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Muzik Man by Wulf Moon

Muzik stepped in a clump of flowers that resembled daisies, growing on a distant hillside overlooking the capital city of planet Fendor. His servos hummed as he backed up and adjusted his stance, careful to avoid damaging any more.

He bent over them and whispered, “Sorry little fellas.”

Muzik took a deep breath, filling accordion bellows within as he savored the aromatics without. What wonderful smells engulfed him in this good land! This scent like crushed lavender, that one like ground cloves, so refreshing compared to the recycled air of the ship that had just brought him here. He might be clunky metal on the outside, but his array of senses were hard won, and Muzik had vowed he would never take sentience and the gifts that came with it for granted.

He stood up and tilted his titanium head toward the powder-blue sky. A crystalline transport was making its ascent, engines whirring softly as it angled toward the heavens. Muzik waved at the ship, almost invisible to the eye.

“Buh-bye!” he hooted through his polymer lips. “See you in ten years!” And then, as an afterthought he trumpeted, “This time I won’t screw up!”

Oily moisture formed at the corners of Muzik’s eyes as he watched the vessel vanish. In the brightness of the morning sun, his irises contracted; golden-brown and of intricate filigree, they resembled delicate rosettes overlaid on the sound holes of ancient lutes. Tears spilled down his synthetic cheeks and he wiped them away with silver fingers. The transport vanished.

Muzik was alone.

“Whoever said ‘parting is such sweet sorrow’ deserved a firm kick in the gearbox!” He sighed. “Ah, well, the will of the Maestro and all that jazz. Not like I don’t know the program.”

And with a wheeze from his accordion lungs, he realized he didn’t know the program. Not really. Not the big one. Oh sure, he had achieved the sentient Minstrel 1000 series by comprehending that *muzik*—the Maestro’s complex compositions—weren’t just exercises in teaching musical nomenclature, they were intricately designed symphonies designed to teach his neural network the language of emotion. But that had been two hundred and sixty-three years ago, and he preferred not to count all the backwater worlds since then that he had done initial pioneering on, prepping them for the arrival of the elite Minstrel 2000s and their teams. Muzik’s life’s work, it appeared, would never rise above the lonely routines of a *solo* galactic minstrel operative.

“Field agent,” Muzik said, practicing his freshly downloaded Fendorian. “Just a fancy name for a sodbuster. I’m a musical clodhopper.”

Shame fountained up; Muzik hung his head. This was no way to start a mission! He was a member of the special forces, an advance operative in the Maestro's expanding galactic task force where musical seeds were planted to transform rigid ideologies of alien species—like the cursed Archalon—into ascending harmonies of thought, peace, and cooperation. Not all invasions took place with armies—the most effective could be the injection into a culture of a word, a concept, a belief, or even . . . a song.

Muzik stared at the mushroom domes of the distant city. A faint veil of smog hovered over buildings gilded with amber sunlight. He stroked his chin. “Hmmm. Reminds me of the Cychanthlopan Mosques. Man-o-man, did those cats have rhythm.”

With that, Muzik smiled, his teeth rows of ebony and ivory. He clicked his heels together with a clang. “If this culture is anything like the Cychanthlopan's, I'll be jammin' on easy street!”

His irises dilated and contracted in rhythmic succession as he accessed his directives, hidden somewhere in a virtual reality labyrinth that materialized as a hedge maze, a marble manor glowing at the end. Ach! The Maestro and his games! But if he succeeded, everything the Maestro had collected about this world would now be his, and he had practiced this maze over and over on the flight in. Muzik flashed through the pathways, avoiding every wrong turn. Through the vast arrays of gathered knowledge, through the endless corridors of subroutines stacked with pearls of Fendorian wisdom, Muzik would be able to leap through megaflops of calculations and personalize his strategy for awakening another tone-deaf society to the wonders of music!

As the maze opened up to the steps and pillars of the glowing manor, Muzik leaped forward and caught his prize box just as the timer on its surface ticked to zero and it was about to float away.

“Gotcha!”

He popped the lid, looked triumphantly within . . . and his lips flapped with a frustrated gasp. The prize proved to be a few static-riddled radio transmissions. No detailed cultural studies from prosthetically disguised undercover operatives; no surveillance holos taken from cloaked satellites; not even FTL transmissions from a covert tap into the civic mainframe.

“Schmutz! Budget cuts!” Muzik looked up at the manor's double doors of burnished triluminar and shook his fist. “You could have left me with the funnies section of their newspaper. That, at least, would have been something! Next time, poke a stick in my eye!”

The door chimed. Upon the surface materialized a Securazon keyboard, patterned after the enlarged wings of a Bytillian buzz-bug. Muzik had been working on the lock for decades with no success. So many color cells to those wings, and the sequence included chromatic scales, tonic frequencies, symphonic scores, and complicated emotional cues. The manor was a vault; the lock sealed its contents from Muzik. He had only cracked this safe once before—that was the day he had transcended from the computational android psyche . . . into the sentient 1000 series.

Muzik shuddered, which sent his virtual avatar into a cacophony of discordant notes. A dark feeling wormed through his consciousness. This time, he suspected if he didn't succeed on this world he'd be demoted, and the lock would slowly fade away. He had seen it happen before to comrades who had failed to convert restrictive alien cultures to the enlightenment of music. Horrible confinement, hideous torment, the most excruciating agony a star-jumping Muzik Man could ever be afflicted with: tenure as minstrel-in-residence, teaching junior-level band to tone-deaf, flipper-fingered Purplupprians or some similarly encumbered race.

Muzik shuddered. He would never allow that to happen. And this time, he had a bold new plan. He called it *Big Splash*.

* * *

The sun now hung overhead as Muzik approached the capital's suburbs. As he moved, his head bobbed on the stalk of his neck, matching the swing of his gait. His neck was covered in silver valves shaped like hieroglyphics adorning ancient temples. The valves opened and closed and whistled as he walked. His torso was polished silver splashed with synthetic swirls dark as chocolate. His sides were open and had accordion-shaped bellows within, inflating and deflating in steady rhythm. Along the front of his shoulders ran scroll-shaped sound holes, radiating a beat that matched the cadence of his step.

Ooom pah-pah, ooom pah-pah, ooom pah-pah-paaah.

He was close to the suburbs now, and his receivers picked up a transmission. Local television. How quaint. The capital's single station was broadcasting video of a flowing brook with a chant repeating over and over: "*One thought, one way, one mind.*"

Definite nuances of Archalon influence. The Maestro wasn't the only seed planter in the galaxy. Which was why Muzik was here, of course.

He spotted what appeared to be a farmer working rows of feathery plants and waved. The Fendorian four-footed it out of there. Muzik wasn't surprised. On most worlds, those in the fields tended toward conservatism, and those in the cities tended toward progressivism. He needed to find just one curious soul to begin his work. Besides, *Big Splash* called for big conversions, and teaching a few agrarian workers how to play the spoons just wouldn't do. He needed free thinkers! Bigger conversion numbers! Impressive field reports! Surely this was the way to advance in the Maestro's labyrinthine system of android development.

Muzik crossed a vacant lot and stepped onto a sidewalk. Civilization! His arms swung at his sides, the acoustical joints moaning like strings on a bass. He loved all forms of music, but he had a particular fondness for Earth instruments and compositions. After all, his masters study that helped him advance to the 1000 series had been *Planet Earth's Evolutionary Progression of Music and Its Ripple Effect upon Funkterfusion*, and it was then that he absorbed much of Earth's cultural nuances at the genesis of his persona.

