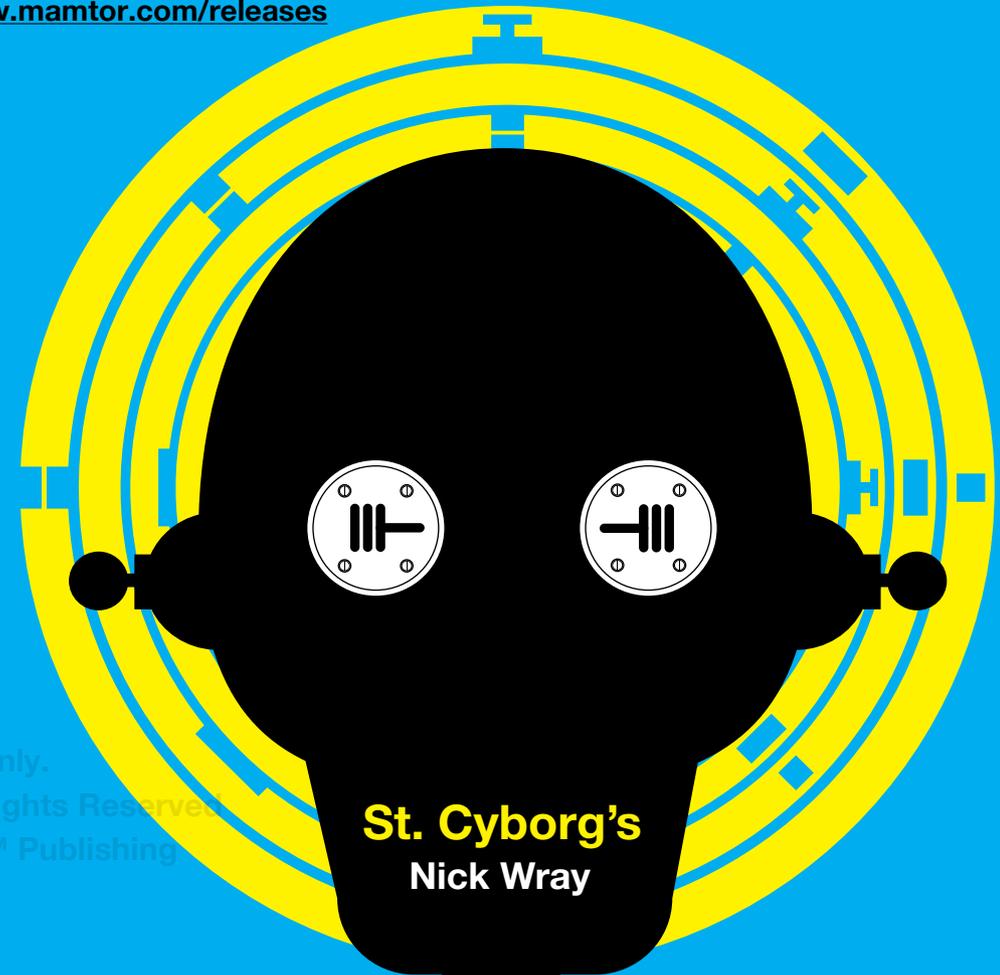


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Here are thirteen stories of alien teachers, pregnant SuperHeroines, a caretaker who runs an after-school chain-gang for miscreants, the scariest petshop in the world and much more...

