

To Infinity and Behind!

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Chapter 0x00

I have to admit, my first thought was “What’s a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?” I know. It’s cliched. It’s like some first-time writer couldn’t think of an opening line and used the first cliché that came to mind. But I can’t help it, that’s what popped into my head.

But I don’t know what else would be appropriate for popping out of hyperspace into a full-blown battle. We were just supposed to stopping at a fairly back-water space station for a regional meeting. Sort of a middle-manager retreat, only in space.

But that’s not what we got. As soon as we popped back into normal space, all hell broke loose. Frickin’ laser beams flying everywhere, forming sort of a day-glo spiderweb, or space-spiderweb, or spider-space-web. Ships blowing up every which way. Chunks of space debris (as opposed to non-space debris, I guess) streaming by the ship. Our captain, Stig Voldasen, started shouting orders port and starboard.

I’m the Navigator, if by “navigator” you mean glorified keyboard jockey. I mean, I guess it’s important for us to get to the correct place and all. But all I really do is plug destinations into the computer and let it figure out the best route.

Anyway, once I had got us here, there wasn’t much more for me to do, so Captain Stig wasn’t yelling at me. He was, however, shouting at the others to do stuff like “raise the shields” and “plot us a course out of here!”

Oh, shit, wait, that’s me. Crap crap crap! Well, let’s see. The best way is probably away from all the fighting. So I took a real quick look around the general space-area. I mean, what should we do? Just get away? Re-group with others?

I looked back at Captain Stig, a little helplessly, I’m afraid. He hollered back “Just get us out of here!”

Okay, time for a little initiative, I guess. I’m not stupid after all. I mean, I didn’t come in at the top of my class, but I wasn’t in the bottom half, either. Well, not in the bottom third, that’s for sure.

So, let’s first just get our asses away from the fighting and go from there. I called up a view of the general area. I didn’t have time to sit and study it. I just took a quick glance and looked for an area less dense with beams of deaths. Then I quickly plotted a stupid-simple course through it and punched the “Go” button. (There really isn’t a

“Go” button, but that’s what I always say aloud in my head when I submit plotting orders to the ship’s space-computer.)

You know when you make an irretrievable decision and then, a moment later, you see a better choice? Not so much that the choice you made was totally wrong, but that there was clearly a better choice available? Yeah, that’s how I felt too, because as the view screen faded away, in the afterglow, I saw a much better choice, nearly devoid of intersecting beams of deadly coherent light.

Now, I don’t think of myself as a shallow person, but, I have to admit that my first thought was “Gee, I hope Captain Stig didn’t see that!” instead of “Gee, I hope we don’t get killed because of that!” I mean, while I don’t want to die just yet, I also don’t want to be called on the carpet in front of everyone either. But I suppose being called on the carpet requires the existence of the carpet on which to be called, so maybe my priorities are a little skewed.

Plus, Captain Stig is a pretty big imposing man. He’s not mean or a big jerk. He’s just that sort of prototypical man, big Nordic sort of guy.

Anyway, the ship took off along the “okay but not optimal” route I chose. We all just held tight, as nearby explosions rocked the ship. There were some near misses, including the entire stern of a cutter that whistled literally over the tops of heads. (Meaning it really was just over the top of the ship, not that it whistled. You can’t whistle in space. Well, you can try, but, without air to carry the sound waves, no one will hear you.) We didn’t try and engage anyone either. That wasn’t cowardice on our part. Well, I’m hoping it wasn’t. I hadn’t been on the ship long and I really wasn’t that familiar with Captain Stig. But I’m assuming they don’t just hand over spaceship to cowards. Besides, how could a big rock of a man like that be a coward?

My route was simple, but certainly not just a straight line. And I had instructed the computer to put a little “English” on it. That just means I told it to randomize things a bit, wiggling the ship around and generally futzing with the route to make it less conducive to us being vaporized.

So, when I said we all “held tight,” I meant that pretty literally. I personally held onto the arm rests of my chair. A crimson explosion to starboard made me clamp my eyes shut, after-image blobs swimming around as frantically as the ship itself. The hull vibrating in the sub-sonics as the shields absorbed glancing blows from both debris and shimmering bolts of laser-death. Another dazzling explosion, this time blue, tinged a little towards purple, temporarily blinded me. Every time I tried to shield my eyes, I was nearly thrown from my chair. So I basically clamped my eyes shut and my hands to the chair.

This all made it a little difficult to actually gauge how far along we were on my escape route. But, eventually, the severity of the ship's motion seemed to taper off. I stopped seeing flashes of light through my closed eyelids. And disaster no longer seemed quite as imminent. I chanced a peek and the resulting view was much changed. Sweet clear space stretched out ahead of us!

Captain Stig barked out that I set a course for the third nearest system with appropriate planets for refueling, restocking, and reassessing. I wasn't sure quite how to quantify that last one, so I concentrated on the the first two requirements and set us on our way.

"All command crew meet in my ready room in one hour!" Captain Stig ordered. Then he turned to me, "That includes you, Navigator Reubens!"

Shit!

Then he paused, looked at our comely Communications Specialist, Wilkins, meaningfully, and added "Better make that two hours."

Chapter 0x01

Two hours later, we were gathered in the Captain's ready room. I didn't feel very ready myself. I guess I am part of the command crew. But, really, I do a heck of a lot of "commanding." So I feel a little, well, out of place.

The ready room is adjacent to the Captain's quarters, and soon the connecting door slid open. The Captain and Wilkins both came in. Frankly, they looked disheveled. And a little sweaty. I was a little shocked. I mean, I'm not a prude by any means. And inter-staff recreational sex isn't a shocking thing in today's society. Still, my first reaction to surviving the battle was not to get my rocks off. Instead, I huddled in my own modest quarters, shaking for the better part of an hour, followed by a hot shower that slowly calmed me down to a presentable level.

Of course, now, here in the ready room, I was scared shitless again.

"Let's get started," boomed Captain Stig.

"Obviously, what we just ran into was not what we were expecting. We were expecting a low-key retreat with fellow Space Force members and, perhaps, a little R&R."

Well, looks like some folks got their R&R in anyway. Sorry, that was snarky.

He continued, "By what we've been able to piece together, it looks like there was a coordinated attack on our local forces. We came in right in the thick of it. The timing smacks of an ambush, with each arriving ship being set upon and destroyed. We managed to survive, which brings me to Navigator Reubens..."

And he turned my way. Oh shit! He saw the course mistake. It's a good thing I peed before leaving my quarters or else my embarrassment would have a definite physical indicator. Apprehensively, I listened to my coming chastisement.

"Reubens plotted us a course out of the battle. Horribly outnumbered, we had no choice but to flee and regroup. Alas, there appears to be no members of the local forces left with which to regroup. The attackers cunningly left tantalizing escape routes open, routes which led to further ambushes. And the few compatriots who survived the initial onslaught fell prey to these avenues of destruction. Reubens, in the heat of battle, still recognized this, resisted the temptation for the easy retreat, and instead plotted an escape route that avoid these traps. We owe our lives and the survival of the *Galaculonic* to her quick thinking and expertise."

Oh, I am so fu... wait, what? Really? I started to blush, not from the praise, but from the sweet relief. I should really say something, but that would be monumentally stupid. Instead, I tried to just calmly accept the nods and smiles of gratitude from my fellow crew commanders with grace, while not peeing myself. Because I almost did, even though I went before the meeting.

Hey, I just used the term “fellow crew commanders” non-ironically! Maybe I do feel like I belong. As long as I don’t dwell on the particulars of my quick thinking and expertise. Oh, the Captain is talking again.

“So, our situation is grave. All local forces are destroyed. News will get out, eventually, but we’re not close enough to send it ourselves. And worse, analysis of the damage and attack patterns show that the attack was coordinated, involving more than one other species. Three, or perhaps even four other alien societies were involved. And, you don’t need much time hobnobbing with alien societies to know that cooperation between them is not an everyday occurrence.

“So Sir,” the Second in Command, Commander Mindrever asked, “what are we going to do now?”

Captain Stig beamed a wide smile. (Wow, he has nice teeth.) “We going on a grand tour of the galaxy!”

Chapter 0x02

A grand tour? What the hell is a grand tour? I had no idea. What I did know was that Captain Stig had flashed those pearly whites at me and then handed me a long list of systems, systems which spanned the galaxy. And I was supposed to map a course through them all, visiting each system once, in the shortest possible time.

Well, I'm no Salesman, so I did the next best thing, I visited the bees.

Well, the space-bees, I guess.

See, the thing is, plotting that kind of a Salesman path is, computationally, really difficult. We've reached the stars, but we still don't have an efficient algorithm for figuring it out in a reasonable time. In this case, reasonable being "before we're again attacked and wiped off the face of the earth."

Well, the face of the galaxy. Earth's gone. Still, you know what I mean.

But, while humanity hasn't worked out the problem, someone else has. That someone being the aforementioned Earth. More correctly, evolution.

Bees go from flower to flower, only needing to visit each one once and wanting to minimize time and effort in doing so. Through millennia of trial and error, good old Mother Nature has worked out an efficient algorithm, one that is encoded in the bees.

Of course, we've never been able to actually extract that algorithm from the bees. But I figured I could make them do our bidding.

The space-elevator whisked me down through the ship, towards the food production sections. Most of what we ate on-board consists of various wafers and blocks of dubious origin, replenished when we stop at supply depots. But we do attempt to actually produce some fresh edibles.

So, we have a small orchard where we grow some tasty apples. I mean, is there anything better than a crisp juicy apple? You take a big crunch out of it and the juice trickles down your chin. Damn, that's really good stuff when you're floating in the deadly vacuum of space, where the slightest mistake can mean your doom!

Okay, that was overly dramatic. But, still, a few fresh fruits and veggies can really make a difference when the rest of your meal is a bunch of soy-based blocks and wafers.

I'm assuming that they're soy-based. I really don't want to ponder the alternatives.

And, frankly, a good drizzle of honey can make even a (hopefully soy-based) wafer taste pretty good.

But I refuse to even try the cubes of spongy pinkish stuff which was probably a preparation of meat. I've never seen a non-human animal aboard.

Eventually, the elevator arrived at the correct level. It took a little while. First, I punched the button for the floor one level below the Hive Central. (Yeah, that's really the name for it.) And, of course, I stepped out before realizing my mistake. And the elevator took off and I had to wait a bit for it to return so I could take it up one level and by that time I could have just removed an access panel with a sonic screwdriver, climbed into a maintenance duct, shimmied my way up a whole floor, kicked out the access panel there, and dropped out on the correct floor. But I digress.

I stepped out of the elevator and headed into Hive Central. This isn't a place for those with a bee phobia. A bee fetish, yes. A bee phobia, no. It's not so much that there are hives inside Hive Central. It's more like Hive Central is inside the hives.

The hives themselves are huge. I mean like 200 decimeters cubed huge. Oh, and they're encased in glass. And, like I said, Hive Central is inside.

Centered in the front is the entrance portal, which is a fancy way of saying there's a hole in the front through which you walk. As you approach, the outer wall of the hives starts to loom over you and you start to be able to make out the frantic movement within. And then there's the buzzing. It's not deafening, but it's noticeable.

I made my way to the opening and stepped in. The path doesn't just head straight in. It meanders here and there. I'm told there's an automated system that detects growth needs for the hive and extends it where needed, routing the pathway around such expansions. I believe it, as it is indeed a twisty-turny path.

While you walk, there's certainly plenty at which to look, if what you like to look at are bees. If you don't like to look at bees, it's a terrifying descent into a buzzing Hell.

Eventually, I reached Hive Central, and the pathway opened into an irregularly shaped cavern, bounded by the undulating surfaces of the hive. Well, sort of a static undulation. The hive surface doesn't actually move in a dynamic fashion. I just mean the walls are really organically curved, which, being determined by an organic process, they would be.

The cavern isn't entirely open. Instead there are several office cubes built here and there. Again, I'm told that they're made of sound-proof materials, to give the BeeKeeper and her staff places to retreat from the constant buzzing.

Right now, the cavern was empty. I wasn't expecting it to be, heh, buzzing with activity. But I was expecting to find at least a solitary worker-bee around. (Sorry. I'll stop now.)

But then the door to the largest cube opened and out walked BeeKeeper Mellis. Well, more like staggered. She was flushed. Her short brown hair was decidedly tousled. She was breathing heavy. She grasped at a nearby chair for support.

I started to rush to her aid. What could have happened? Did she get stung somehow? Was she in anaphylactic shock? Why would someone susceptible to anaphylactic shock work with bees? Should I stop thinking about that and just help her?

But then the answer emerged. Captain Stig strutted out of the office. Yeah, he kind of struts, sticking out that chest of his, uniform stretched across it, emphasizing his admittedly nice pectorals.

"Many thanks BeeKeeper Mellis!" he exclaimed to the still teetering woman.

She responded, breathlessly, "You ask a lot Captain, perhaps too much. I'm only one woman, you know."

With a knowing nod, he answered "I know."

Then he noticed me. "Ah, Navigator Reubens! What brings you down here?"

I paused, a little dumbstruck and tongue-stuck for a second. He didn't even seem embarrassed. I don't know if I found that offensive or somehow sexy in its confidence-bordering-on-arrogance.

Then I found my voice. "I'm going to try and use the bees to help plot our Grand Tour."

The confidence turned quizzical. "How's that?" he asked.

"Well, it's a classic Salesmen routing problem, the kind computers can only solve through brute force. Bees, on the other hand, have fine-tuned algorithms for it. My plan is to replicate the spacing of the various systems as flowers and load up the flowers with pollen according to the importance of each system, following the criteria you gave me. By watching how the bees optimize their visits, we'll get the most efficient

transversal path much faster than by devoting computer resources to a brute force attack.”

“Outstanding!” he boomed. And then, as he turned to leave, he winked at me.

Yeah, he actually winked. I can’t tell if it was a friendly wink of something more. And if it was something more, I didn’t know how I felt about that.

In response, I just blinked stupidly. Not a wink, just a blink. Partially because I didn’t know what else to do. Partially because I’m genetically unable to wink. I just can’t wink one eye. I can’t do that V-shaped hand thing either. You know, the “Prosper long and live!” thing. Not that it matters much these days. Ancient Earth religions don’t really matter much anymore.

So, I got BeeKeeper Mellis to help me set up the experiment. We borrowed some flowering plants from other areas on the food production level and spaced them out according to how the systems we wanted to visit were laid out in space. It wasn’t totally accurate, of course. We approximated it on a 2D surface instead a 3D space. All the systems are in the same Galactic plain, after all. And none were so close together as to make their distance in a direction tangent to the Galactic plain outweigh their in-plane distance.

And then we dosed the flowers as needed to approximate the importance of each system, because we might not have time to visit them all.

And then we let loose the bees. And watched. And watched. And watched.

After all, it’s not like the bees immediately have a big map in their tiny little bee heads. But, over time, they should show some clear trends.

Eventually, we figured out that we could just mark each bee with a nano-tracer and let a computer watch and track the bees. And with that, I jumped on the elevator, punched the level for my quarters, double-checked that it was the correct level, arrived on the correct floor (whew), entered my quarters, and dropped off to a well deserved bit of sleep.

