

A SYNAPSE & BRODERBUND PRODUCTION

Scanned and compiled by Underdogs for Home of the Underdogs,
<http://www.theunderdogs.org/>

ESSEX

ELECTRONIC NOVEL

BY

Bill Darrah
Author

Bill Darrah and William Mataga
Programmers

Printed Material By

Richard Sanford and Bill Darrah




TABLE OF CONTENTS

11	STARBASE ONE HEARSAY
19	SIRUS SECTOR THE RESOURCE SURVEY
25	THE SPACEPORT PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE
41	MALPHORMALLEH THE HAMSTER PEOPLE
45	THE SHUTTLE IN TRANSIT
49	Adventurer's Diary
89	How to Talk to Essex
97	About the Authors

1

ESSEX



STARBASE ONE HEARSAY

“SLOWASA duck in a mudbath.” Herb Kerby reclined his chair and stared, deadpan.

“It’s all astrology, a moon thing, a lunar phase. I mean how are we supposed to fill up this rag day after day? You can’t have a star-fleet scandal every week. What I’m saying is nobody’s hot all the time, know what I mean?” Skeets Randolph raised another chain of bubbles through the water cooler. He paced to the window and back, quick paces on short legs.

“Relax,” Kerby suggested, “you’ll think of something. Go shoot Norton; it’ll make page three. Better yet, get an angle: ‘Man bites robot,’ et cetera. Something new and different. Think about all those planets, all the smarmy stories out there. Get in gear, kid. Now how about if you beat it so I can scour my brainpan in peace for a while?” Kerby chewed the inside of his lip, hoping it was enough.

“Okay, okay. Lots o’ help you are:” Skeets gulped the last paper-flavored mouthful and crumpled his cup. “I might call Patty Daniels at the *Echo*, have a few brews at the Billy Goat. Swap yarns, know what I mean?”

Kerby shook his hand in the air like it was hot stuff. Skeets

waved a toodle-loo wave and exited. Kerby watched him through his office window, navigating like a pinball through the desks in the large outer room. It couldn't really be called a newsroom, any more than writing for *Galactic Hearsay* could be called writing. Still, it had its little diversions. Lucia Gray, for example, travel editor, applying burnt sienna lipstick at her desk in the far corner. Kerby tore himself away.

He had already waited a short eternity for Skeets to leave. He wasn't in the mood to share this lead with anybody, especially Randolph, who would put his own byline on the Christmas story if you looked the other way. What lead? Maybe nothing. Or, as Kerby dared to speculate as he turned back to his computer, maybe a little bit of something big.

He had blanked the screen when Randolph barged in. A line and a half, two lines at most, were all he had seen. He switched the monitor back on and waited. Nothing. A pale sea. With a two-key stroke he commanded the computer to restore its memory, all transmissions received within the last seven minutes. Herb Kerby held his breath and waited. In a moment, the words redisplayed in quick lines from left to right, like rapidly toppling dominoes. He read them again now, and more.

At first it was difficult to believe that all the waiting was paying off. Kerby counted back in time. He had been covering Professor Klein for six weeks. No, closer to seven. That's what a nose for news really meant, *not* a lucky stab or two. It was one, instinct and two, perseverance. All right, maybe it was a break now and then too.

Kerby's foot was tapping on the plexiglass carpet shield as he reread the lines on the monitor. He pressed a key and the printer began to eject a copy. In a few seconds it was finished. The message was brief, less than half a screen. He printed another. His receiver had been set to intercept any transmissions from Klein's sector of the starsystem. So far, everything had been mundane, resource survey broadcasts to headquarters, that sort of

egghead shoptalk. Nothing remotely like this. Kerby stored the transmission in a password-locked file and deleted the original.

He tore off the printouts, separated them, and read the transmission again, word by word. He would break the story in the *Hearsay*, but imagine the rollout! Every paper in the spiral arm would be clamoring for it. Maybe that long-coveted editor slot at the Omega *Word* wasn't so far off after all.

Herb Kerby blanked the monitor again and crossed the cramped office to the single coat hook. As he took down his jacket, he imagined the closet in a new office, a cavernous expanse with wooden hangers and a thick pile. He folded the two printouts and slipped one into his left coat pocket, one into his right. Crossing again to his desk, he picked up his phone, pressed the single preprogrammed digit, and turned off the video transmitter.

"Federation Headquarters, Commodore Norton's Office."

"Commodore Norton, please."

"Yes, who should I say is calling?"

Kerby broke the connection with the tip of his index finger on the white button. So Norton was there. He was smiling to himself as he replaced the receiver. Whistling tunelessly, he grabbed his hat and strode through the door into the outer room. He spotted Randolph, one ear glued to his telephone and a loony grin on his lips, a second before Randolph spotted him.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Zip. Shirts at the cleaners, that's all, kid."

Lucia looked up from her compact mirror, eyes vacuous and inviting. Kerby rounded her desk.

"Nobody at home to iron them for me, the shirts that is, my dear." He slipped beside her. "Single can be so painful, if you catch my drift. But you know what, Lucia, pretty soon I'll wear a shirt once, throw it away. Suits, ties, same thing."

"Really. You drunk?" Lucia's gaze narrowed.

