

The K'Oli Invades

A supplement to

*The Classical Space Adventures of my Father
by Earth President Vagrond the Second*

By Garth Thompson
and Chad Wagner

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Lizard Liquor

Vagrond sat quietly at the bar waiting for the froth at the top of his drink to die down. The drink sizzled, turning the air into ozone above it, but it sat safely in its lead container. Vagrond took a sip, it went down smoothly, without melting his esophagus. One of the benefits of being a lizard, he thought. Though the downside was that he would feel nothing from human drinks and proper GSL drinks like his would cost at least twice as much.

Well, at least the additional expense was less of a concern these days. His new job was paying decent and since he was still over a millennia too young for marriage, no one would bat an eye at him living with his parents here on Vrylaunt.

The new job had been excellent, actually. It had a few moments where Vagrond could throw some punches and knock around criminals, which was fun on its own. But most of the time it was just paperwork that finished neatly at five PM leaving plenty of time for relaxing.

Though actually, it was a little boring.

Vagrond had lost touch with most of his friends from school, back in Alpha Centauri. One of them was going to come visit next month, but until then Vagrond didn't really know any locals. Sometimes things were more lively at the bar, Vagrond had a great talk with a guy who was passing by the planet last week, trying to see if there was room for a new shoe factory on Vrylaunt. Since then, Vagrond had not seen the shoe man around, speaking poorly to the need for said shoe factory.

The bottom his empty cup smoked lightly, Vagrond set it down and gave another look around. The bar was still totally dead. Well, maybe tomorrow there would be a planet to inspect. It had been awhile, after all. Some loser would be burning uranium or something stupid and Vagrond and Bryan would be called out to set them right.

Well, if that doesn't happen, then this Saturday I'll just sneak a drink into the movie theater instead, Vagrond thought, preferably something stronger than what I've just finished...



Vorpgrind's Briefing

Vagrond groaned slightly as something pushed up on his upper lip. Opening his eyes a little he saw it was the end of a broomstick. Opening his eyes the rest the of the way, he was greeted to a room that was dark except for a black and white image projected onto a large white screen. Vagrond knocked the broom's end away with a grunt and sat up in the movie theater seat he had fallen asleep in. At the other end of the broom, which had snapped when Vagrond hit it, was Bryan Orion. Dressed in his collarless business suit, his combed black hair shined a bit in reflection of the movie screen. Vagrond felt off-put in his frayed flannel shirt he had just thrown on for a weekend in which he didn't particularly have to deal with anyone or anything.

"When your parents said you didn't come home from the theater, I guessed it wasn't to catch four shows in a row for free. Looks like I was right."

Vagrond felt a bit frustrated, but responded, "Isn't it Saturday? Why are you wearing your work clothes."

"Well, we both have work to do," responded Bryan, "and besides, it's Sunday now."

As Vagrond grumbled, Bryan gave the broken broom back to the usher and Vagrond shamefully handed him a tip for what was hopefully twice the broom's cost. They walked out as the usher cleaned up the bottles and other garbage from where Vagrond had been sitting.

Catching the streetcar outside the theater, Vagrond tried to shake the clouds in his head and asked Bryan, "Why do we have to go in the middle of the night? What could be so urgent?"

"Mr. Vorpgrind called us. I'm surprised this didn't happen earlier. It says in our contract that we might have late night calls up to twenty-five percent of the time, you remember."

Vagrond looked incredulously at Bryan to send the clear message that he did not remember. How could anyone read that whole contract, anyway? It was ten pages of tiny print in vague legal language. Vagrond had no problem signing it since Vorpgrind had come across as so trustworthy in their first meeting. After working a bunch of exhausting part time work, that was half the reason why Vagrond took the job anyway.

What felt like an instant later to Vagrond, the two arrived at the office. Standing in the lower lobby was their elderly lizard boss, Vorpgrind. Probably in his fifteen hundreds, Vorpgrind's armor had faded to light green and cracks were appearing around his eyes. He offered Vagrond and Bryan tea or coffee, and they both enthusiastically accepted the latter. Vagrond may have had to pay twice as much for the stuff that put him

asleep in the theater, but stimulants seemed to work the same on humans and lizards. This fact was echoed by Vorpgrind's mug which had paper tabs hanging from it from no fewer than three tea bags.

"Terribly sorry to bring you boys here so early," said Vorpgrind, "but we have a rather large one tonight. This one's political I'm afraid."

