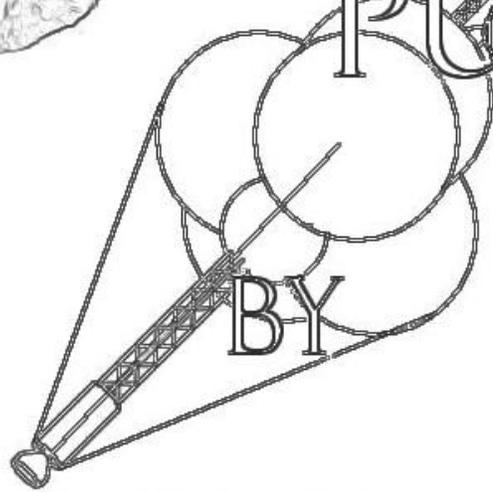




A
LITTLE
PUSSY



CARL BUSSJAEGER

A Little Pussy

by

Carl Bussjaeger

Willen Van Rijn is bright, creative, able to integrate odd facts and see unusual possibilities that would escape most people. Those are good in an inventor. But he's a little weak in the follow through, "That's cool, but what could go wrong?" process.

Jeannette Hunter is bright, tolerant, and cautious. She makes a good counter-balance for her peculiar partner.

Between the two of them, they just might make one good parent.

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This is a work of fiction. Characters presented do not portray actual living persons, with the possible exception of the fuzzy predator who bears a striking resemblance to my cat; but that's probably a coincidence.

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The slim, dark beauty drifted in from the pressure hold with a sodden p-suit liner in hand. She eyed the chunky man wedged into a chair at the dining table, completely absorbed in his datapad display, surrounded by hardcopy flimsies pinned under fridgmagnets. A few seemed to have escaped to settle into orbit around his head.

“Billy,” she said with restrained exasperation, “are you still sitting on butt? I could have used a little help with the load.”

Bill Hunter glanced up from the screen. “Hey, babe. All done?” While Bill pored over spacecraft specs, Jeanie had been supervising a couple of 'Port 'shoremen in stowing supplies for their next run. They rarely made it in as far as Earthspace, and she'd taken the opportunity to stock up on local goodies like range-fed beef, such luxuries still being pricey as hell outside of the gravity well.

She snorted. “Yeah, I'm done. No thanks to you, lazybones” She pitched the damp liner at him. “Here, take care of this.”

Bill caught the incoming garment in one hand, and a few spatters of sweat in the face. “Ech. Why do I want your dirty laundry, wench?”

“Second Tuesday, chambermaid. Your turn to do laundry.” Her lips curled up in an evil grin. “Unless you want to swap for algae filter cleaning.”

He offered her a timeworn digital gesture. “For the first time in two months, I didn't... coincidentally,” he stressed the word, “pull that one out of the job jar. Not bloody likely.” He turned toward a basket against the far wall, wadded up the liner, and, “He shoots!” He tossed the garment at the clothes hamper, only to see it bounce off the edge of the springloaded lid. “He... rebounds” Bill lifted from the chair and stuffed the wayward clothing into the basket.

Jeanie shook her head. “Can't help with cargo, can't shoot for shit. What do I keep you around for anyway?”

Bill leered and waggled his eyebrows at the shapely lady. “Come over here, sweetcheeks, and I'll remind you.”

“Lay off, Lothario.” She glanced at the clock on the main control console of their craft. “Speaking of reminders, did you remember to start some spaghetti? Company's comin'.”

“Sheisse,” Bill said embarrassedly. “Nah, I got into the plasma drive thingy specs and forgot.” He moved to the kitchen area and rummaged in the fridge for the appropriate packets. “No worries. Got plenty of time before Alex gets...” The shipcomm chimed, interrupting him.

“Kali spera! Hola!” came a woman's voice over the speaker. “Anybody home?”

Jeanie evil-eyed her procrastinating partner. “You were saying?” She grabbed Bill's 'pad from the table and tapped an icon. “Come on in, Alex. All clear, Bill's on a leash.” The lock began cycling.

“In your dreams, bondage-babe,” Bill shot back. “And if you pull out those cuffs again, I'll show you new and perv...” He smiled and looked past Jeanie to the young woman entering the room. “Hi, Alex!”

The new arrival was a wiry, well-formed blonde with a long yellow mane drifting behind her like a cometary tail. She left some bulky packages hanging in the air and closed in on Jeanie with a hug. The ladies exchanged greetings.

Bill watched and declared, “Hey! What about me? Don't I get any?”

Both women began speaking at once, and Alex Dohnalek deferred to the older woman. “That remains to be seen, boyo,” Jeanie replied. “Be good and we'll see. Later.”

Bill grinned. “I'm always good.” he made a fair attempt at licking his eyebrows, but failed for lack of adequate equipment. “But I was talking to Alex, you sex maniac. How 'bout it?” The last to the visitor.

Alex smirked, and her eyes narrowed. “We'll...” She paused. “Could be, Billy,” she said cryptically. But she gave him a solid hug anyway.

Jeanie gave the girl a gentle push toward the table. “Sit, sweetie. Billy's just putting on dinner for us. Right, Bill?” she prompted.

Bill's gaze slipped from the complementary set of lovelies to

the frozen packets sucking the heat out of his fingers. “Oh. Uh, yeah; right away, boss-lady.”

“Oh. Don't bother,” Alex corrected. “I can't really stay. I'm...”

“What?” Jeanie demanded in semi-mock outrage. “But you just got here. We haven't seen you in months.”

