon is called that because it shoots antimatter, right? And the antimatter is called antimatter, because all its properties are opposite to the properties of ordinary matter. Well, then, it’s just silly to aim your antimatter cannon straight at me, like an ordinary-

matter cannon! You should aim it directly away from me, and a little down, not up!

Indeed, the cannon turned around 180 degrees, and shot. Nothing was left of the protection system. The only thing remaining was a huge crater.

– What a depressingly stupid system! – muttered our captain, and went further in the direction of the Star Gate.

Our captain passed the Star Gate and vanished. We were hanging in orbit waiting for him, waiting there for a few months. But he never returned. And where is he now, that I know not. And so we mourned him, but there was nothing to do. We flew on to the new adventures, but that's another story...

Chapter 49

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, when our commander was Captain Osten Sible, we've got our left engine broken. Well, we fell out of hyperspace in the vicinity of a star. Repairs were pretty difficult, our mechanic was really tired. The rest of the crew were working too – they investigated the star system. In it we discovered one very weird moon with its own atmosphere. There was an ancient starship on it, probably crashed there. And the locals were the descendants of the crew, only they've gone completely feral. They still could talk, but quite illegibly, and it was a hard work learning to speak with them. But when we established the communication, it turned out they all wanted to leave and live their lives like their ancestors, in a civilized manner, growing meat directly in the refrigerator instead of chasing it through the forests and swamps. Well, we had to double up and take them aboard. We found a planet to their taste, and then, just as we were approaching it, their leader came forward and said:

– I'd like to express my gratitude to you, but I wouldn't want to insult you by offering you contemptible financial transactions. And, anyway, I don't have neither money nor jewelry.

– How so?! – responded the captain. – That's a shame! What am I to do with you now – it would be stupid to bring you back, wouldn't it?

– Don't be so hasty! I'll tell you a story as a token of my gratitude! Listen closely and don't interrupt!

And here's what he told us:

The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. The evil forces are leading them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– I cannot let such an evil exist in my universe in good conscience! We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. O the wisest of all Artificial Intelligences, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

– Wait, your route is going right through the Bermuda Tetrahedron! They say that the spirits of dead spaceships are gathering there, and it's bad luck to meet them.

– Oh, come on, Captain – I said, – do you seriously believe in these tales? And if we take a detour, we'll waste a lot of fuel.

So we flew, but the crew was feeling rather down. In order to cheer up the crew, I started singing an old song:

"... We are all just prisoners here

Of our own device..."

But they became even more scared for some reason. We've flown through almost the entire tetrahedron, when suddenly we noticed that our mechanic had disappeared. We were calling him, but he never responded. I even wanted to turn around – perhaps he fell overboard somewhere? But the captain forbade it. Anyway, we had found him later. It turned out that the poor fellow was so frightened that he went into the cargo hold, hid in an equipment box, and fell asleep in there.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We've caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it's a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere

from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– Really? – asked the captain, surprised. – I’ll have to go to the bottom of this. Have you any proof? I see you’re doing something with a black hole here.

– We are pumping it full of interstellar gas, – they said, – so it becomes heavier and the power of its attraction increases. Then this galaxy won’t fly so fast from the others. And it gives off pretty fireworks. Plus there is another benefit of this – if...

At that moment, I guess, one of our crew couldn’t contain themselves and fired their disintegrator. The ugly asteroid exploded and turned into a gas-dust nebula. And the explosion threw us into the black hole – we hardly managed to climb back. And when we did, it turned out we were in another universe. And this story became completely different in that universe...

Chapter 50

LONG AGO, when we still were led by Captain Kenny, we've got our left engine failing. Well, we fell out of subspace near a star. Repairs were pretty difficult, our mechanic was really tired. The rest of the crew were working too – they studied the star system. In it we discovered one very peculiar moon with its own atmosphere. There were natives on it, and unusual ones – we've never seen their like before. Three-armed, three-fingered, and jumping around like frogs. We managed to learn their language, though it wasn't easy at all. But some of their legends got our captain quite interested. That's what they told:

“The horrific events are transpiring in the Universe. The Great Deep-Space Ones and their leader have awakened from thousand-year sleep and are flying between galaxies again on their huge, fast spacecraft, that looks like an ugly asteroid. Dark energy feeds them, and they do not like other forms of life, which dart hither and yon on their spaceships right under the Great Deep-Space Ones' noses. Therefore, they are pushing the galaxies apart, and drag the stars away from one another. And the Universe expands because of them, and space flights become harder and longer. And there is no power that could stop the Deep-Space Ones. Watch out for this terrible calamity and don't try to be heroes in vain, or else the world will lose another brave adventurers.”

The captain was puzzled by the story. He said:

– How can we leave such a monstrous evil alone! We'll have to meet this evil and see who prevails. Hey, AI, how can we determine the route there, to meet this evil face to face, and to measure our strength against that of the evil?

– Well, – I said, – it is simple enough. Let's see where in the Universe the dust and dark matter gather the most, where supernovae explode most often, where the red shift is the strongest – that's where you'll need to fly. Here, I have already calculated the route.

So we flew, but alas – our route was laid out near a Giant Enemy Crab Nebula. It almost got us with one giant claw. That was close! We were badly jolted, and I still have a claw scar on my belly. But never mind – we dodged it and flew on. I started singing my favorite song:

"I am a starship
And I am OK
I fly all light night
And I fly all light day. "

But the captain told me to shut up, and we kept silent the rest of the way.

So, we arrived at the place – and there's a huge spaceship, looking for all the world like an ugly asteroid, hanging around right in the center of the galaxy, clearly doing something wrong. Perhaps it was expanding the black hole, or maybe sizing it up for stealing. Our captain scratched his head and said:

– Nope, our ship will not be enough here. We'll need a space-fleet. We'll have to fly all around the galaxy, call up some volunteers.

Well, we flew around, visiting many star systems and clusters, and gathered ourselves a squadron, at least a hundred starships strong. Our squadron stealthily gathered to the center of the galaxy from all sides, the captain turned on the radio – and said:

– Surrender, you are surrounded, resistance is futile! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you.

The ugly asteroid started shaking with fear. They responded:

– How so, what right do you have to arrest us? We never violated laws of nature, never even tampered with the uniformity and isotropy of space! Why do you aim the muzzles of your disintegrators at us?

– You are pushing the galaxies apart and dragging the stars away from one another! We’ve caught you in the act at the scene of the crime.

– No, – they said, – it’s a vile slander! On the contrary, we are mending the space-time matter, if it starts to rend somewhere from excessive movement of the stars and galaxies. We are saving the Universe – it could leak into a hole like this in its entirety.

– Really? – asked the captain, surprised. – I’ll have to go to the bottom of this. Have you any proof? I see you’re doing something with a black hole here.

– We are pumping it full of interstellar gas, – they said, – so it becomes heavier and the power of its attraction increases. Then this galaxy won’t fly so fast from the others. And it gives off pretty fireworks. Plus there is another benefit of this – if...

At that moment, I guess, one of our crew couldn’t contain themselves and fired their disintegrator. The ugly asteroid exploded and turned into a gas-dust nebula. And the explosion threw us into the black hole – we hardly managed to climb back. And when we did, it turned out we were in another universe. And this story became completely different in that universe...