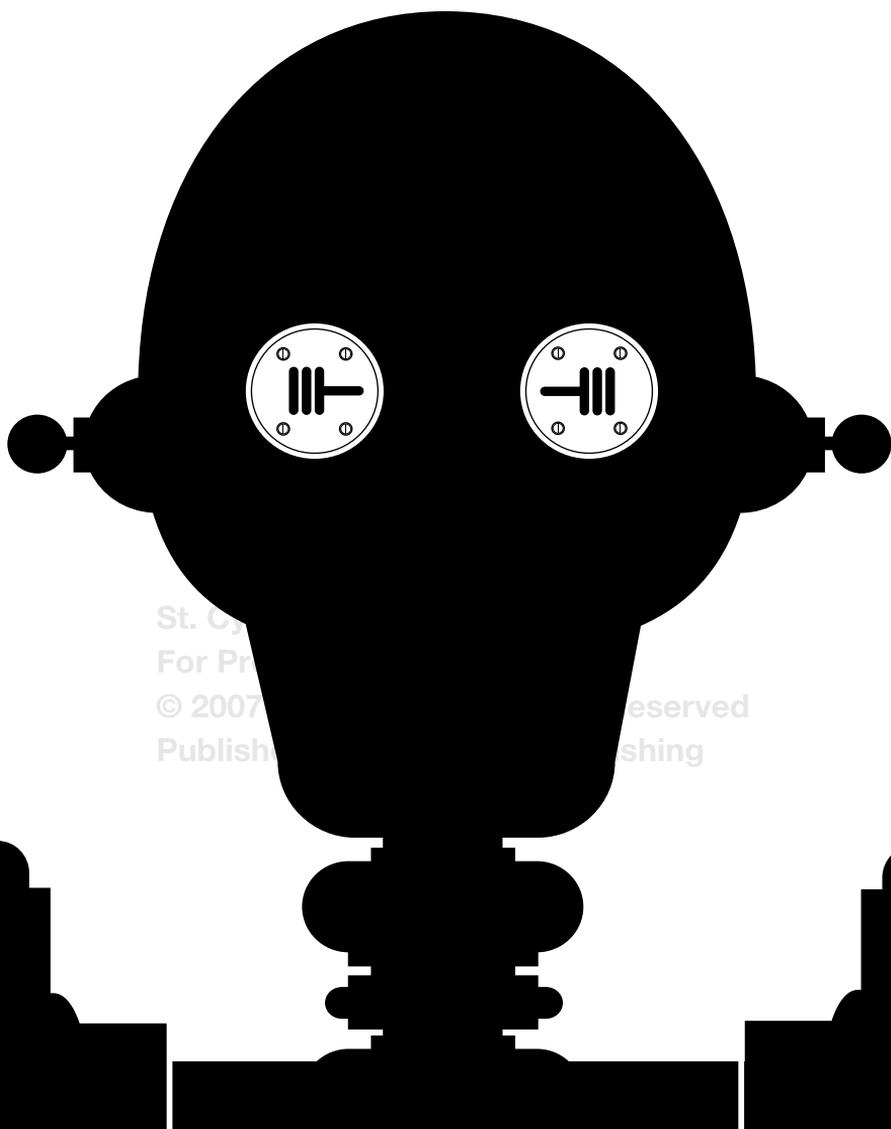
St. Cyborg's – Nick Wray



St. Cyborg's Sampler.  
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**For Shadrach, Keir and Harriet**

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**Xarq**

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For hundreds of years Xarq had waited for this moment, his body as cool as the interstellar voids through which his ship cruised. The onboard computer had picked up faint radio signals, and it swung the craft round to head towards the source. Xarq opened his middle eye sleepily, coming out of the doze in which he had been for so long, to examine the scheme of the star system which the computer flashed up on the screen. The star was an ordinary yellow dwarf, and the signals were coming from the third planet, a small rocky body.

He opened his other two eyes, waking up fully, as he reviewed the signal information. The onboard computer had managed to translate some of it, but even so, much of the material seemed so alien that Xarq had only the dimmest idea of what was going on.

The life forms on the planet needed help. It appeared that they had no leader, and that they were appealing for candidates to fill the position. The information which the computer had managed to decode portrayed a strange society, where the young were herded in groups in some kind of enclosure, each group under the charge of an older creature,

who seemed almost invariably to be ineffectual, and indeed scared of the younger life-forms. The whole planet seemed to be in the grip of both social and environmental anarchy. It had a multitude of names, including Terry, Zembla and Urf, and many competing centres of civilisation which appeared to be sets of artificial caves. Between these centres ran various transport systems, but the populations of each centre seemed to be in some kind of perpetual conflict with most of the other organisms. The whole civilisation appeared to be based on ruthless competition and point-scoring, and the natural environment was hellish too; the temperatures on the planet were so high that there were even whole oceans of deadly and corrosive liquid dihydrogen oxide. The atmosphere was in constant agitation, with vapours forming and precipitating continually. Xarq felt a pang of homesickness as he thought of the calm, crystalline beauty of his own planet, distant beyond imagining on the other side of the galaxy, where slow glaciers of solid nitrogen crawled down to viscous seas of liquid helium. He wistfully rippled his seven tentacles, recalling his own cosy grotto, with the liquid helium pool and fountain. He hoped that his neighbour Qirj was looking after it as she had promised to do, and was taking care of the the Znub which swam in the pool, coming came slowly to the surface whenever one threw in a tentacleful of food...