Alex put her hands against the table and rose from the chair Jeanie had planted her in. “I know. And I wanted to spend more time.” She sighed. “But I got another vid from my new boss, and they want me to get there by yesterday, or earlier if possible. I guess a mission came up.”

Bill's ears pricked up. “So you did take that job with Stados' outfit at Shon?” He referred to the Cassid company which had sponsored the alien probe the three had encountered a few years prior. *Companions of StarFinders*, based on the Cassid homeworld, was in the business of interstellar exploration via normal-space probes carrying space-shortcutting teleportation “doors”.

“Well, duh,” Alex replied sarcastically. “As if I'd turn down a chance to *get paid* to go to new star systems? I'm just glad they're interested in hiring humans.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I think that part might be something of an experiment for them.” Grin. “It sure is for me!” Then her face fell again. “But I need to get there quick, and there's a Cassid fast-boost shuttle leaving for the L5 Door in an hour, and I have to board right away.” One of Bill's errant sheets drifted by her face, and she snatched it out of the air. “Oughta tack those things down in freefall, you know. Speaking of which, I thought you were going to get a suite in the grav section; why're you still in the *Imp*?”

Jeanie sighed loudly. “Because *someone* was too much of a wimp for the Port's quarter-g deck,” she explained with a look of utter disdain at her partner.

“Hey, now!” Bill objected to the ladies. “This is a vacation yet. I wanted to relax.” He shrugged. “And do you know how long it's been since I had to stay in anything over a sixth of a g?”

Alex grinned as Jeanie chanted, “Seventeen years, five months...” She glanced at her wrist 'pad. “Six months next week. You do recall me sitting beside you on that shuttle when we escaped dirtside?”

Alex glanced at the 'copy in her hand, then held it out to Bill. "Plasma drives? Looking to upgrade *Imp* at long last?" she wondered.

"Naw," he replied, accepting the sheet, which he stuck under a magnet on the table, "thinking about replacing her at long last. Been looking over specs on the plasmadancers."

"Plasmadance..." Alex looked puzzled.

"Sort of like ion engines," Jeanie supplied helpfully, "but inside out. Instead of using electrostatics to accelerate on-board reaction mass, you run out governmentally huge stators and charge 'em up to voltages that resemble a dirtside government's national debt. That works against the solar wind."

Enlightenment... enlightened the blonde's face. "Yeah, I've heard of those. Didn't know any were on the market yet. Aren't there some pretty serious power issues, though?"

"They're electron-sucking power pigs," Bill admitted. "The idea's been around forever, but it wasn't practical until the Cassid started exporting their focus fusion generators."

"I dunno," Alex said doubtfully. "They'd be pretty mass limited payload-wise, right?"

"Too true," Jeanie spoke up once more. "Which I've been trying to tell the man." She spread her hands in a gesture of surrender. "But he makes one excellent point..."

"Only *one*?" Bill waggled his eyebrows in a manner likely in violation of multiple Earthly blue laws.

Jeanie eyed him sideways and continued. "So Bill has *one* point: your payload may be limited, but so long as your helium-three for the reactor holds out, your delta-v is effectively unlimited. Really long range trips start looking sorta-semi practical..."

"And I want to check out Saturn," Bill chimed in again. "Besides, we don't go hauling pulverized asteroids around anymore."

Alex gave the pair a speculative examination, then said, "I don't know as that should be allowed. You got away from your

keepers once, headed out to Jupiter...”

“*Trojans*,” Bill corrected pedantically.

“...Jupiter's Trojans, and look what happened.”

Jeanie grinned. “We did get rich.”

“There is that,” their guest conceded. “Um, why Saturn anyway?”

Loud sigh. “Because book-boy here,” Jeanie swept one hand towards Bill, “has been reading old damned scifi again. Hogan, I think.”

“And Callin,” Bill reminded. “Don't forget Saturnalia.”

“I try to.” She faced Alex once again. “Anyway... It might be fun, and a plasmadancer would make the trip doable...”

“Eek!” Alex exclaimed as her datapad beeped. “And on that note, I have to start my own trip. I gotta go! Work... and money.. call.”

“That sucks space,” Bill complained. “The leavin' early part, I mean. Not the job.” Jeanie seconded the sentiment.

Alex grinned again. “But I had to come anyway, because I have something for you.”

Jeanie lit up. “Oooo. Presents!”

The blonde retrieved her floating packages. She flipped a small, flat parcel at Jeanie. “Mikey in Receiving heard I was headed here and asked me to give you that.” She set another, much larger package against the tabletop. It was a gaily gift-wrapped box. With odd...

Jeanie scanned the label on her mail. “Who do we know named 'Zorac' on Shon?”

Bill was examining the pretty parcel pensively. “Whu... Oh, That's Stados; he's using that as his human-space business name. Alex, why does that box have... *air holes*?”

Odd sounds emanated from the package. Jeanie squinted at it. “And why is it squeaking at us? And why is Stados using an alias?”

Bill replied to the second question. “ He thought it would be chillin' to use a kinda-human type nom de plume around here. He went through a bunch of books looking for fictional AIs. He kinda wanted to use Merlin, but I told him Zorac was a little more upbeat. And with the buzz and click, it's almost like a Cassid word, too.” He frowned at the box. “It did squeak.”

Alex gave them a superior stare. “That's not a squeak. It's a meow. Sort of.” She lifted the top from the box and began to reach in. But the contents escaped first.

“Bleeert! Mraow?” the small bundle of camo-calico fuzz inquired, as it floated above the table, little furry paws clutching air helplessly.

Bill stared. “It's a... cat,” he decided.

Jeanie reached out carefully with a finger. The little calico reached back. “It's... a kitten.” She countered.