"No, babe," Kerby pedaled backwards. "But stick around. We'll

throw down one or two this weekend, just you and me. Go to earth or some such place. Listen to live music. Champagne. Mark it on your calendar," Kerby instructed as he backed out the door into the hall, affixing his hat in its usual back-of-the-head perch. "In ink," he added and winked, the door slamming behind him.

Lucia Gray, Galactic *Hearsay* travel editor, snapped her compact shut and listened to Kerby's steps fading in the hall. Funny guy, she thought. The kind that lives for the big break. Nothing doing. She'd known one or two of those — one or two too many. S t i l l The other keyboards chattered around her in the office. Across the room, Skeets Randolph was eyeballing her, trying out his grin. What a creep. Lucia rotated to face her computer and focused on her article, a piece on the Chorion Spas. She thought for a moment of earth and of that quaint romantic beverage, champagne. Herb Kerby reformed in her mind's eye, the hat on the back of his head like something he'd seen Jimmy Stewart do in a late-night movie. Funny guy, Lucia thought. Funny guy.

"I'M SORRY, the commodore isn't Hey! Hey!"

I Kerby tripped nimbly past the secretary-ensign in the outer office. The flustered aide jumped up, red above his perfectly white uniform collar.

"That's okay, funny buttons," Kerby called over his shoulder, "I'll show myself in."

In a moment his hand was on the knob. The man behind the nameplate, Commodore W. Norton, swiveled his chair from the computer terminal that had been commanding his full attention, A video game cycled on the monitor in kaleidoscopic patterns. He was momentarily speechless. Kerby closed the door quickly behind him.

"What in the void do you want?"

"A mere five minutes of your time, Excellency, and a

monosyllabic affirmative or negative." The door burst open and the puffing ensign grabbed Kerby's arm.

"Correct," Kerby teased, "but late."

"I'm sorry, sir. He got one leg up on me."

"That's a dogfaced lie," Kerby countered.

"Throw him out of here!" Norton bellowed.

"Not so fast. you might want to peruse this." Kerby snatched a printout from his pocket and flipped it onto Norton's desk. The ensign continued to drag Kerby backwards, dislodging his hat.

"Hold it." The ensign halted, locked with Kerby in an absurd embrace. They were both panting heavily. Norton glowered at the reporter, reptile eyes charged with contempt, and unfolded the printout. He scanned it, chiseled features betraying no emotion.

"That's all, Mullins. Leave us and close the door." The ensign released his hold reluctantly, saluted, and left the room. Kerby shrugged his jacket back in place.

"Where did you get this?" Norton's voice was low and controlled, a metallic monotone. Kerby retrieved his hat and blew invisible dust from the shabby rim.

"We have ways, Commodore. The point is, transmission was aimed at you, acknowledge? It's pretty fair proof that there's action around Vollchon. A little development Federation has been denying for some time now "

"All it proves, Kerby, is that you and your fellow muckrake bums are falsifying data transmissions." Norton crumpled the printout. Kerby extracted the copy from his other pocket and held it up, folded, between two fingers.

"You clam up and I print the transmission complete. Proof that Klein has discovered Vollchon activity which eluded Federation detection, eluded it long enough to assemble a battle fleet. Proof that the very same Professor Klein, our only scientific mind capable of implementing a neutron deterrent quickly enough to save this arm of the galaxy from Vollchon takeover, has been forced down on some remote hell-hole of a planetoid. In fact, Lunex

Prize winner Ignatz Klein, one of the most revered scientists of all time, may be dead by now. All because there was no evidence of Vollchon activity which Federation was willing to admit. How's that for a headline, Commodore? Klein Kicks -Fed Says Vollchons Imaginary!"

"You print that and I'll have your garbage-digging head on a laser disc."

"Let's not play games, Commodore. If a Vollchon fleet got past Federation detection, it's a story a little bigger than both of us. Galaxy in quite imminent danger, you savvy? Now cough it up. There's Vollchon action happening now, right now, and a lot of it. Yes or no."

"I do not deny that there have been indications of Vollchon activity in the Sirius sector," Norton surrendered the information deliberately, like a man unburdening himself of grief. On the computer monitor behind him, the game cycled vibrantly in orange and lavender.

"What about Klein? He's history, isn't he?"

"Professor Klein is alive and a rescue mission is underway."

"Rescue? How? You don't have a single Federation ship within ten days of Sirius. The only starship in that sector is Dee's Essex and that's a private ship — about as private as you can get."

"Top secret, Kerby. And you'll never find out by poking around here. If I see your face again, you'll be writing with your fingernails on a cell wall."

"What for?"

"A flat head. I don't need a what for. And Kerby — I didn't have to tell you anything. You owe me when you write this up."

"Nobody deserves a bigger break than you, Commodore." Kerby popped his cap back on, opened the door and left it to give Ensign Mullins something officious to do. He was already writing in his head as he caught a slideway back to the office.

TRAFFIC WAS HEAVY and the usual crew, including lovely Lucia, had left for the day by the time Kerby returned. He went directly to his desk, ready to work. The computer monitor seemed to leap at him.