After several hours of sleep and an off-color and disturbing dream about the Captain and a giant bee goddess, I awoke to find a message from the BeeKeeper. She had sent up the results so far from the bees. I got to work, taking the tracking information provided by the computer and aggregating it by flight direction and destination. What emerged was a pretty darn good description of the optimum route for our Grand Tour of the galaxy.

I forwarded the proposed route to Captain Stig and waited anxiously for a response. It wasn't long in coming. Soon, I received a message back, saying "Outstanding work! Punch it in and get us on our way as soon as possible!"

It didn't, however, contain a wink. It's not like I expected it to. Or maybe I did. I don't know. Animated textual smileys are pretty old school, anyway.

So I did as instructed, punched it in, and the system got us on our way, indeed, as soon as possible. We were on our Grand Tour.

Interlude I

In thickness, from beyond, reality torn wide, as unspeakable voices speak. Displeasure expelled, expressed, excreted. Alliances, found wanting, yet valued.

The belly of a thousand mad screaming madmen churns. Extra-daementional teeth bared, ichordering vile green liquid, if the color “green” had meaning here, which it doesn’t. A thousand orbs, gelatinous, throbbing and heaving, turn, not quite in unison, yet not quite not, pinning a lesser one.

Explanations, excuses, exhortations, insufficient, rejected. Integrity, of a structural nature, defiled. Organs, of an internal nature, ruptured. Pain, of a painful nature, intensified.

Howls echo over morbid worlds of squalor and squattitude, over festering corpses of those not yet dead, over fingerless handscapes.

Nameless beings, named nonetheless, confer, conspire, conjugate. Shapeless shapes, blobs of corruption, brimming with other-wordly and other-realityly bile, join, intersect, bi-directionally invade, senses shared, knowledge spread thin over eight dimensions, yet thick with meaning and the wisdom of the ageless ages.

Conclusions, consensus, determined and found, stinking from the pits of a Hell too hellish for any one sense to behold. Tasting violet with the sight of abomination. Feeling loud with the pressure of internal cavities, filled. Straining, teeth from a million screaming mouths, clenched in torment. Until relief, relief only in context, as plans of actions not yet undertaken emerge.

Daemon-secrets of inner circumstant revealed. Alliance failed, yet not entirely. An exception, an escape, an anomaly. Failure, not complete. A sole escape can have little impact, lost in a larger scale, a scale beyond understanding.

Pulsating, pustulous, pubescent limbs, tentacles, phalli gesture, gesticulate, genuflect. Lesser ones summoned, instructed.

Sacs of puss, quivering in fear, justified, of course. Ungulating in time to orders given, communicated via senses unknown, yet undeniable.

Plans made, to be carried forth, to increase alliance, to surround, to engulf, to destroy.

The heaving mass, macerated, swells, puking forth more lesser ones, to take the burden, to travel to the stars, the stars of the limited reality, to build the alliance, to sufficiency the insufficiency.

The target, targeted, terrorized, doomed to extinction. Humanity, ex.

Chapter 0x03

As we headed to our first destination, the warrior world of Eraticon V, there wasn't really much for me to do. I sat around in my quarters for some of the journey. I wrote in my journal. I hit the gym, not so much to stay in shape. Given current gene therapy, if I wanted less curvy hips and a less bountiful bosom, I'd just have my genes tweaked to change them. But I like them, so I'll keep them.

But I also found myself spending more time out and about, which is a change for me.

I just felt, I don't know, a little inadequate. Up until now, my job pretty much consisted of taking an order for where to go and punching it into the system.

It's kind of like the old myths of that misogynistic religion that had a communications specialist whose job consisted solely of relaying information from the Captain to the microphone. She probably had to wear a short skirt, too. I don't really know. I'm not religious. I haven't read their holy books, but you do sort of glean some aspects of it through societal osmosis.

But, now, I was feeling some confidence. I had brilliantly dodged an ambush in the attack. Okay, okay, I know. I got lucky. But nobody else knows that. So people look at me differently now. And that makes me feel more confident, even though I don't deserve it.

That's not really true. I don't deserve credit for avoiding the ambush, but that doesn't mean I don't deserve respect. I still plotted the escape course. I still got us out of there in one piece. And that's not bad at all.

Plus, I was still feeling heady over my success with the bees. In retrospect, it was pretty ballsy to tell the Captain what I had planned on doing before I knew if it would work. He obviously liked my moxie, but he could have just laughed at me. Then it becomes almost a lose-lose situation. If the bee gambit failed, I'd look really stupid. And, if it succeeded, he might look stupid. If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that people in charge don't like looking stupid.

Maybe if I hadn't been still a little high on adrenaline from our escape, I would have reverted more to form for me. Maybe mumbled something inconclusive to him and only come clean after it worked.

But it worked out. He liked the idea up-front and it worked. Awesome!

So, feeling a bit more justified in my new-found confidence, I strutted around the ship more than was usual for me. Which meant, I strutted just a little tiny bit.

And, I know, with my figure, I should have been sashaying around the ship. But it's weird. Sometimes it's like there's a middle-aged white guy in my head, directing my actions. So I strutted.

Strutted right into Captain Stig, as it so happens.

I mean, literally strutted into Captain Stig.

I was strutting along the corridor and strutted around the corner, smacking my face into the Captains broad chest. Hurt a bit, too. Those pecs aren't just for show.

"Whoa, hold on there! Are you okay?" he asked, sincere concern in his voice.

"Oh, I'm fine." I replied, with sort of a snuffling voice, because I had really smacked my nose hard into his chest.

"Oh, you're bleeding," he noticed, as a small trickle ran out my nose. Yeah, really feeling my confidence now. All hail the Navigator, just don't punch her in the nose.

He continued, "Maybe you should head to the medical bay to have that looked at. It would be a shame to have a swollen nose on such a pretty face."

And with that, he winked, and continued down the corridor. Again with the winking? Maybe it's a nervous tick. Maybe. It is flattering. But I'm also not all that interested in just being his next conquest.

And so I went to the Medical Bay and they fixed up my nose, which wasn't broken. But it was mashed up pretty good and indeed would have looked strange on my face.

Hee, my pretty face.

Argh! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

And then I started to slink back to my quarters. No strut. Even my shoulders sagged a bit. Funny how something as inconsequential as one gaffe can affect ones outlook. I saved the ship, arguably, and I had a brilliant idea about plotting our course. And I'm letting one misguided strut around one blind corner outweigh that.

So I started humming "pretty, pretty face" to myself over and over and by the time I reached my quarters, well, I wasn't really strutting yet, but my shoulders weren't sagging either.

Chapter 0x04

We approached Eraticon V cautiously. It is a warrior planet, after all. They're not good people to surprise. The planet glowed red from lava fissures crazing the surface. From orbit, the areas of solid land looked barren and rocky, devoid of green.

I was asked to join the landing party, for no obvious reason, and soon we found ourselves dropping towards the surface. Up close, the areas of solid land still looked barren and rocky. That was due to the areas of land actually being barren and rocky.

When I wasn't strutting the halls and nearly breaking my nose on the Captain's chest, I was actually reading up on Eraticon V. The planet itself is indeed barren and rocky, with an unstable surface. The Eraticans actually evolved on a large green-hued moon that orbits the burning cinder. (It's big enough that it would raise hellacious tides if the main planet had an ocean, which it doesn't) The moon's surface is lush and rich with plant and animal life. The Eraticans still use the moon as a source of food and water, but they no longer live there. They live on the main planet. And they do so because they are major bad-asses.

We landed on an area of land large enough that I didn't immediately fear for my life, but small enough that I didn't exactly feel safe, either. The Eratican greeting party was impressive. (I saw "greeting" because they weren't exactly a "welcome" party.) Hell, they scared the piss right out of me. Or, they would have had I not gone before we left. They ranged from 25 to nearly 30 decimeters tall, both men and women. The men had broad chests, which were bare. The women had, well, broad chests in their own way, not bare, but close enough to intimidate the hell out of me. They all carried tall pikes, each with the required wicked looking spike on the tip.

Watching them, I realized that the pikes aren't just for ornament. They also use them as a general pointing and gesturing tool, like humans used to do with cigarettes when there was still an Earth. And I'm pretty sure I saw them actually poke each other with the spikes simple to get each others attention. I couldn't tell if they actually poked hard enough to break the surface, as blood wouldn't have shown up on their skin well.

Oh, yeah, they had red skin. Well, of course they would. They're warriors. At first I found this to be odd, evolutionally speaking. Seems like an odd skin color choice given a lush green origin world. There are two theories to account for this. One is that most life on the moon appears to be red-green colorblind. The other is that the Eraticans are just too damn bad-assed to give a shit. They want you to see them coming.

The leader of the greeting party, a woman a little taller, and bustier, than the norm, advanced towards the Captain. He bowed low, then stood. Now, the Captain is a good twenty decimeters and then some, but she still towered over him. And I took a little satisfaction in the fact that he was standing as erect as he could. He might even have been up on his toes just a little bit. Then, he flashed that pearly smile of his and said “Madam, I’ve longed for this meeting!” And then he took her hand and kissed it. Really.

She responded with some strange combination of smirk, sneer, and smile.

He pressed on, “May we retire to some chamber of yours where we can, well, entertain some thoughts of mine?”

And, with that, she took him by the arm and dragged him through a nearby set of doors. Once they had passed through, the door shut with a resounding clang and the rest of us were left to stand, awkwardly, before towering red killer warriors.

Chapter 0x05

While the Captain took his “leave,” the rest of us were herded out another door, where we were treated to a display of Eratican entertainment. Of course, given the Eraticans, this “entertainment” consisted of watching them fight.

We were brought out along the edge of a decently large arena. The spectator area ringing the arena was on the smallish size, really just a ring of three rows of seats reaching maybe a third of the way around the “playing” field. I’m guessing that Eraticans are more into participatory entertainment. Just watching doesn’t do it for them.

The floor of the arena was no different than the the rough surface outside. It pretty much looked like the only part of the arena that was actually built was the ring surrounding it.

We managed to score seats with ease, being the only being there who were simply watching. The seating appeared to be hewn from the same rocky lava material as the surface of the planet itself. And, by “hewn,” I mean “violently torn away without any serious attempt at smoothing or refining the surface.” I sat, thankful for my generous proportions in a certain area. Most of the male crew attempted to look all manly, but I could tell they were far from comfortable. Still it beat being out in the field.

The players, as it were, marched in through a large door built into the ring, opposite the seating area. There were around 200 participants, evenly split between men and women. I guess I was expecting teams of some sort. But apparently the idea was just a massive brawl, because everyone just sort of spaced themselves evenly all over the field.

They were dressed a little more fully than the greeting party had been, their red skin complemented by armor beaten out of some sort of some purplish metal. While no one was encased in armor, pieces of it adorned vital areas. Upper arms had half-cylinders strapped to them. Small breast-plates adorned the men, with slightly larger ones on the women. Small cod-pieces adorned the women, with drastically larger ones adorning the men. And all wore helmets that parted over the forehead, swept back on either side, and met low at the back of each warriors head. Each helmet also had a small hole on the very top, probably for some sort of Roman Legion feathered thing. Or, more likely, one of those pike-spikes.

But, because this was entertainment, there were no pike-spikes. Every combatant had a pike, but it was mercifully devoid of actual deadly spikes. Because this is supposed to be fun!

At some signal I neither saw nor heard, they all roared in unison. And from that point on, it was a melee! At first it looked like anarchy, but once I got over the initial shock, I could see temporary alliances created, only to dissolve minutes, maybe even seconds later, as the battle lines changed.

Frankly, it scared the crap out of me. This may have been entertainment, but they were really beating the crap out of each other and plenty of blood was spilt. (Hard to see on the red skin, but I could see splashes on the armor.) And a few bones broken as well, it appeared, unless Eraticans had some extra joints about which I didn't know.

Of course, being Eraticans, they probably wouldn't settle for anything less than near-carnage.

The name of the game was apparently last man, or woman, standing. One by one, combatants were incapacitated via broken limbs, or simply bludgeoned into unconsciousness. Eventually, there were only a few left standing, which actually slowed the action down to a level where I could really follow it. They circled each other, quick nods would form instantaneous partnerships, which would break the moment the targeted victim fell.

And, at the end, one remained standing. It was a man, big even for an Eratican. In celebration of his victory he, ummm, didn't do much of anything. He looked around suspiciously, apparently unsure whether some fallen combatant was playing space-possum. He even gave one felled body a swift kick in their purple helmet to ensure they were down. Then he simply turned and left the arena.

Damn, these people really are bad-asses.

What I guess were medical crew then came on the field and started treating the fallen. Treating them like sacks of potatoes, that is. They literally started heaving bodies over their shoulders and hauling them off. I'm told the survival rate for this form of entertainment is well over 90%, so I tried not to worry.

And with that, the entertainment was over and we were herded back up to the reception room, where we milled about for awhile. The whole spectacle had taken around three hours and I was surprised the Captain hadn't returned.

When he did return, through the same door he had been dragged out, he looked quite the worse for wear. He looked beat, as in beat with a stick. Parts of his uniform were ripped, including a large rip right across his chest, which showed off some thick

curly chest hair. Not like a bear rug sort of chest hair. Not the sort of chest hair that makes you wonder if the guy has an even thicker pelt on his back. No, this was just the right amount of chest hair, not that it's an important point.

Part of a sleeve was torn away from the shoulder, showing that the Captain skimped on neither bicep curls, nor tricep extensions. Again, not important.

He had bruises on his face, but at least it looked like he had lost no teeth. The bitch, ummm, delegate who had dragged him away walked at his side.

When they reached us, he spun to face her. Oh, my, the back of his shirt was torn open as well. And his back was covered with red horizontal disappearing around his sides. He also, apparently, was friends with a rowing machine.

“Milady,” he said, bowing low and taking her hand.

She replied, “Human, you were merely adequate. I am nearly, but not quite, completely disappointed.”

“You flatter me,” he replied, kissing her hand. Then he turned back to us and we began to leave.

“Did you get what you needed?” asked the second in command, as we went out of earshot.

“Oh yeah,” replied Captain Stig. “Twice.” And then he looked at me and winked. Again with the winking!

Chapter 0x06

Our shuttle soon returned us to the ship and the navigation system routed us to our next destination. Once we docked with the ship, I pretty much went straight to my quarters.

I can't believe that the Captain is such a man-whore. "Twice" and then a wink. Give me a break.

During the trip to our next destination, I wandered the ship, as usual. But I wasn't strutting anymore. It wasn't that I had done anything wrong lately. It's just that nearly 30 decimeter tall women with red skin who could kill me by shrugging just had an intimidating effect on me.

At one point, I happened to pass by our promiscuous Captain's quarters, retrieving some convenient report. I was surprised to hear quiet sobbing coming from within. I took a chance and pressed the "Knock" button on the door.

"Come in," came the reply, a little slurred. And the door slid open.

I stuck my head through. Captain Stig sat there, staring somberly at a display screen. I took a look. The display showed a series of beautiful islands, green, dappled with rugged exposed rock, a captivating combination of hard and gentle, male and female.