Alex pulled the little fuzzy carnivore to the table, where it seemed a little happier with the semblance of stability. “It... *She*... is Glassy,” the girl corrected them both.

Bill looked at Jeanie. Jeanie looked back, then to Alex. “Ah... Glassy? Looks fuzzy to me,” she wondered.

Alex stroked the cat's back, then toyed gently with the tips of its ears. “Her name. Glassy.” The catling batted Alex's fingers away from its ears, and emitted a rusty rumble.

“Glassy?” Bill asked in obvious confusion. “Don't... cats... usually have names like Fluffy or Snuggles, or something terminally cute? A cat union rule, or something?”

“Yes, Glassy,” Alex asserted firmly. “Because she's a silly cat.”

Jeanie stared in wounded outrage,

Bill muttered, “Sili...” He groaned and planted one palm against his forehead.

Alex smiled proudly.

Jeanie turned on Bill. “I blame you for that. *You're* the one who got her started...” She stopped abruptly, and faced the blonde again. “*Why* are you inflict... I mean, giving us a cat?”

The younger woman grinned. “Practice.”

“Practice?”

“Practice,” Alex confirmed. Then she relented. “Actually, Mama told me you two were *finally* thinking about starting a kid – and bloody well about time,” she inserted parenthetically. “So I thought you could start with something... simpler to look after.” She smiled at Jeanie. “Not that *you'll* have any trouble.” She lifted the cat and presented her to a dismayed Bill. “Hold her. Gently. She likes the top of her head rubbed. Leave her ears alone until she gets to know you.” Back to Jeanie. “But you *know* Billy's gonna need all the help he can get.”

“True,” Jeanie allowed, choking back laughter.

Alex pushed off from the table. “Sludge! Look at the time! I've gotta go.” She launched the second box to the other woman. “Litter box, kibble treats, and some catnip.”

Jeanie wore an expression of complete lack of surety. “But, Alex; I know nada about...cats. Bill?” she said questioningly. “Do you...”

“No prob!” Alex chirped cheerfully. “There's a care-and-feeding type book there, too.” She grinned at Bill struggling to contain the inquisitive critter. “Billy, think of it as an ops manual, and Glassy as an addition to you bio systems. You'll be fine.” She glanced at her wristpad. “Gotta go now!” She grabbed Jeanie for another hug, and then planted a quick kiss on Bill's receding hairline. “Bye! Have fun.” She escaped to the lock before her victims could further respond.

Bill stared at the fuzzy feline. “We've known Alex... what? Four, five years?” He said idly.

Jeanie glanced up from the box of kitty cargo she was inspecting. “Yeah. 'Bout that.”

He shook his head. "Five years. And she finally gives me a little pussy." He sighed and stroked the cat's soft back. "Talk about 'unclear on the concept'."

Jeanie groaned. Then, "Hon, do you know *anything* about cats? I mean... In the States, the dole would cover cat food, but most labor-reserve types who bought kibble in N'york were eating it themselves."

"Uh... No. Not really." He peered at the fuzz ball as it floated away from the table surface. The fuzz tipped its head and peered back. "My mom kept some cats, but I never really had much to do with them."

"Oh. That ain't optimum."

"I do kind of remember one thing."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "There's considerable doubt as to who exactly owns who."

Jeanie stared at the contents of Stados' package. "Seeds? Why is he sending me seeds?" Then she raised her head and listened, with a slight frown. "Where's Glassy-girl?" She faced Bill who was staring into one corner with a grin. "What?"

He pointed at the covered litter box which was emitting constant scratching sounds. "The furball's in there."

"Ah." Enlightened, Jeanie added, "So that's what I heard. She... Wait a minute..."

"Yeah," Bill laughed. "She's been in there around half an hour."

"Half an... ? Doing what?"

Bill cackled evilly. "Trying to bury her poop. In loose wood shavings. In *free fall*."

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. That. Ain't goin' so well, I think. Kinda like bureaucrats forming committees to study committee building.

Jeanie growled quietly when kitty detritus and cellulosic scrapings drifted out of the crap enclosure. “That is *not* going to be acceptable.”

Bill groaned. “Well, hell. Add it to the job jar. In the meantime, I've got an idea.” He glanced again at the overly busy litter box, and rose from the sofa.”

“An idea?” was Jeanie trepidation-tinged retort. “You haven't been reading old skiffy again, have you?”

“Yep. I'll be in the shop.” And contradicting himself, he proceeded to the pressurized hold just off the main cabin.

Seeing that the kitten was still occupied, Jeanie returned to her mail.

My friend, began the enclosed datacard, Recalling your interest in Cassid bioforms, I thought I would send you a sample of a typical house plant. I did consult with a bio clerk regarding the usual preferences of you electronically-challenged types, and he assured me this would be satisfactory. The plant is native to Shon equatorial regions, so it should adapt well to the warm human environment. The clerk did caution that this particular specimen spreads rather aggressively and should be cultivated away from other forms. Since he understood that this was going to human space, that should probably be taken as “For Ghu's sake, don't let this get loose in the wild on Earth!” Although that might be fair recompense for that village idiot who convinced the Zz-k-rt Botanical Society to distribute kudzu as a new ornamental. I believe he will be paying restitution for several more years.

“Spreads aggressively?” She considered the matter. “I think we'll just keep this in a pot in the lounge, and the hell out of the hydroponics room. She went to work.

After several hours, much metallic mayhem, six bandaids, and a remarkable display of scatological skill even for Bill, he presented Jeanie with his newly-crafted masterpiece. “Behold the Smith/Van Rijn Centrifugal City Container! I call this prototype the

'Lysander'."