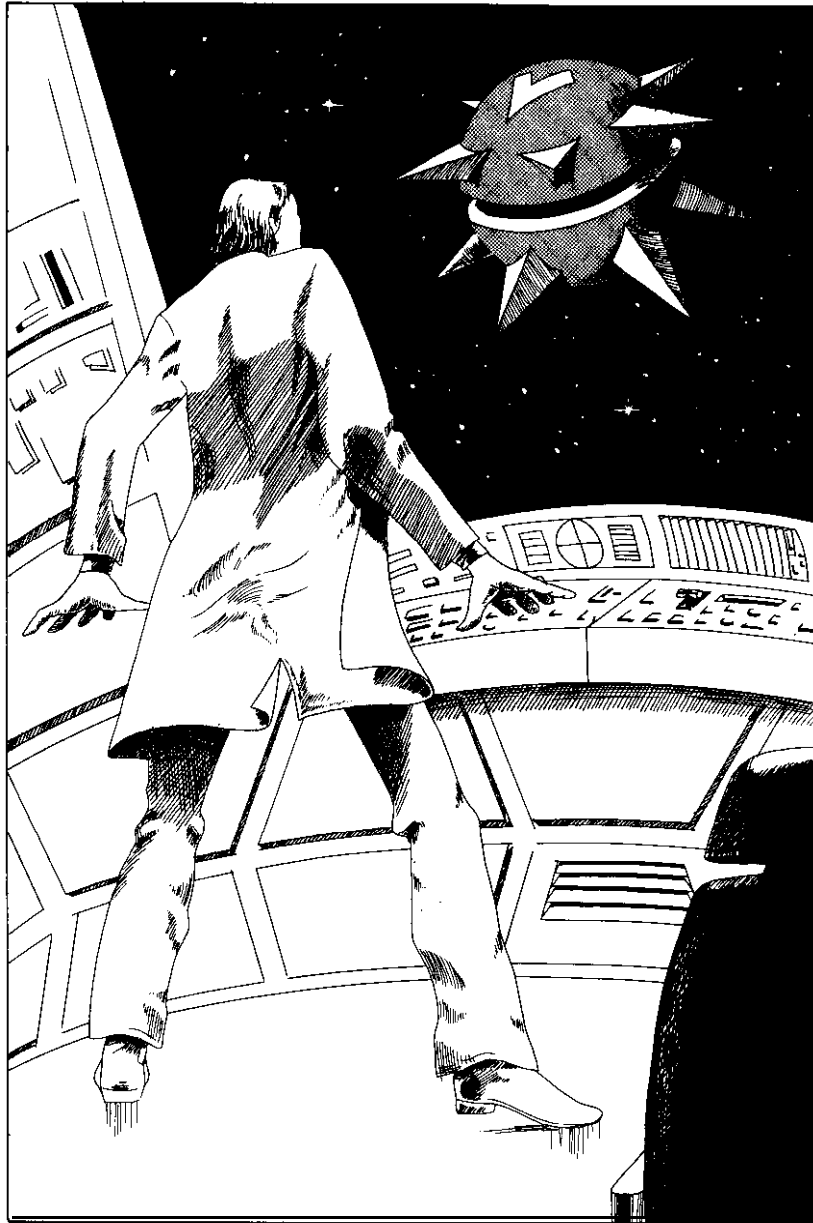
The screen appeared fried from within, a brownish-gray patina like a burned-out light bulb. Around the edge of the monitor, a smoke-smudged ring was visible, and an aroma of singed electronics lingered in the air.

Kerby dashed into the outer room and feverishly accessed his data files from another terminal. He recalled the last half hour of received transmissions. One brief message scrolled onto the screen:

We warn you! Abandon
crude attempts to intercept
transmissions from Sirius.
Sirius is now a Vollchon sector.
Death to all who oppose us!

Kerby stared at the screen for a moment then glanced back in through his office window at the oddly discolored monitor. He had been attached to that computer. He had felt something for it, even for the Esc key that always stuck. Norton, Klein, the galaxy in danger of collapse, they were secondary somehow. Herb Kerby was riled. What did they say in the old days, the pen was mightier?

In the empty office of the scandal rag, Herb Kerby began typing, one sentence appearing clear and clean on the monitor, then another. He began to type faster. the only reporter who knew that from a not-so-remote corner of the galaxy, a real deadline was approaching.



SIRUS SECTOR

THE RESOURCE SURVEY

THREE-SEVEN-FOUR, Professor Ignatz Klein repeated under his breath. The resource survey scope imparted a green cast to his face, almost as though his forehead and cheekbones were glowing from within. The stellar discriminant fluorescence indicated precisely three-seven-four.

He sat back from the scope and ran his fingers through his hair. The possibility that he was orbiting the wrong planet was patently absurd. He had already run error-free diagnostics on the survey scope and the data systems. After staring absently into its blank face for a long moment, he recalled the function of the parallax terminal. Checking it confirmed his position. Were there other variables? Only the resource standards remained, figures so familiar to Klein that forgetting them would be inconceivable. Still, nothing could be left to chance.

In an only partly formulated, mostly unconscious way, Klein resented the rigor, although it was a feeling that would always resist full acknowledgment. He resented the demand implicit in his profession, in his way of seeing, the persistent requirement for scrutiny, leaving no anomalous event to the vagaries of the senses. Was the way to absolute knowledge the inability to trust,

even yourself, a constant peeling back of that old world-adhesive "seems to be"?