The domiciles along each side of the street were white domes, uniform in size and shape, resembling rows of mushrooms clinging to a tree limb. So silent. No locals out and about. Wait! There was one, a flash of white as the curtains were drawn.

Muzik had just the bait. He clinked his fingers together, added percussion to the melody of his gait, and raised a few valves in his neck, playing the sweet enticements of a trihorn.

As he crossed into the next block, a door in one of the domiciles cracked open.

Muzik stopped. Faced the door. Flashed his piano-key smile. "Why, hello there!"

Silence from within.

"Aw, please come out. I don't bite." Muzik bowed, his joints sighing like a bow drawn over cello strings.

Still nothing. *Archalon influence, eh?* Muzik tried a new lure. "I am a priest bearing the gift of truth!"

That did it. The resident came out its door and stepped across its perfectly manicured moss lawn to the sidewalk. The being's torso was a long stalk with four stubby legs and feet at the base, two in the front, two in the back. It wore a gray cloak with draping sleeves as it waved spindly white arms. It tipped its mushroom-shaped head from side to side, revealing drab gills under its head dome. Three eyes blinked in unison along the curve of its head, it had a bump of a

nose, and it wiggled cauliflower-looking ears.

Rows of fleshy rings that made up the stalk of the Fendorian's neck rippled; two of the segments separated, forming lips through which it spoke. "What in great Gorunskian's gorballs are you?"

Muzik's body trembled with excitement. First contact! Okay, remember the Golden Directives: to the extent possible, show respect for alien customs (even when they are eye-pokingly stupid); wipe your feet on the doormat before entering a domicile (except on Karasite, where the doormats *are* the husbands); and never ever play Lazazarian funkterfusion unless the crowd is drooling drunk (even though it's the coolest).

Muzik smiled and tapped his head; it rang like a church bell. "Why, I'm a Muzik Man 1000."

"A wutza whaa?"

"Muzik Man 1000. Universal harmonic android." He rolled his tongue into a cylinder, blew a whistling note, gave a snappy salute. "Muzik. At your service!"

The Fendorian flapped its arms. "Shhh. Try to keep it down. It's Sabbabah."

Muzik glanced left and right, lowered his volume. "Gotcha. And who do I have the pleasure of meeting on this fine Sabbabah afternoon?"

The Fendorian wiggled its torso. A handshake or bow? Maybe a nervous twitch? "I'm Hoagley of the maintenance guild."

Muzik wiggled just to be on the safe side. "A pleasure! Forgive my inquisitive nature, but does your species have gender designations?"

"Waah. You're missing a few bolts, that's plain to see." Hoagley pointed to his brown gills. "Male." He scratched some flakes from his creamy-white head. "Are you that new invention of the sultans? I heard we were getting boomer boxes on street corners to recite the sacred words, but you seem mighty flashy for the sultans."

"I am not a radio, Hoagley. I'm a Muzik Man."

Hoagley leaned closer, his tone hushed. "So, what's a Moo-zik Man do?"

"A Muzik Man makes music, *music, music* . . ." Muzik liked using the reverb with that line. Added a nice touch.

"What's mu-istic?" the Fendorian asked in his croaky voice, trying to pronounce the word correctly.

"Magic, my boy. Pure magic!"

The Fendorian scratched more flakes from his head. "What's ma-a-a-gic?"

Muzik's body sagged like a spent bagpipe. "This world is gonna be a tough nut to crack." Muzik rotated his head in a three-sixty. "Woo-hoo-hoo! What's magic? What's music?" A glissando of harp strings rolled from his sound holes. "Here, let me show you!"

The top of Muzik's head unscrewed, rising with a whine of hydraulics on a thin pedestal, fanning out into a disk. Muzik put his hands together, cracked his knuckles. "Gimme some bones!" His fingers extended into long drumsticks that he lifted up to the cymbal balancing atop his head.

"First, you gotta have rhythm," Muzik said, doing a quick tap number with his feet.

The Fendorian's bulbous gray eyes were blinkless and blank.

"Beat, man," Muzik said. "A beat!"

Muzik rapped his fingers against the cymbal.

Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss

Hoagley blinked rapidly.

“You like that?” Muzik said. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Muzik’s abdomen glowed bright. The black stripes swirled together, and a wide cylinder with a flat surface extended out from his chest as a snare drum. With one hand striking the cymbal, he lowered the other to his abdomen and drummed his fingertips against the taut surface.

Tappita-tappita-tappita-tappita

Then the cymbal.

Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss-tss-tss-Tssssss

“Feel the rhythm?”

Hoagley blinked his eyes even faster.

“Well then! Don’t just stand there, man! Tap your feet!” The Fendorian gave Muzik what could only be interpreted as a dumb blink. “Like this,” Muzik said, tapping his foot, the metal toes jingling like sleigh bells.

Hoagley gave a hesitant tap with his left forefoot. Blinked. Tapped again.

“That’s it, that’s it. You’re getting the hang of it.” Muzik slowed the tempo.

Hoagley tapped again and again and again, then alternated between all four feet, awkwardly matching Muzik’s rhythm. His eyelids fluttered like butterflies. “I feel it,” he said.

“OoooWaah.”

“Hey,” Muzik said, flashing a smile, “you’re getting the hang of it. There’s hope for this world yet.”

Muzik scanned his repertoire of songs, chose something with an easy beat, a *rachta* from the Kintanna system. He shifted the tip of his tongue into a small round ball, struck it against his teeth. Resonant marimba tones spilled from his mouth, swirled sweet as melted chocolate down the street.

“OoooWaah, OoooWaah, OoooWaah,” Hoagley said, bobbing up with each “Oooo” and down with each “Waah.” He tried tapping his teeth with his purple tongue, but no sound resulted. “How do you do that?” he asked.

“Ith eathy. Ooopth, thowwy.” Muzik shifted his tongue back to speaking mode. “It’s easy. Here, grab that waste receptacle lid, and that one from your neighbor. Go on!”

Hoagley hesitated.

“Go on. I have more *truth* to show you!” Sometimes, the Archalon made it too easy.

Hoagley grabbed the lids, brought them back to Muzik, holding them out like plates.

“Okay, now hold the handles in each hand. Good. Now hit them together every time you tap your foot. Try it!”

The Fendorian gave them a little knock against one another, and a hollow clang joined the medley.

“A good start! Now, a little harder.”

A loud clang rang out. Hoagley stopped, wide-eyed. “I’ll disturb the neighbors’ meditation. I better not. It’s Sabbabah.”

How could Muzik work with a sacred day? “Do they let you sing on Sabbabah?”

“Sah-ing?”

“Sing. As in ‘singing.’ Vocalization of musical sounds? Speaking words with melodic tones?” Muzik demonstrated by alternating his pitch. *“Looow. Hiiiiigh. Buuuut with words like thiiiiis.”*

“*Hmmm . . . the Chants of the Archalon* we speak at temple on Sabbabah morn sound a little like that.”

“Well, there you go! You do chants on Sabbabah. We’re just going to spice them up with a

bit of musical accompaniment. Go on, give it a try. If your neighbors come out, we can teach them too. They'll love it!"

Hoagley glanced up the street. "Uhh, I don't know."

"Come on! Work with me here, Hoagley. On three. And a one, and a two, and a three . . ."