Vagrond took a sip of the coffee and briefly made eye contact with the boss. The coffee must have been working as the fuzz in his head started to clear and what Vorpgrind was talking about started making more sense. Vagrond looked down and realized that his plaid shirt was covered with drool stains and various food detritus after falling asleep in the theater. Well, his boss hadn't commented on it so he shook it off and tried to pick up the conversation.

"You see," Vorpgrind said, "this K'Oli radical wore a mask, impersonating Governor Stanford, and thus escaped the holding facility during the governor's visit. His spaceship landed here and was stopped, but, while police found the mask I'm afraid they did not find the person wearing it."

"...but since you usually would call in the military..." Bryan completed Vorpgrind's thought.

"Yes," he replied, then noticing Vagrond looked confused, turned to the younger lizard, "you see, because of the recent war between the GSL-Rimerian Republic and the K'Oli central government it would be impolitic to employ military force in this case. But if I instead were to classify it as an immigration issue, I can use you and Bryan to solve it with quite little fuss."

"K'Oli?" asked Vagrond, "those guys are true aliens, right? Never met one."

"Ye-es," said Bryan rolling his eyes, "their bodies work based on the stochastic interpretation of ultra-small activity. That means they can move anything nearby which integrates to relatively non-complex on a macroscopic level..." Bryan stopped as he saw Vagrond's eyes glazing over.

"Well," interrupted Vorpgrind, "for the most part they live their lives as formless clouds of gas. I suspect this is the form in which Plandeux impersonated the governor. But please keep in mind he can move to anything relatively large, solid and simple. Pieces of unpainted metal, for an example. But not other people, dirt, or things that are mixed together like that."

"So how am I going to bust this guy's head and bring him in if he's a cloud of gas?" asked Vagrond, and added in all seriousness, "use a vacuum cleaner or something?"

Vorpgrind looked a little worried, as if someone other than he, Vagrond and Bryan were in the room and said, "well, hopefully nothing so racist as that so as to keep our new K'Oli friends as such, right?" Vagrond looked confused as Vorpgrind continued, "after all they were

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amiable enough to allow us to use one of their containment devices."

Vorpgrind pointed to the cabinet where, sitting next to the coffee maker, was a kind of garish bag. It was about the same size and shape as a largish paper bag but covered with a fine grid of what appeared to be gold, and as Vagrond looked closer there appeared to be another grid of another metal under that, and yet another under that.

"Considering the sensitive nature of this," said Vorpgrind, "best if I don't tag along. I'll stay here for the time being. Once you have captured Plandeux I can thus return him to the K'Oli ambassador post haste."

With Vorpgrind's approval Vagrond walked over, picked up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. He and Bryan caught the next streetcar towards the spaceport.

The Search

The shoe-shine stand splintered into dozens of pieces with a loud crash as Vagrond bashed both of his fists into it at once. He had the forethought to yell beforehand so that its operator had safely ducked to the side and covered his head to prevent any of the debris from hitting him. Vagrond stood up, looking around furiously.

The shoe-shiner eventually sat up and looked around, replacing the baseball cap on his bald head. Vagrond was in the process of apologizing to him and giving him the address to write to for a reimbursement, something Vagrond could now do from memory. Bryan noticed and walked up to Vagrond with a stern look on his face.

"Hey!" said Bryan, "I told you at the last shoe stand you busted that Plandeux can't control wood! It has cells and..."

"Yeah, yeah," said Vagrond, frowning, "but I could have sworn I saw it move this time. Are you sure..." Vagrond retrieved the brightly patterned bag from the rubble and threw it over his shoulder.

"I'm pretty sure Plandeux can't break the laws of Physics, Vagrond" said Bryan.

"Well, you would know..."

"I certainly would," said Bryan, responding non-sarcastically to the sarcastic comment and cutting off Vagrond. Vagrond's face switched to bemused as Bryan continued, "we might not have the tools the immortals had but with the help of people like the K'Oli we understand physics pretty well thank you."

"Well," said Vagrond, "what do you think he could be hiding in?"

"I don't know," said Bryan, "but on a planet full of multi-cellular life like Vrylaunt probably not much. Frankly I would look for denser parts of air."

"How can I tell if air is denser by looking?" asked Vagrond, "It's air." Vagrond's face then turned sly as he added, "Wait...you've never met a true alien before have you!"

Bryan tilted his head back and gritted his teeth a moment. Slight color changes in humans were hard for Vagrond to see, but he bet Bryan turned a little red.