Still, he had to do his duty, having volunteered for the trip to seek out alien life, and now he was going to make contact between his kind, and the restless creatures of Terry, or Zembla, or Urf, or whatever the planet's true name was. It was a moral imperative of his species that one should not pass others who were suffering by. The computer sent back an acknowledgement to the third planet, saying that their call for help had been picked up, and giving an approximate time of arrival. With a tentacle he touched a set of buttons, and at once a drowsiness came over him as the ship began the long dive into the gravitational field of the yellow dwarf star.

The ship sped past blue green gas giant planets, past a huge planet with spectacular rings, past an even huger banded giant with a red spot in which raged unimaginable storms, past a region of debris and small

Xarq

spheres of rock and past a small red rocky planet with white ice caps. All this time Xarq snoozed, with just his middle eye a little open, half-watching the train of data which the computer projected onto the screen, whilst little by little the yellow dwarf star got larger and brighter. For the first time in centuries the refrigeration unit had had to whirr into action, keeping the liquid helium that was both his body fluid and his atmosphere down to the requisite three degrees above absolute zero.

The computer informed him that the life forms on the third planet had many different languages; something that astonished Xarq, as it had never occurred to him that any planet would have more than one. On this third planet did they all carry around communication devices, like the one he had within reach of his tentacles, which, via the computer would enable him to communicate with any alien on the planet? The computer also showed him close-ups of the intelligent life form; they were grotesque, thrice his height, with only two eyes and two upper and two lower tentacles, each ending in five sprouting tentaclettes. They carried their brain in a shell at the top of their body, unlike Xarq and his kind, who kept their brains safe in the centre of a spherical pod, from the bottom of which radiated the seven tentacles. And these monsters needed oxygen – oxygen! that terrifyingly reactive and poisonous element! – to live. The heat on the surface of the planet was terrifying too; Xarq was going to have to stay safely inside the life support system of his ship when he landed. The one thing which comforted him was reading off that the planet's gravity was no greater than that of his home. At least he wouldn't risk being crushed to death by his own weight.

Now Xarq was in an orbit around the third planet, looking down on blue oceans of the horribly acidic dihydrogen oxide, and green and yellow land, and white polar caps. He saw an archipelago come into view, neighbouring a continent with an irregular and indented coastline. The signal which had attracted his craft's attention as it passed the star system was coming from the largest island of the group. He telepathically instructed the computer to calculate a trajectory, and moments later a jolt told Xarq that his landing module had separated from the mothership,

which was to remain in orbit, retrojets firing to slow the descent and stop the module from burning up as it fell through the increasingly dense atmosphere. Xarq watched as the island grew larger beneath his tentacles, until the horrific ocean was pushed beyond the horizon. He could see structures, cuboids, arranged in irregular rows, between which were moving what appeared to be clumsy metal vehicles. Now he was nearly at the ground; the parachute system opened out, and Xarq floated down above a open green space next to some kind of building. He touched down with the gentlest of bumps, and lay in his bath of liquid helium, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of gravity acting on his body.

The whole experience of landing had been rather strenuous, and Xarq must have dropped off to sleep once more. He was suddenly aware of... of a couple of the life-forms native to this planet looking in through the window of his craft. They were slightly smaller than he had anticipated, and he noted that one was a pink colour with yellow fur, and the other was a brown colour with black fur. He opened his eyes wide one after the other, one, two, three and he saw how on the third eye opening they jumped back. A big hole appeared in each of them, just below their two eyes. This was it, thought Xarq to himself, this was first contact. This was a historic moment and he must get it right. Maybe he could make contact telepathically. He beamed a greeting at them. There were faint signals from their brains, a kind of muttering, but nothing he could use came back, and they didn't seem to have understood him. It was a shame that they were not a mind-reading species, although, given the level of conflict that he had seen on the planet, he should have realised that. With a bit of practice he might be able to talk to them directly. Sighing, he reached for his communications device and began to press buttons, hoping that the computer would interpret the language correctly.