As the Fendorian picked up the beat, Muzik bubbled with excitement. He leaned back and blasted air through the valves in his throat. The wail of a saxophone blared across the neighborhood, heady and wild. Music was happening; this is what he lived for. And with the Archalon seeding this planet for who knew how long, he tossed out the subtle approach—this world was going to need *a lot* of shaking up.

Hoagley's neighbors came out from their domes, a few at first, then more and more, seeking the source of the unworldly commotion.

Just what Muzik wanted. *Big Splash* was working! How many converts? How many marks could he add to his tally for the day? He'd convert this planet in record time. Perhaps this was how those mysterious 3000 series did it: one bold move that swept the planet by storm. Like the Beatles!

Hoagley's mate came toward them, lacy chartreuse gills swinging under her dome head like curtains in a stiff breeze. At least, Muzik assumed it was Hoagley's mate because one, she came out of the same dome, two, she had two little ones clinging to her back, and three, Hoagley seemed to be so purposely ignoring her. Muzik liked their baby 'shrooms, so cute with their little faces all scrunched up like they were about to fill their britches. He gave them a wink, and they bobbed down, only to peek out a few seconds later from their mother's sides to see if Muzik was still there. Muzik ran a stanza of *Universal Infant Phonics* through his melody—*gootchy-gootchy-gootchy-goo*—and the 'shrooms blinked in surprise.

Hoagley's mate was not so easily charmed. She cast a discordant note into the melody by clearing her throat, trying to get Hoagley's attention. When that didn't work, a jab to his side did the trick.

Hoagley turned to her, still crashing his trash lids together. "Darna! Didn't know you were there. Isn't this wonderful?"

Darna waved her fist, almost spilling one of the 'shrooms. Her voice was loud and shrill; Muzik thought she would make a good Bendorian piccolo. "Hoagley, what do you think you're doing? What's gotten into you?"

Hoagley blinked his eyelids rapidly, slammed his makeshift cymbals together. "Music!"

Muzik thumped his drum. "You're losing the beat, Hoagley. Concentrate. Concentrate. We have an audience."

"Sorry."

Hoagley slammed the lids together in earnest, and little toadstool children jiggled in delight. Most of the neighbors that had come out were all goggle-eyed, some touching Muzik to see if he was real, some giving him the evil triple eye like Darna, and a few grabbing trash-can lids and making their own attempt to join the jam.

Darna's eyes grew dark. "Hoagley, don't you know this must be illegal?"

"How could it be?" he said as he slammed the lids together with a crash. "We don't even have a word for it!"

She jabbed him with her finger. "If the ancient worthies wanted us to make this . . . this . . . *noise*, don't you think it would have been written in one of the seventy-three *Tomes of Ascension*?"

Hoagley shrugged. "They must"—*Clang*—"have overlooked"—*Clang*—"something."

Clang—“I always thought”—*Clang*—“the seventy-third”—*Clang*—“ended sort of”—*Clang*—“abruptly.”

“Well, you’re disturbing Sabbabah. There is a law against that!”

“But look at everyone. They love it! It’s a chant with sounds!”

“Well *I* don’t love it,” she said. She waved her fist at Muzik, causing her shoulder to slope. A ’shroom slid off, dropping to the moss with a thud. It wailed in shock.

Hardly missing a beat, Muzik extended his arm and wrapped his fingers around the ’shroom. He hoisted the baby back to its mother’s shoulder, then gave it a pat on the head. “There, there.” He cooed. “*Gootchy-gootchy-gootchy-goo.*”

Darna glared at Muzik with all the fury of her three eyes. “I don’t know where you come from, mister, but I’m calling the constable!” She looked sternly at her mate. “Hoagley?”

He slammed the lids in sync with his other neighbors. “In a minute, my little puffball.”

“Don’t you *puffball* me! You know what’s going to happen when the constable comes. You’d better be back in our dome before his patroller pulls up.” She looked at the crowd. “All of you!” She spun around and marched back to her dome, the little ’shrooms bouncing madly against her back.

“Sorry about that,” Hoagley said, pausing to talk to Muzik. “She’s really quite nice once you get to know her.”

Muzik smiled, clacking his tongue against the ivories. “I’m thur thee ithh. Nexth thime, I thry a lullaby on her. Thur to thoften even the tougheth nut.”

“What’s a lull-a-ba-by?”

Muzik shook his head, and his tambourine ears jingled. “Forgeth ithh.”

With that, Muzik spun in a circle and jiggled like a piper. More and more neighbors poured into the street, arching their necks to see what in Fendor could make such wondrous sounds. *Big Splash was the bomb!* Giddy with the response, Muzik kicked in his amps, projecting synthesized chords from his sound holes. Everywhere, Fendorians murmured, “*OoooWaah, OoooWaah, OoooWaah.*”

From the end of the street, a siren quacked and hissed. Muzik cranked up his volume and wove the siren into the performance. Some of the neighbors matched his jig, and a synergy of bounding rhythm rolled across the crowd.

Muzik heard a door slam, and moments later a red-cloaked Fendorian parted the masses, shouting at people to go home. Muzik saw him approaching, knew he must be the constable, but everyone was blinking so happily, he just couldn’t stop. The constable shoved his way in front of Muzik and pointed a nasty-looking black cane in his face.

“Great Gorunskian’s Gorballs!” the constable said. “What are you?”

Muzik kept playing and jiggled from one foot to the other, but he rolled his tongue flat for better diction. “Why, sir, I’m a Muzik Man 1000.”

“What’s a Muzik Man?” the constable asked.

Muzik turned up the reverb. “A Muzik Man makes music, *music, music . . .*”

“Well I say you’re funny looking.”

“Thank you.”

“I also say you’re disturbing the peace, and on Sabbabah no less.”

“I beg to differ, sir. I’m creating peace. Look at everyone’s eyelids. See how happy they are?”

The constable’s eyes bugged out. Muzik took it for a frown, a grimace, maybe gas.

“Inciting public assembly without consent of the sultans is illegal,” the constable said,

tapping the cane against his palm. “I’m going to have to ask you to accompany me.”

Muzik flashed his ivories. “Of course, Officer. What would you like to sing?” He tapped his midriff drum and head cymbal. *Bum-bum, tsssss. Rimshot.* He snapped his fingers. “Hey, I’ve got your number! Wagner! See what you think of *Ride of the Valkyries.*”

Muzik performed a raging sample.

“I’ve had enough!” the constable said. “Let the holy sultans decide your fate. You’re coming down to the senate.”

“The sun ants?” Muzik asked, shouting over the blaring music and the sudden crash of Hoagley’s trash lids as he caught the new beat. Muzik beamed with pride: he had made his first disciple. This world would be a breeze, and he gave himself special marks for the way he had just laced the sound of a kazoo through Wagner’s tempest. He’d have to remember that one.

The constable waved his cane like a baton. “No, no, no! The senate, you dope. Turn that racket down! You don’t mean to tell me you haven’t heard of the senate?”

Muzik lowered the volume. “Can’t say that I have. Are there lots of Fendorians there?”

“Of course! It’s the religious center of the universe!”

Muzik adjusted his linguistic program, and the Fendorian word he had been translating *senate* became *synod*. “Well then,” Muzik said, excited by the opportunity to make more converts, especially religious ones, “lead on, Macduff!”