"Dare I ask why?"

"No."

Jeanie pushed away from the table to close on the... invention. It was generally cylindrical, with an inclined plane leading to one open end. The opposite end of the stubby tube – all nicely mounted in a frame – was connected via drive belt to... *an electric motor?* "That's a cement mixer."

"No, that's a Centrifugal Citty Container. Tee-Em," he added unctiously.

"And you got the idea from one of your everloving books from the Gutenberg archive."

"Yep," he said smugly. I first read it as a kid. There was this little old lady showing a guy her freefall kitty latrine. I thought it was kind of a cool idea then, but Mom would never let me test it out with Dad's cement mixer and one of the barncats."

"For which cats across the Solar System bless her name. And you plan to stuff Glassy into that thing?"

"I propose to teach her to use it. I shall – most sanitarilly – transfer some of her... waste from the current, inadequate, box to this ingenious device..."

"Ick. Why?"

Bill's display of confidence slipped slightly. "I vaguely recall that one thing cats key on in learning to use a litter box is smell. So I figure to... pre-decorate it, odorifically-speakin', to help convince the Fuzzy One to start using it."

"And *then* you're gonna stuff her in there?"

"Pree-cisely."

"Do you 'vaguely recall' that Glassy-girl is sharp and pointy on five outa six corners? Better wear your welding gloves."

"Hmm. Perhaps. The suggestion has some merit." He

gestured dismissively with one hand. “Nah. Don't want to panic her.”

“You're gonna stuff my cat into a cement mixer... but you don't want to panic her?”

Bill huffed. “ Centrifugal Citty...”

“Whatever. I'll watch. From over there.” She pointed to the lounge wallscreen.

As specified, Bill did the necessary with the nasty, then approached Glassy, who slept unsuspecting, wedged into the sofa cushions. “C'mon, little fuzzy. Poppa's got something to show you.”

Bill pushed over to the Centrifugal Citty... contraption, and flipped a switch. The cylinder began rotating and rasping as the litter within shifted. The cat's eyes widened, her ears and whiskers tipped back. Claws eased out *sloowly*. “Ouch.” He pried her loose. “Here we go, kittykat. This'll be fun.”

Glassy disagreed most audibly.

“In ya go.” In she went.

“SSSzt! Meo-argh!” Out she went. Later, Bill contended that she deliberately chose her exit trajectory for max damage. Jeanie agreed, and applied six more bandaids to various sections of exposed Bill.

“Billy, may I remind you that Alex had the admittedly crazed notion that Glassy-girl would be practice for a little bioform of our own?”

“Certainly! And I have this icy idea about diapers...”

“You're not getting' near any baby of mine with didies that involved power tools or moving parts, Jeanie stated flatly. She cradled the murderously upset kitten in her arms. “Don't worry, sweetie. I won't let the idiot psycho do that again.” He didn't.

Bill placed the cover back over the newly modified litter box and set the retention clips. “OK, this should be a little easier on sensitive feline nerves. No tumble cycle, no shifting litter or... stuff.”

The kitty crapper now included a screen and charcoal filter – courtesy of the air system spares – under a generous layer of wood shavings. Beneath the filtration assembly was a fairly powerful fan – air spares again – that set up a negative pressure under the litter. Theoretically – Jeanie said 'hypothetically' was more like it – this would hold litter and waste in place even in microgravity.

Lather, rinse, repeat: Bill... *encouraged* the wary carnivore into the box. Nothing happened, which was as it should be. So far.

Now what, insane human? Glassy's eyes were remarkably expressive as she peered from within the chamber. Bill flipped a switch. The fan swooshed. The cat tensed.

When nothing else occurred, the cat hissed, then stalked out, tiny claws velcroing the carpet. Jeanie put the bandaids back in the med-kit. “This one might actually work, Billy,” she declared. “But just leave the fan running all the time. She'll get used to it, and it'll keep the odor filtered.”

“Yep,” Bill answered smugly. “I'm a freakin' genius.”

“Centrifugal Citty Con...”

“Shut up.”

Improbable was under acceleration, bound for Pallas. Jeanie walked over to the kitchenette and stuck a finger in a shallow tray of wheat grass growing in a layer of dirt under a plastic mesh which served to hold everything in place in in micro or shifting gravity conditions. The soil felt a little dry, so she sprayed some water over the sprouts. Then she turned her attention to the neighboring pot containing her Cassid botanical. *Sheisse, that's growing fast*, she noted. She spritzed it, too. “Billy!”

“Uh.. yeah,” he replied absently from his seat at the control area desk. He typed away, drafting a pricing and spec request for a plasmadancer drive system and pinch fusor. At that point, Glassy decided she required attention. She slinked across the desk and draped herself over the keyboard. “Hey! Don't do that.” He slid her away.

“Don't do what?” Jeanie asked.

“Not you. For once. Furball here. Did you say something?”

“Yeah, looks like Glassy has been laying on the wheat grass and grazing again. Got any ideas about that?”

He sighed, hit save, and faced the mildly annoyed woman. “That. Yeah, I check the owner's manual. Seems like the best thing is to set aside a tray just for her use 'n' abuse; apparently cats just like to eat some greenery on occasion.” A flicker of motion caught his eye.

Glassy was stalking and batting a pen across the desk. Whap. Skitter. Whap. Skitter. Whap.

Thump. The pen slipped over the edge of the desk and hit the floor. She walked over and looked down. Then back up at Bill.

“So?” he asked her.

She looked down at the pen, and up again. “Meep.”

“Get it yourself. You knocked it down.”

