

K'Orb

A Tales of Young Roscoe Story

By William S. Russell III

The previous alien invasions had all been unpleasant for one reason or another, but this one was different, primarily because the costume was so elaborate. The fuzzy gray kitten sat in the sunny bay window and reflected on the various times he had witnessed the Earth imperiled by marauding extraterrestrials. There was the Tyrant of Repulex (pronounced: rep-yooooooo-lecks, with a sinister bit of a reptilian lisp at the end) who appeared shortly after a pair of lime-green swim fins had been discovered buried deep in the back of the hall closet; the Talaethian Squirrel, which bore absolutely no resemblance to any terrestrial squirrel, but looked remarkably like a five-year-old with a pair of scarves tucked in the back of her pants and a paper bag with a multi-eyed angry face drawn on it in crayon over her head; and the Martian Mold, which was a blanket masquerading as a sort of shapeless creeping horror that slid and shuffled across the floor and grabbed people's ankles or tails. The Martian Mold was pretty annoying. This time was different though; this time was a lot more involved.

It all started when the adult female had gone away to her sister's apartment in the city for the weekend. The kitten had been anxious about the absence of half of the human parental unit, as he had a hard enough time keeping an eye on the single instance of human young in the house when two parents were on the job. The little girl was creative in the occasionally manic and sticky sense (as only a five-year-old can be), and she had the uncanny ability to be in more than one place at once. He had resigned himself to a few days of mostly laying low, such as staying completely under the couch, in order to avoid starring roles and costume fittings for impromptu musical productions involving Legos, and the inevitable mountain of crayons, markers, pencils

and paper that went along with the frantic script and score re-writes. Being a kitten, his vocal range was somewhat limited still, and he was self-conscious. No matter. The real trouble was with the television.

While the mother was away, the father and the daughter spent what the kitten learned was “quality time” together at home. “Quality time” frequently consisted of wrestling, explosive belching, video games, pizza and discussions about why certain professional football teams were “for losers.” As the nights wound down however, the two would retire to the green couch to talk about such father-daughter topics as what it would be like to have a baby brother or why lip-balm was not very nutritious, and to watch some television before it was time for the little girl to go to bed. The kitten often climbed up to the back of the couch behind their heads while they watched so that he could attend to a little personal hygiene and see how the stock market was doing, if someone were conscientious enough to leave the business news on for a few minutes. Most of the programming was child-oriented, mostly cartoons like: *Lamar and the Lemur*, or *Stinkytoons*, which delighted the little girl but put the kitten to sleep. On occasion the adult male would turn to the “Hi IQ Channel,” so the family unit (minus) could absorb knowledge about arcane and intellectual topics passively through the excitation of pixels.

The night before the mother came home, the Hi IQ Channel aired a program entitled: *Artificial Intelligence: Road to Utopia or Horrible End of the Human Race*. The Hi IQ Channel frequently aired programming that breathlessly speculated on human extinction in one form or another, be it from errant weather patterns or excess bovine vapors. The kitten often wondered why there weren’t more shows about how to subtract fractions or convert them to percentages, which very few humans seemed to know how to do and would certainly improve the viewer’s IQ. For example, the cat food can label specifically spelled out: “contains two servings,” which

would be equal to half at a time, but to the kitten's eye he frequently wound up with thirds, which forced him to supplement his diet with quick commando-style raids on the dinner table when no one was looking.

The *Artificial Intelligence: Road to Utopia or Horrible End of the Human Race* show was very interesting to the father and the little girl, and they sat quietly through the entire program, with no bathroom breaks, even during the commercials, which was unusual. The basic premise of the show was that because of something called nanotechnology, and something else called quantum computing, it was only a matter of time before machines would be capable of thought more powerful than human-like intelligence, which could be either really good or really bad, or maybe both. The show ended with the interview of a scientist named Dr. Walter H. Vacuum. Dr. Vacuum had a boomy voice and eyebrows that reminded the kitten of fuzzy caterpillars, and the little girl pointed out that his nose whistled when he exhaled while not speaking. Dr. Vacuum said in his boomy voice with one caterpillar eyebrow raised that if Earth were ever to be visited by beings from outer space, they would most likely be super-intelligent machines, as such machines were clearly the next step in evolutionary progress and they would not be subject to the ravages of time or disease like organic beings would be. The kitten found this interesting, but dismissed it as unlikely since Earth's little corner of the galaxy did not contain much to attract the interest of smarties of that order. They had probably already monitored broadcasts of *Stinkytoons* and decided to steer well clear. The little girl however, was fascinated by the concept.