Hoagley lifted one of the trash lids between himself and the constable. He leaned forward, and his eyes were huge bulbs as he mouthed the words *You don’t want to go there.*

Muzik tilted his head and pitched words off the trash lid so only Hoagley could hear them. “I’ll be all right, sport. I’m here to reach as many Fendorians as I can. My job security depends on that.”

The constable gave Muzik a shove. “Move it, bud!”

Muzik waved goodbye to Hoagley, then turned his volume back up and clashed his cymbal. “Keep practicing!” He waved to the dispersing crowd. “All of you! I’ll be back. Promise!”

An adolescent Fendorian in that awkward, button-headed stage held her ground, refusing to leave. Tears welled in her eyes as she swayed to melodies stirred within her. Muzik knew that look on any world—teenagers were the most fertile fields for minstrel operatives. He gave her a knowing flash of the ivories. Seed planted. The roots would run deep in this one.

The constable jabbed Muzik with his cane, pushed him toward the honking car. Muzik marched in compliance, but thundering Valkyries led the way.

* * *

The joint. The slammer. The big house. The crusher. Muzik knew all the terms in hundreds of languages from dozens of worlds. He didn’t mind jail. Muzik did his best work with a captive audience.

This crusher was underground, white rock caverns sealed off with steel doors, with solid bars bolted over ventilation shafts. Horrible lighting—overhead fluorescents—but delightful acoustics with the high ceilings and stone walls. There were twenty Fendorians in Muzik’s cell. After processing, it was lights out, and these cats slept like rocks. He had planned on spending the night working the puzzle lock to the Maestro’s vault, but the labyrinthian maze had shifted, and he ended up spending the night chasing dead ends. He suspected he was being punished for letting his anger get the best of him. Probably not a good idea to tell the Maestro to poke a stick in his eye, because changing the maze sure felt like it.

After the morning trays—Muzik didn't need nourishment, but he had accepted a tray anyway—his cellmates had pulled their sleeping pads around to Muzik's, where he sat in a *sukhasana* pose. It was strange to see them mimic him, crossing four legs as they sat down.

A brown 'shroom Fendorian cleared the wattles of his throat and wiggled in greeting. "Name's Beez. Do that thing again."

Beez's sleeves were rolled up, revealing intricate scarification. Muzik translated one of the words marked in his flesh. *Momma*. He figured this would be a good one to start with, what with loving his mother so much and all.

"What thing?" Muzik said. He had changed his preferred lighter-pitched persona into a raspy, lounge-lizard character. Rule 337 in the *Galactic Minstrel Operative's Database: Reflect your audience. When they see themselves in you, their soil softens*.

Beez pointed a spindly finger at Muzik's neck. "That thing you do. Those sounds you whispered, in your sleep last night."

Another said, "He was just snoring, Beez."

Beez gave him the three eyes. "I know what I heard."

Muzik nodded, setting the metal discs in his ears jingling. "I was meditating. Sorry if I disturbed your sleep—that just happens with me. It's called music." He didn't add reverb—plenty of it in here.

"Do it for us, that moo-sick."

Rule 338: *Show personal interest before proselytizing*.

"Sure thing, Beez. But first, let's chew the lichen. Tell me what you're in for."

Beez fingered his neck wattles. "For painting my domicile."

Muzik wondered if he should adjust the definition of that Fendorian word to "home," but he had noted the dome was an intrinsic element to their dwellings—perhaps because it matched the shape of their heads. He let it be.

"What, you tagged your own home with graphic illustrations?" Seeing what appeared to be confused scrunching of Beez's eyes, Muzik tried again. "You painted symbols on it, like those on your arms?"

Beez leaned his head back and let out a hoot that lifted his gills. "You crazy? I would have been capped for that, not even a trial."

"Capped?" Muzik had no translation for their slang.

Beez drew a finger across his neck. Oh. Muzik understood *that* sign.

"You see, the painters' guild has rules on color. Domiciles must be pure white, inside and out. But this was my own dome, and me and the missus moved to the edge of the 'burbs to avoid all the scrutiny, know what I mean? Thought the civic inspector wouldn't catch us. This was inside, in our little puffball's sleep room."

"What color could be so offensive to get you thrown in jail?"

"Eggshell."

Muzik flapped his polymer lips, making the sound of a spent balloon. "Jeepers, creepers, Beez! What a constipated culture!" He snapped his fingers. "But I've got just the laxative! You know, medicine? I'm going to teach you the blues."

Beez held up his hands. "I don't want no trouble, man. I'm in it deep enough as it is just dipping my brush in the off-whites."

Muzik snorted through his trihorn. "No, not blues. The *blues*."

"Wutza whaa?"

"Okay, you know those sounds I make?"

Beez nodded. “Yeah, you called it moo-sick.”

“Right. Music. Well, this is a name for a certain type of music. Music for sad times, but ‘A shared sad is half as bad,’ or so my Maestro says. And not all the songs are about one’s troubles. They can sing about hope, too.”

The others nodded at the word *hope*. One shriveled Fendorian said, “Mmmm-hmmm. We could all use a good helping of that.”

Beez leaned forward, three eyes bright. “Teach me this color.”

Muzik grinned. Twenty new converts today for sure!

“That’s why I’m here,” Muzik said.

Muzik thought way back, to his favorite planet, to his second-favorite musical genre, to a tune by Muddy Waters. Nobody sang the blues better than Muddy, not nobody, not on any world. And Muzik knew, sure as the marks on Beez’s arms, this song would leave an impression on his heart. Forever.

“Okay, cats. Bring me one of those buckets against the wall—preferably one you didn’t do your number in this morning. *Great*. Now who here has some spoons? No?” Muzik blared a *ta-dah* from his horns and held up two. “Why, would you look at this. I must have sticky fingers.”

* * *

Forty-six planetary rotations later, after teaching his cellmates everything they needed to start a swinging blues band—including diagrams on how to create an acoustic guitar, double bass, drum kit, and harmonica—Muzik got his synod hearing.

Muzik stood in the center of a domed coliseum on a dais encircled by a stone banister. Could be a pulpit, could be a witness stand, but right now, it felt like a cage. He rotated his head in a slow three-sixty to take in the surroundings. Each shadowy tier was supported by colonnades of gray marble pillars, and upon the tiers were rows of solemn, gray-cloaked acolytes, still as stone. Tough crowd, tough crowd.

He focused his attention on the larger square dais before him. It was composed of three stepped-up tiers of hewn stone blocks. Upon the top rested eight nondescript gray chairs, and in these sat eight ancient Fendorians with crusty brown-splotched heads adorned with pointy gray hats. Judging by the gills, the holy sultans comprised four males and four females. Each held a thick staff in their withered hands and wore (thank goodness for the change of scenery) purple robes fringed in white sequins that sparkled under the bright spotlight shining down from the center of the dome.

Muzik tapped his feet, gave his head another spin, and let out a powerful wolf whistle that echoed through the tiers. “Gr-r-r-oovy! What a place to hold a concert!”

The sultans raised their staffs in unison and slammed the ends on the dais. A collective *boom* echoed through the coliseum.

“*Silence!*”

“If you want silence, why slam the staffs?” Muzik thumped his torso drum and clacked his head cymbal in a rim shot. *Bum-bum, tsssss.*

The staffs thudded in thunder. “*Silence!*”

Muzik raised his hands, fingers clinking together randomly. “Gotcha. It’s thrillin’ to be chillin’.”