This jumbled amalgam of sensations occurred in Ignatz Klein somewhere below the threshold of consciousness. He crossed the deck of the one-man module and called up the Resource Standards file on an amber monitor. Point-zero-zero-seven-five. Of course. What else could the quantity have been? Hadn't Klein himself helped to determine the mineral resource allotments for the trade sanction treaty? The Vollchon portion was limited to .0075 parts per million of gerontium, the natural distribution, a fraction that would make construction of even one battle destroyer hull impossible.

The resource scope was still visible from where he stood. Klein's breath caught for an instant. The survey scope which he had been using to explore the surface of Vollchon, the scope he had used on dozens of other uneventful planetary surveys, had seemed to flicker momentarily. The green glow had vanished for an instant, a fraction of an instant, and returned. Or had he imagined it, a synaptic blip, a brief shadow on the retina? He stood perfectly still, observing the green aurora above the scope, a pale fan of upward-spreading light. In a moment the fan snapped shut.

Klein dashed to the survey scope and stared down into the dark rectangle. A green trace skittered across the blackness and disappeared. His hand went automatically to the power switch which had not been moved. Perhaps only the monitor, the imaging crystal. The other computer screens in the module began flickering. The amber screen turned suddenly brownish-gray, and smoke exhaled from the ventilation slots on the sides of the computer.

Klein spun to face the control panel. Internal power stable, pressure stable. His brain was racing to the inevitable. The source of the malfunctions was outside the ship. He glanced up and, for the first time in hours since beginning the resource survey experiments, looked out the broad command station window into

surrounding space.

The wide rust-colored top of Vollchon lay in the lower portion of the window. Above it, motionless in the field of pure blackness and twinkling stars, too far in the distance to see details, hovered an ominous steel-gray ship, a strangely studded sphere. The ship was scanning Klein's module, disabling his equipment. In a moment, he could be locked into a force field.

Klein hit the warp jump control and the ship lurched. He was moving. There might still be time. But the ship above the planet's horizon began moving also, gaining on him rapidly, the battle destroyer enlarging in the window, ballooning to fearsome proportions. The ominous sphere was outfitted with great pointed arms, like enormous thorns or spikes, each extending at least two hundred feet into space. Klein, beyond reason, was leaning his weight against the warp jump stick, both arms straight from the shoulder.

With his very survival in the balance, trapped in this most horribly alien of contests, something about the pursuit nevertheless felt familiar to Klein. The monstrous battle machine was like a token, a reminder of an old foe — time. Time, the dimension Klein could not control, could never alter because it was change itself, relative, perpetually elusive. Seconds drawn into years when each second could be the last. Endless seconds escaping the Vollchon planetary system. Another planet appearing in the window, nearing so slowly. If he could reach the far side of Malphormalleh, he stood a chance of evading with a low orbit, perhaps a landing.

A sudden blast as bright as a magnesium flare rocked the ship, toppling Klein from the controls to the deck. The shot had ripped past with a savage hiss. The professor could see the battle destroyer cruising closer, probably angling for a second shot. As Klein's hand returned to the controls, he knew that the second strike, if it came, would be unnecessary.

Even with the stick full forward, the warp jump failed to

engage. The planet and the enemy ship were rotating slowly in the window. Klein realized that his ship was beginning to spin, falling helplessly, disabled by the wing-shot.

One terminal remained intact. Professor Klein worked his way unsteadily across the deck and switched on the input microphone.

"Klein to base. Sirius sector. Being forced down onto Malphormalleh. Repeat, Malphormalleh. Coordinates one-nine-four, three-zero-two, zero-zero-eight, Have detected abnormally high gerontium presence on surface of Vollchon. Suspect violation of trade sanction treaty. Under fire from unidentified destroyer. Power loss

Klein's feet rose from the deck. So did the chairs, books, pencils, all objects not secured to the weightless, plummeting capsule. Pages of notes drifted absurdly past Klein's face. As the microphone chord tore loose from the computer, he wondered if Malphormalleh's atmosphere was thin enough, if the heat shield would hold. He floated across the capsule until he lay, still clutching the microphone like an obsolete talisman, flat against the window. A wall of glass separated him from the cold hands of space. The planet was rising inexorably to meet him. Above him, moving still closer, the battle destroyer loomed in the void like an angel of death, emblazoned in red on its underside the infernal letter V.



THE SPACEPORT PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE

THE WAITER in the spaceport restaurant glanced down at Kaxalgazmurithar and blushed, his face darkening by degrees, gradually approaching the red of Kaxal's carapace. "Monsieur, forgive me. These menus are quite old. I assure you that we no longer ." His voice trailed off in embarrassment.

The Fraxulian salesman of cleaning utensils nodded and tried to clear his brain simulacrum of violent thoughts. He concentrated on the sections of the menu that did not feature members of his own species.

"Would Monsieur care to order now?" the waiter inquired timidly. Kaxal dismissed the fantasy that this very waiter had eaten his third cousin the previous year, days before Fraxulians were removed from the menus of all major restaurants.

"Eewoop," his prosthetic voice squawked, "grazit don't mind this matchanical voice, it always frezzitcalit ." Kaxal carefully removed his voder and pounded it three times deliberately on the checked tablecloth.

"There!" the device announced for him. "I think my voice is working propervly; I am ready to arver now."

"Yes, 'Monsieur?'"

"I will have the NEW specialty of the house."

"Certainly, and may I say on behalf of everyone here at the Frax House that we are very pleased to serve you."

