

Popping the Bubble

by Cullen S. – Winner of Gold Key at Regional Level

Far into the future, Solar War IV is happening. On July 2, 3179, Atlantis launched nuclear missiles at the U.S. and the whole solar system became engaged in a nuclear war. On November 14, 3277, Clyke Tose, a General in the U.S. Air Force, was sentenced to life imprisonment on Ophothosp by an Atlantian judge. General Tose had been commanding the launch of nuclear missiles at Atlantis for which the Atlantians, who captured him, sentenced Clyke to life imprisonment.

Why are they doing this to me? They would have done the same thing if they were the ones being attacked.

“THREE...TWO...ONE...BLAST OFF!” The rocket engines roar to life hurtling the spaceship into space toward Ophothosp, one light year away. Clyke has many months to think about what he has done to end up on a spaceship zipping towards one of mankind’s highest security prisons. After three days, Clyke is so bored he enters his hibernation cell, and sets the spaceship’s computer to wake him up 12 hours before touchdown. Clyke sleeps as the small, sleek, spaceship streaks like silver lightning toward its destination.

“Touchdown in 12 hours,” A monotone, robotic voice says.

Clyke slowly awakens from his hibernation. He staggers to his feet and watches the stars go by like little nuggets of glittering gold, as he contemplates his fate.

“Touchdown in 6 hours.”

The spaceship slows down in preparation for landing.

"Touchdown in one hour."

Clyke can see the planet clearly. It is covered in rocky grassland. There are no trees or visible bodies of water.

"Touchdown in 30 minutes."

Clyke sees cells dotting the planet like a herd of cattle. They are clear bubbles with a living facility, yard, and some woods. Each cell covers about two acres.

"Touchdown in one minute. Please buckle your safety harness."

Clyke sits down and lowers the restraint until it clicks into place. He can feel the cabin getting warmer as the spaceship enters the atmosphere of Ophothosp.

"Touchdown in 45 seconds. Prepare for rapid deceleration."

The spaceship lurches as the airbrakes open.

"THREE ...TWO ...ONE ... TOUCHDOWN. Please remain seated with your safety harness buckled until the craft has completely cooled."

Clyke waits for the voice to tell him he can leave the spaceship.

“You may now exit the craft. Once outside, your personal guard will escort you to your living quarters. I hope you enjoyed your flight. Unfortunately, you will be here for life so I can’t ask that you fly with us again.”

Stupid computer; they should feed your programmer to a Slyon.

As cool air rushes through the hatch, Clyke steps out to face a humanoid. So far, the only inviting thing about the planet is that the robot resembles a human. The low humidity makes Clyke’s throat dry. *At least the cells look like Earth environments. Other than that, this planet isn’t at all welcoming, just like a prison should be.*

The robot is about seven feet tall with glowing red eyes; his armor glistens in the sun.

“Hello, Clyke Tose,” the robot says. “Welcome to Ophothosp. I am your personal guard. My name is Humanoid 63-X9, but you can call me X9 for short.”

He must be an enemy. After all, his only purpose is to keep me here.

Clyke is led to his cell, one of the bubbles he observed when approaching the planet. X9 shows him around and is very friendly. The bubbles contain real objects of nature.

There is a soft carpet of grass, a flowing stream, and a grove of trees.

X9 visits Clyke’s bubble three times a day to restock his food supply. Clyke is provided a computer with a few outdated programs on it. Other than that, he has nothing do, so he spends time thinking of escape.

As the weeks pass, Clyke begins to think of X9 as a friend. *He spends time talking to me and asking about life on Earth, which shortens these unrelenting days. This is not what I expected.*

One day, he asks X9 for help escaping. X9 seems willing, so Clyke tells him his plans, and asks him to get the things necessary to carry out his scheme.

“You know I cannot do that.”

“Please, can’t you do it for a friend?” Clyke pleads.

“No, I cannot do it.”

The next day X9 comes back to tell Clyke that he thought about it and he may actually be able to help him escape. Clyke gives him a list of things he needs to escape, and X9 leaves.

I wasn’t sure if X9 was this much of a friend. This is great, I’ll have no problem getting out of this slime-hole.

The next week, X9 brings the items to Clyke. Clyke tells X9 he will escape that night and asks him to distract the guards so he can get to the spaceship undetected. X9 doesn't reply; he only nods his head as he leaves.

As darkness descends upon Ophothosp, Clyke puts his plan into action. *Fools, they call this a high security prison? Breaking out is as easy as falling off a log. What could go wrong? The only one who knows I’m escaping is an ally. Once outside of the bubble, all I have to do is run to the spaceship scheduled to depart tonight, board it, and fly away into the sunrise.*

All goes well until he runs up to the hatch of the spaceship. When he swings it open, a voice says, "Hello, Clyke. I hope you enjoyed your short lived freedom, because it's over."