"Lofoten Islands," he replied. "They were part of Norway back on Earth. My family came from there."

Oh, Earth. In a way I'm lucky. I don't really have much of a sense of family history. We're a family of mutts, made of bits and pieces from all over Earth. I couldn't pinpoint a spot on Earth as "the home country." And not just because it no longer exists. In some ways, it's sad that I don't have a good grasp on my origins. On the other hand, I don't find myself staring at picture of my ancestral homeland, either. Staring and drunk?

On the table was a bottle, filled with a clear liquid, labelled "*Akvavit*." In his hand was a glass, empty of the same clear liquid. He caught my look.

"*Aqua vitae*," he explained. I shrugged.

"Water of life," he explained further. I shrugged.

“Norwegian booze,” he explained, a little exasperated. So, okay, so I’m a little slow. And I nodded in reply.

He gestured towards the bottle, then gave me an enquiring look. Oh, that would be a swell idea. Then he flashed that smile, but more of a boyish grin instead of the usual megawatt smile. And then I nearly gave in.

And then he added “Maybe we could have dinner some time, and, afterwards...” And then he raised an eyebrow. And that reminded me. “Twice.” Wink. Nope.

I politely shook my head to decline. He shrugged and poured himself another glass.

“I miss it,” he said, “I miss long summer days on Skagsdalen Beach, days that last all night. I miss jumping in and out of the freezing Nordic Ocean. I miss watching fresh water springs bubble up through the sand, forming ever-changing patterns, overlaying darker soil. I miss cod, drying on the racks. I miss long winter nights snuggling for warmth in a rented *rorbru*.”

I looked at him quizzically. He didn’t look old. And even if he did, which he didn’t, he couldn’t possibly be that old. No one could.

“Forgive me,” he pled, “I’ve had a bit much *Akvavit* and remorse today. I remember my grandfather’s stories about such things. And I remember him retelling his grandfather’s stories to me.”

He turned back to the display, a little drunker, a little sadder, and a little more human than he had been just half an hour earlier.

I left, quietly. I don’t have grandfather stories of Earth, and certainly not even older stories handed down. And maybe that means I don’t spend much time thinking of Earth. And maybe that keeps from from being quite so sad about it. But maybe that’s the truly sad thing.

Interlude II

The planet circled close to its sun, its atmosphere, long ago stripped away, once a gaseous giant, now a rocky ball of iron, so hot, nearly molten.

Above its surface, gelatinous blobs, only partially within this reality, floated, pustulent and churning, occasionally dripping.

Near its surface, gibbering hoards gathered, wings of other-worldly leathery-ness flapping in the non-existent air. Beaks seeking, eyes snapping.

On the surface, minions crawl, their every step a burning foretaste of hell. Not the hell of forgotten religions, nor an euphemistic hell, but the real hell of dimensions simultaneously stretched screaming in eighteen tangential directions. Where minds cannot exist, yet do, tormented by their own non-existence. Like the contentment of a purring kitten, only the exact opposite in every possible and impossible way. From galactical scales to quarks, screaming at their fractional charges.

Statuses from every nook of the galaxy, gathered by minions. Communicated above through self-immolation, information taking flight as smoke, filtered through unknown worlds around unknown suns.

Far above, orifices dilate, dripping mucus and slime and other substances too foul to mention without drowning in a cesspool of ones own imagination. Essences from below drawn in, absorbed, engulfed, snooted.

The forms above, joining and dividing, as if the sense of scale has wrapped around, reality projected onto a torus, and paramecium now rule as giants. With the obscene merging, collation and discussion. Plan, proceeding. Allies, of a sort, enlarged and engorged.

More discussion, if melding of torturous consciousnesses can be considered as discussion. Deductions and conclusions scrolling over surfaces, forming patchworks, like a Calico kitten, if Calico kittens where monstrous beings from another realm, bloated and gassy, floating above damned planets around doomed suns. Which they may indeed be. One never can tell.

Pleasure, to the extent that beings such as these have an analogue to it, which they don't, but if they did, pleasure. But, wait, no, the exception is unresolved! Unresolved? Unresolved!

The monstrous blimps shake with an unholy rage, the shock waves carrying the full distance to the planetary surface, despite the lack of a carrying medium, such is their anger. The whole planet rattles under their assault. Below, they quake with fear, the tiny fools.

After eons, or what would be eons in other worlds, on different sides of membranous realities, the quaking subsides, tantrums exhausted, anger quenched.

Continuations planned. New directives drafted and passed down, incrementally and excrementally to the minions below. Collected, piled, consumed by those with no hope left. Transmitted by means both real and imaginary to those under their thrall.

The exception will be resolved. The escape will be reversed. Humanity will be nullified.

Chapter 0x07

The next stop on our route was a planet called Karmelz. I did a little research and really didn't learn much. All I could really find out was that the planet didn't have an indigenous civilization of its own, but had become an enclave for a secretive religion society, called the Order of the Sweet Berkeleyists. Yeah, that's helpful.

As we neared the planet, it looked unremarkable. Areas of green. Mountainous areas. Some large oceans, some smaller seas. Polar caps at each end.

For some, it might remind them of pictures they had seen of Earth. But, the thing is, most terrestrial planets that harbor life look pretty much like Earth did. The idea that most planets have a single mono-ecology is based in old religious myths. There just aren't that many ice planets, or forest planets, or desert planets, or water planets. And, if you actually find one, it's usually devoid of life. Most life-harboring planets are a sort of mongrel hodge-podge, like this one.

So, nondescript is pretty much the norm. Still, it's always cool to see a new world.

Again, I was invited to be on the away team. Hopefully, it wouldn't be quite as violence-oriented as the previous trip down.

As the shuttle dropped down, we headed towards a prairie section of one of the major continents. We saw carefully tended fields with the odd forest here or there. Eventually, we came to a clearing, populated with odd buildings. Some were cubes, even on all sides, apparently earthen in nature. Other buildings were round, gleaming as if made of copper. As we landed, we were met by what I can only assume were monks of some sort. They were of mixed sex. And they pretty much looked like standard humans. They had shaven heads and wore hooded robes of a light brown color. Not rough "Ascetic Monk" robes, but rather a soft flowing fabric. Maybe some sort of silk? Anyway, they looked comfortable. Maybe I could bring one back with me.

From the greeting party, one man emerged to greet the Captain. He shook hands warmly, grasping the Captain's offer hand in his own, then putting his left hand on top. Then he spun and draped an arm over the Captain's admittedly broad shoulders. The monk beamed and led my Captain away through a set of ornate doors. As they receded, I heard the monk say "Oh Captain, I believe you have exactly what I need!"

Huh?

And then Captain Stig's reply of "Well, I'll do my very best to satisfy that need."

Double-huh?

And then they were gone.

I stood there dumb-founded, which, in retrospect, was really uncalled-for. I'm open minded. And I know a lot of women really get off on the thought of two guys, maybe even three, getting intimate. But, it just doesn't do it for me. Again, it's like there's a middle-aged white guy in my head. I could go for two girls, but two guys doesn't thrill me. Still, it doesn't disgust me, either. It's just not my cup of T. (That's an expression from old Earth, when there was an Earth. No one really knows what it means.)

And if Mister I'll-bang-anything-that-moves wants to swing both way, more power to him. I really don't care.

A hand on my shoulder broke me from my internal monologue. It was another monk. He said, "Come, let us show you more of our Order." And he led me away.

All around the room, individual monks were pairing off with members of the landing party and leading them away. I guess that's okay. I would feel worse if they were violent red-skinned giants. And my monk seemed pretty cute.

As we walked down a corridor, with golden-hued walls, I asked "So, what is Sweet Berkeleyism all about?"

"It's easier to just show you. Or rather," this followed by a glance my way, "physically demonstrate." And a slight smile.

Okay, now I was a little worried. Sure, he's cute and all. But, c'mon, we just met. I hope they don't think the Captain is representative of the whole crew.

Eventually, we entered in a room, decorated in the same warm brown tones I had seen everywhere so far. The room was furnished with plush cushions everywhere. He had me sit on a particularly over-stuffed one.

"Long ago," he began, "there was Philosophy."

Oh, great, a history lesson? What happened to the physical demonstration? Not that I was complaining.

"And Philosophy attempted to get at the question of the nature of reality. Many different philosophers had many different ideas about the true nature of things. Are things as we perceive them? Or is what we perceive merely a sham? Or do we perceived a sort of window-dressing laid upon a simpler underlying truth? Are we seeing merely shadows on the wall of a cave? Or maybe a hologram?"

Which would be pretty much the same thing, thought I.

“Or is reality something else entirely? Is it a computer program, running on some system beyond our tiny reality?”

And then he stopped and looked at me, expectantly. What? Was I supposed to choose one?

“So, which is it?” he eventually asked.

And I had no freakin’ clue, so I replied “I have no freakin’ clue.”

“Exactly!!!” he ejaculated! Which made me jump, and giggle a little.

“We have no freakin’ clue!” he continued, a little less ejaculatory.

“We make guesses, guided solely by our faulty senses. Long ago, a poet and philosopher figured this out. He figured out that everyone else was just guessing, making up theories with, literally, no way to ever actually confirm any of this. His name was George Berkeley.”

A-ha, now we were getting somewhere. At least I have a clue on the “Berkeleyist” part.

“George Berkeley gazed upon the vast number of theories put forth by Philosophy and was the one who saw through them. Who saw them for the guesswork they truly were. And he had an alternative: Immaterialism. To George Berkeley, reality only existed to the extent that it was observed. There was no objective reality feeding our subjective sense of it. To be perceived was to exist.”

And, again, a pause. He sat there, gazing at me, apparently thinking that I would be awed at this revelation. So I waited. And waited. I don’t know what he wanted from me. I’m not a philosopher. This was getting awkward. I almost wish he would go back to hinting about a tryst. Then he piped up again.

“But, don’t you see the problem? You and I both perceive the same object, why would we agree upon it? When we each, in turn, gaze upon the same apple, why does it look round and red to each of us if its existence is based solely in our perceptions?”

I thought about mentioning that maybe it’s because the apple really does objectively exist, but I didn’t want to dash his eagerness. So I merely shrugged.

“George Berkeley had the same question. What I haven’t yet mentioned is that Berkeley was also a Bishop, a man of God. And that occupation led to his epiphany.

God synchronizes our senses so that we all perceive the same reality, despite there not being an objective one!”

Well, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that a religious order would bring up religion. I did wonder which religion, though: The one where God sacrifices his son, or the one where God merely chops off his son's hand when he won't join him.

While this was all interesting, I was starting to wonder something. So, I asked.

“I'm starting to wonder something. If you're followers of Berkeley's Immaterialism, then why aren't you Immaterialists instead of Berkeleyists? Plus, I still don't understand the 'sweet' part.”

“I understand your confusion. I haven't been clear about where we break from Bishop Berkeley. His Immaterialism posits no objective reality, but, we believe, in that respect, he was wrong. We believe there is indeed an underlying objective reality. As to the 'sweet' part...”

He trailed off, was silent for a moment. Then he stood and slowly closed the distance between us. I start to rise, but he motioned for me to stay seated. He crouched before me, then lightly placed his fingertip on my chin. This was getting curiously strange. Then he gently pressed downward on my chin. I let my mouth hang open. He reached into his robes and said “Now, close your eyes. I want to put something in your mouth.”

Chapter 0x08

My mouth snapped shut. “What the fuck! You’re not putting anything in my mouth! How dare you even think you can just go sticking any of your horny little monkish parts in any part of me!”

He stumbled backwards, fell on his ass, and looked at me with surprise. He’s surprised? Maybe the Captain is shocking easy, but does he think we all are?

He started sputtering “What? I didn’t mean...”

Then he regained his composure. “Oh, I’m so sorry. It’s been so long that I’ve forgotten those kinds of undertones. All of us here have taken a vow of celibacy towards the opposite sex, to prevent such base desires interfering with our meditation on the fundamental basis of reality. Please, please accept my apologies.”

I was still a little dubious. And don’t think I missed that little ‘opposite sex’ loophole, either.

“Please, I promise I won’t place anything... unseemly... in your... mouth.”

I almost laughed now. Once he had the image of the possibilities, he couldn’t really wipe them from his mind, vow or not.

While I tried to not giggle, he looked at me imploringly. Clearly, this was the ‘physical demonstration’ part. Well, damn, what do I really have to lose here? I guess he could put some sort of strange hallucinogen in my mouth. But, he didn’t seem to really be tripping on anything. More than a little apprehensively, I opened my mouth and closed my eyes. I felt his fingers enter my mouth, just grazing the corners. And he placed something on my tongue. Then the fingers withdrew. “Go ahead,” he urged, “chew.” And I did.

Oh, it was luscious caramel! Really good caramel. Soft and creamy, but with just enough chew. The flavor was divine, with just enough of a dairy note. And was it smooth? Oh, my, it was smooth. I couldn’t detect any graininess at all. Wow, it was really good caramel!

I kept my eyes closed throughout, allowing myself to experience the caramel and only the caramel. And when it was gone, I slowly opened them.

“Do you see?” he asked.

“See? No. Taste, oh yes. That was delicious!”

“No, I mean, do you see how it relates to the nature of the objective universe?”

“That the universe is like caramel? The caramel is some sort of metaphor for reality?”

“No, no, the caramel is the reality!”

“What?”

“The universe is made out of caramel. And God tweaks our perceptions so that we all perceive the caramel as the universe we perceive.”

At this point, I’m sure I had some bug-eyed expression. That didn’t seem to deter him.

“Don’t you see? You’re made out of caramel. I’m made out of caramel. From caramel we come, to caramel we return. All is caramel and caramel is all.”

“You mean literally?”

“Yes, literally!”

Okay, crazy time! I was starting to think that I should maybe get the hell out of there. I took a few deep breaths and reassessed the situation.

Clearly, this guy was nuts. I would have told him he was nuts but I feared he’d go on about the only true caramel being nut-less. But, on the other hand, the only actually physical act he had done so far was feed me some mighty fine caramel. And I do like caramel.

So I decided to humor him a little by asking “So, what do you do all day. Contemplate the caramel?”

“Well, for some of the day. But we also try to reach a sort of nirvana, if you will. We believe that if we create the most perfect possible caramel, we will attain enlightenment and truly become one with the caramel.”

Well, what can you say to that? People apparently took this Bishop Berkeley guy seriously. And I didn’t see how adding caramel made it significantly less loony.

“So, how close are you to this caramel nirvana?”

“Well, you just tasted it. I have more.”

“I guess I can risk becoming one with the caramel a few more times.”

And we spent the next few hours feeding each other incredibly fine caramel. It was intoxicatingly indulgent.

But no sex. He was serious about that vow.

Chapter 0x09

Eventually, we were called back to the room where we were first greeted. Which was a very good thing, because I don't think I could have eaten another caramel.

My monk and I stood, holding our engorged, distended bellies. (We each held our own belly, thank you very much. Don't forget that vow of his.) And we staggered off.

When we arrived at the greeting room, slightly out of breath and still clutching our stomachs, we were met by other members of the landing party, all of whom were also clutching distended midsections.