Kaxal remained calm and managed to convince himself that no play on words was intended. "Thank you," his voder said automatically. As he observed the passersby in the spaceport terminal, he fervently hoped that his upcoming excursion on the Essex would be completely uneventful.



TINY ED CAREFULLY folded the paper he had bought in the spaceport newsstand, then tore it in half. "Ha!" he exclaimed, "this time the Federation will have to be more severe with the Vollchons. If this were the Midget Confederation, we would never have let the Vollchons go in the first place!" Johon, Ed's friend and sometime debating opponent, wrinkled his nose.

"What could the Midcon have done to stop the Vollchons after their first attack?" he taunted. "Now wait until I finish, Ed. I meant that the Midcon had no heavy armaments to combat the Vollchons and ."

"Just the kind of big-person snobbery I expect whenever I mention the Midcon. In those days there weren't any battle machines on either side. Had the Midcon survived to the time of the first Vollchon encroachment, we would have had just as powerful arms as the Federation and a lot more spirit to use them."

"Well, maybe you're right and maybe not; there's no way to test your theory now. I only hope you don't bring up the Midcon to Captain Dee when you go aboard the Essex. You'll bore him to death." A loud page for "Mr. Robert Clemon" sounded through the terminal. Tiny Ed waited for a moment of silence.

"On the contrary, Johon. I think Dee will know an adventurous spirit when he sees one. I wouldn't be surprised if he makes me a field explorer for the Essex."



NANCY SMITH MOVED three seats away from the woman blowing emerald fumes from a Marlowe vapor sucker. Nancy had inadvertently seated herself in the smoking section of the spaceport gate. The tall muscleman in magnesium alloy briefs was eyeing her from the corner. The behavior of life-forms in public spaceports! she thought. Nancy crossed her legs, slipped her skirt up one inch, and resumed the article she had begun in *Persons Magazine*.

Captain Dee: Dead or Alive?

RUMORS ARE FLYING THAT CAPTAIN Dee, president of UIC and legendary recluse commander of the *Essex*, the most formidable private starship in the galaxy, is dead.

Speculation first arose over

an eyewitness report by Stu Beavers, a Federation Express courier. Beavers recently reported sighting a pod-sized projectile being jettisoned from the *Essex* into deep space. However, petty officer Joyce Carew, spokesperson for UIC, claims that the pod contained only garbage, the product of shipwide spring cleaning.

Proof On Film

CONTROVERSIAL BIOGRAPHER
and electronic novelist Norbert Mailstrom has refueled the controversy. Mailstrom has produced what he claims to be a rare photo of Dee's graduating class at the Academy. In the picture, Dee seems to be wearing a shoe on his right foot, but only a black sock on his left. Mailstrom, arguing for

a symbolic connotation, theorizes that Dee was actually dead at the time of his graduation and that an imposter has been commanding the Essex in his place. Irvin Howard, literary critic and author of the definitive biography of Dee, contends that the entire Mailstrom theory is nothing more than a crude publicity ploy concocted by Mailstrom's agent, Scott Smeardith.



The Academy graduating class of 2299 (Dee is allegedly third from left in front row.)

He's Fine, Says Lupa

LUPA VARGA, FORMER MISS Cosmos and popular video actress on Arion A, contends that Dee is fit as a fiddle and

that matrimonial plans may be in the offing. Triple-divorcee and one-time companion of Federation Commander Walkrieg Norton, Lupa has her favorite spot already picked out for the ceremony, earth's Golden Gate Park. Good luck, Lupa.

We'll see about this Dee soon enough, Nancy thought, and absentmindedly slipped the issue of *Persons* into the pocket of her capacious flight jacket. The muscleman grinned. Nancy glared him down and turned to another magazine, *Brainscape*. She flipped from back to front until an interview with Professor Ignatz Klein caught her eye.

BRAINSCAPE INTERVIEW:

PROFESSOR IGNATZ KLEIN

B: Congratulations, professor, on receiving the Lunex Prize.

K: Thank you.

B: How do you believe your early experiences contributed to your eventual development of the Neutron Snap Theory?

K: Early experience. Childhood. Yes. My father was a linguistics professor and my mother a voice coach. Between them I was speaking Greek and Mandarin at age five. I renounced academic pursuits completely for the rest of my formative years. Then, was it ten? No, seven. I was seven. I met a very great filmmaker, by then nearly destitute, who called my attention to the movements of clouds reflected in puddles of rain water. He called it the first cinema. The material transformation of puddles to clouds inspired wonder in me that the image and its representation were not only metaphorically but also physically one in the continuum of change. I would like to say that this gift of awe led directly to the formulation of Neutron Snap. Unfortunately, as you probably know, I derived the actual theory while on a Guggenberg Grant on the planet Halvor, which has a thin atmosphere, negligible cloud formations, and no puddles of any kind. Still, I think

the image of a cloud gliding across the mirror surface of a simple puddle stands behind it all, although I confess I am at a loss to explain just how.

B: Are you concerned that your discovery might someday lead to a nearly instant capability to manufacture neutron armaments?

K: Perhaps. Yes.

B: Then do you believe that it is the duty of the scientific community to safeguard this knowledge, to contain it within responsible hands?

K: We must do what we can

B: Then aren't you really describing a kind of tyranny of science, investing ominous power in a few individuals?