All Clyke sees is a metallic fist flying towards his head.

When he comes to, Clyke is lying in his bedroom. He can feel his head throbbing from the blow. When his head clears he begins to wonder what he did wrong during his escape attempt. *How could they have seen me? How could they have gotten into the ship before me? I told X9, but he wouldn't tell my secret. The other guards probably just saw me running toward the spaceship.*

Months pass before Clyke attempts escape again. He makes a crude shovel out of a large cooking spoon. Then he begins to tunnel under the metal floor-plates in the kitchen. Clyke digs the tunnel towards the nearest edge of the bubble. He spends hours every day digging through the rocky soil. Once the tunnel extends beyond the bubble, he stops digging. He will make his escape tonight.

He covers up his signs of work and goes outside to confirm that the tunnel is beyond the edge of the bubble. While doing this, X9 goes into the house to restock the food in the kitchen. Clyke notices that X9 has been in the house an unusually long time, so he goes in to investigate. When he enters the kitchen, he is shocked to see that the metal floor-plates have been removed. He can hear X9's hydraulics pumping from down in the tunnel. Clyke silently pads out of the house.

I don't think X9 will tell the other guards; I'll still try escaping tonight.

The hours drag by until finally the time arrives for Clyke to escape. He quietly removes the metal floor-plates, and lowers himself into the tunnel. After putting the plates back over the entrance, he slowly begins his 150-foot crawl to freedom. When he gets to the end, he begins to dig the last foot of soil away from the roof. At last, a large chunk of dirt falls away and Clyke can see the night stars. That is not all he sees.

“I see you are once again trying to escape.” Clyke sees a metallic glint in the moonlight as it rushes towards the side of his head and knocks him unconscious for a second time.

“Déjà vu,” Clyke says to himself as he once again awakens in his bedroom with a throbbing skull.

After thinking about his escape attempts, Clyke finally concludes that X9 is the one who keeps foiling his plans. Clyke wonders why X9 would even pretend to be a friend if he wasn't one.

I must come up with a way to escape that runs no risk of being discovered by X9. He comes to my living quarters three times a day, which means I will have to set up the escape and carry it out in the five hours between his visits. But that is impossible...escape would be too complex to pull off in that short a time. After a year of imprisonment, Clyke reluctantly accepts the fact that he will be in prison for the rest of his life.

One morning, Clyke meets X9 coming to restock his food, and for the first time in two years, he realizes that X9's armor is slightly larger than Clyke himself. He decides that before the day has passed he will put a new escape plan into action.

The next evening, Clyke has his old shovel, which he has sharpened, ready for X9 to enter the house. He is like a cryogenic monument behind the door to the kitchen. He grips the shovel with all his strength. His breathing is labored, sweat is rolling off his forehead. Clyke hears the front door as it creaks open and slowly clicks shut. Clyke can hear the pumping of hydraulics as X9 moves closer and closer. The robot walks across the room to the cooling unit. Clyke quietly glides toward the robot. Suddenly a floor plate shifts letting out a grating shriek. Instantly, the robot spins around and lunges at Clyke while pulling out its plasma sword, but Clyke is too fast for him. Clyke jumps to the side and thrusts the shovel under the robot's neck. X9 lands with a thud and does not stir. Even though this is what the Air Force trained him to do, he is remorseful at what he has done. *Yes, this is why I was here in the kitchen, but X9 was my friend...no, he really wasn't my friend; he ruined my plans to escape twice and betrayed me.*

After standing over the motionless robot for several minutes, Clyke springs into action. He removes all the internal electronics and hydraulic systems, and steps into the armor. Pleased with his new armor, Clyke rigidly stoops down and picks up the robot's plasma sword, hooks it to his belt, and strides out the front door.

As he leaves the bubble, he is approached by two other guards coming in. The apparent leader of the two is one of the new larger models of guard robots and has glowing green eyes. The other guard looks like X9, red eyes and sleekly built.

"Are you okay, X9?" the leader asks. "You have been in there awhile, and we were coming to check on you."

“I’m fine,” Clyke replies trying to imitate X9’s mechanical voice.

“Well, what happened in there?” the red-eyed guard asks.

“Nothing.”

“Something must have happened; it took you twice as long as usual,” the leader says.

Oh no, they’re suspicious, and if they go into the house they will guess what happened.

“What? Oh yeah, um...I was checking to see if Clyke was digging another tunnel.”

“Did you find anything?” questions the green-eyed guard.

“No, I think he finally accepted that it is impossible to escape from Ophothosp,” Clyke replies.

“He almost did, twice, but he told you all his plans. Fool, he thought a guard would help him escape,” the leader says.

“Well, we should head back to Headquarters and recharge before we have night patrol,” the red-eyed guard says.