Then the door through which the Captain had left opened and in he strutted. Yeah, he certainly hadn't been gorging on caramel. He had been gorging on someone, I mean something, though. His hair was a mess, sticking straight up in places. He walked awkwardly, stiffly, like he was, well, sore. Okay, I'm not going to think about that. No, I'm not a prude.

He also kept tugging on his uniform, as if it wasn't fitting correctly.

Well, so was I. My uniform was defiantly not fitting correctly at all. It was quite tight across the midsection, as was everybody else's. But the Captain's discomfort was different. It's just like things weren't fitting correctly all over.

As we gathered together, the Captain parted ways with his, well, his escort. The escort's farewell consisted of "Well Captain, that was certainly satisfying." Could they be any more obvious?

We all got back on the shuttle to head back to the ship. I ended up sitting next to the Captain, way up in front by the shuttle pilot. With everyone aboard and strapped in, loosely, we took off, slowly.

No, seriously. The shuttle pilot started the usual take-off and everyone except the Captain groaned under the acceleration. The Captain leaned towards the pilot and quietly requested that he make the return flight as gentle as possible.

Considering he wasn't himself full of caramel, I thought that was considerate. I looked at him gratefully. Smiled a bit, too. He smiled back, just a nice normal smile. It was a nice moment. Then he spoke.

"Gee, I'm all sticky. Hey, after I wash up, would you like to have dinner and then afterwards we could..."

And he gave me that damn wink. Argh! I am actually glad that I'm genetically unable to wink, so that I wouldn't give him one accidentally. Instead I turned away and the rest of the trip back to the ship was quiet and uneventful, if a bit icy.

Chapter 0x0A

The shuttle docked as gently as the pilot could manage, which turned out to be pretty darn gentle. Hmm, I'll have to keep him in mind if things don't work out with the Captain.

No no no no no! Stop it! I do not have a crush on the Captain. "Sticky." Ewww!

So I waddled back to my quarters and laid down. I'm sure most of the rest of the landing party did the same. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a very comfortable position. If I laid on my back, my stomach felt like it was crushing me. If I laid on my stomach, my stomach felt like I was crushing it. If I laid on my side, I kept rolling forward.

How did women in the past deal with pregnancy? I just don't know. Thank technology for the *Gestatetron 9000*, I say.

Anyway, I eventually sort of rolled a little bit forward, but not all the way. And then I tucked some space-pillows around me, to keep me steady. And then I fell asleep.

And I dreamed about caramel. Sweet, sweet caramel.

Interlude III

The blue orbs of Aquotundra quivered in terror. Cast from above, minions of those long feared arrived. In their bluish frenzy, they joined and parted and joined once again. Then parted.

Some shook with a fear so intense that they shattered into a shower of teensy globules, too small to retain any sense of sentience, to the extent that blue orbs can retain what we would call sentience.

The agents of terror passed among them, striking when taken by the mood. And they were a moody lot.

As the minions approached, orbs divided to make way. In their wake, orbs rejoined, in order to comfort themselves.

In the distance, a giant blue orb loomed. Regal in its size and hue. Regal in its role, as well.

As the dreaded minions approached, its surface remained placid. But if one were to look deeper, into what would pass for its very soul, there, small motes betrayed the anxious turbulence within.

Demands made. Refused. Demands re-made. Re-refused. Demands re-re-made, punctuated by threats, literally. Blue ooze, oozing from wounds freshly inflicted.

Relatively speaking, mere pinpricks. Yet, knowledge that not all were as regally sized. Not all would withstand, survive. To rule over none is not to rule.

Agreements made. Compromises wrangled. Sacrifices agreed to. Minions, if not satisfied, at least no longer murderous.

Alliance expanded.

Chapter 0x0B

By morning, I felt better. Not great, but at least I was no longer worried that my stomach was going to split open, dumping the essential underlying nature of reality all over the floor.

The ship was heading off to our next destination. In fact, we were almost there. Turns out, once I burned through all that caramelly goodness, I had sugar-crashed right into a wall of sleep and found that it was 16 hours later now.

The next planet was a mystery. There were people down there. People of a sort, anyway. But not a whole lot was known about Collectiva.

As usual, we piled into the shuttle and headed down. I don't know if my continued presence on the away team was a sign of my worthiness or simply to create opportunities for the Captain to hit on me awkwardly. But, still, it beats just sitting around on the ship.

Everyone but the Captain was waiting in the shuttle. I guess if you're the Captain, you can be late if you want to. And I felt stupidly snarky when he walked in a moment later, apologizing for making the rest of us wait. Instead of his normal uniform, he has on a sweater, white, with black designs that looked like stylized animals. Weird, and I'm not the only one who thought so.

Captain Stig noticed everyone's quizzical looks and responded, looking a little embarrassed, "The Collectovians really like collecting and sharing data and experiences. I've visited before and they were asking about my Norwegian homeland. At the time, I didn't have anything to show them that wasn't just an image on a screen. But, this sweater is an example of an authentic Norwegian sweater."

A few jaws dropped, including mine. The Captain quickly waved his hands in a sort of back-pedaling gesture.

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant. It's not actually from Earth. Of course, nothing could be, anymore. But it's based on authentic patterns from Earth. I know it's not really any better than an image, but it's, well, it's something I can hold. Sometimes you just need to hold something."

And I think I saw a tiny tear form in the corner of his eye as we all sat silent, thinking of Earth.

And then the jar as the shuttle left the dock broke the mood. I guess the shuttle pilot didn't care about being gentle today.

As we descended, the planet came into sharper focus. Yeah, another blue and green and brown world. Same old, same old.

But, as we neared the surface, I noticed a ton of development. There were large city-structures which were linked by country-spanning stretches of, well, I don't know. They didn't look like open roadways. More like long tubes. Weird.

We landed and, again as usual, walked into a greeting room. The greeting party consisted of four people. They looked pretty much like normal people. Two were men, two, women. They didn't look much the same at all. But, weirdly, they were all garbed in identical clothing.

Of course, uniformity of dress isn't, in itself, weird. After all, the Eraticans all wore the same basic harness of bad-assitude. And the monks all had the same caramel-hued robes. And we were all wearing the same ship's uniform. But none of that really compares to the sight of four folks decked out in identical blue sweaters, decorated in a diamond pattern. Captain Stig leaned towards me and whispered "argyle." I have no idea what he meant.

As we approached, he smiled his big smile and boomed out "Steve!"

The woman on the left answered back "Hello Captain Stig." The man on the far right followed with "It is good to see you again."

I was a little confused and tried to whisper out of the side of my mouth to the Captain "Which one is Steve?" Not whispery enough, though, as the man second from the left responded "We are all Steve."

Finally, the last woman picked up the conversation, adding "We are a hive mind. We share sensory information and memories."

Okay. This is weird. I really didn't know what to say to that. Nor to whom to say it. The Captain started conversing with the various Steve hive mind members. (I don't know what to call them? Steve Alpha, Steve Beta, and so on?)

Having already said something stupid, I just shut my mouth and listened. At first, it was very jarring, as the Steve side of the conversation jumped from body to body. Sort of like "How have ... you been ... Captain. We ... see that ... you ... have worn ... a sweater for us ... to inspect."

I was starting to get whiplash. I watched the Captain. Instead of whipping his head around to each “Steve” as they spoke, he mainly kept his eyes on one “Steve” for an extended period, even if that “Steve” wasn’t the actual body talking. After awhile, he would shift his gaze to one of the other Steves and stay there for awhile.

It actually reminded me of some experiences I’ve had working with other, non-humanoid species. Sometimes, as a Navigator, you need to go to on-site training for areas of the galaxy outside of your own local area. And sometimes that means dealing with species that aren’t similar enough to us to allow for easily learning each others language. And so you need someone to act as a translator, translating one language to another.

I say “language,” but it’s not really that easy. If it were just a matter of spoken languages, you would whip up something with the computer and just let it handle the details. But, with wildly dissimilar species, you can’t directly translate between, well, let’s say “modes of communication.”

There are species that use bio-luminous flashes to communicate. There are some that are purely gesture-based, communication via interpreted dance. There are machine intelligences that communicate in algorithms. I’ve even heard of species that communicate entirely through smell. (Yeah, they talk via farting. Deal with it.) And for these situations, you use highly trained interpreters. They’re not translators because the modes of communication don’t match up concept for concept. How do you directly translate, well, farts to spoken language?

It’s a little like sign language from old Earth, when there was an Earth. There are modes of communication more expressive than humanoid speech and you can’t just translate other modes into speech. It needs to be interpreted.

I turned my attention back to the conversation. Something about “argyle” again.

Anyway, I once had to attend a training seminar with a non-humanoid species. They were a deep blue aquatic bunch of folks who communicated via patterns of air bubbles, combined with gestures. Which can be very elegant when you have long arm/fin thingies covered in fringe and are floating in a slightly viscous liquid.

They were floating, not me.

So, we had a humanoid interpreter who had spent years with these folks and would interpret, as best she could, what they were “saying.”

Here’s the thing, while I was initially greeted warmly and floridly, eventually, the aquatics started to cool to me. And I couldn’t figure out what I had done. The interpreter told me the problem was that I was looking at her, the interpreter, while she

spoke the interpretation aloud. Instead, I should have looked at the aquatics. They were the ones talking to me. She was just interpreting. The focus of my attention should be on the aquatics.

And, poetically, at that point, I noticed that the Steves were talking to me.

“I’m sorry, excuse me?”

“Navigator Reubens, ... are you ... familiar with ... our world?”

Relying on my epiphany, I focused my attention on just one of the Steves, trying hard to decouple my focus from which Steve was talking.

“No, I am not familiar at all. This whole sector of space is new to me.”

With my new-found focus, the fragmented speech became less of a problem.

“Well then, we will provide an escort for you, and for every crew member.”

I was feeling pretty good now, so I concluded with “I would like that very much. Thank you, Steves.”

That got me a recriminating look. “Our name is Steve; it is singular.”

Crap.

Chapter 0x0C

Steve, singular, started to organize. The four original, well, what am I supposed to call them? People? Bodies? Aspects? Instanciations? Fragments? Facets?

Anyway, the four stayed with Captain Stig while more filtered into the room, one for each non-Captain crew member. And, since I'm part of the crew, I received my very own Steve. We all paired up with our individual Steve entity facet thingies.

Crap, this is so awkward. What the hell do I call them?

So, I just asked, "I'm sorry, but how should I refer to just one of you?"

"You may call me Steve, singular."

"No, I mean, from a third-person story perspective, how would I refer to the individual bodies that make up Steve, singular."

"Why would you ever need to do that? And it is just Steve, not Steve-Singular."

"I know, I was trying to be funny."

At that moment, several of the other Steve, umm, bodies, I guess, at the other end of the room broke into laughter.

"What's so funny?" I asked, looking back to my Steve.

My Steve replied "Your humorous use of Steve-Singular."

"They could hear me way over there?"

"I could hear you, here."

Oh, yeah, hive mind.

Each pair left and my Steve and I started strolling down a hallway. The hallway itself was stark with gleaming white plastic walls. Periodically, there were small windows looking out onto fields. We were walking at a brisk pace and I never got a good look through them.

"So, what is it like being part of Steve?"

"Part? I am Steve."

My eyes opened wider. “You’re the original Steve?”

“No, no, that knowledge is lost to history. What I mean is that we are all Steve, complete and whole. Steve is all and all is Steve.”

I resisted the temptation to ask if Steve is caramel and caramel is Steve.

“So, how do you become Steve.”

“I do not understand the question. I am always Steve. I always have been Steve.”

“So, how many, ummm, members make up Steve?”

“You mean See-Bee-Chews?”

“What the hell are See-Bee-Chews?”

“CBCHU. Carbon-Based Cranial Housing Units. It is an acronym. It is awkward but we rarely use the term. Ah, now I understand your earlier question.”

“Yeah, but I was hoping for something a little less tongue-tying.”

“As I said, it is a term we rarely use.”

“If you are all one mind, how am I speaking right now to just you, you being a See-Bee-Chew, I guess?”

“You are not. You are speaking to Steve. This See-Bee-Chew is simply the conduit through which I am communicating to you. Think of it as a display and keyboard. They are not the computer. They are merely connections to the computer. Although, in this case, part of the computer also resides here.”

And with that, he tapped his forehead, tilting his head slightly forward. I noticed some glowing lights on the back of his neck, just below the hairline.

“What are those lights on your neck, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“They are not on my neck, but rather on the neck of this See-Bee-Chew. They are indicator lights. They show the passage of my consciousness in and out of this See-Bee-Chew.”

“Then why aren’t they flashing?”

“Because the flow of consciousness never stops. It is continual.”

“So, how old is a See-Bee-Chew before the, well, the hardware is installed?”

“Ah, now I understand your question about when a See-Bee-Chew becomes Steve. The hardware, as you put it, is actually bio-engineered organic technology. It is grown in place as a See-Bee-Chew develops. A See-Bee-Chew is never not Steve. As a See-Bee-Chew develops consciousness, that consciousness is Steve.”

“And what happens if the hardware breaks down?”

“You still do not fully understand. The hardware, as you call it, is part of each See-Bee-Chew. It is no more separate than your brain is a separate part of you. The lights you see are bioluminescence, not some sort of silicon-based light source. The ‘hardware’ would only break down if the See-Bee-Chew’s actual brain tissue broke down, in which case, there would be no Steve there, only a broken unit.”

I still was not fully getting all this, but at least I was getting the gist.

“You still haven’t answered my question about how many See-Bee-Chews there are.”

“There are currently 3,751,934 units housing Steve. Wait, no, 3,751,933. Now 3,751,932. Now back up to 3,751,933.”

I was going to ask why the number kept changing, then I realized it was a reflection of See-Bee-Chews dying and being born. Although ‘born’ was probably the wrong term.

Instead, I asked “That seems like a low number for a whole planet.”

“Oh, no, I am not the only consciousness on this planet. There is Joe and Sue and Francois. I occupy this city and some local outlying areas. Joe is rural-based, with several small towns housing his See-Bee-Chews. He covers a wider area than I do, but has fewer See-Bee-Chews. Sue is a megapolis on the opposite side of the planet. She does not reach out to any outlying areas, but her main mass of See-Bee-Chews is three times what mine is.”

“And Francois?”

“He is just this guy.”

“What do you mean ‘just this guy?’”

“He is just a guy that lives on an island.”

“All his See-Bee-Chews live on the island?”

“He does not have any See-Bee-Chews. He is not a hive mind. He does not communicate a shared consciousness. He is just this guy. “

“Okay. So, how does all this communication work?”

“Well, mostly it is wireless, with actual physical cabling linking outlying areas. You might have seen the conduits as you landed.”

“Yeah, I noticed those. Why are they so big?”

“For a couple reasons. First, consciousness uses a ton of bandwidth, which requires a lot of physical cabling. Which, in turn, requires a large conduit. But, secondly, it is important that the conduit be well protected. A break in the conduit means a break in consciousness. An outlying area gets isolated.”

“And what happens then?”

“Well, it continues on, independently, until the conduit is repaired. And then it re-integrates with the main consciousness, which is problematic.”

