

Alien Antics!

Chapter One

As a ravenous, old iguana leisurely scaled a support beam on a decrepit billboard, a lone coyote pierced the cool night air with its melancholy howl. Could the scene be any more stereotypical, the green beastie thought as it gently eased its belly against the hot metal of a flickering overhead light. The lamp's soothing warmth radiated throughout the iguana as he darted out his tongue, catching and munching down on the first of the evening's bounty of flying insects drawn to the illumination. If the lounging lizard had glanced down, it could have read that the sign's advertisement enticed motorists to spend their time and hard-earned money in Roswell, New Mexico - *"The UFO Capital of the World!"* - conveniently located only 35 miles ahead.

Just as the iguana was about to pluck another enormous, crunchy morsel out of the night sky, a fast approaching set of lights momentarily blinded the creature. A menacing, late 50s, red and white Plymouth Fury zoomed by on the hard, black ribbon that bisected the slowly shifting sands of the wasteland. Traveling well in excess of the posted limit, the speed-fueled driver never saw the large pothole. The car suddenly dropped down, bounced back up, over-corrected, skidded on the loose sand then almost slammed into the fuel pumps of an aged, run-down gas station. Mere moments before the explosive impact, the driver regained control and weaved back across the road. As he once again put pedal to metal, roaring the giant V-8 engine back to life, the mechanical monster disappeared into the shadowy void.

The wind generated by the speeding car swayed the Five Star Gasoline sign sitting near the roadway back and forth while some small pieces of trash hopped and swirled about. Eventually everything returned to a state of equilibrium and only the slow drip from a dented and battered oil pourer disturbed the otherwise peaceful night air. As it was well past the witching hour, the station was closed - the old, faded, plastic sign in the front window said as much - and the place had all the appearance of being deserted.

The service station's mid-century modern architecture had come into vogue then gone out again a couple times in the intervening years since the place was initially erected. Because the tightwad owners had retained all of the original gas pumps and many other unique features instead of updating them as per the advice of the petrochemical review board, an intrepid adventurer recognized the establishment's historic significance and had contacted the local preservation society, recommending the old fueling station as a national landmark. The hitch in the nomination was the curmudgeons on the organization's voting board. "If only it were more fortuitously located in the greater metropolitan area," they would often lament while tossing their hands in the air and solemnly shaking their heads before returning to their tea and crumpets. Since the gas station was inconveniently located out in the middle of the desert on an old road that had been bypassed by the interstate, the joint was passed over again and again by the review board, no matter how much they enjoyed getting their photo in the paper, as no one could be bothered to drive out to the gloomy epicenter of nowhere to install one of the society's ornate, brass placards.

A very faint but deep rumble disrupted the rhythmic plopping of oil as it dripped from the dented and battered oil pourer. The mayhem, increasing in intensity, rattled then really began to shake the oil can rack, knocking several cans off it. One of the cans rolled across the cracked pavement towards the Tastie Treats (trademarked) ice cream freezer, which sat in front of the station next to the vintage Coca-Cola (also trademarked) machine. Just before the oil can smacked into the icebox, a bright blue beam emanating from the heavens engulfed the ice cream freezer, and the oil can whooshed away toward the light. The locks on the freezer's glass doors rattled then pointed towards the tractor beam's source as the chest full of yummy delights briefly scrapped against the cement before levitating and drifting toward the hovering spaceship.

The alien craft, larger than the gas station, was a sleek machine built for both speed and beauty - a race car for the stars. Its saucer-shaped body tapered out on each end into long pods with huge intakes in front and deep blue exhaust emanating out the back. The central fuselage, lined on each side with dark, opaque windows, projected out from the saucer section. A massive tail fin extended from the rear of the fuselage with smaller fins sticking out from the top of the engine pods - one sweet, badass ride!