K: Did I say that?

B: What will you do now that you have received the galaxy's highest award for scientific achievement?

K: Following a few weeks of vacationing, I expect to conduct a series of resource surveys for the Federation.

B: Are the surveys to test your hypothesis

K: The theoretical syllogism modeling the phenomenometric distribution of matter in the universe.

B: Yes. And is it also true that resource surveys are highly sought-after assignments in the scientific community?

K: Well, they're boring but they pay. The krupek isn't worth what it was once, you know. Don't let them fool you: there isn't much money in science.

B: What would you advise our young people to study today to be successful?

K: Literature. That's the field to watch these days.

B: Thank you, Professor Klein. We're glad you're on our side.



"EXCUSE ME. UH, do you know anything about these gadgets?" Fred Jones looked down at the hoverfield generator the stranger was turning nervously in his hands. "My hovercraft's stalled in a tow zone out in the lot and I was wondering."

"Don't lose our place. I'll be back in a minute," Fred told his wife. Martha's lips tightened with characteristic impatience.

"Are you really going on the Essex?" the stranger inquired as he led Fred through the sliding door of the spaceport toward the disabled vehicle.

"If we can get tickets. There's going to be a gang wanting to get off this mck when the Essex shuttle arrives."

"I guess you're pretty excited about going off planet. I've never left ground before myself, except in that, of course." Fred hefted the generator, a profitless chunk of technology which yielded no clues to its internal problems. The craft looked very heavy to push.

"Well, after a while the excitement wears off," Fred confessed. "You see, we've logged over a dozen parsecs on this vacation already." The stranger looked very impressed. "In fact, now we'd like to get home early. That's why we're taking the Essex."

"Really. How early?"

"Two weeks. Why?"

"Oh nothing, nothing. Good to go but good to get back, they say." The stranger grinned, exposing a jawful of crooked teeth which Fred found mildly repellent. Oh well, maybe he could turn this little interlude into more than a waste of time.

"That hovercraft's a beaut. You've got service insurance, I suppose ."

M^{ARTHA} ARMS FOLDED and tapping her toe, had bought their tickets by the time Fred returned. "What kept you? You were gone over half an hour. I bet you tried to unload a policy on that poor guy, didn't you." Fred glanced around, looking momentarily disoriented.

"Of course not. It's just that he had a disconnected oscillator and it took a while to ."

"Don't give me that, Fred; you're hopeless with machinery. You'd just better keep your hands out of things on the Essex."



CROSSING THE SPACEPORT lobby to the Fresh machine, McKinnley reflected on the test series. Routine firings before any flight. But this time, they might not have been so routine.

The purring engines and the power level readings had indicated that all was running smoothly. But Commander Gregory McKinnley didn't just follow the readings; he followed his heart, and his hunches. The ship and his engines would be fine, barring unforeseen catastrophies, but it was his job to worry about those unforeseens.

This time, the engineer thought, Captain Dee had really fouled things up, maybe even endangered the ship. How could the engines recover if the only trilithium crystal left on board gave out? The engineer swigged his Fresh and headed back down a long corridor.

As old as that crystal was, it should support normal functions; just no long warp jumps, that's all. Eventually Dee would get over his pique and apologize to the trilithium dealer. Poor guy, the captain had thrown him in the brig for no reason at all, it seemed. With Kroz locked up, the nearest source of trilithium was Omicron Delta Theta Five, a slag heap of a planet. No one would want to scrounge about for crystals there. The engineer approached the door of the crew's teleporter.

A standby course to ODTS could be charted, just in case. But nothing would go wrong. The engines would be fine, McKinnley half-prayed, under his breath. If anything should happen to the old crystal, finding a new one would become the life-and-death concern of everyone aboard the Essex.



MALPHORMALLEH THE HAMSTER PEOPLE

AS THE LITTLE CRAFT plummeted to the ground, Widget and Plover watched its meteoric descent. “Our great starliner crashed like that, Plovie, remember?”

“Oh come on, don’t be a grobbol. None of us was alive when the great starliner crashed here. Only Queen Bctuma was around then, and she was just a pup,” Plover chided.

“The queen was never a pup,” Widget reprimanded, feigning shock. “She was born full grown and in her throne, with a frax shank in her mouth.”

“We shouldn’t talk about the queen like that. What if she should hear us?” She pulled Widget’s tail.

“She would think nothing of it; she knows we all love her.”

“Aye,” Plover said, deeply moved. “I’d give my right arm to feed her.”

“It might come to that if we don’t catch something soon.” Plover nodded gravely.

Just then Soerctue ran up as fast as her stubby legs would carry her. “Plovie, Widget, did you see that?!”

“Of course we saw it,” the larger female said. “We also felt the

ground shake, and this morning we saw the sun come up." Soerctue, accustomed to their teasing, ignored it and went on.

"Don't you think there might be something valuable in the crash? Do I have to do all your thinking, huh?" Momentarily intimidated, Plover said nothing, but Widget quickly agreed and all three moved on to investigate.

AT THE CRASH SITE, they were amazed by the sight of the shiny metallic hull, partially wedged into the cliff wall.

"You can tell it's a human ship by the boxy shape," Soerctue stated sagely.

"Look!" shouted Widget. "Look in the window!"

"It looks like Plugh! What's he doing in a human's spaceship?"