"That's not true," Bryan said, "I met an Urekkian...once. But they actually have, you know, consistent physical bodies. I've never met a K'Oli."

"So why did you say..."

"I had read it. They look like 'dense air.' Maybe that means they look like smoke? I don't really know."

"Well, what else? I looked all around and I have a hunch he's

not in the air.”

“Maybe he’s not here at all,” Bryan said as he pointed back at the ticket desk lady, “but no one has seen anything at all since that ship landed. The traffic controllers have been watching the ship since it landed and didn’t see anyone get off. Plus we checked the ship pretty thoroughly and nothing looked wrong.”

Vagrond looked around the spaceport. This early on a weekend morning it was rather quiet. Only a few passengers walked towards the exit or waited by a window, all of them human or lizard. There might actually be more employees here right now than passengers, Vagrond thought, noting that other than the shoe-shiners whose stations he had wrecked there was a waitress at the restaurant, two people at the information booth, two people at the ticket stand and a bunch of traffic controllers outside against the pitch black sky.

“You think the stuff you read would have said if K'Oli could turn invisible,” said Vagrond offhandedly.

“Wait,” said Bryan, “you’re right.”

“Huh?” said Vagrond.

Bryan continued, “I mean, I’ve never seen a K'Oli but from everything I’ve read you should be able to see him if you’re looking right at him!”

“He’s still here!”

“Yes, he must be. But where?” Bryan nodded forward touching his head for a moment, then looked up and around rapidly. “Simple...something where the arrangement doesn’t matter...” he said as his eyes scanned the airport’s lobby. “The windows,” Bryan said quickly, “also look for anything made out of solid metal...polymers too, they’re made from corn but they don’t have cells themselves...”

“Poly-whats?” asked Vagrond.

“Rubber, plastic, oil. Also...” Bryan looked around some more, “Also the tiles,” said Bryan while pointing down, “if they’re made of igneous rock and not sedimentary...”

Vagrond looked a little confused but gathered the gist of what Bryan was saying. He ran towards the windows and looked up and down them, looking for anything un-windowly. Nothing was apparent. Looking back he saw Bryan on his knees in the main hallway examining the large, gray and plain floor tiles. Vagrond turned, running to the spaceport’s restaurant, and, apologizing to the waitress, overturned a stool which he noted had three metal legs - three *unpainted* metal legs. Remembering what Vorpgrind had said, Vagrond started flipping all of the stools at the restaurant over and yelled for the waitress to do the same. Moments later the restaurant was upside down but nothing out of the ordinary was apparent. Bryan was now at the restaurant as well, examining the bare

metal mixing cups behind the bar.

Vagrond looked at him and asked, "Plandeux can only control something big, Vorpgrind said, are those big enough?"

Bryan's brow furrowed and he said, "I don't know!"

Vagrond and Bryan both were quiet for a moment, then Vagrond giggled slightly.

"Come on, this is serious," said Bryan, though he had a smile on his face himself.

Vagrond and Bryan then both looked to the window. There was a family of lizards sitting by it, waiting for their ship. They must be religious, Vagrond thought, since both of the elderly parents and their daughter were wearing no colors or patterns, just different shades of gray. The daughter, though, was screaming and having fun. It looked like she was just walking along the window, looking at the paneling and clapping her hands occasionally. Looking. At a bump in the insulated electrical cable that was moving along slowly...

Vagrond and Bryan looked at each other then rushed towards the bump, yelling. The father grabbed his daughter and, before Bryan and Vagrond arrived, the bump pushed itself up slightly and the insulation on the cable fell flat. It looked like the cable was smoking. Or rather, that smoke seemed to be self-forming in the air, extending out from the cable, until a cloud of smoke floated freely in the air.

The cloud then turned; in actuality rotated which is something one doesn't usually expect smoke to do. But clearly visible on the cloud were bulges that looked like cartoonish eyes and a line under it like a mouth. Only slightly more sophisticated than a smiley face, Vagrond thought.

The cloud's mouth opened and Plandeux said, "Cursed metal in the middle slowed my movement to a crawl! But now I would say the cat's out of the bag, or rather the cat's off of the cord!"

The Chase

Vagrond pulled the bag off his shoulder and lunged at Plandeux, trying to grab him like a butterfly in a net. Plandeux just hovered slightly higher and Vagrond went crashing through the window.

"Oh dear it seems you can't hover!" said Plandeux, laughing and slowly, slowly floating towards the ceiling.