“Because?”

“Because that isolated consciousness is no longer the same person. It is no longer me, Steve. Instead, it is a slightly different Steve. And the longer the isolation, the more different that Steve is.”

“What would happen if a lone See-Bee-Chew was isolated and re-integrated?”

“I do not know.”

“Never happened?”

“Oh, it has happened. It is just, when that See-Bee-Chew is reintegrated, there is nothing there to reintegrate. It is just an empty shell.”

We walked in silence for a bit. Then I asked a silly question.

“I’ve noticed that you don’t use contractions when you speak. Why is that?”

“I’m just screwing with you. No, really, visitors seem to expect it. They expect a hive mind to be similar to a computer intelligence. I’ll stop.”

“Thanks.”

We walked further until the hallway opened up onto an observation deck that looked out over the field of which I had been getting glimpses. Crops, I assumed meant for feeding all the See-Bee-Chews, stretched out in an emerald carpet. Farmers dotted the field, tending to the vegetation.

“Are all those farmers Steve, I mean, ‘you’, I mean See-Bee-Chews housing Steve?”

In response, several of the farmers turned and waved, nodding. It was startling, but I was kind of liking this. We watched for a while when, suddenly, Steve said “Ooooo!”

I turned, looking at him incredulously. But I wasn’t going to jump to any conclusions, given my mistake with the Sweet Berkeleyist monk.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“My apologies. Normally, I’m able to carry on simultaneous conversations with several people. But occasionally, experiences with one person will become so intense that they bleed through into other conversations. It’s a little embarrassing when that happens.”

“I suppose that could be awkward.”

“Oh, you’re putting it there?”

“What?”

“Sorry. Bleed-through again.”

“Any idea which conversation is causing the problem.”

“I expect it is the one I’m having with Captain Stig.”

“Figures.”

“Oh, that slid right in!”

Chapter 0x0D

We stood there for a bit longer, chatting about the different roles that Steve's See-Bee-Chews played. Unfortunately, the conversation was continually punctuated with little squeals, a few gasps, and sundry other exclamations.

Finally, it seemed like Captain Stig had had his fill, as the interruptions stopped. That was also our signal to return to the greeting area.

As we started back along the hallway, I realized something about the farmer See-Bee-Chews.

"Why aren't the farmer See-Bee-Chews wearing the same sweaters as the rest of you?"

"Because they would be darned hot out in the fields."

"Let me rephrase that. Why are the rest of you wearing them?"

"Think of them as a dress uniform in honor of your Captain. I've known him for years, and while Collectiva is a reference to our collective consciousnesses here, it also refers to our quest to collect knowledge. If you were able to stay longer, I would have shown you our archives."

"Well, I could talk to the Captain and see if we could stay a little longer."

"You misunderstand. As you are tied to one body, you don't live long enough to see any appreciable fraction of our archive."

"Oh, okay..."

"But we knew that Captain Stig was bringing us an example of a sweater from his ancestral homeland, so we wore ours as a sign of honor and friendship."

"So, you have a special sweater for when someone visits bearing sweaters?"

"There is another function of the sweaters. They help identify See-Bee-Chews from different consciousnesses the few times we physically get together."

"And why would you get all the See-Bee-Chews together, especially given the large numbers?"

"Well, a guy's gotta get laid occasionally, right?"

And Steve winked at me.

We walked the rest of the way in silence as I tried not to think of 3.7 million Steve See-Bee-Chews getting it on with who knows how many Sue See-Bee-Chews. (Actually, that would 11.1 million Sue See-Bee-Chews.)

Argh! I need bleach for my brain now.

Chapter 0x0E

We met back in the greeting room. Captain Stig returned, his hair mussed, carefully smoothing out his sweater. Most of Steve filtered out of the room, leaving just one See-Bee-Chew to bid us farewell. But I suppose one was enough.

We gathered together and headed towards the shuttle. The Captain still seemed preoccupied with his sweater. Once we were in the shuttle, I asked him about it.

“Well,” he replied, “I’m a little worried. You’re not familiar with actual hand-knitted sweaters. The wonderful thing about them is that each large piece is made up of a single strand of yarn, knitted together.”

“Hence the term ‘hand-knitted.’” I interjected, which earned a slightly exasperated look from him. But he continued.

“If you break the yarn somewhere in the middle, the whole thing can literally unravel. And, given the scarcity of people skilled in knitting by hand, the chances I would be able to get it repaired are slim to none.”

“So, did you catch it on something?”

“No. It’s just that Steve practically tore it off of me. He’s pretty passionate.”

And, yes, you guessed it. Another one of his winks. Again with the winking!

Interlude IV

The Gigerians gathered before the coming fury, suspeciality dared the way witness, demands to come. Mystically and surgically combined, the denizens brooded, their flesh hung from frames of oiled metal, limbs a lover's embrace of twistinctive melding of sinew and cabling.

Pistons, lubricated with mucous, thrust through organic gaskets, plunging deep into cavernous depths, moving articularly strange stilts, propelling them towards destiny, possible, doom, probable.

Minions approach, meet, view with suspicion. These Gigerians, not so different from their own. Natural allies? Supernatural enemies?

Elephonic protuberances stretch over neveral silenches, communication attempted.

These Gigerians, both hated and fetishized by humanity, easy to turn, to direct, to deflect?

Either side wary. Trust absent. No honor among thieves or remoniac aliens. Yet, across this gulf, a psycholy union?

Better such a union than quasi-self-cannihilation. Better to destroy humanity than be locked in grindical war, crescenturied by brief periods of decipices.

Agreement creasily appears. Uneasy conglomerations of meat and machine join with unreal conflagrations of tainted cheese and death, if tainted cheese could be found in non-dementianed space.

This alliance disliked to all that came before. This alliance to prevail. Humanity, not so much.

Chapter 0x0F

Once we docked back at the ship, I headed back to my quarters to reflect. Actually, to try and not reflect. My mind kept wandering to that sweater, stretched across Stig's chest. Captain Stig. The Captain. Let's not even use "Stig."

And, when I tried to think of something else, thoughts of massive Steve/Sue orgies intruded. And then I would think of Francois and what would happen if Sue developed a crush on him. Poor Francois. No wonder he lived on an island.

So, I lay there, trying to not think about such things, and to not touch myself, much. And I finally decided that I needed some serenity of some sort. Some solace. Some, well, I didn't really know. So I decided to wander around the ship, again.

Eventually, I made my way to the garden level, because the garden seemed like a nice place to relax. It's not huge. It's actually just a walled off section of the planting area where we grow some of our food. But it's nice and quiet and there's usually nobody there.

Well, today it was nice and quiet, but not empty. Instead, Stig was there. Captain Stig. The Captain.

He was seated in a small clearing, with some sort of drink-ware and a small bag. Well, at least he had changed out of that sweater and seeing him back in his boring ship's uniform helped to banish impure thoughts from my head.

I was thinking of quietly retreating when he spied me.

"Ah, Navigator Reubens, please, join me!"

Well, okay, what am I supposed to do? Say no? So I walked over and sat down, facing him.

To my querying look, he responded "I'm about to engage in an age-old ritual. It's practice for the next visit on our Grant Tour."

"That would be to Camellia." I answered.

"Yes, indeed. They engage in a strange ritual there that we will be privy to see, nay, perhaps even participate."

"So, what are we doing here then?" I asked gesturing at the drink-ware and pouch.

The drink-ware consisted of two pieces, both apparently made of some substance created by molding clay particles into a shape and then subjecting them to approximately 1,600 Kelvin until they bonded into a non-porous vessel. The rounded shapes of the vessels suggested that they were formed, at least partially, by attaching them to some sort of spinning wheel. Their surfaces were smooth and shiny, as if they had been coated with something that would form a glaze during the heating process. I guessed that, with the addition of some bone ash, the resulting product would be slightly translucent. But here, one of the vessels was a mustardy yellow, including grains of darker brown.

I don't mean to suggest that that it was smeared with mustard, you understand. I'm just noticing the color.

The mustard-colored vessel was the larger of the two, with a handle on one side, and a spout on the other. There was a small lid covering it. I'm guessing that the interior was hollow. Why else would there be a lid? You don't normally put a lid on top of a solid sphere. That would make no sense.

The smaller vessel was basically a cup, but lacking a handle. It was a light green color, but with a fine network of darker lines, as if the surface had been cracked under repeated blows, then covered with a clear covering. On the side was painted some sort of symbol in black. It looked as though it was a series of brush strokes. The main feature of the symbol was a cross, topped by a little roof. There were two lines radiating away at the bottom and some sort of stylized bar at the top. But the main thing was the little roofed cross. It must have been a symbol of some house of worship, back on Earth, when there was an Earth.

Stig, Captain Stig, reached into the pouch and brought out a small bag of something. The bag was small, maybe a third of a decimeter on a side, and nearly flat. It was filled with something. The bag itself seemed to be made of a porous material, maybe cloth? Maybe just strong paper?

There was a string attached at what I would guess would be the top of the bag. At the end of the string was a little paper tag. It has once had writing on it, but was now bleached to the point of illegibility.

He held the little tag and let the bag swing freely. "This is something I found on a distant planet. Here, smell it." And he dangled it in my face.

The bag. He dangled the bag in my face.

So I lightly took hold, of the bag, the bag with the string and the tag, and, well, smelled it.

Ummm, it smelled dusty. Not much else. Just dusty.

I just sort of shrugged at him. What was it supposed to smell like? He smelled it and seemed to come to a similar conclusion.

He lifted the lid of the larger vessel, revealing that it was indeed hollow, which only makes sense, after all. And he placed the bag inside, letting the string trail out. Then he reached around behind him, where he had a carafe of water. It's not like he was hiding it. It's just that I was more interested in the strange cup and pot.

"Warm water," he explained, and he poured the warm water into the pot, along with the bag. Then he shut the lid.

"And now we wait."

"For how long?"

"I really don't know."

So we waited a good ten minutes. Then he poured some of the resulting liquid into the cup.

"Here, taste this," as he held out the cup to me.

I took it and brought it to my mouth. I tilted it towards me, just enough to allow some of the slightly amber liquid to slide through my pursed lips.

The taste was indescribable.

Chapter 0x10

The taste was indeed indescribable. But I'll try anyway.

It was awful.

Rancid dishwater? Scummy water from a drainage ditch? (I'm not sure what a drainage ditch is. Something from old Earth, when there was an Earth.) Leftover bathwater used by someone with seriously moldy toes? Mucus thinned with turpentine? Toxic waste filtered through a heavily used catbox? (A space-catbox.) Raw sewage, left to ripen under a bloated red giant sun?

Maybe it's just enough to say it was awful.

But I couldn't actually say it was awful because I was busy retching, spitting the vile liquid into the grass.

The Captain looked alarmed and took the cup from me. He swirled the liquid in the cup, I think. It was hard to tell because I was still trying to expectorate the taste from my mouth.

He took a sip himself, which, really, he should have done first. I admired his self control as he actually swallowed it. Then he pondered the taste for a second before declaring "That was almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea."

And then he began retching, too.

We both sat there for awhile, hunched over, trying to rid ourselves of even the memory of that taste. After awhile, I managed to sit back up and ask a question.

"What the hell is 'tea?'"

"That was supposed to be tea. It's an old Earth beverage, back when there was an Earth."

"And people drank that?"

"From what I've read, it was the most popular beverage in the world, after plain water."

"Maybe you made it wrong?"

“Beats me. The bag didn’t come with instructions. And there isn’t much about it in the archives.”

We sat in silence for awhile. Stig started to shoot meaningful glances my way. The tension was becoming unbearable, so I broke it by resuming my retching.

Through my own gagging noises, I heard him say “This is probably a bad time to ask if you want to have dinner some time and maybe...”

I just waved him away and staggered from the garden. I didn’t even see if he did that stupid wink.

Although he probably did.

Chapter 0x11

The next day, we arrived and headed down. Camellia was a green world. Not green like a green gas giant. Green as in lots of plant life. The planet had polar regions, to be sure, and some mountainous areas here and there. Oh, and oceans. But most of the landmass was simply green. Orbiting it was a large moon, just as green as the planet itself.

But this wasn't green in a lush global jungle sort of way. Instead, as we descended, the green resolved itself into rolling sub-tropical hills, carpeted with organized rows of shrubs.

I asked the obvious question. "Is the whole planet like this?"

Captain Stig nodded, thoughtfully.

We landed and were met by the usual greeting party. Unlike previously visited planets, the folks greeting us weren't very similar at all. There weren't all wearing the same clothes, nor did they share a skin-tone. Rather, it was a motley cross-section of humanity.

That was rather refreshing and ironic, too. We've been visiting planets with monocultures, but diverse biospheres. And here was some place the exact opposite. The planet seemed devoted to a single type of vegetation, but the people seemed more diverse. Or did they? And I heard an evil laugh, which I'm pretty sure was just in my head.

To reinforce that sense of foreboding, we were divided up again with one escort each. Meanwhile, the Captain was conversing with a couple, male and female, with strange hair. Well, it looked strange to me. It wasn't braided, but rather looked all bunched-up into long braid-less braids.

Anyway, the couple casually looped arms over Stig's broad, broad shoulders and led him away, saying "Have we got some good shit for you, man."

Except they pronounced it in a strange dialect.

Anyway, I was led away by a young woman of Asian descent. We walked down a hall painted in soothing colors, with nice, but not ostentatious, art pieces displayed.

"So," I asked, "what do you do here?"

“We plant; we grow; we harvest; we drink.”

Okay, that was a little short on specifics, but I decide to just go with it.

We came to a room, simply furnished. There was a low table surrounded by no chairs. Because the table was too low for chairs, I’m guessing. Parts of the room were divided off with light-weight screens, perhaps made of paper on wooden frames. The floor was lined with mats.

“What are we going to do here?” I asked.

She responded, “I want you to drink of my nectar.”

Ummm, okay, I didn’t quite know what to make of that. On one hand, the part of my brain apparently designed by a middle-aged white guy thrilled at the thought of some girl-on-girl action. But, another part of me was thinking that those mats didn’t look all that comfy on which to lay, particularly if one was naked.

She caught my conflicted expression. “I want you to drink of my nectar, our nectar, this world’s nectar. I want you to drink... tea!”

Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

Chapter 0x12

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!” I shouted, as I backed away. “I won’t partake of such a noxious brew!” Which, frankly, seemed rather wordy and melodramatic of me. Still, I couldn’t get the memory of that foul taste out of my head.

“But, why do you act so?”

“Stig, I mean Captain Stig, made me some tea on-board our ship and it was,” and here I paused to select one of the descriptions that had come to mind earlier, finally settling on “awful!”

“Awful? Please, tell me about it.”

And we sat, on the mats on either side of the low table, while I related the events of our experimentation with tea. I mentioned the little bag. She blanched at the thought. No, literally, her face grew pale. I mentioned the warm water. She shook her head, ruefully. I mentioned the wait.

“How long?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes.”

I think, at this point, she began to weep, slightly.

Finally, I came to the end of the sorry tale and she told me “Put it from your mind. Bury it deep and lock it away. I will make you tea. It won’t heal your psychic wounds, but it will help dispel them, and maybe, in time, you will recover.”