“Dad, would robots from outer space ever come to our house?” she asked.

“I don't think so, honey, we're not on a main road.”

“If they did, would they get mad because we force machines like the microwave and dish washer to do the jobs we don’t want to do?”

“I’m pretty sure that if the microwave were that smart it would not consistently burn my burritos on the outside while leaving them completely uncooked on the inside,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Dad, maybe the microwave is trying to send you a message.”

“I doubt it. Now it’s time for you to go to bed,” he said, bringing the conversation to an end in his best parental manner.

And off she went, but that was hardly the end of it.

That night, the kitten slept in the laundry basket, as was his wont. His sleep was restless, and he had a vivid dream of little metal people, only a few inches tall each, assembling microwaves in a long assembly line. In his dream, he looked closely at the control panel on each microwave, and instead of the usual settings, such as “defrost,” or “popcorn,” they had labels that read: “become self-aware,” “weather control,” “exterminate!” and “open the pod bay door.”

The kitten woke up feeling more tired than he did when he went to sleep. Yawning and bleary-eyed, he dropped out of the laundry basket (he was still too small to touch the floor from the plastic edge) and padded into the little girl’s room to see if she were still asleep, which was often the case. Oddly, her bed was empty but for rumpled blankets and a solitary crayon on the pillow. Nonplussed, he made his way to the kitchen, expecting to see wet food in his dish and the two humans slurping their way through bowls of breakfast cereal, but his dish just contained the stale dry food from the night before and there were no humans in sight. It was then that he

heard the commotion on the outside. The mother was home from her visit to the city and was talking to the neighbor on the front step. With a little difficulty due in part to his small size and the fuzzy tufts of hair between his toes that prevented him from getting a good grip, he leaped to the broad sill of the bay window to see what was going on.

As he expected, both of his adult humans (the Fishers, as he would learn to call them) were in the yard chatting with their neighbor, a burly red-headed man named Leod Brambleton, who was quite boisterous in manner, and he spoke loudly with an accent that the kitten sometimes found hard to follow. Pepper was with him. The Brambleton family (there were a number of them in the “clan” as Mr. Brambleton called his family) also included a small and thoroughly obnoxious (thought the kitten) Jack Russell Terrier named Pepper. Pepper was straining at his leash while Leod Brambleton went on in tortured English to the Fishers about how the weather could indeed be “Scottish.” Although the kitten and Pepper had never been properly introduced, they had taken an instant disliking to one another the first time they had met while hissing and barking through the storm door window. Whenever Pepper escaped from his yard or got off lead (which was often- Pepper was the Houdini of Jack Russell Terriers- a collar had not been invented that he could not wriggle out of) he always made a point of jumping at the Fisher’s bay window and letting out a piercing bark to terrorize the kitten should he happen to be sleeping there. Pepper had been measured jumping over five feet straight up and the bay window was hardly a challenge for him. The four-legged miniature canine menace would then tear pell-mell down the street, across lawns, flower beds and through swing sets, stopping only to bark furiously at nothing and pee on any object taller than he was, which was just about everything. The kitten surmised that Pepper was mostly bladder, and the small cat often indulged in the guilty pleasure of entertaining evil thoughts about the dog, including filling him

with helium from the back end with a hose and watching him float upward and away. He was having those thoughts again now as Pepper eyed him from the step.

“When I saw ye go ‘way with your overnight bag, I thought for certain you’d be coming home with a new wee bairn,” said Leod Brambleton, in his strange accent.

“Oh no, Mr. Brambleton, just a weekend visit to my sister’s in the city. Nothing as exciting as any *bairns*,” said Mrs. Fisher, laughing nervously. Her husband, hands in pockets, chuckled uncomfortably at the thought as well, and rolled his eyes skyward. He started to whistle tunelessly.