Bryan rushed to the shattered window and looked outside, but Vagrond was mostly unharmed other than tearing his clothes up a bit, and a few scratches on the armor that served as his skin. Vagrond shook off the remaining shards of glass from his head.

"Is the bag OK?" yelled Bryan.

Vagrond looked down but the metal bag was completely unharmed. Picking it up he fumbled getting into the airport and fell down outside. By the time he did get in, Plandeux had made his way ponderously up to the ceiling.

Bryan yelled to the waitress who had been helping earlier to get a ladder and she ran off. For now Vagrond, whose natural armor weighed him down by a few hundred pounds, could only look up and wish that Vrylaunt had a bit lighter gravity. Looking up, Vagrond noticed that the ceiling was made of stone tiles as well, probably so spacecraft could land on top of the building. Wait, the tiles were solid color, and looked like they might be, what did Bryan say? Ignatius?

A frantic laughing came from the ceiling and the tile directly above Plandeux split in two and fell towards the ground. No one was under it, so Vagrond didn't move. Except as the tile fell, it curved towards him! Vagrond moved sideways in a flash but the metal bag, trailing behind him, was caught on the flying tile and torn from Vagrond's grasp. Another tile that Vagrond had not noticed soared down from the ceiling and hit the bag as well. Before Vagrond could recover it, the two tiles pushed the bag in opposite directions, ripping it in two.

One of the tiles clattered on the ground immediately, but the other flew until it hit the bar. The familiar cloud of smoke rose from the further tile and started to rise into the air again.

"Fools!" said Plandeux, "Now my escape is assured!"

Plandeux's ascent was probably at a rate of about one foot per minute, and Vagrond was able to catch up to him this time. However, Vagrond's attempts to grab an immaterial cloud of gas were not effective. As Vagrond's punches went through the cloud again and again, Plandeux's laughter echoed through the spaceport. Vagrond finally took a step backwards.

"This isn't..." Vagrond started to stay, then stopped and looked at

Bryan.

“Maybe we can fold over half of the bag?” suggested Bryan.

Vagrond picked up half of the torn bag and Bryan the other half while Plandeux continued laughing madly and started a monologue. The half Bryan picked up was slightly larger but when Vagrond looked at it he couldn't help but think that even when the bag was intact it was smaller than the cloud rising above them.

“...and once I've assembled my army of space oddities I will begin the second phase...” continued Plandeux. Bryan handed his half to Vagrond and, taking the two halves, he climbed on top of the bar at the restaurant to get up to Plandeux's height. He waved the halves of the bag through Plandeux, trying first to move the cloud around, then second to fold over the halves and scoop the cloud up. Neither technique was effective as Vagrond's motions just passed through the smoke which immediately reassembled in a fraction of a second.

Vagrond shrugged his shoulders at Bryan, and threw the pieces of the metal bag to the floor in frustration. Plandeux once again slowly made his way to the ceiling. “Heads up!” yelled a wide-eyed Vagrond.

However, instead of breaking the ceiling panels again, Plandeux now only rotated them slightly in place, one after another, so that they were touching. This must have been necessary for him to move from one to another, as he was making a path of diagonally connected tiles across the ceiling. This too was not a fast process, and Vagrond roughly guessed it would take about twenty minutes for Plandeux to reach the edge of the room and continue his escape.

Bryan yelled to Vagrond, “Wait, maybe Vorpgrind has another bag we could use!” Bryan ran towards the ticket desk to use their phone.

Vagrond looked up at the ceiling again. Upon closer inspection, the smiley-face-like design that had appeared on the cloud was visible on the tiles. This, along with the slow rate of progress, made Plandeux's current location visible so they would have no trouble catching him, if they could just figure out how. After a few minutes the progress seemed to have stopped. What was going on?

As Vagrond watched Plandeux moved over to a light fixture and shifted the tile in such a way as to hit it with the tile that was his current body. Remembering the tile from before, Vagrond moved out of the way as Plandeux hit the fixture repeatedly. Finally it loosened enough and fell sparking to the ground, but what Vagrond hadn't noticed was that it was falling towards the bar, where they had an open casket of lizard liquor sitting. Luckily for her, the waitress was now long gone. However Vagrond could only cover his face with his arm as the sparks hitting the volatile liquid exploded. The shock knocked Vagrond to the floor, breaking the floor tiles where he landed. Vagrond looked down and his right forearm's

armor had a medium sized burn on it, but there was a round part in the middle that was oddly not burnt. Not having time to think about that, Vagrond looked up at Plandeux again. The K'Oli ceiling tiles had again begun to align slowly in a line towards the building's exit door.