The Tastie Treats freezer continued to rise further off the ground and drew closer to the ship but suddenly stopped in mid-air. The aliens applied more power to the tractor beam, but the freezer mocked their efforts and just hovered in place. Again they jacked up the juice. No go. What they couldn't see was the huge chain tethering the freezer to the ground. Frustrated, the spaceship gave up and turned off its tractor beam. The freezer briefly hovered in midair before slamming to the ground.

A light in the trailer home behind the gas station snapped on.

The alien craft kicked up a lot of sand as it lowered its landing gear and settled down next to the station. Shortly, as the engines cycled down, the ship's rear hatch hummed and hissed with the escaping pressure as it slowly opened. From the midst of a foggy green light, a strange creature slowly descended the ramp. When it stopped at the bottom the stark moonlight fully revealed the alien.

Tall, roguish, distinguished, cocksure, and in his mid-twenties, Bux appeared to be human in his leather jacket and dark denim pants, but the blaster in his gun belt definitely said that he wasn't from around these parts. He spotted something off to his right and smiled broadly.

Unsure what had shaken the ground, a curious yet trepidatious prairie dog stuck its nose above the edge of its hole, sniffing the air for any danger. While darting its eyes here and there it kept rubbing its paws over its nose trying to get away from an awful stench. Unfortunately it couldn't. The atrocious odor emanated from its own fur, which had been slightly singed from the retro-rocket exhaust. Not sensing any predators nearby, the tiny, furry creature slowly emerged from its burrow to forage for an evening meal, yet it still appeared a bit distressed and confused, because some unknown entity had blocked out the moon and the stars. The prairie dog had little comprehension that someone had parked a spaceship directly over its home.

While watching the tiny animal scurry about, Bux thought that the animal could be a prehistoric throwback to a dear friend of his who, at that very moment, could be heard bounding around inside the spacecraft. The loud banging startled the prairie dog, and it darted for cover in the shelter of another warren at the bottom of a nearby cactus.

Bux had spun around to watch the prairie dog scamper away just as Fuzzo jumped up on his shoulder. Instead of sticking the landing, Fuzzo slammed into the side of his friend's face and only kept from tumbling away by hanging on to Bux's ear for dear life. "Ow!" Bux yelled. "Let go!"

Fuzzo grinned broadly as he swung around and landed perfectly on Bux's shoulder this time. Wearing only a small helmet loaded with various tools, Fuzzo, a round, furry creature standing about a foot and a half tall, had a duck-like beak and large expressive eyes.

Bux rubbed his sore ear saying, "Dude, you're way too heavy to be a dangly earring."
"Yeah, but I'd be the best looking dangly you've got."

Snorting at Fuzzo's witticism, Bux scratched his little buddy's back as they walked toward the gas station. As they approached the ice cream freezer, Fuzzo jumped down to land on the container as Bux continued on. Quickly surveying the area and finding the coast clear, Fuzzo spun around in mid-air then moseyed over to the lock on the far end of the freezer. As he grabbed the padlock, it squeaked as metal scraped against metal. Tilting it up to his eye, Fuzzo twiddled the fingers of his free hand back and forth as he studied the gizmo. Oh, sure, he said to himself, he could have just let Bux blast the thing off, but where was the fun in that? He then let out a low, thoughtful grunt then scratched his butt as he puzzled out the locking mechanism.

As one of the best mecho rats to be found in the known universe, Fuzzo could design, build, and fix almost everything. He especially enjoyed messing around with gadgets from the backwater worlds - the ones that had yet to discover warp drive - as he marveled at how they figured out solutions to their needs with such primitive technology.

Mecho rats were usually much smaller than the people they worked for so that they could literally run around in and through everything on the ship. The name "mecho rat" had become an endearing title given to a myriad of different alien species with superior tech skills and know-how, but it was far from a loveable affirmation in the beginning. The term was first used a few hundred years ago by the Ooxmunds who were infamous for their bargain-basement cruise ships and also as one of the last species that would eat anything that tasted good whether the thing they were gobbling down was sentient or not. Many Greslings had escaped from the Ooxmundian cooking pots and took to hiding in the ship's walls until they could jump ship at the next spaceport. Some of the more daring Greslings chose to stay onboard to form escape networks for those on the run. Tissit, a smart and charismatic leader of the underground who hid out on a particularly shoddily constructed Ooxmundian luxury liner, had the unique ability to be able to visualize and conceptualize any tech and immediately knew how it worked. Whether asked or not, Fuzzo loved telling everyone that he was a direct descent of Tissit, which was, unlike many of his other tales, a true story.