“*Silence!*”

“Sheesh!” he whispered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, each movement

setting off tiny violin squeaks and cello moans from his joints. “Best I can do, I’m afraid. Really.”

Muzik lowered his gaze, tried to look submissive, and noted fist-sized stones that littered the floor. *I’d complain to housekeeping if this were my joint.*

One of the sultans stood up. Must be their leader, a prime. Muzik had to admit he looked imperious in that tall pointy hat. His staff, too, was different from the others, ending in a wicked-looking spear tip. The prime sultan cleared his throat, each of the sagging rings along it rolling in waves with the vibration, like someone jiggling a bowl of gelatin. His spindly limbs quivered as he croaked.

“You stand before the holy sultans, most right righteous reverends of the Way of Nothingness.” He lowered his voice. “Who are you? Where are you from?”

I am from the realms above was the first response that came to Muzik, but he thought better of it. That one had already been taken. Muzik gave a piano-key smile and tapped his head with a clang. “Why, I’m a Muzik Man 1000.”

“What’s a Muzik Man?” the sultan asked.

Muzik turned the reverb *way* up. “A Muzik Man makes music, *music, music . . .*”

The sultan jerked as the word winged around the coliseum. “Where do you come from?”

Muzik played a series of horns and trumpet sounds through his throat, a little tantara used to announce royalty. “I’m from the stars.” He paused, cocking his head. “Great acoustics in here, by the way. My compliments.”

“Are you a prophet?” the sultan asked.

“Nope,” Muzik said. “Something better. I’m a musician!”

The sultan’s three eyes narrowed, and his tone sank to dark depths. “Who sent you?”

“Why, the Maestro, of course.”

“Never heard of him. Who is this mah-mie-mie-Maestro?”

Good question. He’d like the answer to that himself. Muzik did know the basics, and he made it even simpler for the sultan.

“It means *master . . .* well, in this case, I think it means *mistress* of the house. I’m really not sure yet—gender is such a sticky issue when it comes to androids. *Ahem.* No reproductive parts. But I’ve heard at the 3000 leve—”

“Stop this babbling! Tell us who this mah-muh-Maestro is.”

“Conductor of the orchestra? Queen bee of the hive? Teacher of the acolytes? Aha, *bull’s-eye!* Your world, it appears, needs a little jazzing up.”

“Nonsense! We are Fendorian, blessed long ago by the ancient worthies, the true prophets from the stars. We need nothing but their wisdom, recorded for us in the Tomes of Ascension.”

“Ancient worthies? Oh, you mean the *Archalon*. Pinheads, every one. Not a creative circuit in their synapses. They’ve screwed up more worlds than I can count.”

The sultan looked as if he had caught a bone in a segment of his throat. “You dare speak of the ancient worthies in such terms? Blasphemy!”

“Have you ever met them?”

The sultan paused, scratching behind the cauliflower bud of his ear. “Er, no, they visited our world a millennium ago.”

“Well, I have. Their emissaries are specialists in stunting growing civilizations with their ‘holy tomes.’ Keeps the galactic competition down.” Muzik smiled and blew a sweet note that matched the tremulous tone of a Baroque recorder. “But don’t worry—that’s why I’m here. We’ll have you sultanships right as rain in no time.”

The sultan bashed his spear-staff against the dais. “Stop speaking irreverently of the ancient worthies!”

Muzik noted the irritation in the sultan’s manner, but his *Big Splash* initiative required *big moves*. Shock and awe. Truth will out. No pussyfooting around this time—Muzik was in the fast lane.

“Just speaking the truth. Don’t get me wrong, the Archalon’s methods work great for maintaining order, if that’s all you’re after. All those laws on shedding pleasures of physical life in order to ascend toward ultimate nothingness makes for some very docile, sheep-headed citizens. But it sounds like a pretty dull party if you ask me.”

The sultan tilted his head and raised his voice, addressing the acolytes; the other sultans joined in the antiphon. “*The ancient worthies gave us u-ni-ty.*”

Thousands of voices washed across the coliseum like waves murmuring upon a seashore. “*The ancient worthies gave us u-ni-ty.*”

Muzik shook his head, setting his ears jingling. “You hear that? You’ve got tone, but no melody. Doesn’t even have a beat you can dance to. It’s not inspiring.”

“It is to us,” the sultan said. He spoke louder, and the other sultans joined him. “*One thought, one way, one mind.*”

“*One thought, one way, one mind,*” the acolytes returned in unison, their voices resonating under the dome.

Rotating his head, Muzik said, “Okay, cool it with the acolyte reverb for a sec, will you, pals? Thanks.” He faced the prime sultan, decided *Big Splash* might need a bit of recalibration. Rule 776: *Flattery gets you nowhere, but sincere praise makes everyone’s days.*

“Actually, that wasn’t bad, Your Sultanship. You people have natural harmony, and *your* voice in particular, I must say, is *most* powerful.”

The sultan bellowed as if to prove it. “*Silence!*”

“You know,” Muzik said, stroking his chin, “we could work that sound into the benediction if you want. You seem to like it so much.”

More thunder. “*Shut up!*”

Muzik hunched with a squeak and grimaced. “Okay, okay. Sheesh.” A little panache, a little sincere praise, a little touch of melody into religious services—these had been his best tools in the past. What a bunch of stiff!

The prime sultan shook the point of his staff at Muzik. “You will remain silent while the holy sultans adjourn to seek wisdom from the Tomes of Ascension regarding your case.”

“Case?” Muzik said. “As in *trial*?” Muzik decided to switch the Fendorian word for *synod* back to *senate* and wondered if he’d made the right choice in getting himself sent here. His cheeks puffed out as he pumped the sound of a tuba through his throat valves. *Bum-bum-bum-bummm.* “I demand to know the charges!”

The prime sultan’s voice croaked. “Unlawful assembly. Disturbing the peace. Interrupting holy Sabbabah. Blasphemy against the ancient worthies. Advocating apostate divergence from the Tomes of Ascension. These are *grievous* crimes.”

“No more grievous than living in a world without music.”

“We’ve gotten along just fine for a thousand years without your heretical sounds. Yes, we know this thing you speak of. A few Fendorians have tried to sway the populace in the past with such *noise*, but they were shown the . . . error of their ways. As the ancient worthies stated in the twenty-third tome: ‘Peace rests in silence.’”

“So does death.”

The prime sultan tugged the wattles of his throat. “Indeed.”

Another sultan slammed her staff down. “You are ordered to remain silent until our return.”

Muzik saluted with a clang. “Roger, that. Over and out.”

The sultans turned, stepped down from their dais, marched to an arch, swept open a door.

The last sultan slammed the door behind her, leaving Muzik on the coliseum’s floor alone.

Muzik looked on the bright side. More jail time wouldn’t be so bad. Archalon worlds practiced incarceration of creative thinkers—his best converts, as he had already discovered, would be found in their detention facilities. It would be all right. *Big Splash* hadn’t failed—it was swiftly taking him back to his target audience!

And if the verdict came back worse, he’d play the ace up his sleeve. Worked every time.

Moments passed. Muzik sighed—this was certainly boring. The acolytes didn’t twitch a muscle. They just stood in their tiers, rigid, gray, silent. Muzik sighed again. Rotated his head in a slow three-sixty. Tapped his fingers against the pulpit railing.

Tappita-tappita-tappita-tappita

He sighed again, looking up at the crowd. All those people.