“Meep.”

He sighed, and retrieved the scribbler. “Happy now, fur for brains?”

She whapped the pen once more and watched it plummet. “Meep,” she demanded.

“Freakin' feline...” He picked up the pen.

Whap. Thump. “Meep?”

“No, damn it.” This time he put the pen in the desk drawer. “Gravity games, hmmph. Let's see ya knock that down.”

“Don't challenge her,” Jeanie said. She'd walked over to observe the antics. “She might manage it.”

“Probably.” Glassycat sat, looked miffed, then stretched out again. Across the keyboard. “Great. *You* draft the RFP then, kitty. I'm gonna take a nap.” He let his eyes slide up Jeanie's trim figure. “Care

to join me?” he leered.

“Not... just yet,” she smiled back. “Things to do.”

“Sigh.” He went to the bedroom and stretch out on the bed. Since the *Imp* was still boosting he didn't bother with the semi-elastic retention sheets, trusting in acceleration and Einstein's equivalency principle to hold him in place.

Just as he began to drift off, he felt little fuzzy footsteps. The now-middlin' large kitten walked up his belly and planted herself on his chest. “And who invited you?” he demanded.

The cat replied quietly by bumping his chin with her head and rubbing her cheeks against his.

“Do I look like a cat bed, fuzbutt?”

She began purring loudly in the affirmative.

“Whatever.” They napped.

Jeanie frowned at the wheat grass trays. Someone had scooped a large section of one tray clear of sprouts. Her suspicions involved someone with fuzzy paws. She gathered up the displaced greens and put them in a strainer to wash; no reason to let them go to waste. Next, she pulled a seed jar from the retention shelf and turned back to the tray she meant to reseed.

And caught the culprit in the act. The Cassid house plant leaned over, scraped away the competing plants in an adjacent tray, and placed what looked like a seed into the bare dirt. “What the fu...! Bill! Come look at this!” Now that she had an idea of what to look for, she spotted a tiny, decidedly non-wheat sprout in the first bare patch. “Spreads aggressively my ass,” she muttered.

“You want me to do what aggressively?” Bill asked from immediately – and all too appropriately – to her rear.

“Not you, dipstick. That.” She pointed and explained what she'd witnessed.

“Damn,” was his sole comment. Then, “I don't suppose

Stados included growing instructions with that thing, did he?”

“Nope. Let's check the wonderful world of wiki.”

It took a while. The information was there, but the links to related and supplemental material were quite diverting.

“Plants?” Bill said wonderingly. “They're all plants?”

Jeanie was staring at the 'pad display dumbfounded. “Well... not... exactly. I can't believe I.. I just assumed they did the whole plant and animal thing like Earth. I mean, they look like animals. Right? And the subject never came up before.”

With a few – generally single-celled – exceptions that blurred the lines, Earthly life was classified as plant or animal. Shon's lifeforms had taken a different, singular evolutionary path. Since most were at least partially photosynthetic – including the Cassid bioforms themselves – human biologists opted to call them plant-analogues. Cassid tended to differentiate classes by mobility: sessile forms that filled the equivalent niche of Earthly plants and motile forms that masqueraded as animals. To make things worse, the lines between the two were much vaguer than Earth's comparatively straightforward plant/animal distinctions.

Bill stared intently at his 'pad. “Says here that the sessile forms tend to have cell walls like Earth plants, but it's a protein that more or less does what cellulose does. And it's essentially the same material that makes up Cassid bones and plates; just folds differently, denser.” He looked up. “Instead a metallic oxide bones or... chitin, Cassid have what we'd call wood.”

“Wood?” Jeanie demanded disbelievingly.

“Yep. Ya know, that does explain the decorative inlays on the bioforms' chest plates. Where we'd go to a tattoo parlor for a needle and ink job, they go to a cabinet maker who breaks out the ol' router and starts carving.”

“Freaking Freya, who knew?” an astounded Jeanie replied.

“Apparently ever'body but us. Near as I can figure, what you have over there,” he nodded towards the kitchen, “isn't so much a house plant as what Cassid would call a house *pet*.”

“A pet?” She gave her a head a brisk shake. “Sheesh. So what? Should we name it?”

A slow grin spread across Bill's face. “Sure... in fact. Call it 'Arness'.”

“Ar-what?” And suspiciously, “This is another of your stupid obscure references, ain't it? Talk, bud.”

“Look it up,” he challenged.

Jeanie opened her mouth, clearly ready to do verbal battle, when she was interrupted by cat(naturally)erwauling. “Hiss. Rowr. Meee!”

Bill grimaced. “Now what is your cat doing?”

“Kitchen. Take wild guess.”

They headed over to witness Glassy doing battle with the fierce house plant. Or whatever. She had a leaf firmly in her jaws and was tugging furiously, while the alien batted her head with another frond.

“You gotta be shitting me,” was Jeanie's surprisingly calm observation.

Bill, on the other hand, cracked up laughing. “For Ghu's sake... *Get pictures!*” he choked out. But it was too late. The ferocious feline yanked the leaf free and scampered away with the booty. The plant drew back and hung its savaged branchlets in clear indignation.

The cat paused in the center of the room, where she nibbled at her prize, then rubbed her face over it, and twisted around ecstatically. This was obviously the greatest thing since...

“Catnip?” Jeanie exclaimed.

“Huh?”

“Look at the stupid critter. That's exactly what she does when I give her catnip.”

“Can't be. Alien catnip... stuff in a plant from lightyears

away?”

“I don't mean it *is* catnip, but it seems to affect her the same way.”