So X9 did betray me. He never was a friend to me. Just what I was afraid of.

The three of them begin the half mile walk towards the large collection of buildings that

make up Headquarters. When they arrive, they all enter the recharging station. Clyke suddenly realizes that he has no cord that he can pretend to recharge with. Thinking quickly he tells the other guards, "I need to go talk with the commander. I'll be right back." Clyke walks out the door and as soon as he is out of sight, starts running toward the spaceship sitting on the launch pad.

After he has been running for about five minutes, he realizes that he misjudged the distance to the launch pad. As he sits down to rest, he hears a shrill siren and sees red lights flashing on the landscape. *Spleet! They found out I'm gone!* He looks up at the spaceship and sees that there is no chance he can get all the way out to it without the guard catching up to him. *I'll just have to try.* He stands up and begins to run determinedly.

After a minute or two of running, he hears a hum behind him growing louder. *It must be a hovercraft. He'll be easy to deal with since there's only one.* Clyke keeps running pretending not to notice it. Then, just when it is about to hit him, he pulls out the plasma sword and does a somersault along the ground. As the hovercraft goes over him, he holds the sword in its path. The two halves go flying into the ground and explode.

That probably won't help me stay undetected. As he goes by the crash site, he sees the pilot's anti-matter pistol. He stoops down, picks it up, and keeps moving. The distance to the spaceship continues to grow shorter. Clyke looks back over his shoulder. Five more hovercraft are approaching him. *I may not be able to handle five at once. I can't just give up with out a fight. No, I have to fight to the end, even if it means death.*

He pulls out the anti-matter pistol, aims at the first hovercraft, and squeezes the trigger.

The ball of anti-matter flies through the air and hits the first hovercraft, destroying one of its wings. The uncontrollable craft veers into another hovercraft. They become entangled and explode as they hit the ground.

Wow, I guess God is looking out for me today. The next shot Clyke takes is purposely aimed at the ground. The rocks that fly up like small missiles, destroying the fans on the bottom of two close flying hovercraft. They smash into the ground and tumble into an outcropping of rocks.

The last pilot speeds up his hovercraft as he approaches Clyke. Clyke alters his course and dashes towards a tree. The pilot continues to gain on him. Clyke is almost at the tree. The pilot puts on a last burst of speed like a cheetah about to bring down its prey. Clyke dives to the ground as the hovercraft roars over him and hits the tree. He scrambles up and starts sprinting towards the launch pad again.

Clyke boards the spaceship and begins frantically searching for the auto-pilot switch. As soon as he finds it he flips it to the "on" position. Indicator lights flash on and off as the computer checks the ship's systems. After what seems like hours to Clyke the spaceship begins to rise. On the ground, the guards prepare a laser cannon. Clyke prepares the spaceship's decoy, which will make a hologram of the real spaceship, which is made invisible. Clyke controls the hologram of the spaceship to the right of the real one. The guards fire the laser cannon. It hits the hologram. Clyke moves the hologram rapidly toward the ground so it will look like the real spaceship was hit. The guards cheer until the hologram vanishes. They are confused at first, but too late, realize what happened.

Safely on his way back to Earth, Clyke falls into a deep sleep. Hours later he wakes up

and begins to think about X9. *My first feelings about him were that he was an enemy. Then he was friendly to me so I thought he was a friend. I was such a fool to be led astray so easily. I should've listened to my initial feelings about him.*

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A little over a year later, Clyke lands on Earth, the Earth that he thought he would never see again. He gazes at the blue sky, and savors the feeling of the breeze brushing past his face. The best thing about being on Earth again is the Humans. He hasn't seen a Human for years.

The day after he lands, a man visits him at his apartment. The man is about eight feet tall and wearing a white suit with black pin stripes, like a zebra. His short hair is straight and black. Although slightly annoyed at being visited so soon after his return, Clyke is still excited about having a real Human to converse with. The man offers to show Clyke where all his possessions are being stored.

"They are in a warehouse on 52nd street," is the vague hint the man gives.

"Isn't that a deserted neighborhood?" Clyke asks.

"Kind of, why are you asking?" the man asks.

*This is a trap. He is trying to get me out of the busy apartment building so he can kill me without being noticed.*

“I would rather not go to get my stuff. You can keep it.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, sir?”

“Yes, now go away.”

Clyke slams the door in the man’s face and punches the button to activate the magnetolocks.

*If I was going to be in prison for life, all my stuff would have been given away.*

The next morning Clyke cautiously opens his door and picks up the newspaper. On the front page he sees a picture of the man who had visited him the day before being held against the hood of a police hovercraft by two robots. The headline reads, “Number One Atlantian Assassin Arrested”.

*Good, I wondered if I should call the police about that guy. Good thing I didn’t ignore my initial feelings about him. I guess I’ve learned not to ignore my first impressions when I meet new people.*