“*Bairns?* Is that Scottish for brains? K’Orb is interested in studying primitive human brains!”

That was when the kitten realized that they were in the midst of yet another alien invasion and by the looks of it, a serious one. A few yards away from the talking adults, and certainly within earshot was a young elm tree, and now a shockingly advanced alien machine-intelligence leaped out from behind it, waving a kitchen spatula to emphasize its alien machine-intelligence pronouncements.

“Take me to your bairns so they may be studied, puny non-machines!” K’Orb commanded.

The alien was not very tall, not that a super-intelligent machine from a distant galaxy would need to be of any particular stature, and happened to be about average height for a five-year-old human girl (maybe a little less than average but a growth spurt was coming “any day now”), and wore a helmet that was unmistakably the bowl portion of a salad spinner turned

upside down and covered in what looked like tin foil. The foil was some advanced photovoltaic used to power the machine's core processing unit, no doubt, surmised the kitten. K'Orb also wore a cape, which by eerie coincidence was the same pattern and material as the good bath towels that Mrs. Fisher only put out when company was coming to stay the weekend. Pepper began barking furiously at the menacing alien and straining at his leash. Pepper was well known to steal good bath towels from clotheslines when they were hung out to air dry, and he was eyeing the alien's cape.

“Is that wee Grace, then?” asked Mr. Brambleton, not cowed by K'Orb's commands.

“Grace! Is that one of my good towels?” Mrs. Fisher demanded.

“SILENCE or I shall activate the portable plasma focus!” shouted K'Orb, gesturing with the spatula to a number of crayon-like objects strapped around the alien's wrist with what appeared to be duct tape. The kitten was thinking that it was a good thing that alien machine-intelligences generally did not have hairy arms. Removal of the duct tape securing the portable plasma focus was likely to pinch more than a bit, which ironically enough, the kitten thought, is what the electromagnetic compression of plasma is called – *a pinch*. Then he caught himself. *A portable plasma focus?! Why, that could cause a small nuclear explosion or any of a number of other nasty high-energy gas-type reaction thingies right here in the front yard! People and Jack Russell terriers alike would be converted to ash or vapor or messy pools of essential components in the blink of an eye! The lawn and the vinyl siding on the front of the house would not fare well at all! Who would open the wet food cans? The kitten had to do something to prevent the unthinkable.*

K'Orb was not likely to be bluffing. As an alien machine-intelligence, K'Orb would be able to upload its consciousness to another body as soon as anything iffy happened in the front yard. The portable plasma focus had to go, which would hopefully cause K'Orb to retreat back to whatever spacecraft or dimension it had come from in the first place. But how to disarm what was clearly a superior being?

“Enough idle chatter! Take me to Doctor Whistle-y Nostrils!” K'Orb said imperiously.

“Why it's wee Grace, and isn't the lassie growing like a weed,” said Leod Brambleton.

“Arf arf arf arf arf arf arf arf arf arf!” Pepper barked frantically.

“Gracie, take my salad spinner off of your head this *instant*,” said Mrs. Fisher.

“Prepare to be superheated, puny earth creatures!” said K'Orb, cape whipping in the morning breeze as she/it dropped the spatula and pointed the portable plasma focus at the flustered group of adults.

The cape. That was his only hope, realized the kitten. The alien's cape had just enough resemblance to a bath towel that Pepper was sure to go for it if there were only some way to get the little brute off his lead. In a flash, the kitten devised a plan. Jumping down from his perch in the bay window, he scampered around the couch to the front door, which was open but for the full-length glass storm door, which would allow him to get close to the action and be seen by the terrier. The kitten skidded to a halt just in front of the glass, bunching the “Bless This Mess” door mat under his rump.

At first Pepper did not see him, as the little dog was focused on K'Orb's cape like a bull on a matador. Not knowing how long it would take for K'Orb to build up electromagnetic

compression in the plasma focus and guessing he had mere seconds to get the dog's attention, the kitten realized he would have to use the tennis ball.