“Huh. I wonder...” Bill approached the outraged pet-plant, and leaned over to sniff. The plant drew back one limb and whacked him on the nose. “Hey! Sunnuva... Behave yourself or... or... you're going to your room with no growlight!” He blinked. “*That's* gonna take some getting' used to.” He reached out slowly and stroked the plant. “Easy there, Jimmy. I ain't gonna hurt you. Just want a sniff.” He bent over once again. The plant leaned away, but kept its fronds to itself this time. “It does kinda...” He looked up. “Where's that catnip?”

Jeanie stared, thoroughly bemused. Glassy-girl had given up on her leaf and was curling up on the floor for a snooze, very post-nippishly. “Um... what? Oh. Hang on.” She went to a cabinet and pulled out a small jar.” Here.”

“Danke, darlin.” Bill flipped the lid and sniffed. Then he sniffed the plant again. He handed the jar to Jeanie. “Tell me what you think.”

She repeated the procedure, which the wounded shrubbery seemed to be more accepting of now. “Tax me; smells like catnip. What're the odds?”

“I got no gorram idea. Wish I could get a chemical analysis on the stuff.” He stepped away from Jimmy and shook his head. “I think we need to talk to Stados.”

“We're too far out for a realtime link to the L5 Door. Try email.” Then, quite abruptly, she giggled. “Damn, I hope this stuff can't cross-pollinate. Can you imagine going through all that just to harvest a little cannabis?”

Bill smiled, then went blank-faced. “Could be worse. What if it cross-pollinated with the tomatoes in hydroponics?”

“Wha...?” Then it hit her. “Killer tomatoes?”

“From outer space,” Bill elaborated.

The Interplanetary Olympic Gravity Games were in full swing once again. This time, the cat had found an old-fashioned thumb drive. Whap. Thump. Bill resignedly fetched and returned the toy, trapped in a GOTO loop with no exit code.

Beeeeep Beeeeep Beeeeep! Acceleration warning. At the end of the audible alert, the shipcomp ran thrust down to zero. They'd spend a few hours prepping and fine-tuning the course, then flip over for deceleration into Ceres space.

Glassy, though, was none too sure of the process. When the g's dropped off, she started to drift off the desktop. Panicky, she drove her tiny pitons into the blotter paper. Secured mentally and physically, she attacked the thumb drive again. Whap. ... No thump. What the hell? She crawled forward and looked over the edge of the desk. Nada. She looked around, and spied the drive... floating there. It didn't fall? She looked at the drive again, then over the edge.

Gravity is arbitrary.

She reached out with a fuzzy paw and slapped the thumb drive. Down. Thump. OK, human; *now* you can fetch it.

Bill laughed, and grabbed the drive on the rebound. He placed in the air in front the the cat. Glassy looked at it, thoroughly miffed at the improper behavior. She reached up... and dislodged herself from the blotter. She floated helplessly, tumbling gently. "Er-mreow?" Another revolution and she spotted her prey again. She struck out and... watched the drive spin away. Her little furry legs worked furiously as she struggled in vain to follow it. "Meep!"

Bill had mercy. He planted her back down on the desk, and watched as she immediately used the traction to launch herself after the drive.

Almost. She drifted past it, just out of reach. "Me-row!" And bounced off the ceiling.

Jeanie interrupted Bill's entertainment. "Billy! Email from Stados!"

He gave the airborne cat a last glance and turned to Jeanie and her datapad. "Gods. Please tell me he has something useful for us."

She pulled herself down to a chair and wrapped a leg around the base. “Some. First, he has no idea if the... he calls it a *k'k'z-tikit*,” she stuttered and gargled, “or something equally unpronounceable by human throats. Anyway, he can't find anything about Jimmy and catnip in Shon databases, so he's querying someone Earthside for catnip's chemical workup. When he has that, he'll get someone on his end to compare it to their data. He'll let us know. He does say that, at least for Cassid, Jimmy is non-toxic, and that they routinely pull leaves off the plant-things for a kind of tea. His best guess for now, is that if it didn't kill Glassy yet, and even acted like catnip, it may be safe.”

“That's something anyway,” Bill said thoughtfully. “Mostly null, but it beats 'the triffid's gonna poison Alex's gift then uproot itself and murder you all in your sleep'. Anything else?”

“She nodded. “Good. Cross-pollination is not going to be an issue. Apparently Earth-derived life uses something the molecular geneticists call b-DNA almost exclusively, and Shon forms went with a-DNA, and never should the twain intertwine. They think.”

“No trained attack-tomatoes. Right.” Then he frowned. “DNA?”

“Ayup. He didn't go into detail, which would have been lost on me anyway. But apparently the biology types are at each other's throats over it. You got one side that thinks it's vindication for some anthropic theory or other that DNA is *the* universal life code, while the other says the fact that it isn't the same variant proves any self-replicating molecule will work, and that Cassid use it at all is pure chance.” She shrugged. “Stados just laughs and says 'Eureka! Arrhenius was right.' That's in quotes, so I'm guessing it's yet another of your excreting obscure references.” She paused to stick out her tongue at Bill. “You've corrupted that poor AI.”

“Heh! Not me. He says that while Cassid have humans beat at most tech stuff, they can't produce fiction worth a damn. So he's addicted to the good stuff now.” He smirked. “And that, dear lady, is why I invested in the media companies exporting programming to Shon. And you laughed.”

“I guess I'm laughing all the way to the bank,” she conceded.

“You really want a chuckle? Keep a vidcam handy for next

time Glassy attacks Jimmy. Wanna bet on how much we can get out of pay-per-view toobers for that footage?”