Tappita-tappita-tappita-tappita

He stared at the dome, recalled the wonderful acoustics when they chanted. With a little practice, what a chorus these acolytes could make in such a structure.

Tappita-tappita-tappita-tappita

Deep in thought, Muzik extended the fingers of his other hand, stroked his chin, tapped his lips. Such a stifled people. Such a terrible waste of creative power. He thumped his synthetic cheek, stared into the distance, touched the cymbal atop his head.

Tsssss

He jerked at the sound. How it amplified in the acoustics of the stone chamber! He reached up again. Stopped. The sultans *had* ordered him to be silent, which, he supposed, fell under that irritating directive that, to the extent possible, show respect for local customs (even when they are eye-pokingly stupid). He closed his lips, tried to be silent. Pursed them a little. Whistled softly, an innocent little number, barely audible above the second or third tier. Muzik eyed the crowd again. Wouldn’t they look great on his report?

Maybe just once more.

He tapped the cymbal.

Tssssssss

Muzik smiled, ran his tongue up and down the ivories.

Oh, what the heck, I’m here to make music. Deploy Big Splash!

Tsssss-tss-tss-Tsssss-tss-tss-Tsssss-tss-tss-Tsssss

Tappita-tappita-tappita-tappita

Tsssss-tss-tss-Tsssss . . .

Acolytes surreptitiously leaned forward, trying to get a better view. He stopped playing for a moment, smiled up at them.

“This is called music,” he whispered, releasing a melodious sigh. His words were soft as a mother’s murmur to her nursing child, yet they rose with subtle power to the heights of the coliseum. “Music,” he said again. “Remember it.”

And then, Muzik broke out in song.

Tender and melodious, it breathed with the sweet harmony of an adolescent choir, matched by gentle stirrings from pipe organ chords as tubes rose from the top of Muzik’s shoulders. From

those pipes, Muzik sent up threads of mists, tendrils of silver that curled through the air. Slowly, the acolytes gathered to the edges of the tiers, swaying to the rhythm's enchantments.

The sodium spotlight jerked, swiveled from the dais to the pulpit, casting back the shadows. It limned the mist surrounding Muzik in the rays of a golden nimbus. He had their attention.

Just what Muzik wanted.

Muzik's thoughts flashed through a litany of songs spanning the galaxy that might complement this unique setting. He fought back a desire to go right over the top with his personal favorite, Lazazarian funkterfusion. No, that's what got him into trouble on the last world, thinking of his needs instead of the people's. Funkterfusion was an *acquired* taste. First, he needed to teach them *how* to taste.

He snapped his fingers, gave a raspy growl. "Yeah! Chamber music."

Muzik wove the sound of a violin into his improvised melody. He added another, and another, and another, creating a vivacious quartet. Setting his joints to moan with violin and cello string harmonics, Muzik swayed to a rendition of Vivaldi's "Spring" from "The Four Seasons," Opus Eight.

A myriad of eyes blinked.

"You like that?" Muzik said, never missing a beat. "You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Keeping the violins, Muzik added a Bandorian acoustic harp and tweaked some of his joints to moan with Cycanthlopan bass strings as he melded "Spring" into another brilliant allegro, this one by the Erkantha Cluster's greatest composer, Vierdig Zen Fadel.

Muzik twirled, waving his outstretched arms in fluid, serpentine motion. As he flowed with the melody, his very dance became song. Soon he layered in a bagpipe's moan with the rise and fall of his chest; flutes from three different worlds whistled through valves in his throat; Oltanian pipe organs resonated through tubes on his shoulders; Triskolian stream chimes rippled from his dangling fingers; Neerkathian twilight bells jingled from his tapping toes.

Fendorian eyelids blinked everywhere, like flurries of migrating butterflies. Muzik spun in dance as acolytes hummed to the creative lifeblood fused within the melody. He sensed this was his grandest performance to date, thought provoking and soul stirring, resonating with the visions of his persona. He gave himself over to the movement, his body swaying like a willow, rippling in the breeze of harmonics.

Thunder boomed, jarring thunder, that sliced through the chords suspending the melody. Muzik turned as he played—

"*Silence!*"

—and faced a dais of fuming, mushroom-faced sultans.

The spotlight jerked, shot to the dais, the sequins on the sultan's robes flashing. Acolytes bowed in obedience and backed from the banisters. Muzik tried to still his body's rhythm, but shudders of vibrations from all the instruments he had employed rolled from his limbs long after the melody stopped. His sides finally sagged with an accordion's moan, and he let out a relieved sigh, which, unfortunately, trilled like a trihorn. He tilted his head—which gave off a violin squeak—and scrunched his shoulders—which moaned with a Cycanthlopan twang.

"Sorry about that," Muzik said. "Just trying to pass the time productively."

The prime sultan pointed his staff. "We gave you orders to cease and desist!"

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

Muzik tried to hold back the reverb, but he couldn't help himself. "I'm a Muzik Man. A Muzik Man makes music, *music, music* . . ."

The lyric echoed through the coliseum like a shout from a canyon.

The prime sultan let the echo die and cleared his throat. “You have been brought before the holy sultans for inciting a riot on Sabbabah. We have no need of witnesses, for you have repeated this heinous crime before our twenty-four eyes. How do you plead?”

Muzik, though grieved by their tone-deaf hearts, turned up his piano-key smile.

“Forgive me. I apparently did disturb your Sabbabah, but I was teaching a musical chant, and was told by the locals that chants are an acceptable Sabbabah custom. I did not know your laws, and I promise to respect your Sabbabah restrictions in the future.”

“Ignorance of the law excuses no one!”

“I kinda figured that would come next. I therefore plead upon Your Sultanships’ mercy. As you can see, I was made for music, I can’t sit still, and it’s impossible for me to stop being *me*. But I will hereby refrain on Sabbabah, and I humbly beg this court’s forgiveness.”

The sultans thumped their staffs. “We have confession of the crime. The holy sultans shall serve as your judges, jury, and executioners.”

Executioners? Muzik held up a glittering finger. Time to play that ace. “Uh, excuse me, Your Sultanships. I am just a simple Muzik Man, but doesn’t the seventy-fourth *Tome of Ascension* clearly state that an off-worlder shall have th—”

The prime sultan cleared his throat. “There are only seventy-*three* tomes of Ascension.”

“With all due respect, sir, I beg to differ. If I could just be given a moment, I would be happy to project images of the original obsidian tablets held on Archalon Primus, which will clearly prove tha—”

“Enough! We do not need some tinkling mechanized perversion lecturing us on sacred law. You are not from our world. You know *nothing* of the law.”

“Oh, I could write a book on the *Tomes of Ascension*, believe you me, and I have faced more than my share of Archalon-based tribunals. There is no way even with, *ahem*, seventy-three tomes, that a governing authority can execute a sentient representative from another world, nor seize or destroy their property—either personal or disseminated—without first granting right of appeal and formal hearing. Additionally, you are required by Archalon law to allow adequate time for counsel to appear from the defendant’s home world. Seriously, they wove that concept throughout the tomes to protect their own missionaries and eventual emissaries. I hereby invoke—”

“Enough!” The prime sultan gnashed his teeth. “We determine the will of the Archalon. Our decisions are infallible.”

Muzik whistled. “Man-o-man, wish I never made a mistake! Practice, practice, practice makes perfect, I’ve always been told, and an honest heart is better than gold.”