The kitten had come into possession of the tennis ball at a particularly low point in his own personal history of feline/canine relations. It was shortly after Pepper had scared him out of the bay window for the first time, and swearing revenge, the kitten had staged a night raid on the Brambleton's yard to steal this most prized of Pepper's toys. Members of the Brambleton clan would stand in the backyard throwing the tennis ball to the furthest reach of the fence and without fail the terrier would streak off to get it. Unfortunately the Brambleton's were under the impression that Pepper would return the ball for another throw, which he never did. Instead, tennis ball locked in his miniature jaws; he would run in wild circles of ever-decreasing radius, dog drool streaming behind him as he went. Eventually the circles would decrease to such small diameter, that Pepper would come to a sudden halt, plop down on his rump and drop the soggy tennis ball into the grass. The ball-tosser would call for Pepper to return the toy in vain, sometimes for quite some time, much to the vexation of the neighbors. The kitten had pilfered the tennis ball (he winced at the memory of carrying the spit-soaked thing in his own mouth, but revenge was a serious business) with the intent of one morning hurling it into the back of the garbage truck in hopes that Pepper would follow, but he had lost the heart and merely hid the thing behind the green couch. Now, he swatted the somewhat drier but no less stinky tennis ball from its hiding place and into the glass of the front door. The familiar thud caught the dog's attention immediately.

Seeing the beloved ball was too much for the Jack Russell. He lunged forward on his lead so hard that Leod Brambleton (who was a large man) nearly fell over. Then, almost faster than the kitten could follow, the dog leapt directly and impossibly backwards, and as the lead

reached its maximum stretch length under Leod Brambleton's still outstretched arm, the clasp holding the collar together gave way with a loud "pop." Pepper was free.

So that's how he does it, thought the kitten.

Before anyone in the yard could react (not even the alien machine-intelligence with all of its quantum bits of processing power, the kitten would reflect later), Pepper hit the glass of the storm door, hard. Whether the dog did not realize the glass was there, or his canine brain was not processing as fast as his feet were moving, no one would ever know. The dog hit the glass with a thunderous bang, shot directly off the stoop, and elastic and inelastic collisions being what they are, flew at high speed backwards across the yard and smack into K'Orb. Two almost perfectly symmetrical circles of dog-snot clung to the glass at the spot of impact (where they would remain until roughly Christmas). The dog and alien crashed down together among the roots of the elm tree, a tangle of legs, arms and cape. The crayon-like objects making up the portable plasma focus scattered to the four winds, many to be discovered in the workings of the lawn mower months later.

From behind the paws with which he was shielding his eyes, the kitten gave a sigh of relief.

"Ow! Quit it! Get off me, you stupid dog!" K'Orb's voice had gone quite screechy.

A moment later, Pepper raced from behind the elm tree, K'Orb's cape gripped firmly in his teeth. In a flash he was across the yard, the driveway, the neighbor's yard stopping only for an *extremely* brief piddle on a package the postman had left on their stoop, and half way down the block, cape flailing in the breeze behind him.

"My towel!" shouted Mrs. Fisher in despair, both hands to her cheeks.

“Pepper! *Pepper!* Come back here, ye daft mutt!” And off ran Leod Brambleton after the errant Jack Russell Terrier, without so much as a good bye.

Mr. Fisher had gone to the base of the elm tree, where he was gathering his daughter and the scattered accoutrements of K’Orb. The little girl had a little scrape on her chin from the collision, but other than wilder-than-usual hair, she was none the worse for wear. Still, the impact had frightened her, and she was a little teary.

“They got you with mind control, didn’t they buddy,” said Mr. Fisher softly, gently pushing strands of blonde hair out her wet eyes with his fingers.

“Yes Dad, they did,” replied his daughter, a little catch in her throat.

“Well, let’s go inside and clean you up. Maybe *Lamar and the Lemur* is on,” he said, lifting her up in his arms.

The kitten only just had time to get the tennis ball back into its hiding place behind the couch. In the distance, a distinctly Scottish voice yelled something unintelligible. The world was back to normal again, for the moment.