

“Terminate all functions.”

“Operators return to clusters.”

“Disc moving to Landing Zone.”

“Powering down.”

The operating system character stopped hovering and settled to the floor while around him the sounds of activity lessened. In the background he could hear the distant hum of the reserve batteries. With the main power off, these were necessary to keep the computer ticking over.

Flic sighed with pleasure as his body returned to his normal mode shape of a golden inverted cone with round head on top. Long arms stretched above his body. The globes at the end of each limb split open allowing him to flex the three sided grips hidden within. His round blue eyes glowed with pleasure as he relaxed.

An angry buzzing noise shattered his peace. The air shimmered in front of Flic to reveal a strange figure in dark metallic armor facing the opposite direction. The stranger immediately crouched into a fighting position, drawing a blaster from the low slung holster at his side.

“Your weapons won’t work here.”

When the figure spun to face Flic, he took a good look at his visitor. A dark helmet topped with a round radar scanner covered the head. A dark golden visor hid the face. Two spindly legs supported the body. The stranger’s thin arms ended in three fingered hands one of which held the blaster which he pointed directly at Flic.

“Who in space are you? What do you mean my lasers won’t work?” Anger peppered the stranger’s words.

“Nothing works outside its program. Except characters like me. I’m from the Operating System. We work everywhere on the hard disc.” Flic tried unsuccessfully to his pride of his position.

“Oh really?” The stranger tightened his grip on the blaster. “Why should I believe you? I demand you tell me where I am.”

“You’re in the main directory. Where on disc did you think you were?”

“But... I don’t belong here!” The stranger looked around and when he spoke his voice shook. “Where’s my ship? Where are the other fighters? How did I end up here?”

In an effort to calm his visitor Flic replied as casually as he could.

“I expect you were sucked into the root directory when the computer powered down. You’d better tell me who you are.”

“I’m a star fighter. My name’s Stargun. I’m the best gunner on my ship.”

“The problem is not how you got here, Stargun. You have to work out how to get home.”

“Me! I don’t know what I should do! You have all the answers -- whoever you are. Why don’t you tell me what I should do?”

“In the Operating System we are known by our job titles.”

“Well what’s your job then?” Stargun asked impatiently.

“I co-ordinate the input of file listings,” Flic replied proudly.

“Don’t you have anything else I can call you?” Stargun lowered the gun to his side.

“I think of myself as Flic. You could call me that if you want.”

Stargun nodded and removed his helmet. His head was the same dark golden color of his visor. At first Flic thought the space fighter had no eyes. He then noticed two small areas begin to darken in the place where he expected eyes to be.

Inside Flic a warm glow of pleasure grew. Someone else would call him by his name. His fellow characters in the Operating System referred to each other by their job names. Flic had wanted an identity so he gave himself a name. This Stargun might not be too bad after all, he might even become a friend. Flic thought it would be nice to have a friend.

“Can you tell me how to get home? I must get back as quickly as possible. The other fighters can’t win the battle without me.”

Flic thought Stargun sounded boastful. For several moments he remained silent, thinking over the matter. The star fighter waited impatiently. Flic knew his words would not give Stargun much hope.

“Sorry Stargun. I’ve never come across this problem before. Each file has a code number which tells me the home address. You’re only a graphics character from one of those files. We’d have to look for your address on the control centre and the only one allowed to do that is the head of Operating System. The Grand Master!” Flic spoke the last two words with a kind of awe. A look of annoyance crossed Stargun’s face.

“So! What’s the problem? Ask the whatever-you-called him to find my address and then I can go home.”

“I can’t do that!” Horror filled Flic’s voice. “You don’t ask him to do such menial tasks -- he’s the GRAND MASTER!”

“I don’t get it. Why can’t you ask him?” Flic saw a flicker of red around the spaceman’s eyes. He wondered if Stargun thought he’d deliberately made an excuse to stop him going home.

“You don’t understand Stargun. Lost files are fine, I can return them to their proper directories. Any characters or odd scripts found outside their home program are destroyed. If the GM knew you were here he’d call the guards to erase you.”