Bryan had run back after hearing the noise, "What happened?"

"Oh, just a small explosion, I should be alright," Vagrond said, his right forearm not hurting anymore, "What did Vorpgrind say?"

"Uh," said Bryan, holding his hand behind his head and looking a bit dumbfounded, "all he did was yell 'Plaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaandeux' dramatically. And I'm not sure, but I thought I heard him crushing one of those Styrofoam cups in his hand as he was yelling that."

"What, like the kind we were having coffee from?"

"Yeah, like those," Bryan said, looking at Vagrond.

An awkward silence hung over the shattered remains of the airport restaurant. Moments later, Bryan's eyes lit up again.

"Wait," said Bryan, "your shirt!"

"Yeah I know," said Vagrond, "'a government employee should not look like a bum blah blah,' but I had no time to change."

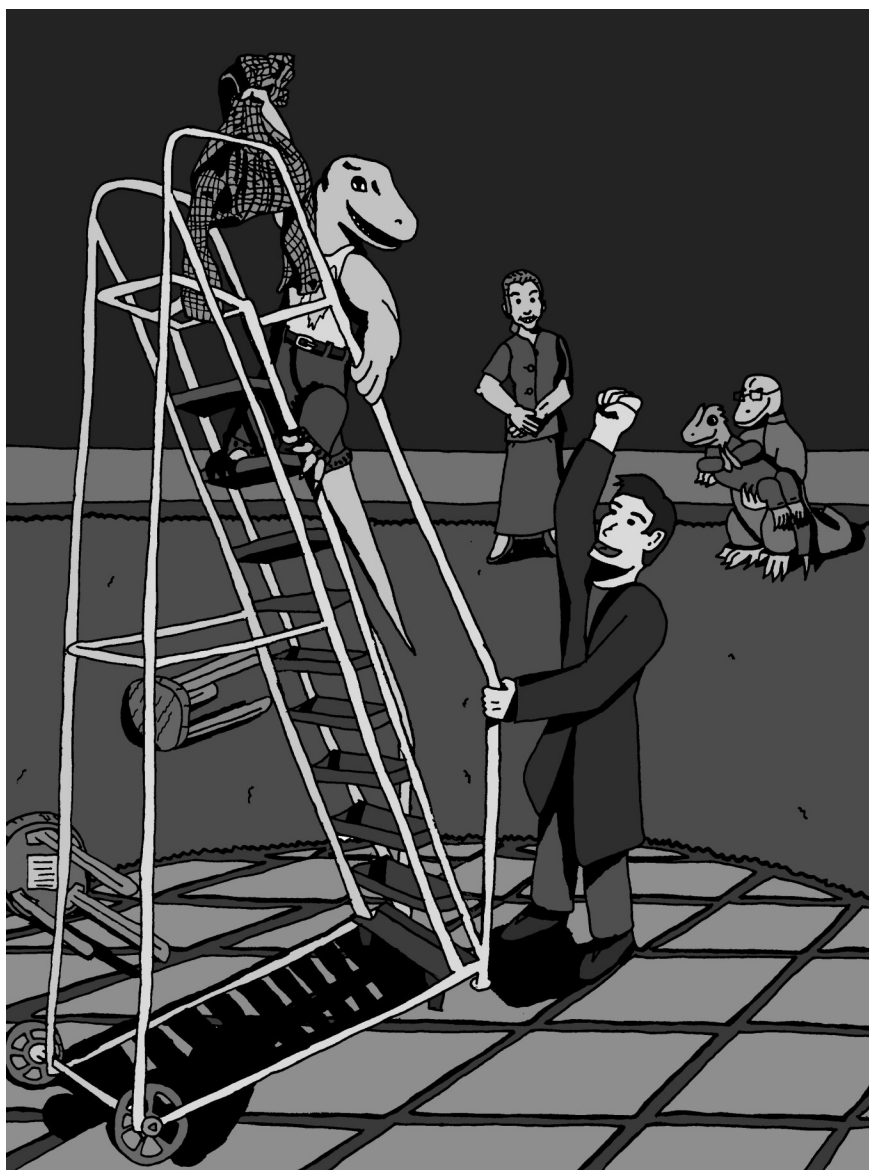
"No," continued Bryan, "the bag doesn't matter, we just need something complex enough. Your shirt looks like cotton, plus it has a pattern on it!"

