

Rockets Red Glare
by Lesley L. Smith

"Mommy!" Emma's voice pierced the summer afternoon like an air raid. "Ethan's hitting Cutie-Pie-Baby on the head with his Robo-Monster!"

In the kitchen, Lucille sighed. "Ethan! Don't use Robo-Monster as a weapon."

His only response was a giggle.

That didn't sound reassuring, so Lucille quit packing the picnic basket and went into the family room. The classic movie E.T. was playing in the background, totally ignored by the kids squabbling on the carpet. Where was Michael? "Where's Daddy?" Lucille asked, leaning over and turning off the movie.

"Dunno." Ethan shrugged and waved his toy around, too close to Emma's head for comfort.

Emma, sitting on the floor, was engrossed in acting out some arcane ritual with her doll.

"Michael?" Lucille yelled.

A muffled "Yeah?" came from the study.

Lucille walked down the hall and peered into the study. He was doing something on the computer--work, no doubt.

Lucille crossed her arms. "So, you have some kind of super-powers that let you see through walls, now?"

He glanced up at her from the screen. "Huh?"

"Well, that's the only way you could be watching the kids from in here," Lucille said. "Congrats on your new power. What, did a radioactive carrot bite you?"

"Huh?" He glanced up again. "Carrots? Sure we can have carrots on the picnic."

"Mommy!" Emma blared from the family room. "Robo-Monster hit me in the head!"

Lucille forced herself not to jump up and down and scream. "Please go check on the kids. Now," she said to Michael in a very reasonable voice.

He looked up at her, but her stormy expression must have made an impact. "Yeah, okay."

In the hall, next to the family room, Lucille said, "We're leaving in five minutes. We promised we'd meet the Wilson's at the park at 4:00 and we're already late."

"Chill out, Lucille," Michael said. "They can't start the fireworks until dark."

The Grand Supreme Leader Huxtotempil slid up to the viewscreen eagerly. The first view of the planet with his own eyestalks! The entire commandpod crew held their breathsacks.

Suddenly the clouds parted to reveal strange blocky structures and smooth black surfaces.

"How bizarre!" Grand Less-Supreme Gooptalshin said. "Their beautycenters must be deformed or diseased."

"Severely diseased," Huxtotempil agreed. "They need our assistance badly." His eyestalk swiveled to Gooptalshin. "It is good we came."

"Yes, they are very primitive," Gooptalshin said. "I wonder why they have not answered us."

"Perhaps they cannot detect our transmissions?" Grand Even-Less-Supreme Shuptam said.

"Has there truly been no reply to our greeting songs?" Huxtotempil turned to Shuptam.

"Alas, our beautiful harmonies have been ignored," Shuptam said.

Huxtotempil shook his midsection. "So sad. We have our work spread out for us."

Gooptalshin exclaimed, "Something is approaching us at high speed!"

"A Welcome Craft?" Huxtotempil asked.

"Is it the right size and shape, but it is moving much too quickly," Gooptalshin said.

"Are evasive maneuvers required?" Huxtotempil said.

"Too late," Shuptam said. "Brace for impact!"

The craft shuddered.

"Ack! A second craft has been launched!" Gooptalshin said.

Huxtotempil's top section shrunk. "Apparently, they HAVE detected us and they do not want to exchange beauty with us."

"Brace for impact!" Shuptam yelled.

Ben Wilson was chasing Ethan around and around the blankets the two families were sitting on.

It made Lucille dizzy. "Boys sit down, now," she said. "The fireworks are starting soon."

Caren Wilson said, "More wine, Lucille?"

Lucille glanced over at Michael and Tom Wilson poring over Tom's Blackberry. She gulped down the rest of her goblet and held it out. "Yes, please."

The two boys collapsed on the blankets practically on top of Emma and Jane Wilson. Immediately the girls started whining, "Stop it. Mommy, they're squishing us. Make them stop."

Caren said, "Be quiet and watch the fireworks."

Lucille drank her wine and leaned her head back to watch the sky.

Ethan jumped off the blanket and scooped something off the grass, carrying it back to the group.

Ben said, "Cool!"

"Is it a firework?" Ethan said. "Dad, look at the firework we found."

Without looking up, Michael said, "Yeah, the fireworks are neat."

"Let me see!" Emma said.

"Me, too," Jane said. "It's so pretty--all shiny."

"I think it's metal," Ethan said.

"Look, it opens," Ben said.

"What's that inside?" Ethan asked.

Huxtotempil puffed up his top section as the craft opened. First contact--how beautiful! He got ready to give the opening song of harmony and cooperation.

Gooptalshin and Shuptam were still reorienting themselves after the emergency landing.

And then a huge pink fleshy thing reached in and plucked Gooptalshin off the floor.

He didn't even have time to emit before he disappeared out the top of the craft.

Huxtotempil deflated. What was going on? Where were the songs of welcoming? What were these things?

Another grasping creature entered the craft and started grabbing at Shuptam.

Shuptam tried to hide behind the Command Chair, to no avail. "Help me, Huxtotempil!"

A third fleshy creature entered.

Huxtotempil deflated further. Gone from his mind were the welcoming songs of joy and beauty.

All he could say as the thing grabbed him and squeezed his midsection was, "Ack!"