LATER, BACK IN the hunter's chambers, Plugh told his story. "Me and Eewoalk dug a tunnel out to the ship, a quick tunnel, nothing special, and tapped on the hatch. When the human opened it, she jumped him and I went inside to look around. I didn't find anything interesting and the hatch closed again."

"You mean," Eewoalk chimed in, "that you tripped and pulled the hatch closed when you left, clumsy."

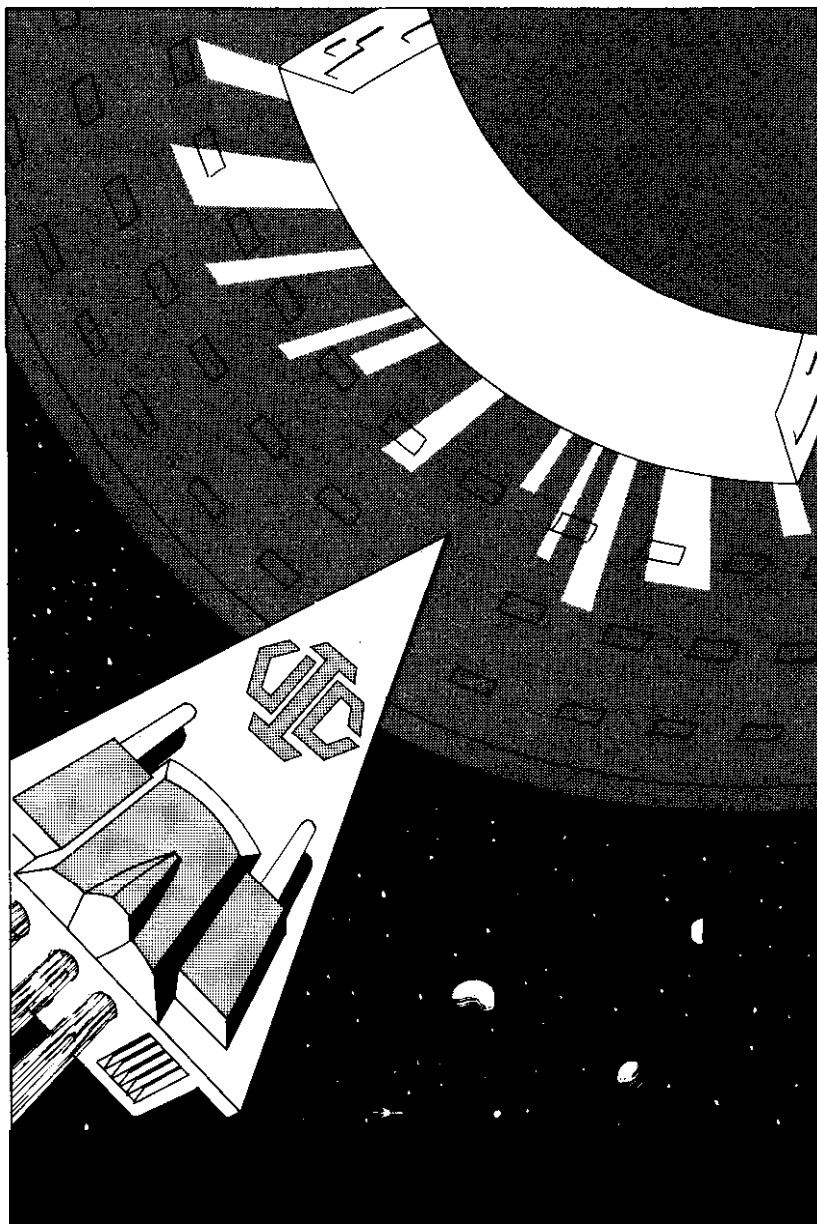
"You weren't afraid of the human were you, Plugh?" Widget teased.

"Certainly not," Plugh insisted, "but he was very strange. He seemed to be less afraid of us than of something else, names he kept repeating, something like jeronchum and vulchons."

The quick, high-pitched voices of the furry creatures penetrated the stone corridor and fell upon the ears of Professor Ignatz Klein in his cell. Even with his face against the bars, it was impossible to see them around the corner in the main hall, his captors, the ravenous little cannibals who had vowed to eat him, perhaps within hours. Escape was unimaginable; he had

tested every inch of the stone. And who could possibly come looking for him in the underground burrow on Malphormalleh?

The professor sat down in a dank corner and tried to think of a starship close enough to save him. No Federation ships within days. Among the private vessels in Sirius, he could imagine only one close enough to attempt a rescue. Only the Essex.



THE SHUTTLE IN TRANSIT

RECLINING THE BACK of the shuttle chair, I'm staring out the porthole into the dark, empty eye of space. Why do I have the funny feeling this whole trip isn't what I bargained for? I've wanted to take this tour for years and never had the chance. So what if the others wouldn't be at the top of my party list?

The ones across the aisle, for example. She must be memorizing that Galactic *Hearsay* rag, scouring it line-by-line through those rhinestone glasses. I suppose that's her husband next to her in the wrinkled gray suit, nodding, mouth open, nearly dead to the world.