**“greetings make me yr leader”** he said.

Royston and Gina had been sat on the low wall at the end of the playing field, sipping a FloobJuice and quietly comparing notes on their calculator homework, when Royston had suddenly looked up. He pointed. “What’s that?”

Gina followed his arm. They both saw a small object, hanging from a parachute, coming down slowly. It twirled around in a leisurely fashion before disappearing in the thicket of bushes which separated the bottom of the playing field from the road. They both jumped up. “Come on,” said Gina, and leaving their calculators warming in the sun they pushed their way between branches and creepers, ignoring cuts and nettle stings in their curiosity.

“I think it’s more this way,” called out Gina at one point, squeezing between two neighbouring trunks. “Yes, look!”

Royston scrambled after her, and in a clearing was what looked like a metal drum, with some kind of transparent window. It was about three feet high, and inside, through strange mists and vapours they could see something stirring. A tentacle whipped across the window, and Gina and Royston jumped, clutching each other. Then the fog inside the chamber cleared somewhat, and inside they could see a round greeny-blue thing, from the base of which were writhing a number of tentacles. Suddenly, halfway up the round thing, a green eye, like a cat’s blinked open. Then a second eye opened. The eyes looked at them.

A third eye popped open, and Gina and Royston both yelled in surprise. “Aaargh!”

Their heads started throbbing. Gina scratched hers. “I can kind of hear something.” She cocked her ear and listened. “Can you?”

Royston nodded. “It’s very faint. A voice...?”

At the same moment they saw the tentacles prodding at something inside the capsule which looked remarkably like their own mobiles, and both their phones sounded. They had the same text message.

“**greetings make me yr leader**” it ran.

Gina peered in at the creature inside the metal drum. “What is it?”

“It’s an alien,” said Royston confidently. “But what does it mean by

“Make me your Leader?”

Gina was already on the case. “**greetings o alien**” she answered. “It’s trying to say “Take me to your Leader”. That’s what aliens always say. It’s mistranslating.” “**wil take u 2 our ledaz**” she added.

“**u request leader**”

The two of them looked at each other. “I don’t know what it wants,” admitted Gina.

Royston tried. “**u mean pry minster?**”

They saw the alien’s three eyes blinking open and shut in a kind of complex rhythmic pattern. “It’s thinking,” whispered Gina. The tentacles moved again, and their phones beeped once more.

“**need leader**”

“Well,” said Gina, “It obviously wants us to take it to someone. We’d better take it into school.” She touched her phone. “**can u come out?**”

The alien rustled inside the capsule. “**oxygen poisonous**”

“We’ll have to carry him,” decided Royston. He reached out and took hold of the capsule. It felt very cold, and although he could rock it slightly, he couldn’t lift it. “Help me,”

But even the two of them couldn’t manage it. “We need a wheelbarrow or something,” reckoned Gina. “**bak v soon**” she told the alien

So they went into school and down into the Basement, where Mr Squitt, the caretaker, had his underground complex. All the students were scared of Mr Squitt, who would bad-temperedly tell them to get off his nice clean floor “which I’ve just polished”, or who would silently appear in the toilets when they thought that no-one was around. He had one room where a leather swivel chair sat before a bank of all the closed-circuit television screens, and another filled with mops and buckets and mysteriously smelling polishes and powders, as well as his own kitchen and suite of living rooms and bedrooms. Nervously, Gina and Royston made their way along the corridor, peeking round the corner of each door, but Mr Squitt was nowhere to be seen, somewhat to their relief, although his absence left them with a moral dilemma.

“I think,” said Gina carefully, “that contact with an alien species is

important enough to justify borrowing a wheelbarrow without asking prior permission.”

“I agree,” said Royston, pulling out a barrow from underneath a workbench. “Let’s go.”

They hastily wheeled and carried the barrow up the stairs and out onto the field. Luckily, everybody else was busy around the other side of the school watching the long advertised punch-up between Bobo Knobbs and Smasher Horrorbin, although Royston and Gina had decided to absent themselves from this event. Bobo Knobbs had thumped Royston on the very first day of big school, and had waved his bony fists at him every time he had seen him since and Smasher Horrorbin had always pulled Gina’s hair whenever he had managed to sit behind her.