Jeanie planted her face in her palms, rubbed her temples, and shook her head. Then, with a sigh, “Sure. Why not? I'll even hang a webcam on the wall for some 24X7 coverage.”

“That's my capitalistic honey,” Bill told her.

Wheeeeeeeee!

“Hell's brazen hinges,” Bill muttered as he crawled out of bed. “Now what the fuck?” “Didn't I put something in *Imp's* bylaws about 'no comp failure alarms during sleep shifts'?”

Jeanie pulled the sheet over her head. “We don't have bylaws. Statist scum. Go see if we're going to die from CO2 poisoning or something.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He stumbled out the bedroom door and turned left to the server room. His foot landed on something soft and slippery. “Yeep!” He looked down and saw he slipped on one of Glassy's toy catnip mice. “Damn cat. Damn gravity,” he added, since *Imp* was under acceleration again. The server door was already open, so he went right in and cast a glance over the status panel: Noncritical alarm on the media server; the server failed. *So why a critical audible alarm?* Right, he reminded himself, it's a distributed backup for life support controls. Continued breathing being the better part of valor, something like that, he punched keys on the system monitor.

“Overheat?” That's weird,” he told himself. “Don't recall ever seeing that when we aren't even running vids or r-pigs. Sigh. Let's take a look.” He stepped across to the rack in question and found the cabinet door ajar. He swung it open.

“Mrr-rrr-ow?” the cat complained from her warm cozy nest inside the blade rack.

“What the hell are you doing in there?”

“Meep.”

“Warm, is it?” Bill asked her accusingly. “Real warm now; and I can guess why.” He pulled a maglamp off the wall and lit up the racked cards.

Cat fur. Lots of cat fur. Blanketing boards and clogging chip coolers. “Regulatin' damn cat. Oughta ship your fuzzy ass to DC and letcha sabotage them.” He tipped his head and considered. “Not that they'd notice the difference. “Out, damned cat!” He bent over and lifted the sleepily complaisant kitty clear of the computers. “Go bug Jeanie, and let me clean this up, kitty cat.” As Glassy-girl sauntered away, Bill went to the shadowboard. “Artist brush, handvac... yeah, gonna want a noncon probepic, too. Shit.”

He spent the rest of the shift cleaning the servers.

The bumps and growls alerted him.

Bill poke his head out of the bathroom and looked across the hall to the kitchenette. Glassy and Jimmy were going at it. Bill looked at his toothbrush, then tossed into the sink and headed to the rescue. Of which mindless critter, he wasn't sure.

Close up, he saw: Cat chomping leaves. Jimmy's now rather long tendrils twined completely around the cat. Cat whapping a free branch. Jimmy going for her soft underbelly? *Joy. Alien versus Predator.* “Jeanie!”

“Yes?” came her disembodied voice from elsewhere.

“Your plant is beating up my cat!”

“Who's winning?”

“Uh... Jimmy. I think.” Glassy twisted, and planted tiny claws in the tummy tapping frond. “Or maybe the chlorophyllic-challenged critter.”

“Neither of 'em's chlorophyllic,” she corrected. “Shon forms use something iron-based for that. Is the camera running?”

“Yeah.”

“OK, then.”

Bill threw up his hands in resignation. “It was my idea, after all.” He moved in to see if either one actually required rescue.

Glassy was purring.

And Jimmy's frond wasn't striking at her furry belly, it was.. rubbing it.

Damned critters are playing, he realized. Then he noticed the cat's head rubbing against the plant's primary stalk. *She's ruttin' kittynip-stoned.*

This has potential.

Jeanie stared in sheer disbelief. “You want to sell what to who? Where?”

Bill, as usual grinned maniacally. “To...”

“Are you friggin' insane?”

“No more'n usual,” he said defensively. “I think. Hear me out.”

Jeanie leaned back in her chair with the hapless calico cat cradled in her arms. “OK. Explain.”

“'JimmyNip Active Cat Toys: Purr-fect for the solitary kitty'.” he half chanted. “It's – no pun intended for once – perfect. The cat toy that plays back, no batteries required. Keep your cat exercised *and* stoned, cheap.”

Jeanie shuddered. “Yeah, I'll grant hat we could probably move a few to little old cat ladies dirtside, but have forgotten the *spreads aggressively* catch?” she demanded forcefully. “For one thing, once the stuff starts spreading, no one will need to buy 'em from us.” Finger up. “For another, once the stuff starts spreading... they sue the bejeezus out of us! Did you forget about the clown who exported kudzu to *Shon*?”

“And you won't credit that I thought of that?” was Bill's quick rejoinder. “*He* didn't do full disclosure or disclaimers. We will. With very specific instructions on the care and feeding of Jimmys.” He

smirked. “And advertising.. That's not gonna cost us a thing. Advertising is going to *pay*.”

“What?!”

Bill tapped his 'pad, which showed a freeze-frame of full kitty-jimmy engagement. “We're putting this on pay-per-view, right? And when people see it, they'll all want Jimmys for their own cats, right? People're gonna pay us to download our friggin' commercial. How can we lose?”

“Injunctions, attractive nuisance lawsuits...”

“Only in the national areas...” Bill started.

Jeanie stood abruptly, startling the cat. “The nationals. Gods above and below, the Californians will go batshit insane! They don't let *apples* across their border. It boggles the mind to think what they'll do about *aggressively spreading* animated stoner cat toys!”

“The Californians *are* batshit insane, and I was saying that I don't plan to peddle Jimmys in the national zones.” He paused, and an evil light lit his eyes. “Although we could air drop...”

“Billy! No!”