“You mean I’d be disintegrated?” The star fighter’s voice trembled and his legs shook. Flic watched him force his fear away. Stargun’s pincer hands lifted the gun and pointed it at Flic. “You’re not thinking of telling him about me are you? You’d get in trouble if your GM knew you were talking to me, wouldn’t you? Can’t you get the address without asking him, Flic?”

The gun drop to Stargun’s side as he made his final plea and his head flopped forward. Flic hated to see the spaceman so unhappy. He gave the problem some thought, the shape of his eyes going fuzzy as he concentrated.

“There might be a way. The GM sorts out any problems in the hard drive during power off. He often leaves the Control Hall. If we choose the right time we might find your address, although we’d have to be careful. Even if we find it we can’t do anything until the power comes up again. It might take a long time. Then we’d have to wait until your game program is played.”

“Oh great!” Stargun sank to the floor when he heard Flic’s words. “So where do we start?”

“First we go to the Control Hall and I approach the control tower. If we get the address without any trouble, we come back here until the power comes up.”

“You make this Control Hall sound scary.” Stargun shifted nervously.

“It is scary! The main Operating System files are kept there. The Grand Master works at the control keyboards in the centre. Our main problem will be getting to the tower without being seen. Tell me about your job?” Flic wanted to get Stargun into a happier mood before they started. They’d need all their wits about them if they were to succeed.

“Nothing much to tell,” Stargun sounded a bit grumpy. “I live on a starship and use my radar to lock on to the enemy. I shoot my blaster to destroy them. What about you? How come you’re such a weird shape.”

“Weird.” Flic took exception to Stargun’s words. “This is my power off mode, I can take on any shape I want to get into the different directories. Watch!”

Flic’s outline wavered and changed until he became a mirror image of the star fighter.

“Hey. That’s neat!” Stargun sounded impressed. He jumped up and down with excitement. “I’ve got a great idea Flic. Why don’t you take on the shape of this Grand Master? It would solve all our problems. Nobody would bother if they see him using the controls.”

“Oh no. I couldn’t do that. Nobody ever takes the GM’s shape. It isn’t allowed.” Flic returned to his power off mode, his eyes flickering nervously at Stargun’s suggestion.

“Has anyone ever tried it before?”

“Well -- no.” Flic looked at the star fighter’s stubborn face. He could see Stargun would

try anything to get home.

“So what’s the problem? All the more reason for you to do it. No one would suspect you weren’t the real thing. Go on Flic -- give it a try.”

Should he take the Grand Master’s shape? Stargun waited, his rigid stature daring his friend to do it. Flic calmed his circuits. His figure wavered and in its place floated a tall misty image wearing a pointed hat and a cloak full of swirling lights. The hand held a stick which waved like a wand. Dark eyes solemnly stared from the shadows beneath the hood. Despite trembling at the danger of his actions, Flic smiled as the star fighter backed away. Quickly he changed back. When Stargun took another peek the familiar shape of Flic had returned. The golden figure looked around nervously, wondering if the guards would burst into his alcove at any moment.

“Not too difficult.” Flic’s voice shook despite his pride in his efforts. “We might have a problem with the control wand. I think it’s the key to access the main control. A copy image may not work.”

“You never know until you try do you? Will we have to wait for the power to come up again or anything?”

“No. I can move around quiet easily even when the power’s off. As long as you stay with me you’ll be able to move too.” Flic sensed Stargun’s nervousness, even though the star fighter tried to conceal this with a show of bravery.

“Come on Flic, say you’ll do it.”

It took several seconds for Flic to be convinced Stargun’s idea could work. The two planned their course of action when they reached the control centre. Flic explained they’d have to find Stargun’s address and the correct pathway. Once the power came up they must find the right doorway or they would end up on the other side of the hard drive.

“If you arrive in the wrong program you’ll fade or be attacked by the characters who’ll think you’re a virus. You must do exactly what I say Stargun. Understand?” Flic didn’t want his new friend to act hastily. A wrong move would get them both into serious trouble. “You’re safe with me. Please remember my power supply is the only thing keeping you from fading.”

Stargun looked a bit crushed by the warnings. He nodded without speaking.

“Right then, let’s go!” Flic lifted from the ground and floated to the alcove entrance. He looked out to check no one was around. “All clear Stargun. Remember, keep close behind me.”

Flic moved outside and beckoned Stargun to follow him.