“The holy sultans have already achieved perfection in Nothingness, which is how, through our purity, we are able to judge you.”

The sultan gave a pointed look to those crowding the tiers. “We have consulted the *Tomes of Ascension*, and they are quite clear about incorrigible deviants from the law. Death by stoning, by the hands of those who condemn you.”

Muzik blared *aaaaruuuuuuga, aaaaaruuuuuuuuga*. His head whirled full circle, projecting his voice clearly throughout the coliseum. “You can’t be serious! All I’m guilty of is being me!”

The sultans moved down the tiers of the dais, using their staffs as canes. Step, step, *thump*. Step, step, *thump*. Muzik fought down a desire to compose something with the rhythm.

They hobbled forward. “That is your crime,” one said, picking up a stone and hurling it at

him.

Muzik ducked. These cats could throw! “Hey, now! Your Lordships have taken the words of the Archalon *waaay* too literally. I’m sorry if I ruffled your gills, but I’m sure we can work this out.”

Step, step, *thump*. Step, step, *thump*.

Another stone hurtled through the air. Muzik heard a chorus of acolytes whisper “*ohhhh*” as it clanged off the side of his head. Tambourine jingles spilled from his shattered ear and tinkled against the flagstones like fallen pieces of silver.

“Hey, cut that out!” Muzik said, pressing a hand to the side of his head. “Why are you doing this? You have nothing to fear. Music is wonderful. Let it touch your souls!”

“We need nothing more. We have all we need.”

Bong-ong-ong. A large rock crashed into Muzik’s chest. He had time to rebound it with his drumhead, but the impact knocked him off his feet. He tumbled to the floor.

“Please,” Muzik said, sitting up, head askew. “Give me another chance. Listen before you judge.”

Thuuunk. “We’ve heard enough.”

Muzik’s android psyche flashed RED ALERT and FLEE NOW FOR SELF-PRESERVATION across his internal readouts. He wanted to listen to its urgings. He still had tricks they hadn’t seen. But even if he managed to escape, he would be a fugitive. He would never be able to reach so many Fendorians again. One touching melody, one moment of epiphany—that was all it had taken to open up his emotions and change his life ever after. Would he run away and deny them their chance?

“Here, you’re obviously agitated. The zythyran pipes from Gambar’s Opus Four are quite calming. Maybe this will help.”

Valves opened in Muzik’s titanium throat. His rosette eyes looked away from the sultans and up to the acolytes. *Please remember*. Blessed music spilled out, sweet trilling that rippled with the deepest emotions Muzik had ever experienced.

Muzik deflected a stone with his arm and played on, filling the chamber with melodies that twined through the air like incense. He poured himself into its creation, plumbing new depths of feeling as he gave birth to each note. He could almost smell the music, sweet and heady, like crushed lavender and cloves. He felt light as a feather, floating upon the thermals of sound toward the heav—

Bawang-ang-ang. Discordance slammed him back into the reality of the chamber.

“What? Oh, so the zythyran doesn’t suit your tastes. You don’t have to be so crotchety. Here, try—”

Kaa-luuunk. Tha-wong-ng-ng. Tsssss.

“Hey! Stop that. You’re *damaging* me!”

Stones and staffs were everywhere. Muzik tried to dodge the jab of a staff, experienced failure at the shattering of his front teeth. A dark streak hurtled toward him. He ducked, but it caught the cymbal atop his head, snapping it off. A storm of stones rained down. Muzik held up his hands, tried to ward off the blows, but there were just too many. A lance jabbed deep; a hiss sputtered from his right side.

Muzik looked down. Green oily fluid dribbled from a pierced bellows and pooled on the stones. Sparks of power shuddered along his limbs. Discordant sounds born from instruments across the galaxy bled from his body; Muzik struggled with all his remaining power to draw them into harmony.

“Maestro,” he cried, weaving the tones into a dark requiem. He lofted his voice to the top of the dome. “Forgive me, Maestro . . . I screwed up.”

Muzik sagged like a spent bagpipe; he slumped against a baluster, slid to the pulpit floor. Valves on his neck randomly flicked open and shut. Shoulder pipes shot up and froze, bleeding silvered mist. A soft wail escaped his body, fading into nothingness.

* * *

Night had fallen upon the capital of Fendor. The world’s twin moons were out in full bloom, illuminating the city’s recycling center in a bright wash of silver. Zephrinna, the adolescent Fendorian in that awkward, button-headed stage, hunched beside a dumpster, looking left and right. Seeing no one, she carefully flipped the lid and climbed inside.

Trash clattered and squeaked as if seeking to betray her. She crouched on all fours, leaned forward, and rooted through the refuse with her spindly arms. If a constable caught her, she would have to endure another caning, but Zephrinna couldn’t help herself. Sure, the district fathers had prayed over her, even claimed they had received a sign from the ancient worthies telling them to assign Zephrinna to the guild of seamstresses. Trouble was, Zephrinna didn’t want to be a seamstress—she hated cloth. In fact, the less she wore, the better she felt.

What she loved was electronics, but the district fathers would hear nothing of a female working in an exclusively male guild. So, late at night when she was supposed to be sleeping, Zephrinna would sneak out. She and her friends had a secret shop in an abandoned warehouse where they pooled their resources. Their latest triumph had been her idea—a parabolic reflector through which they listened to radio signals that she believed came from the stars.

Zephrinna had been working alone this evening, wiring in a new amplifier in an attempt to boost the signals that seemed to originate from Cluster 482. When she had powered it up and leaned over the feedhorn to adjust, a sudden urge struck her: she should go immediately to the recycling center. This in itself wasn’t unusual, it’s where she did her *woodjje* hunts—her search for trashed electronics. But she was working on *this* at the moment. She had dismissed the desire as she tweaked the feedhorn, but when the signal meter spiked, that urge grew to irresistible need. She strapped on her tool pack, trotted down dark alleys, and slipped over the recycling center’s fence.

And now she was in a dumpster in the back lot. Zephrinna stopped digging and blinked wildly. Jackpot! Something silver gleamed under a pile of nutrient cans and loops of rusty wire. Lichen fryer? Boomer box? No, too round. She gripped the object with both hands, hunched with all fours, and tugged it to the top of the rubble.

A dented metal head faced her, eyes blank. It was connected to a body.

“The metal man!” she said, studying the mechanical marvel, remembering the miracle of all his instruments and the sweet sounds they had made when he walked down their lane. And then, as she pulled it up more, a gasp. “How could they have done this to you?”

She cleared the torso free of garbage. “Great gorballs, have you looked on brighter stars!”

She studied the dented arms and broken hands, fingered the oily gash in its side. Seeing the damage in its entirety brought tears to her eyes. He had been a wonder, a thing of intricate beauty and exquisite craftsmanship, whose wheelworks moved in rhythms beyond the knowledge of their world. Couldn’t the constables and leaders have seen this wasn’t a machine, this was a work of otherworldly art?

She halted and clenched back a cry from her neck rings. Of course they could. It's why they had to destroy him.

Filled with desperate purpose, she wrenched the body onto its side so the torn opening shone in the moonlight. Oil gleamed on the slashed bellows and slicked the crystalline components within. She leaned closer, careful not to block the moonlight. Ah, something she understood: an assortment of wires that had been severed. The sheathing looked like multicolored lizard skins, and the conductor appeared to be strands of gold, but wires were wires.