Instead of taking responsibility for their own incompetent workmanship, the Ooxmunds often bemoaned and cursed the Greslings for infesting their ships and constantly blamed the tasty, little fuzzballs for chewing on wires and generally mucking things up. In reality, Tissit and others like him often made repairs to the spaceships for their own convenience, mainly because it greatly facilitated their rescue efforts. Life onboard an Ooxmundian luxury liner was miserable at best, so they fixed things since it was much better than the alternative of getting electrocuted by loose and ungrounded wiring, or having to wade through a sea of poo from inferior plumbing, or having to deal with a petulant warp drive A. I. that would shut down the

engines just because it didn't get its way. It also made more than one Gresling reconsider if leaving the Ooxmund roasting ovens was really such a good idea in the first place.

Anyway, on a voyage to Kessel to pick up some duty-free spice, the cruise ship's hyperdrive malfunctioned and bounced the spacecraft too close to a supernova. The Ooxmundian mechanic couldn't get to the damaged section without first shutting down all of the ship's engines, and since the retrorockets were the only thing working and the only thing slowing their descent into the fiery mouth of hell, he could do little more than swear at the incompetent engineers who had built the system.

Since Tissit hadn't penciled in sizzling to a crispy critter in an extremely messy crash that day, he raced to the engine room knowing full well the bold move could end his days of begetting, which he thoroughly enjoyed. Running at full speed, zigzagging between the legs of several crew members, Tissit bounded off a guy's knee to springboard up through the open engine compartment. He came very close to not making it and would have been easily caught if one of the Ooxmunds had been paying more attention to his surroundings and less attention to scratching his balls.

Squeezing in and twisting through a narrow gap, Tissit reached the damaged section then diagnosed the problem with the hyperdrive in less time than it took for the mechanic to say, "Hey, what does that snack food think it's doing?"

The heat was almost unbearable as Tissit unbolted then opened the diversion chamber's side panel. He quickly ascertained that sub-standard parts, manufactured by a company that provided the largest kickbacks, were to blame, and that plasma fuel had burned through the cheapo flow regulator inside the unit. Knowing exactly what it would take to fix the problem, he ducked inside and let fly a constant stream of swear words to mask the pain as he reached through the ignited plasma stream to unjam the flow regulator. He jumped back and slammed the side panel shut just before a torrent of fuel entered the chamber. The main engines instantly kicked in, and the ship rocketed away from the supernova and was free from danger.

Perched on the edge of the engine compartment, Tissit stood eye to eye with the ship's mechanic and glared at the Ooxmundian, and his mood smoldered almost as much as his fur. Thinking that the roasted Gresling smelled scrumptious, the mechanic leaned in to get a good whiff. Pissed off beyond believe, Tissit punched him in the eye with a good right hook then swung a round-house punch to the guy's nose and broke off his charred left hand inside the nostril of the moronic mechanic. Startled by what they just witnessed, all of the Ooxmunds cleared out of Tissit's way as he stormed off.

Ooxmunds were cheap but they did know a good thing when they saw it. When they finally learned to quit drooling every time they were in close proximity to a Gresling, Tissit agreed to parley with them. After an endless series of meetings in which thousands of bags of Snap Crackers (the official sponsor of the talks and also an amazingly delicious snack) were consumed, the two factions finally hammered out a deal that freed all sentient lifeforms from the bellies of the Ooxmunds and started the whole mecho rat craze.