The creature in the capsule blinked its three eyes in turn as they manhandled and manoeuvred the wheelbarrow through the undergrowth. They tilted it down. “**hav 2 roll u**” Royston told the alien, who braced himself with his tentacles. Grunting and groaning, they levered the craft into the barrow, which they then tipped upright. Royston trod the branches down whilst Gina wheeled the barrow along over the rough ground. When they got to the edge of the field they halted.

“Where are we going to take it?” asked Royston.

“If he wants to go to our leaders then the best place is to the staffroom. Mr Zilloughby’ll know what to do.”

Royston nodded his agreement. “Okay.” He looked at the creature, who had shut its two outer eyes. A jet of vapour squirted out inside the capsule chamber. The alien did not look as if it were enjoying the stage of its interstellar journey which involved being shaken about in a wheelbarrow. At one point Royston was sure he heard an “**ouch!**” somewhere between his ears.

“**where u from?**” he asked it.

The alien prodded its communication device. “**xqshprxq**”

Was that a mistake or was that really the planet’s name? They decided to pursue that question at a later date. They trundled the barrow across the field, into the school buildings and to the staffroom doors, where

Gina knocked. “**come in**” they were told. They pushed open the doors, and instead of the usual scene of their teachers sitting around drinking coffee, texting, or marking, or reading the papers, they were presented with the sight of a row of nervous looking strangers, and Miss Basilisque, the school secretary sitting at a desk, shuffling sheaves of paper. She looked up as Gina and Royston wheeled the alien in.

Miss Basilisque flicked her tongue in and out and smiled, in her habitually very scary way. “Ah, exsscellent. Our lassst candidate.”

Royston and Gina didn't understand this. “Sorry, Miss Basilisque?”

“Our lassst candidate for the possst of the new Head of St Cyborg's.”

“But Miss Basilisque, this is an alien...”

“I am well aware of that,” said Miss Basilisque sternly, her tongue flickering once more. She noted something on one of the papers before her. “Are you sssuggesting that the ssschool does not operate a fully-fledged diversssity in appointmentss policy?”

Gina and Royston didn't understand what she meant. “We just found this capsule out on the field.”

At this point a door opened and Mr Zilloughby stuck his head out. He smiled briefly, doing his trick of raising one eyebrow when he saw Royston and Gina, and their charge. “Ah, excellent, our last arrival. Miss Basilisque, we're ready to interview the next candidate.” He disappeared, and Miss Basilisque consulted her documents.

“Ms Katzenliebe, the panel will ssee you now.” From the row of candidates stood up a tall woman with blond pigtailed, who was wearing a horned helmet. She unsheathed her sword, holding it up. “*Mit Odins Hilfe, kriege ich diese Stelle,*” she declaimed, before striding through the door.

The other candidates looked at each other sheepishly, whilst Miss Basilisque frowned. The ruff on the neck of her blouse raised up slightly. “Health and sssafety, health and sssafety,” she muttered, then tutted loudly to herself, before glancing over to Gina and Royston and their companion. “If you could jusst position Mr Xarq over there --” she indicated a space at the end of the line of candidates, “-- I'd be very grateful.”

They put the barrow and its contents where requested, and stood there

awkwardly, not knowing what to do next. Miss Basilisque regarded them over the tops of her half-moon spectacles. “Well, run along. Thankyou.” she hissed gently at them.

Royston and Gina looked at the alien. It had its middle eye open, and it was looking at them. A little buzz of noise sounded inside their minds. A tentacle waved. “**thank u**” beeped on their mobiles.

“**good luck**” they said.

“What about the wheelbarrow?” whispered Royston to Gina.

“Let’s just get out.” She was unnerved by the whole proceedings. They made their way down the corridor and, as the bell went, were swallowed up by the crowd surging in from the field for the afternoon lessons. Bobo Knobbs staggered past them, mud-spattered and bruised. He and his mates were singing triumphantly. They made rude gestures at Gina and Royston, who shuddered. Then, from nowhere, a soft, kind voice spoke inside their heads. “**Don’t be afraid of them. I will help you.**”

“You know,” said Gina. “I rather hope that Mr Xarq gets the job.”

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