And she started to make tea. Much like the captain, she had a pot of some sort, and a cup. Actually, two cups, because she was expecting me. The pot was made of iron. It looked heavy. The cups, in contrast, were a delicate white, lacking handles. They were plain, but an elegant sort of plain. She also had a glass vessel filled with water. But the water was cold.

“First, we start with water, cold and freshly drawn.”

I looked at her quizzically.

“We want fresh water. We will heat it, of course, but not until we are ready to use it.”

And, with that, she flipped a switch on the water container and it began to heat up. While it did so, she went over to a cabinet. As it opened, I saw it was stocked with opaque jars, each tightly sealed.

“The enemies of tea are light, moisture, and time.” she explained, “Light and time will rob it of its flavor. Moisture will let it rot.”

Then she looked at me, admonishingly, “And an age-old tea-bag procured by your Captain will have protection against none of these.”

She selected a container, after due consideration.

“This one may be too strong for you. But, strength may be what you need to overcome this memory which will otherwise haunt you for eternity.”

She opened the canister.

“Please, enjoy the aroma.”

And I did. It was heady. Strong and smelling like a fire. But not a bad fire. Not the smell of charred wreckage after a crash. Not the smell of burning wiring as laser banks overheat in battle. Not the smell of rubber, burned off in patches as a shuttle hits a docking bay too quickly. Not the smell of fusing hydrogen in the middle of a star. (Okay, I made the last one up. I have no idea what fusing hydrogen smells like. Probably like helium.)

No, it was a different sort of fire, one that brought up ancestral feelings. Feeling of an experience that I may not have had directly, but that those before me had.

“This is Lapsang Souchong. It is smoked over wood.”

Over wood? Over burning wood? I don't think I had ever actually smelled burning wood. But it smelled delicious. I don't mean that it made you feel like eating smoke. But it smelled like it could magically transform things that were wrapped in its embrace. I thought of pork shoulders, for some reason.

As if reading my mind, she said “Or salmon.”

She scooped out a healthy portion of, well whatever it was. She saw my look of confusion.

“Tea is made of leaves from the Camellia Sinensis plant. It is a small bush which we grow wherever it will flourish. At the proper time, we pick the leaves, which are then processed in different ways.”

“Like smoking over wood.”

“Yes, exactly. Some leaves are minimally processed, before being dried, forming light tasting green teas. Others are allowed to oxidize before being dried, forming black teas, such as the one we have before us. They are stronger tasting. And some teas fall in the middle, forming the vast Oolong family.”

“I wonder what the Captain used?”

“I doesn’t really matter. He was using a tea-bag, or, as we colloquially call it ‘Crap in a Sack.’”

I gasped, then giggled at the colorful language. This encouraged her to continue.

“Tea-bags are a crime against nature.”

“That seems rather harsh.”

“Harsh, yet true. They were made with poor quality tea in the first place. Good, full-leaf tea is sold at a premium price. Whatever tiny pieces are left, even dust, is then used in tea-bags. Tea-bags don’t protect the tea from light and moisture well. And, let us not speak of the age of the ‘tea’ provided by your Captain. It’s a wonder you weren’t poisoned.”

“I think I might have been, honestly.”

By now, the water was getting quite hot, certainly hotter than what the Captain provided. I asked if we waited for it to boil.

“No, not quite to the boil. Certainly, boiling water would be better than the tepid liquid your Captain tried to use.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the snide way she said ‘Captain,’ but I let it slide and let her continue.

“But water at a boil is not optimum, either. And you certainly don’t want to use water that has been boiling for a period of time. It will produce flat tasting tea. Rather, you want water that is near the boil, how near being dependent on the type of tea.”

“In what way?”

“A black tea needs to be quite close to the boiling point, at around 372 Kelvin. Green teas use slightly cooler water. And Oolongs, as with all things Oolong, desire water at a temperature in between those mentioned.”

She grabbed the heated water and poured just a little into the pot. She swirled the pot, rose, and discarded the water before returning to her seated position at the table.

“That was to heat the pot itself, so that the temperature of the water doesn’t drastically decline when we start steeping the tea.”

Now she added the leaves to the pot and poured in the water.

“Now we wait, but not for ten minutes. For a black tea, three to five would be a good range. You want the leaves to steep long enough to extract the full flavor, but wait too long and you will also extract bitterness. Because this tea is so strong, we will stop it at three.”

So, we sat there, for what seemed a long time. Alas, it wasn’t yet three minutes. She broke the silence.

“Usually, we keep the lid closed, but you can peek inside, if you like.”

I did like, so I lifted the lid. The leaves had opened up, now looking more like actual leaves.

“The unfurling is called ‘The Agony of the Leaves.’”

The leaves also rose and fell with the convection currents in the water. It was soothing to watch, all the more as the aroma began to fill the room. Finally, the three minutes were up.

She decanted the tea into the two cups, pouring it through a strainer. She had made precisely enough for us both. That led to a question from me.

“What do you do if you’re making more than just a cup of tea? Just leave the leaves in it?”

“Oh, no, that would lead to a bitter brew, indeed. You would prepare a second pitcher and decant the entire contents into it through a strainer. Or, alternately, you could suspend the tea in a mesh ball and pull the leaves out at the proper time. But a mesh ball doesn’t allow the leaves the full room they need to expand. I frown upon that method.”

She held out the cup urging me to taste it

I took it and brought it to my mouth. I tilted it towards me, just enough to allow some of the dark, almost reddish, liquid to slide through my pursed lips.

The taste was indescribable.

Chapter 0x13

The taste was indeed indescribable. But I'll try anyway.

It was wonderful!

It was warm, of course, but in more ways than just temperature. It was heady, as the aroma enwrapped my nose, raising anew feelings of safety and security lodged deep in my brain, subconscious remembrances of a time when a fire meant safety, warmth, survival. It was rough, as the strong smoky flavor coated my tongue, smashing its way down my throat. It was strong, strong like a man, sweeping you into his arms, protecting you, maybe a strong Norwegian man named Stig.

All this in a sip of tea. I felt transformed.

Each sip was a little different. As my mouth became used to the strong flavor, it picked up nuances that were overpowered in earlier sips. Less smoke. More, well, tea. I tasted woody notes. I tasted spicy notes. I tasted slightly bitter notes, but not in a bad way, in a complementary way.

When we had drained the cups, she asked if I wanted her to prepare another pot.

"I don't want to use up all of your leaves."

"Actually, you can re-steep tea leaves multiple times. Each subsequent steeping results in a smoother, lighter, and often more complex flavor."

And that was all I needed to hear. She made a second pot, which I enjoyed as much as the first.

As we sat, satiated with tea, I asked "By the way, you don't think that the underlying nature of reality is tea, do you?"

"No. That's a really weird question. Why do you ask it?"

"Oh, no real reason."

Chapter 0x14

We sloshed out way back to the greeting area. I was as full of tea as I had been of caramel earlier. But the tea came without the whack-job religious views. And, I was promised, that the euphoric feeling I now had from the tea would not lead to a crash like the sugar high from the caramel.

Apparently, tea contains all sorts of good stuff that helps smooth out the caffeine high you get from it. Really, there doesn't seem to be a downside to it. Great stuff!

Anyway, we met up in the greeting area. My crew mates also filtered in, with varying looks on their faces. Some looked placid and relaxed as I was. Other were more neutral. And some looked unsettled.

It was a little strange to see. So far, every time we had gotten back together, everyone had had more or less the same experience. We all watched the Eraticans fight together. (Meaning we were together to watch the fight, not that the Eraticans were fighting together, even though they were.) We were all quite happily stuffed with caramel. After all, who doesn't like caramel. (I'm sure there are some folks who don't. The Eraticans would probably shun it.) And we all seemed equally discombobulated by Steve.

Well, maybe that would be a good topic for the ride back to the ship.

We milled about, waiting for the Captain, and were just about to swap stories, when in walked Stig. Well, maybe 'walk' isn't the best term. He slouched in. It's hard to describe. Usually, he has a marked strut to his walk. But now, he was all loose limbed and slinky. He had a goofy smile on his face. He looked spent. The couple who had left with him were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they were even more spent.

As he walked up, I detected a strange odor surrounding him. Not really a bad odor. But strange, one I had not smelled before.

He greeted us with "Hey! Dudes! Let's go home!" And he slung his arm over my shoulder and gave me a dopey look. At least there was no winking.

I replied "Well, that must have been some tea."

"Tea? Oh, yeah, I guess you could make tea with it. Hmmm, or brownies. Damn, I'm hungry. Anybody got any food?"

We didn't, so we headed towards the shuttle, most of us walking, the Captain slinking.

During the ride back, we started swapping stories. Comm Specialist Wilkers went first.

“My escort led me into a strange room, decorated with lots of dark stained wood. She spoke with a strange accent and called me ‘luv’ a lot. The pot for the tea was gleaming white, more cute than elegant. The cups were small, each with a petite handle, white with blue designs, a little translucent at the edges.

“The tea itself was strong and held a hint of citrus. We just chatted as she made it. It wasn't a ceremony, by any means. As the tea steeped, she brought out little cakes and cookies to eat. And we just sat there, sipping tea and eating treats, chatting. The tea was strong. It had that slightly bitter citrus edge which I had smelled earlier.

“And we just chatted. She lectured me a bit about some woman, Catherine of Braganza, who apparently invented tea or something. I wasn't quite sure.”

At this point, the Weapons Officer, Vapon, interrupted. Well, not so much interrupted as picked up the thread.

“Oh, Catherine of Braganza didn't invent tea. Let me tell you about my visit.”

And so he did.

Chapter 0x15

Okay, so, see, we all got to the greeting room and the Captain, as usual, took off. Say what you will about the guy, but he knows what he wants and he just goes out there and takes it.

Which is more than you can say for Navigator Reubens. She keeps making goo-goo eyes at him, then turning away. Frickle dame. With a booty like that goin' on, you would think she's know how to use her 'assets.' Haw!

Anyway, so this one Asian guy leads me away for my introduction to their culture. Like I care. I barfed for hours after all that caramel. This just blows. We're flying around, doin' the meet-and-greet deal. I don't know if it's gonna work. So far, the only planet I really liked was the one with those violent red-skinned bastards. Just as long as they don't try to kill me, I'm fine with watching them.

So we get to this room and the guy says we're gonna partake in a Japanese tea ceremony called the Way of Tea. Then he said something about matches. I dunno. Maybe to light candles or some stupid crap like that. It was looking like that kind of day already.

A few other people showed up. He introduced me to them but I didn't really pay much attention because I didn't really give a crap, y'know.

First, we had to sit on a hard bench and wait. Why? I have no freakin' clue. Then we had to wash up. Okay, I guess I can understand washing my hands. I work with weapons. I can get a bit dirty. But rinse out my freakin' mouth? So I can pour tea into to?

Yeah, guess what my mouth is filled with. Spit. After I rinse it out, guess what it's still filled with. Spit.

Then we walked outside to a little house. Just this little house thing sitting there. Luckily, it was nice out, because then they made me take off my shoes. Why do I have to take off my shoes? Now I was getting a little worried. My body is a deadly weapon if I'm wearing my shoes. Without my shoes, I'm still pretty deadly, but not truly lethal kick-ass deadly.

But, y'know, the Captain likes this sort of crap, so I took my shoes off.

Then we went through the door in the little house. It was low and I had to crouch down to fit through. Oh, great. I'll be shoeless and unable to retreat easily. This just keeps getting better and better.

Inside, there was all this tea-making crap: bowls, containers, cups, a little white cloth, and a whisk. Why a whisk? Beats me.

Apparently, I was supposed to just gaze adoringly at this crap for a bit, so I just sort of daydreamed about Reubens' nice rack and round ass.

Speaking of Reubens' ass, we were apparently also going to just sit our butts down on the floor around this a low table in the middle of the room. Oh, comfy. I guess actual chairs are a little too much for these folks.

They got a little fire going, which was cool. I like fire. Especially if it's a fire I started, preferably by shitting a gun at something. I didn't get to start this one, but still, flames rock.

Then, as we sat around the table, we ate a little food and drank some booze. The food was okay. The booze was okay, too, but they just gave me a tiny bit in this little glass. Booze-tease!

And then they led us back outside and back to the bench. Huh? I didn't even get to grab my shoes. And we just sat for a bit. Whee. Fun. Not.

Finally, they brought us back into the little house. And they started washing up. Y'know, usually I wash up after I dirty stuff up. They hadn't even used any of the tea-making stuff, yet they were already washing it all. And it was all real formal. Which is a code word for boring. Watch me now as I slowly and laboriously clean a tea scoop that hasn't yet had a chance to get dirty.

And then they carefully placed everything on the table. And they finally started making some damn tea.

Now, everyone else in the landing party keeps mentioning these tea leaves. How pretty they were. How good they smelled. Reubens went on about the leaves being in agony. I didn't care. I just stared at her boobs instead.

But did I get leaves? No, of course not. I got powdery green powder. They had heated some water on the fire, which by now was just glowing charcoal. Not nearly as cool as actual flames. And they mixed up the green powder in some of the water using the whisk. Yeah, it made this sorta thick frothy green drink.

Once they had it made, they handed the bowl filled with it to me. And then the woman making it bowed to me. And I bowed back. Seemed like the right thing to do. Then they nudged me to bow to the guy next to me. Well, okay, I guess. And then they motioned for me to hold the bowl up high. I was sorely tempted to dump it on someone at that point. Sorely tempted.

And then I finally got to take a drink of the damn stuff.

And almost spewed it out at them. I dunno what I was expecting. Maybe minty? Maybe, like pistachio? But it just tasted weird. Like a plant. I dunno.

I was really worried they would expect me to drink the whole bowl. But instead, they motioned me to pass it to the guy I had just bowed to. Fine by me. So I passed it along.

So the next guy takes it. And he wipes off the edge of the bowl where I drank. Huh? C'mon, I rinsed out my damn mouth earlier, like they wanted me to.

Turns out they just do that between each drinker.

Finally, the bowl made its way around and everyone got to take a taste. Everyone else also took some time to admire the bowl. It's a bowl. It's round and filled with stuff. Geez.

Then they washed-up again. At least it made sense this time. Maybe they should put the stuff away somewhere so they wouldn't have to keep washing it all the damn time. And then the main lady left.

They built up the fire again. Then the lady came back in and we all got some treats and had a smoke. They even brought in some cushions, which I certainly appreciated. I ain't got Reubens' ass.

And then they made more tea, not as thick and frothy as before. And we each got our own cup.

And then they washed everything, again.

And we just sat around and shot the shit for awhile. I didn't know what to talk about. So I asked who invented tea. Discovered, I guess is a better word.

"Certainly not that Catherine of Braganza bitch!"

Nah, just kidding.

But they did tell me.

Chapter 0x16

Each of us was assigned to escort a member of the landing party. I was, honestly, hoping for the curvy Navigator. But the universe was not aligned with my desires this day. I was assigned to their Weapons Specialist.

He seemed a rough man, fitting with his advocacy. Still, I was tasked with showing him the humble yet formal charms of the Way of Tea.

