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The asteroid is running Barney: it sings of love on the high frontier, of the passion of matter for replicators, and its friendship for the needy billions of the Pacific Rim. "I love you," it croons in Amber's ears as she seeks a precise fix on it: "let me give you a big hug. . . ."

A fraction of a light-second away, Amber locks a cluster of cursors together on the signal, trains them to track its Doppler shift, and reads off the orbital elements. "Locked and loaded," she mutters. The animated purple dinosaur pirouettes and prances in the middle of her viewport, throwing a diamond-tipped swizzle-stick overhead. Sarcastically: "big hug time! I got asteroid!" Cold gas thrusters bang somewhere behind her in the interstage docking ring, prodding the cumbersome farm ship round to orient on the Barney rock. She damps her enthusiasm self-consciously, her implants hungrily sequestering surplus neurotransmitter molecules floating around her synapses before reuptake sets in: it doesn't do to get too excited in free flight. But the impulse to spin handstands, jump and sing, is still there: it's her rock, and it loves her, and she's going to bring it to life.

The workspace of Amber's room is a mass of stuff that probably doesn't belong on a space ship. Posters of the latest Lebanese boy-band bump-and-grind through their glam routines; tentacular restraining straps wave from the corners of her sleeping bag, somehow accumulating a crust of dirty clothing from the air like a giant inanimate hydra. (Cleaning robots seldom dare to venture inside the teenager's bedroom.) One wall is repeatedly cycling through a simulation of the projected construction cycle of Habitat One, a big fuzzy sphere with a glowing core (that Amber is doing her bit to help create): three or four small pastel-colored plastic *kawai* dolls stalk each other across its circumference with million-kilometer strides. And her father's cat is curled up between the aircon duct and her costume locker, snoring in a high-pitched tone.

Amber yanks open the faded velour curtain that shuts her room off from the rest of the hive: "I've got it!" she shouts. "It's all mine! I rule!" It's the sixteenth rock tagged by the orphanage so far, but it's her first, and that makes it special. She bounces off the other side of the commons, surprising one of Oscar's cane toads which should be locked down in the farm, it's not clear how it got here? and the audio repeaters copy the incoming signal, noise-fuzzed echoes of a thousand fossilized infant's video shows.

"You're so *prompt*, Amber," Pierre whines when she corners him in the canteen.

"Well, yeah!" She tosses her head, barely concealing a smirk of delight at her own brilliance. She knows it isn't nice, but Mom is a long way away, and Dad and Step-Mom don't care about that kind of thing. "I'm brilliant, *me!*" she announces. "Now

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