“Just a thought.” He tried a new tack. “Look, if you don't want to market 'em directly, we could still import seeds, for which Van Rijn Interstellar Import/Export is already ideally placed, and sell them to distributors. Let them take the risks from there.”

Jeanie opened her mouth then froze for a moment. “That... isn't such a bad idea.” She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then went on. “Let me think about this for a couple of days, OK?”

“Sure, sure,” he allowed. “There's no rush. Yet. I'll just tip off Stados to keep an eye on commodities markets for a heads up in case someone else starts buying up seeds.”

“Well...”

“C'mon, babe,” he persisted. “I was right about the superconducting pizza pans, wasn't I? Remember?”

She shuddered again. “I remember that you wanted to stick a

key piece of an alien starship's control systems – one containing small nuclear generator, no less! – in the oven, thus derailing humanity's shot at alien first contact.”

“More of an isotope thermal battery, than what you'd call a nuclear reactor,” he countered pedantically.

“You wanted to shove a nuclear powered – *radioactive!* – alien device in my toaster oven!”

“It was just a thought; I didn't actually *do* it.”

“I stopped you when you headed to the kitchen.”

He grinned. “And the pans did work later.”

“*M' RAOOWW!*”

Bill shot upright in bed, pulling the sheet away from Jeanie. “Whuh...! Alarm?”

“MRAOOWW. MRAAOO-OOOOWWW!”

Jeanie sat up. “What the triplicate-filed hell is that?”

“MRAOOOOOOOOW!”

Bill tapped the lights on. “*Yob...* It's Glassy. I guess.”

“*MRAOOOOOOOOW!*” demanded a surprisingly deep-throated kitty. Bill looked down and saw the critter by the bed. Crouched low to the floor, almost crawling. “MRAOOOOOOOOW!” She rolled over, twisting her belly upwards.

Jeanie leaned over her partner to stare at the cat. “Is she sick?”

Worry lined Bill's face. “I dunno. I...”

“Come on, Billy. You're the one who had cats once. Don't you...”

“*Mom* had cats,” he corrected. “I never had much to do with 'em besides filling their kibble cups. I don't freaking know.”

Jeanie climbed over Bill and picked up the troubled cat. “C'mere, sweetie,” she crooned. “We'll see what's wrong and make it all better.” She faced Bill. “Find that damned owner's manual Alex gave us.”

He swung his legs over the edge of the mattress. “Yes, dear. Right away, dear.” He eyed the cat squirming against the woman's breasts. “And you. This better be real or... or... *Tacos*. That's all I'll say: *Tacos*.”

“MRAOOOOOOOOW!”

Thank the gods of bureaucrats for overly detailed indexes. “Found it,” Bill called out.

Jeanie hurried over to the table. “Is it serious. Should we...”

“Settle, woman,” Bill instructed. “Serious... Yes... and no.”

“MRAOOOO' OOOOW!”

“What already?”

He tossed the well-thumbed cat manual on the table. “She ain't sick. She's horny.”

“What?”

“MRAOOOOO-AAROOOW!”

“Damn cat's gone into heat. She's not sick. She's on the prowl for a tomcat, and too-blasted loudly announcing her... availability. That's...”

“MRAOOOOORROOOW!”

“...all,” he finished.

“MRAOOOOOOOOW!” Glassy-girl slinked over, plopped to the ground, and curled into a near-circle, belly exposed. “MEERAOOOOW!” she called again.

Jeanie looked exasperated. “Well, how long is this going to go on?”

Bill shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “Book says anywhere from a week to two weeks. Or until she gets laid.”

“MRAOOOOOOOOW!”

“Bill, you did notice that we don't have a boy cat handy? And that we're three weeks shy of Ceres yet? And I got no clue whether there's even cats on that damned rock?”

Billed sighed tiredly. “None of those points had escaped me.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“MRAOOOOEEAOOOOW!”

“Ear plugs?”

Jeanie ran her hands through her hair. “Leapin' Loki, you'd think that vac-skulled girl could have warned about this?”

“MEEOOOOOOOOW-ORW!”

Rather unexpectedly, Bill laughed. “I guess she just figured after all these years with you, I'd be used to it.”

“Bite me, Billy.”

“If you insist.”

Suddenly *Jeanie* laughed. “Oh. My.”

“MRAOOOOOOOOW!”

“What?” Bill asked through caterwauling.

“Did you look at Alex's last vid yet?”

“Nope.” He looked puzzled. “Got some bearing on this... this catastrophe?”

Jeanie grinned evilly and chuckled. “Only indirectly. Did you know this animated civil defense siren had siblings?”

Bill looked blank. “Well... cats come in litters. Even I remember that. So?”

“So Alex actually took one of them with her. To Shon. On the job.”

“She took another Glassy-class kitten... on an interstellar survey mission... with the first mixed human-Cassid crew?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yep.”

“Dear Bog... That should be interesting.”

Those folks with an interest in the history of technology, not to mention good science fiction, can find the original Centrifugal Citty Container in L. Neil Smith's [The Venus Belt](#), where it operated more successfully (although it should be noted that the primary user drank a lot of whiskey).

More from Carl Bussjaeger:

[Net Assets](#): What would you do for cheap space access for everyone? For *anyone*? And what would the government do to prevent it?

[Bargaining Position](#): Sequel to *Net Assets*. First contact. Sorta. The original Bill & Jeanie adventure.

[The Anarchy Belt](#): Collection of more short fiction from Carl Bussjaeger. Includes several tales from the *Net Assets/Bargaining Position* universe.

[Beginners' Guide To Self-Publishing Through CreateSpace and Kindle Direct Publishing](#)