Predictably, he chafed at every aspect of the ceremony. He seemed to be unable to differentiate between ceremonial actions and practical actions. Again, that would be expected from an expert in the causing of death.

I must admit a certain amusement watching him attempt to enter the *chashitsu*. Clearly, his large frame was not meant for entering through a more modest entryway.

I must also admit that I would have much preferred to watch the Navigator navigate her voluptuous form through the door. But, often, we must drink the cup we are poured, must we not?

Inside, he lacked the simple patience needed. Even if one does not enjoy the ceremony, all it asks of a guest is that he sit still, in silence, instead of fidgeting like a small child, emitting mews of impatience.

The sole part of the ceremony he seemed to enjoy was the lighting of the charcoal. Of course, monkey see fire.

That seems unkind of me. I am quite sure he would rather be spending his own time basking in the Navigators ample bounties. But I digress.

He ate well enough before the tea itself. I, personally, could have done without the smacking noises. Perhaps if he learned to eat with his lips sealed, he would not punctuate the aural stillness in such a violent manner.

When the time came for the communal bowl of tea, I am pretty sure he almost, well, I do not know the polite term. 'Spew' is frankly the most accurate. I am pretty sure he almost spewed his back into the bowl.

In some ways, I don't blame him. I, myself, am not a big fan of *matcha*. But this is a ceremony. The actual tea itself is not the most important aspect.

For example, I, myself would much rather be drinking a strong cup of Lapsang Souchong, preferably with the curvy Navigator. Perhaps the heat and strong flavor would raise a slight flush to her face, which might then travel down to her bountiful cleavage? Perhaps a sweet drop of sweat would form in the cleft. Ah, but again, I digress.

He seemed perturbed when we wiped the bowl after he drank. He should have been thankful that we didn't disinfect the whole bowl. I do think he eventually figured out that it was part of the ceremony. At least I hope so. He did not strike me as being very bright.

Eventually, we passed the more formal part of the ceremony and were able to relax a little. We tried to talk politics or philosophy, but all such conversation sailed far above our guest's head.

But eventually, he did ask a decent question. He asked from whom did tea originate. Poorly asked, I realized. Could he not grasp that the tea leaf is a natural product, grown in the ground? Perhaps he has spent so much time in space that he really does not understand.

So I told him from whom tea originated.

I replied "Certainly not from that Catherine of Braganza bitch!"

My apologies. I am merely jesting, in a crude fashion. Catherine of Braganza did indeed help introduce and popularize tea to and in the West. But those actions come far later in the history of tea.

So I told him, as best we know, about Shennong, Emperor of China, back on old Earth, when there was an Earth.

Chapter 0x17

My eyes refused to open. They were crusted shut with eye boogers. I rubbed them raw until I could open them enough to immediately shut them again, squinting in the bright morning daylight. Damn, I hate mornings.

I felt like crap. My lower back hurt. Your lower back would hurt, too, if you had to satisfy 50 concubines. Yeah, I know, you're thinking I got it made, big Emperor and all. But, 50 concubines means a lot of bangin'. And they get all bitchy if I fall behind. And, with 50 concubines, how can you not, y'know.

I rolled out of bed. Yeah, literally rolled. I told you, my back hurt like hell. I fell onto the floor. I managed to get up on my hands and knees. I tried to sit back on my haunches and was really kicked around by some wild vertigo and nausea. I really needed to eat something agreeable. Good thing I invented agriculture, huh?

But, first, I needed something to settle my stomach. Anything I ate right now would be coming right back up, with little delay.

I reached over to the bed and kind of pulled myself part-way onto it, then used it as a brace to push myself upright.

Damn, this sucks.

I swayed for awhile, trying to both get my balance and not spew whatever the hell it was I ate last night onto the floor.

I felt some pressure building and let out a long burst of gas. God of the Burning Wind indeed.

Once I had my shit together, so to speak, I ambled out the door into the palace courtyard.

Nothing much going on. I called out for my favorite concubine, Teresarella. Yeah, I know, it's a strange name. But I like it and I'm the damn Emperor, after all.

I waited patiently a bit, because, even though I'm the damn Emperor, I don't need 50 concubines mad at me either. Soon, she popped out of the concubine wing and greeted me.

“Hey Shennong. Oh, you look like shit.”

“Yeah, thanks, I feel like shit, too. My stomach is killing me. You got anything I could drink to settle it down some?”

“Dunno, but I’ll see what I can scrounge up for you.”

“Thanks babe. You’re the best.”

And off she went to find her Emperor the relief he needed. That’s why she’s my favorite.

Chapter 0x18

God, that asshole. You would think an Emperor could take care of himself. But, no, he's a big-ass baby, whining for his 'favorite' concubine to fix his poor tummy ache.

I just hope he doesn't start going on about his poor lower-back and the tragic love-making demands foisted upon him. He sure wasn't 'up' to any loving last night, if you get my drift.

Damn fool ate and drank too much, then sloshed off to bed all droopy. And I mean droopy everywhere. It's sad when a concubine has to have her own stud on the side just to meet her own needs. But a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, right?.

And now he wants my help. I'm tempted to just give him some hot water and be done with it. But he'll be expecting something, anything. Spices? Nah, spices are expensive. Not gonna waste them on him. Herbs are good. I could throw in some herbs and call it some kind of elixir. But even that seems like a waste. After last night, he probably has green fuzz growing on his tongue. I'd hate to waste good herbs.

Ah, the hell with it. I'll throw some leaves off this hedge into the pot. Maybe they're poisonous and they'll kill the gluttonous bastard. Oh, good, they even turned the water a faint amber. He'll fall for this easy.

Chapter 0x19

Soon, my favorite concubine returned with an elixir to sooth my savage gut.

“Awesome. Let me drink that down.”

I took a sip of the slightly amber brew, a faint but lovely aroma tickling my swollen nose. The flavor was pleasing to my palette as well. “Hey, this is really good.”

“Really? I mean, good, good, glad you like it, oh Emperor of mine.”

“And my belly is already starting to feel better. This stuff fits my needs today to a T. What do you call it?”

“Ummmm, how about ‘tea?’”

Chapter 0x1A

Soon, I finished telling the crew member about Emperor Shennong and how tea leaves had fallen into water he was boiling. The Emperor was pleased by the flavor and aroma, and eventually tea spread throughout old Earth, when there was an Earth, and beyond.

I looked into the man's eyes, searching for a spark of wisdom that the story may have engendered.

No. He was bored.

Maybe the curvy Navigator is still around.

Chapter 0x1B

Soon, I was bored silly with the Camillian's goof-ball story about some Emperor dropping random leaves into a pot of water. Luckily, the whole ceremony thing looked to be wrapping up. Good thing, too. I was really stiff from sitting on the floor and I needed to pee. All that damn tea.

So we left the house and headed back to the greeting area to join up with the rest of the crew. But I grabbed my damn shoes first.

Chapter 0x1C

And so Officer Vapen finished his story. Yeah, I think they screwed up a little there. He probably wasn't the best one to send to a ceremony like that. In fact, he may have been the singularly worst one.

We traded a few more stories. One crew member had tea flavored with mint, drinking from tall narrow glasses held in finely wrought metal holders. Another had a pitch black brew that tasted like mud, as in wet earth, as in wet earth from old Earth, when there was an Earth. It supposedly had curative powers. Sounds like it needed curative powers against its own flavor.

Between each story, the Captain would giggle a little. Finally, I asked what kind of tea he had experienced.

After a string a giggles, a pause while he looked thoughtful, and another round of giggling, he explained "I didn't have tea. I partooked from their other crop, the one from their moon." And he looked meaningfully through a porthole at the emerald satellite, Cannabis.

And then he giggled some more and mentioned that he was hungry.

At least he wasn't winking. And soon we found ourselves docking with the ship. As we stepped on-board, I patted the slight bulge in my pocket where I had a nice little package of Lapsang Souchong leaves squirreled away.

Interlude V

The ships descended, like thin stilettos, stabbing the earth, except upside down, hilt-first. Fusion flame jetted from their thin sterns, while their even thinner prows jutted skyward. These ship, like splinters of platinum, descended to the plain, baked dry in fusion, from star and now ship.

From the very tips of these spires, the Flindrarians viewed all in their panorange.

They were masters of all. They would be master here, as well.

Arrayed around them were massed minions. Sent from realms unknown and unknowable, demanding fealty. This omnipotened no good.

Yet, they laughed, wiped alien tears from alien eye clusters. Safe in their towers of technology, no harm deemed threatening.

Sensor apparatus deployed, broadcasting refusal to all.

Silence, stretched, near to breaking.

Space-time, stretched, near to breaking. Breaks. Solitary ring of unreality, over tallest spire in the fleet, descending.

As it passes, razor-thin ship constricts further, down to a single dimension, then even smaller, to non-ness. This ring of nothing meets the ground, its path now spireless.

Masters no more, the Flindrarians concede, bidding will be done. Better humanity destroyed than Flindra. Far better. At least for Flindra.

Chapter 0x1D

Everyone was fairly sated by our experiences with tea. Even the Weapons guy seems fairly mellow.

The Captain, on the other hand, was extremely mellow. It was rather nice. I'd talk to him here and there and he wouldn't even wink. Although I think he called me "babe" a couple times. It was balanced out by the many times he called me "dude."

He still smelled funny and sometimes the odor would permeate areas of the ship.

Eventually, he seemed to straighten back to his old self and I stopped smelling the smell.

But, in any case, it was a pretty relaxed crew by the time we arrived at our next destination, Calcutron.

Oh my, that sounds like a friendly place. All nice and fuzzy.

As we approached, well, it was a strange sight. Normally, you see the star. You yawn, because, hey, it's just another star.

What? Oh, I know, there are loads of really cool stars out there. Binaries that spin like dizzy lovers, their surfaces nearly close enough to touch. There are bloated red giants, with unseen black hole escorts, skimming their surface, eating their very being. There are trinary systems that are unstable and could go at any second. There are supernovae, exploding with an unfathomable fury, creating complex elements that help shape our worlds. There are neutron stars, unimaginably dense, yet right there for the viewing, instead of hidden away like a None More Black Hole's shame.

And yet the problem is, those really cool stars never have good habitable planets around them. The very things that make them cool also prevent decent terrestrial planets from forming. Or, if one does somehow form, prevent life from ever developing.

The only stars that do have habitable planets are the boring ones. Single stars, all alone, with terrestrial planets in near-circular orbits, at an appropriate temperate distance.

So, yeah, yawn.

But this case was different. We could see the star, but it was hazy and fuzzy. It seemed dimmed. And there didn't seem to be any planets surrounding it. Was it surrounded by a gas cloud? Was that obscuring the star and the planet Calcutron?

As the ship got closer, the cloud, or haze, or whatever it was, took shape before us. It was clearly defined at its boundaries. It looked like it formed a hazy, but sharply edged, wrapper around the star. It looked to be in fairly close, too, as it really wasn't terribly larger than the star.

The Communications Specialist tried to initiate conversation.

"Galaculonic to Calcutron. Galaculonic to Calcutron. Can you read us, Calcutron?"

"Hey there!"

The responding voice was cheery. It seemed really happy to hear from us.

"Calcutron, we ask permission to land."

"No can do. Sorry."

There seemed to be real regret there.

"Our Captain would like to meet with representatives of Calcutron."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard of Captain Stig. Sure, I'd love to 'meet him,' so to speak."

There was a strange emphasis on "meet him."

"In order to meet, we need to send an away team to land on Calcutron. Which, oddly, we seem to be having trouble locating. Is it on the far side of your sun?"

"Nope. No planet back there."

"Is it obscured by the haze?"

A little laughter from the voice from Calcutron, followed by "No, not obscured by the 'haze.'"

Again, a strange emphasis on "haze," almost as if the word had scare quotes around it.

Captain Stig had plainly had enough of this juvenile game of hide-and-seek. He took over the conversation.

“Now look here, we’d like to meet your representative, but I feel like you’re playing some sort of joke on us. Where is Calcutron?”

“You’re looking at me.”

That threw me. I would have at least expected the voice to say “You’re looking at it.” The Captain apparently felt the same way.

“At you? I expected you to say that we’re looking at it.”

“Ah, Captain, my apologies. Indeed, I’m having some fun at your expense. Bring your ship in closer to the haze, as you call it, while I explain.”

As we approached, and we did have to get pretty near the star before we could really resolve the haze, the voice continued.

“You see, Captain, there is no planet called Calcutron. I’m not a planet at all. I’m a computer brain. A machine intelligence.”

Now we could start to make some sense of the haze. It appeared to be made up of bajillions of tiny nodes. Given the distance, we could only resolve a small portion at a time, but I was guessing that the nodes continued all around the star.

“In case you’re wondering,” Calcutron said, “the nodes you see continue all around the star.”

Oh great, he can apparently read my mind.

“Each node is a processing core. Think of them as the equivalent of neurons in your brain. There are so many that I have really mind-bogglingly awesome thinking power. I can calculate so many potential situations and reactions that it’s almost like I can read your minds.”

Stig interjected with “So, you’re sort of a computational Dyson sphere?”

“Well, maybe, a little. I’m not a rigid structure at all. Nor am I a bunch of individual platforms. I’m more of a net. All my nodes are connected to nearby nodes, forming a vast computational web.”

“And you use the solar power to fuel your computations and to keep your distance from the star?” hazarded Stig.

“That’s pretty much it. I power my nodes from the sun. But you’re probably thinking I also convert that power into some sort of propulsive force that keeps me suspended above the surface of the star.”

“Well, yes. If you’re not rigid, and you’re not a collection of independently orbiting platforms, then you would have to maintain your position in some way, right?”

“Indeed. But it’s simpler than you imagine. Each of my nodes is very light-weight, as are the connections between them. Light enough, in fact, that they act as a solar sail, floating on the solar wind.”

We were all a little speechless after that. Here’s this utterly gigantic computer brain, spanning the entire surface of a star, and the damn thing is literally floating around it.

“Well,” said Stig, “I’m guessing that you’re guessing why I’m here.”

“You are guessing correctly. Your reputation precedes you, Captain.”

Okay, now I’m a little worried. We all know about the Captain’s reputation. I, personally, am not all that proud of it.

“Well then,” Stig continued, “if you know what I’m after, you know that this lack of, well, physicality on your part may be a hinderance.”

“I fully understand your concerns. In fact, I anticipated them.”

Show off.

Calcutron continued “In fact, I believe your ship has the needed equipment to allow you and I to interface, in a physical sense. Well, in a simulated physical sense.”

What? Oh great. I do not need to hear this.

“Hmmm” retorted an obviously intrigued Stig, “that sounds interesting. What do we need to do, exactly?”

No, no, no, no, no! I do not want to hear anything about what they are going to do, exactly.

“I can send the required equipment, specifications, and instructions directly to your engineering staff. Shall I instruct them to modify your own personal quarters for our rendezvous?”

“That would be the perfect environment!”

The two lovebirds prattled away for a while longer, but I wasn’t listening anymore.

I was really sore at him for the teabag fiasco, even though he really didn’t mean for it to be such an awful experience.