A tall reddish crustacean passes in the aisle, inclining his eyestalks to look me over then ambling back toward the rear of the shuttle. He raises his claw toward a good-looking woman, but she brushes him off, her intelligent, disinterested gaze swiveling toward the window. Who's that bizarro in the seat next to her? He's three feet tall at most. And what's that "Midcon" T-shirt about? I guess the only normal one is sitting in the seat next to me, and he looks like they sewed him up with a big secret inside. He just keeps staring straight at the bulkhead with those little gray eyes like one of the old NASA types.

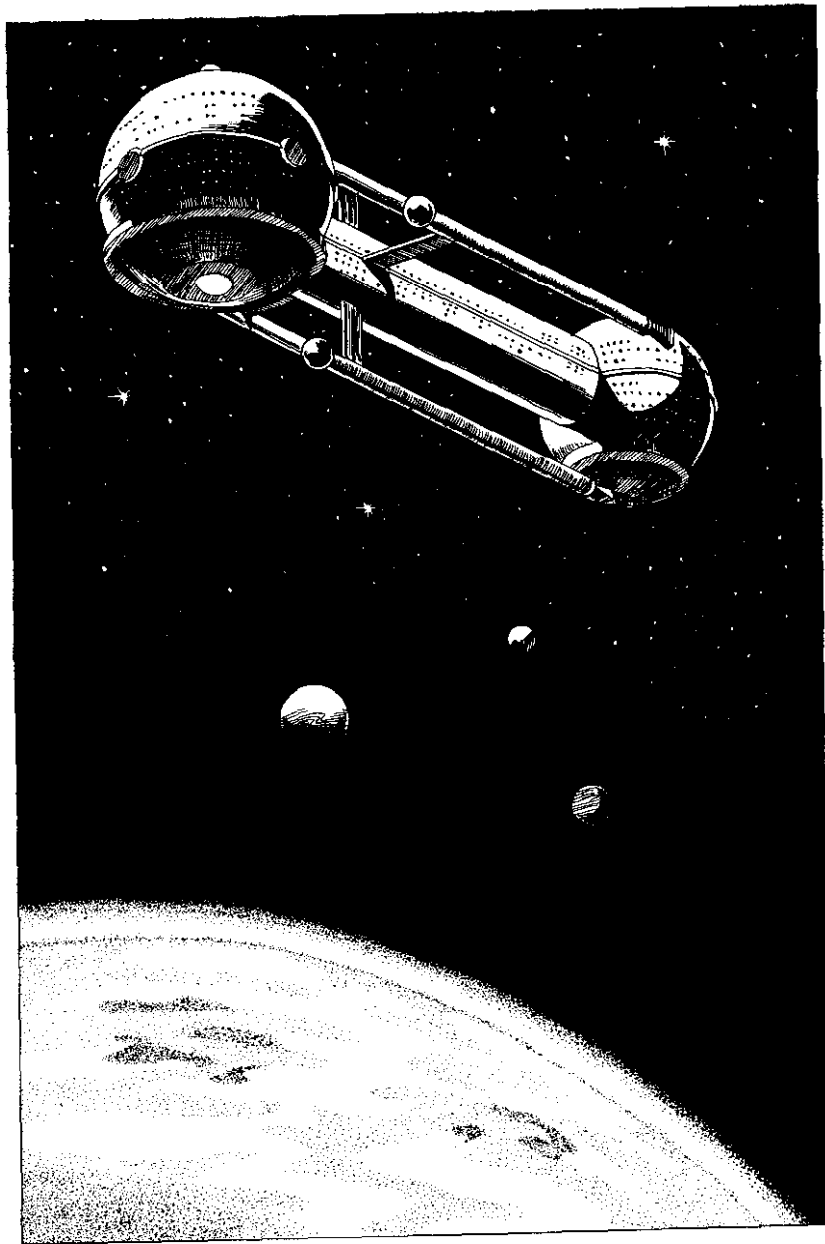
I should forget the small quirks of my fellow passengers. This is the first vacation in a year and I'm determined to enjoy it. I'll disregard the news stories from back on the colony. The Vollchons may be stirring up a little trouble in this arm of the galaxy, but the Federation will handle them. It may not be the safest time to tour the famous Starship Essex, but what the heck, space travel is safer than crossing a slideway.

All that makes sense, so why am I still feeling uneasy? Maybe those stories about Captain Dee of the Essex are knocking around in some remote corner of my brain. What a weird recluse they say he is. And the rumors — is he really missing a leg, could he possibly have a third eye?

"Ladies, gentlemen, and other forms:" the pilot computer begins over the intercom, "we will be entering the hangar bay of the Essex in sixty seconds."

As I glance back at the porthole, the Essex looms suddenly large like a white leviathan or great ghost ship hanging in space. All around it, the stars sparkle like pinholes in an obscure map. The hangar bay door opens, and it seems that our small shuttle will be swallowed up. The Essex seems so vast

At this point, you do not know, cannot know, that in a few moments the adventure of your lifetime will begin. Already the figures of destiny are assembling, and in this play you will have the leading part. The curtain is about to rise — inside the Essex.



ADVENTURER'S DIARY

THE UNIVERSE IN an Electronic Novel is constantly changing. Sometimes things happen too fast for the human mind. You may need some time to consider and some space to take notes, make maps, and otherwise plan your strategy. You may use these pages for that purpose.

Note: Missing pages after this are blank pages for the diary - don't worry, you're not missing anything :) - Underdogs

Essex Hangar Bay