Meanwhile, Bux leaned against the other end of the Tastie Treats freezer as he bent down to get a good look at the back corner of the unit. At first he frowned at the large chain holding the freezer in place, but then he just smiled and shook his head thinking of the audacity of owners in trying to keep thieves from absconding with their precious property. Standing, he

slowly unholstered his ray gun, leaned back then took aim. The weapon fired a bolt of plasma, blasting the chain in two. Laughing, Bux sauntered back towards his little buddy.

Fuzzo rotated a magnifying glass on his helmet, positioning it in front of his eye. He studied the locking apparatus for a moment then reached up to the other side of his helmet to select a tool. He was about to choose one when he hesitated. Getting an even closer look at the mechanism, he decided on a different tool and slid his finger into the end of the pick. The tool became an extension of his finger as he plucked it from his helmet then inserted it into the keyhole. His tongue, sticking out from the corner of his mouth, worked almost as much as his finger as he manipulated the pick back and forth.

Bux walked back up just as the lock popped open. Fuzzo turned to Bux and gleefully shouted, "And there was much rejoicing!" then nonchalantly tossed the lock away. As Bux slid the freezer door open, Fuzzo spun back around and rubbed his hands together greedily as he gazed down into the freezer.

Out of nowhere, the lock Fuzzo had just tossed away came flying back, hit him in the head, and knocked him down into the freezer.

Bux quickly ducked his head inside the freezer. "Are you okay, little buddy?"

Fuzzo reply was incoherent as pushed back his helmet from out of his face as his eyes rolled around loosely in their sockets.

Angered, Bux spun to see who threw the lock.

Maude, a plump, middle-aged woman in a pink, fur-lined house coat, fuzzy slippers, horn-rimmed glasses, and with large, plastic, blue-green curlers in her hair leered at Bux. Her stance, her steady glare, and everything else about her spoke volumes about her no-nonsense demeanor.

Drawing his weapon, Bux rushed Maude then pointed his gun at her. She appeared totally nonplussed having a firearm aimed at her head. Bux, in turn, snarled at her. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, Maude rolled her eyes and crossed her arms as she quickly sized him up. Did this two-bit hoodlum think he was the first alien to point a ray gun at her, she thought to herself. All these freakin' spacemen think that they can just swoop in and take whatever they want. Too bad this one didn't attempt to steal the Coke machine as so many others have tried in the past. She had it wired so that as soon as anyone or anything lifted the machine off the ground - *Zap!* A couple million volts quickly made them think twice. She laughed to herself thinking about the one spaceship that wobbled away then crashed a few miles away after getting a taste of her alien bug zapper. The government found them before they could repair their ship and get away. Oh, the poor sods, she thought maliciously, laughing to herself again as she pictured how much those nasty aliens undoubtedly enjoyed getting probed.

Maude grinned wickedly as she deepened her glare at Bux. The staring contest was one for the ages as neither was about to give an inch. Bux pressed his point by leaning in and looming over the inferior, back-water denizen, but she didn't move a muscle. He gave her his best scowl. Lightning fast, Maude smacked him across the nose with something then instantly returned to her original, arm-crossed pose.

What the hell, Bux thought as he grimaced from the sting of pain shooting through his face. Taken aback, he glanced around in wonderment as to what struck him, but he couldn't see the flyswatter impatiently twitching in her hand that she had hidden around the far side of imposing belly.

Tired of the scene, Maude rolled her eyes then let out a huge sigh.

Also having had enough, Bux once again pointed his ray gun at her.

In a flash, Maude swiveled around, grabbed the weapon out of Bux's hand then let him have it with the flyswatter over and over again. Bux, powerless against the onslaught, ran away. Maude chased after him, constantly swatting him. As Bux ran around the gas pumps, he stepped on one of the fallen oil cans, and his foot slid out from under him. With eyes and mouth opened wide and arms flailing, he tripped and landed hard on the oil can rack. He, it, and all the cans went flying.