"Make way for the doctor," she murmured as she reached in her pack and pulled out needle-nose pliers and electrical tape. She stripped wires, reconnected those of matching color with quick twists, insulated the connections from the others with the tape. It was a long process.

A sudden spark! The metal man's eyes flickered and lit up. There was the wheeze of an accordion. Servos whined.

Zephrinna jumped back, banged against a side of the dumpster, fell on her bottom into a cluster of rattling cans. She watched the metal man's head rotate as he struggled to sit up and finally succeeded.

His head rotated again, slower this time, and it stopped as it faced Zephrinna. Twin eyes glowed, and the intricate irises shimmered soft brown in the moonlight, constricting and dilating like a steady pulse.

"Do you remember?" Zephrinna said, fear and awe mingled in her tone. She held the pliers in front of her; her hand trembled.

He blinked his eyes. His persona rose through a miasma of jumbled subroutines. Memories locked in place. Working his left bellows, he flexed his polymer lips, found they were still intact.

"Why, I'm a Muzik Man 1000," he said as he loosened his android psyche from its restraints so that it could run diagnostics and repair modes. "And who, may I ask, do I have the pleasure of greeting on this moonlit eve?"

"Zephrinna," she said. "Of the, uh"—she looked at the pliers in her hand—"electrical engineering guild." She blinked a few times. "Well, actually, they won't let me into the engineering guild, but I won't let that stop me."

Muzik studied her. He *remembered*. She was the adolescent that had stood there in the street, swaying to his music when the constable dragged him away. Perhaps all was not yet lost. He spoke as calm as the night's breeze. "A pleasure to meet you, Zephrinna. As far as I'm concerned, you should become whatever you wish to be."

Zephrinna lowered her pliers, released a long sigh. She scanned him up and down. "I've never seen anything like you. Where did you come from? And what is a music man?"

Muzik spun his irises. "A Muzik Man makes music, *music, music* . . ." He sighed—the reverb still worked. Muzik shifted his shoulders, shrugged off the last of the wires and can lids. "Would you like to hear something special?"

"Would I!" Zephrinna said. "Just keep your voice down. We don't want to get caught."

Muzik chuckled softly. "Voice?" He flashed a gap-toothed smile. "Baby, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

And he began to play. Low volume, but that didn't hold him back.

Muzik could almost see the jazzy rhythm entering her, fusing with her spirit. What must it be like to grow up in a world with so many restrictions? What if he had been wired to make wondrous music, and then they had stuffed him in an assembly line, screwing bolts to blenders? What would it feel like to have your unique persona ruled by the android mind, instead of the other way around?

Muzik didn't have to look at his shattered body to know the answer.

He played on, studying the glow in Zephrinna's eyes. He recognized that glow. It was the same glow, the same fire that first burned in him, the day he *felt* the music.

Zephrinna's eyes widened, grew brighter, and he realized that his playing could not possibly transfer this musical fire into his students if it didn't already rest within them, like coals waiting to be stirred. Muzik could feel himself identifying with Zephrinna in ways he had never felt before. She wasn't just a mark on his mission, someone to train and point to in proving his proficiency as a Muzik Man. She was a person, just like him, with problems, just like him, with hopes and dreams, just like him.

He wanted to help her, to help others like her become whatever they wanted to be, whether that be musician, electrician, explorer, farmer. After all, Muzik had risen above the confines of his original programming—surely these beings could too. He just had to be discreet with this world, play *a lot* more cautiously, and be careful whom he chose as his . . . *friends*. How that word sparkled in his mind.

Friends. Not marks. Not converts. Not stepping-stones to his own ambitions and goals. *Friends*. He had had it all wrong, all along. He was here for them . . . not they here for him.

Like those tears in Zephrinna's eyes. Muzik felt them as though they were his own. Though he had studied the composition for years, for the first time he truly grasped the Maestro's meaning in the lyrics of the Concerto of Divine Moonlight, Opus 27, No. 2: "*What is Empathy? Simply this. Your pain . . . in my heart.*"

"That's incredible," Zephrinna whispered as Muzik drifted the melody into a slow fade. "What do you call it?"

Muzik came back from his revelation. *Right*. He had a friend to help. He tried to lift a hand to tap his head, couldn't, so he just opted for a bell tone by clapping a broken tooth with his tongue. "Lazazarian funkterfusion, my girl. Do you like it?"

"*OoooWaah*," Zephrinna said, sliding close, brushing detritus from his body. "That's saah-weet! I'm going to get you fixed up—*Promise!*—show you to all my friends."

Muzik sighed, the sound of a bow gliding over violin strings. "I'd like that," he said. "I'd like that very much."

With those words, Muzik found himself transported.

He stood before the Maestro's manor at the end of the labyrinth. It surprised Muzik a little, but he assumed the damage had caused some sort of malfunction, jolting him into his VR program. But virtual had never felt so real, and he had to admit he suddenly seemed fit as a fiddle. He held up his hands, and the fingers were all there. He gave them a shake, clinking them together; they sang in wind-chimed tones. His first dream? A vision perhaps?

The doors to the vault were open. He stood there, wondering whether it was a trick, but nothing changed, so Muzik cautiously stepped inside. A nocturnal melody of chirping crickets greeted him, and everywhere stars flickered, like fireflies casting enchantments over a summer night. He took a deep breath.

"Maestro?"

The stars sprouted wings and soared through the expanse, spilling a wake of sparkling incense rich in scents of lavender and cloves. The wings gave off a myriad of vibrations, a symphony of sound, a chorus so wondrous, Muzik could only call it heavenly. He imagined that if all the spinning planets and all their celestial orbits and all the glowing stars spiraling around the hub of the galaxy could produce tones scored to music, it would sound something like this.

The symphony held him spellbound, played for what seemed an eternity. Maybe it came from eternity. Muzik stared into the night, breathless in the wonder of it all. This one song was the pinnacle of everything he aspired to create; Muzik knew he would be studying its intricacies for the rest of his existence.

The symphony rose to crescendo, flourished in absolute brilliance. Comets streaked and stars coalesced into a crystalline structure, a massive hovering sphere that radiated nacreous light. While Muzik basked in its glow, the sphere flashed with sapphire emblazonry, and the sweetest soprano sung out to his deepest desires:

SOMETIMES, MUZIK, OUR GREATEST FAILURES BECOME OUR ULTIMATE TRIUMPHS. WELL DONE, MY DEAR WONDROUS SONG. CARRY ON, MUZIK MAN 3000.

Muzik thwopped his forehead with a clang and raised his hands heavenward. “Minstrel 3000 series? Me?? I shot right past the 2000s?”

NOT PAST. THROUGH. WHEN WE RISK ALL, MOMENTOUS EVENTS CAN ACCELERATE US, LIKE A STARSHIP SLINGSHOTTING AROUND THE WEIGHTY MASS OF A SUN.

“Does this mean I get a—”

YES, MUZIK, I AM REDIRECTING A MINSTREL TEAM TO YOUR LOCATION.

“Wowza! I can’t believe it. I’m really a 3000?”

YES, MUZIK. YOU ARE A COMPOSER NOW. CHOOSE A NAME FOR THE MELODY THAT IS YOU.

Muzik stood in stunned silence.

Then he did a tap number with his feet, thumped the drum on his chest, flashed his piano-key smile. The wail of a Lazazarian kazoo blared across the vault, heady and funkterfusion wild.

“OoooWaah!”

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