"I guess so, and it didn't get torn or burned so bad yet either," responded Vagrond. He took the shirt off, revealing the even less sophisticated government-employee-like sleeveless stained white shirt underneath. Folding the flannel shirt into a loose bundle he thought, yes, this was much larger than the half of the bag he had discarded.

Plandeux hadn't made his way very far and the timing of the waitress returning with the service ladder was perfect. Vagrond pushed the ladder up under Plandeux. Plandeux began yelling "No! No!" repeatedly but didn't waver from his slow crawl towards the exit. Bryan carefully pushed the ladder along as Vagrond climbed up it, keeping Plandeux's pace. Upon arriving at the top, Vagrond punched a left hook to the ceiling tiles, shattering them and catching them in his folded shirt held in his right hand. The shirt-bundle pulsed madly in every direction, but not so much as to tear the cloth or loosen Vagrond's grip. After a few moments of screaming, the tile pieces clattered to the bottom of the bundle and the air seemed to puff up the top half.

"Curses," said Plandeux, trapped in his gaseous form, "this is but a minor setback."

Vagrond climbed down, holding the bag triumphantly. Bryan raised his fist in success, and the waitress and the gray-clad lizard family, who had been watching from a safe distance, clapped enthusiastically.



Vorpgrind's Assessment

A short public transit ride later, Plandeux was safely contained and on his way back to his homeworld. Vagron and Bryan were sitting around the small folding table in the lobby area in front of the front desk in Vorpgrind's building. Bryan had declined the coffee, planning to get some sleep later in the morning. Vagron was drinking it eagerly, thinking he'd probably just tough it out and stay up. Vorpgrind was giving them Monday off anyway, so might as well not waste it since Sunday was already trashed.

Vorpgrind finished saying, "...so excellent work. Though due to the rather liberal K'Oli justice system he'll probably be free fairly soon. But I doubt he will hassle us on Vrylaunt again in any case."

"What was his problem anyway?" asked Vagron.

"Didn't you listen to his monologue?" said Bryan, rolling his eyes, "he wants to militarize the K'Oli."

Vorpgrind cut in, "well, to be more specific he wants the K'Oli to be more like us, I'm afraid. In fact rumor has it he has even taken a humanoid wife-servant to this end. Counter us by being more like us undoubtedly."

"Huh?" asked Vagron.

"Humans and their constructs have a bit of a warrior's reputation in the galaxy," Vorpgrind continued, "not unearned I fear. The high proliferation of the immortals and their works is a consequence of the truth in that idea. In any case, we will one day be aware we do not own the universe, and I hope we are not judged too harshly."

Vagron's mind had wandered off so he didn't catch the repeat of the monologue. He had really only asked out of habit, and had picked up as much of answer as he needed - Plandeux was a warlord. Vagron's eyes drifted down at his right arm. It would probably take a week to heal, but wouldn't leave a mark. That reminded Vagron...

It was in college. Several of his friends were in the Esh Zay Pay fraternity, though of course Vagron was barred because, like most lizards, he wasn't Rimerian. The fraternity had many children of privilege in it and had spawned many captains of industry and politicians. As such, legend had it that members of the fraternity branded each other with a circular mark which would be secretly revealed at job interviews and so forth. The secret mark was supposed to be a ticket to wealth and power. Everyone Vagron knew in the frat denied this, but one day when Vagron was visiting, and it was late into a party when everyone was piss drunk, Vagron had found a metal ladle with a long handle. Vagron, completely wasted, insisted that the ladle was the mythical brand. His friend Benny,

also completely wasted, insisted that it was a spoon, which was true, and also insisted that there was no way they could get it hot enough to brand someone, which turned out not to be true when Vagronnd applied the brand to his own forearm.

A trip to the emergency room was luckily avoided through cold water and some ice cubes, but the burn mark persisted on Vagronnd's arm for a few days. After it healed it was only another few days before the mark was completely gone, leaving not even a trace of Vagronnd's youthful indiscretion.

As Vagronnd rode the street car home, he thought about the burn on his arm now, which looked similar and would probably be gone in the same amount of time. He would bet money that the unburned circle in the middle of it - the circle of his armored skin that was still as bright green and as hard as always - was exactly where he had been branded at Esh Zay Pay.

As the car clattered along the rail Vagronnd stood quietly and held the support bar, looking out the window. He spent the rest of the trip wondering about what the Aurons had really intended when they created the Giant Space Lizard people so long ago.



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