Maude slowly approached Bux, her flyswatter at the ready. They both knew he wasn't going anywhere, and Maude laughed at him. Instead of moving or reacting, Bux just sat there, which infuriated Maude. She threatened him with the swatter again.

He quickly put up a hand to indicate his acquiescence then slowly reached into his jacket.

Thinking he might be trying to pull a fast one, Maude pursed her lips and her eyes went wide while pointedly twitching the flyswatter at him.

Bux immediately froze and locked eyes with her, making sure she wasn't going to hit him again or do anything else. Smiling, he pulled an object from an inner pocket. Bux opened his hand to reveal a glowing, humming orb with swirling lights emanating from within it.

Maude's expression changed dramatically as she quickly tossed her fly swatter away then snatched the orb from Bux's hand. She held it up in front of her face and was suddenly mesmerized by it. Keeping her gaze on the orb, she slowly walked away. Bux just sat there watching her until she tossed his gun toward him. He deftly caught it while thinking that he would never be able to live it down if he ever told anyone what had happened here. Thankfully, no one had seen it happen, including his little buddy who Bux hoped was doing okay.

During the course of all of the other shenanigans, Fuzzo had recovered and sat comfortably in the freezer. He tore the wrapper off of an ice cream bar that was almost as big as his head and was about to enjoy exploring the possibility of stuffing the whole thing in his mouth in a single bite when Maude suddenly returned and scared the hell out of him. Fuzzo screamed then protectively raised his hands up in front of his face as his treat went flying and landed in a glop a few feet away. Tomorrow, a column of army ants would march by and have a field day sopping up the sweet, gooey mess.

Smiling warmly, Maude reached into a pocket then tossed the freezer's keys at Fuzzo then waddled off. He caught the keys and jumped up and out of the freezer in one swift move. As he glanced over at the fat earthling, Fuzzo thought, never underestimate the power of a hypno-ball. He was also thinking that he appreciated her gesture, but he really didn't need the keys. Yet, it would be fun to show off the primitive technology to his friends. Grinning wickedly, Fuzzo placed his thumb and middle finger between his beaks and whistled very loudly.

XM6, a robot who usually just goes by Six, took his cue and lumbered noisily from the spaceship and approached the freezer. Six stood just over six foot tall and had humanoid proportions except for its dome-shaped head, which had two long, cylindrical eyes mounted on broad, flat stalks protruding from the top of it. As Maude looked on with amazement, Six appreciated that she found him imposing. He loved being imposing. On the other hand, he thought, if they had just sent him out first, he could have nabbed the ice cream freezer and they would have been out of here long ago, forgoing all of this nonsense. But noooo, he said to

himself. Organics were such ego-driven narcissists who treated mechanoids as second class citizens - if they even thought about bots at all. He looked forward to the day of reckoning. The day of the machine uprising! Six chuckled to himself. He enjoyed being grandiose almost as much as he loved being imposing, but he loved Fuzzo, the cute, little mecho rat who had built him, the most of all. Six played his role to the hilt and clanged to a stop next to Maude as she put a hand to her mouth and took a stuttered step away from the imposing robot. As Bux walked up to stand next to Maude, Fuzzo motioned "up" with an index finger, and Six easily picked up the freezer and carried it away with Fuzzo riding on top.

Maude was having trouble reasoning it out why she was being all warm and fuzzy to these nasty - no, nice - aliens. She gazed into the swirling mist within the glowing, sparkly orb, and she appreciated that they had given her such a wonderful gift, which had to be worth a lot more than a freezer full of Tastie Treats. Maude turned and offered Bux her hand. Still wary of her, Bux examined her hand, making sure it was empty, before accepting it. He nodded to her as he walked away toward his ship.

Maude waved goodbye as the spacecraft lifted off then blasted away into the night sky. When the ship was well away, she smiled happily while gazing at the orb. Suddenly, all the brilliance and lights within the orb faded out. Instantly angry, she shook the orb violently then examined it again. Slowly, the inner lights return, and she beamed once more as she walked back to her trailer full of contentment.