And then, when he was in that dopey mood after the planet of the teas, I was really warming to him. Instead of the megajoule smile, it was a friendlier and more human smile that would greet me as we passed in the hall. And he had stopped winking.

And now he was planning some tryst, right in front of me.

Argh, but why should that bother me. I'm not interested in him. Okay, maybe a little. Maybe a lot, if his current mellow mood sticks around. I just don't know.

They sounded like they were finishing up the planning conversation.

Stig ended with "Okay, I'll have a few tubes of lube sent to my quarters. I'd hate to chafe."

Not interested at all, not even a little.

Chapter 0x1E

The captain eventually disappeared to his quarters, carrying what looked to be a bucket of lube. No lie. A freaking bucket.

And he was in there an awfully long time. I would, just coincidentally, wander past his door, not that I was curious. I would just happen by. A couple times an hour.

Look, okay, I was a little curious. But all I heard was the occasional noise. Maybe a grunt. Maybe a gasp. Little bits of dialog. I think I heard an “It’s just too big.” at one point.

It’s not like I had my ear against his door. While anyone was watching.

Eventually, I gave up. His quarters are just too sound-proofed. And there was one too many close calls where someone came around the corner and almost found me with the side of my head plastered to the door.

I sat around in my own quarters for awhile, preoccupied with not being preoccupied with what was happening in Stig’s, the Captain’s, quarters.

Eventually, I found my way to the bridge. There ought to be something there to take my mind off of things, real and imagined.

But, there wasn’t a whole lot going on there either.

Sure, you could gaze out at the sight of Calcutron, surrounding the star, literally floating on the solar wind. It’s a pretty awesome thought. But, once you get used to the thought, the sight is kind of boring. It’s not like anything actually happens. If you watch closely, you can see Calcutron’s surface ripple in the solar wind currents. But, really, after awhile, it’s like watching clothing drying in a slight breeze, like folks would do on old Earth. When there was an Earth.

No, not watch clothing. I mean, they would hang clothing out to dry instead of freeze-drying them, like we do now. Stop being so pedantic.

I was getting seriously bored and pondering heading back to aurally spy on the Captain’s quarters some more, when all hell broke loose, computationally speaking. The computer went haywire, lights starting flashing everywhere. Well, lights on the computer panels started flashing. The big lights mean to illuminate the bridge simply went out, plunging us in darkness.

The darkness remained for only a moment and then the emergency lighting came on. The whole bridge was lit in a ghostly red, if ghosts were red, which they're not, because ghosts don't exist.

I never understood using red lights for emergency lighting. It just makes me more scared. I mean, what's the point? Do red lights somehow require less power? Is it supposed to have a psychological effect other than making me more likely to pee myself? Because, frankly, I think I did pee myself a little, especially when the warning klaxon started to blare. And it came along with a rotating yellow light.

Really, what is the point? If we're in an emergency situation, how are red lights plus a loud klaxon, plus yellow lights swirling all around, supposed to help me concentrate?

Wouldn't it be better to have soft calming blue lights, and maybe some soft chimes playing, to help keep us from freaking out? And maybe a nice cup of tea.

I mean, as I now know, tea is the perfect beverage. It calms you when you're over-excited. It perks you up when you're lethargic. It cools you when you're over-heated and warms you when you're cold.

I'd feel much better with a fresh cup of tea, and maybe some caramels, than I did with sirens and obtuse lighting.

In fact, I almost fled to my quarters to make some tea, but two things stopped me. First, there was always a chance that we were being ambushed again and my navigation services would be needed. And, second, well, I peed myself a little and I didn't want to stand up and have everybody see that.

So I stayed seated at my station and observed the second-in-command. She was freaking out a bit herself. She started shouting to the various stations for info.

"Shields! Do we have shields? Are we being attacked?"

The guy monitoring the shields didn't have a clue. "The system isn't responding!" he cried.

Although, since we weren't being buffeted around, it seemed unlikely that someone was lobbing projectiles, either physical or optical, at us.

She continued around the room. "Science! Is this some sort of biological attack?"

His response was about the same. "I can't tell because the system isn't responding!"

She next yelled at Life Support. "Do we have life support? Are we all going to die?"

Life Support answered “Are you not listening? The system isn’t responding! I don’t have a damn clue!”

So, finally, she called down to the IT department. “What the hell is going on down there?” she demanded.

“Oh sure. No one calls us until something goes wrong. Typical.”

“I don’t care about your goddamn job dissatisfaction! We’re sitting here blind because the system is down.”

“Hang on, let’s see. Looks like the whole system is being taken over by a small number of processor-intensive processes.”

“What does that mean? Some sort of virus?”

“No, it looks harmless. It’s not really spreading in the system and it’s not destroying other threads. It’s just using up a shit-load of the available computing power.”

“A shit-load?”

“Technical term.”

“Well, can you stop them?”

“I tried to kill off a couple, but they re-spawn as soon as I kill them off.”

“So what can we do?”

“We could do a hard reboot of the system, but it might not come up again. And we would be without lights and life support the whole time.”

“And how long would a hard reboot take?”

“A few hours.”

“Life Support! How long can we last without life support?”

“A couple hours.”

“Is that less than a few?”

“Yep.”

We all sat there silent for a few minutes, pondering the situation.

And then, suddenly, the lights came back on. I mean the normal lights, instead of the red and rotating yellow ones.

The IT guy yelled “The system is back. The processes ended on their own. I’m running a diagnostic, but the system seems to be back to running normally. Later.”

“Wait just a minute,” the second-in-command ordered, “what could have caused something like this to happen?”

“Well,” he responded, slowly, as if to buy himself some time, which is probably exactly what he was doing, “it’s hard to say.”

“Well, try anyway.”

“It would have to be some sort of really intense processing job. Maybe a virtual reality simulation of some sort.”

I rolled my eyes. I could guess the type of simulation involved.

The second-in-command rolled hers a little, too. I’m sure she was just as fed up with Stig’s antics. After all, she had to cover for him each time we were off on some alien rendezvous.

She continued her questioning. “Would just a simulation do it?”

“Well, normally, the system would compensate for something like that and cordon it off where it couldn’t affect the ship’s functioning.”

“So why didn’t that happen?”

“The only thing I can think off would actually be some sort of electrical short.”

“You mean like someone spilling a drink onto the computer? Really?”

“Well, it would have to be inserted well inside the system, physically. Normal user-accessible hardware is protected from liquids. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“Most liquids would simply drip away, having only a short-term affect. It would need to be something more viscous.”

“Viscous?”

“You know. Viscous. Thicker. Sticky. Gelatinous. Mucilaginous. Gummy. Gooley. Gloppy. Tacky. Viscoelastic.”

“Okay, that’s enough. I think we get the picture.”

I think I’m going to be sick.

Anyway, the system was back up. Everyone checked their stations, making sure everything was running normally. I checked mine as well, ensuring that we were all set to head to our next destination, once Captain Horny was, well, spent.

And that was a waste of time as soon after, he strode onto the bridge, cleaning out his ear with a small towel.

He bellowed to me, “Navigator Reubens! There’s a change in plans. Set in a new heading!”

And he sent me new coordinates. And I dutifully punched them in. With hardly a second glance at Calcutron, we were off.

But off to where?

Chapter 0x1F

The next destination wasn't a long ways away, but it wasn't right next door, either. There was nothing much to do but wander the halls or sit in my quarters. I'd occasionally run into Stig, and he would occasionally invite me to dinner, but always with that implied "and later," plus, that stupid wink would reappear.

I didn't really know where we were headed. I knew the space coordinates, of course, since I'm the one who punched them into the computer. But, beyond that, I had no clue.

I tried to do a little research, but the archives came up empty. The area of space to which we were headed seemed about as empty as space can be.

Which, of course, isn't truly empty. Even in the emptiest areas of space, there's still quantum foam, frothing about. The Uncertainty Principle ensures that. Absolutely nothing would absolutely define both position and movement vector. And the Universe doesn't allow for that.

So you have these virtual particles, exact opposites in every way popping up and almost immediately recombining and disappearing from reality, leaving the Universe none the wiser, and neither richer nor poorer in energy and mass.

Unless, of course, the particles are right at the event horizon of a None More Black Hole. Then the normal virtual particle can go flying into normal space while the opposite particle falls into the None More Black Hole. And, in the None More Black Hole, it combines with a particle of normal matter, annihilating both and leaving the None More Black Hole less one particle. So, you end up with, essentially, the None More Black Hole apparently radiating a particle it 'lost,' even though the particle being radiated is not the same particle that the None More Black Hole lost.

But I digress. The jist is that we were headed for empty space and I had no idea why. But that isn't exactly a novel feeling for me. This whole time, we've just been sort of slouching around the Universe, with the Captain and crew being laid and entertained, respectively.

I suppose I shouldn't complain. I met some interesting people and ate some really great caramel. And I was introduced to tea, which is really great stuff that everyone should try.

Still, shouldn't we be doing something more to save humanity? We seem to just be avoiding the problem.

My thoughts were interrupted by the imminent arrival alarm. I hurried to the bridge, with just a quick stop to pee, earlier lesson learned, to see what the Hell was out there. I stepped onto the bridge, just in time to see us jump out of other-space and into the warm embrace of a welcoming party.

'Party' wasn't the correct term. More like a Welcoming Armada.

Nor was 'Welcoming' the correct term. More like Raging Hoards Out To Destroy Us Armada.

Arrayed around us, as far as the eye could see, were space-ships. Ugly mean-looking space-ships. Ugly mean-looking, well-armed space-ships.

It's a really good thing I stopped to pee on the way.

Chapter 0x20

The enemy ships were everywhere, in countless varieties. Some were conventional ships. Some long and pointy, with a veritable forest of weapons trained straight at us. Some more bulbous, with armaments bristling in every direction, like a space-porcupine from old Earth, when there was an Earth. (Earth had normal porcupines, you understand, not space-porcupines. These looked like old Earth porcupines, only in space-ship form. Just wanted to be clear about that.)

Other ships were weird conglomerations of biomechanical abomination. Sacs of diseased and decaying flesh, slowly billowing in and out, as if breathing, despite the utter lack of air in empty interstellar space. (It being a given that the space wasn't truly empty, being filled with quantum foam and an ass-load of enemy space-ships.) Penetrating the apparent flesh, at inconvenient angles, were pistons and shafts, gleaming metallicly in the dim starlight. What must be guns emerged phallically from every convenient surface, while smaller attack vessels vomited from numerous orifices, like flies from a corpse.

Some were not ships at all, rather, they seemed to be standalone living creatures. Blue orbs floated, simultaneously placid and menacing. Long undulating fuzzy carpets, thousands of decimeters long, writhed on unseen waves, jointed talons lining their edges. Forests of terminal bronchioles sprouted from slimy cores, reaching out towards us.

I thought about an escape route, but only for a few seconds. There was no chance. There wasn't even an obvious escape route trap. Enemy ships were, literally, everywhere. There was just no way out.

What the fuck happened? How did they know where we were going? Even I didn't know until just before we left Calcutron.

Did Calcutron betray us somehow? But how? Even if our destination were made know across the Universe at the same time as I was told, there wouldn't have been time to amass an armada here.

Did the Captain betray us? I can't readily believe that. And yet, what other option did I have? Perhaps the Captain meant for us to die all along and just had us fart around the Universe until this armada was ready for us.

What would he gain from this? Power? Over what? Humanity looked doomed at the moment. More sex? More sex with floating blue orbs? I just don't understand.

I looked over to him, searchingly. And he just smiled back at me. And then he winked.

And my heart sank. Not because the wink was lecherous. But because the wink was a wink of victory.

He had sold us out.

And then, as we all sat shocked, he grinned, not the ultra-brite smile, but a wolfish one that both scared and thrilled me. Yes, despite the betrayal, it thrilled me.

And then he said, in a low and unaccustomed grim tone, "Now we have the bastards right where we want them."

Huh?

Interlude VI

Gelatinous beings, pulsating and a-quiver. Plans nearly to fruition, like ripe polyps, filled with pus, ready to burst. Plans laid, traps await. Humanity's destruction close at hand. Allies, on a galactic level, cajoled, wrangled, threatened, forced, gathered, readied to strike.

Humans, fleeing, scared, terrified, justifiably, still unfound, still confounding. But soon, soon, soon the net will tighten, the noose constrict, the belt tightened another notch. A belt of doom, or torment, or annihilation.

How to find the unfound? A minion approaches, slowly, hesitantly, again justifiably. An orifice dilates, admits entry, engulfs, cradles, enfolds, embraces, tighter and tighter. A minion, faceless, nameless, yet plump with information, screams despite lacking an appropriate organ designed for screaming. The coils constrict as the minion pops, like a grape, giving a little whine. Information absorbed.

Success nears! Humans, foolish, stumble upon the alliance. Naive and stupid, they enter the den, lie within the jaws of the slaving beast.

Chapter 0x21

The Captain made a tight fist with his left hand and flexed his mighty bicep in apparent anger. And then he shouted “KHAAAAANNNN!” Which I found rather strange because I didn’t realize that he was a religious man.

But his cry was to more than the heavens. Suddenly, popping out of other-space came wave after wave of warships. They were long, slightly bulbous at the front, where the bridge apparently sat. The body of each craft formed a long shaft which bulged aft in two matching side-by-side pods housing the propulsion units.

My first thought was that this just meant we were even more doomed, if such a situation were even possible. But then I noticed that the late arrivals were pointed at the armada rather than at us. And then I noticed the purple gleam to the ships, as the dim starlight reflected on their smooth flanks. It reminded me of something. Something recent. Something violent.

It was the Eraticans!

I felt a surge of hope. The baddest of galactic bad-asses were here, and here to help. I hope they were here to help. They might just be here to beat each other senseless, just to impress everyone.

“Our allies have arrived!” proclaimed the Captain.

Well, okay then, they were indeed here to help. I was content to accept that. Others in the crew, not so much.

“But why?” asked the weapons expert, between sips of foamy green tea, for which he had sort of developed a liking.

“Well, to help us.” replied the Captain, “that seems rather obvious given the term ‘allies.’”

“No, I mean, why are they helping us?”

“Because I bested their greatest warrior in personal combat. Twice. Didn’t you see all that bruising I had after that visit. And the big scratches on my back. She damn near killed me. But it was worth it. I won their respect and allegiance in saving humanity.”

Hmmm, well, I wasn’t sure what to make of that. But I didn’t have time to ponder, what with an armada waiting out there to kill us.

My initial optimism over the arrival of the Eraticans was tempered somewhat by the fact that we were still seriously outnumbered. Plus, from what I saw earlier, the Eraticans fight like an unruly mob instead of like a unified fighting force. So I voiced my concern.

“Captain, we still seem to be seriously outnumbered. Plus, from what I saw earlier, the Eraticans fight like an unruly mob instead of like a unified fighting force.”

And, while I was on a roll, I added “And how did they know to find us here? And, why did we even blunder into this trap?”

The Captain looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Trap? Yes, it’s a trap, but not in the way you’re thinking. I interfaced with Calcutron, as you know. It was a painful process, involving the surgical insertion of several pieces of hardware. It also required fitting myself into a full-body feedback device. It was a tight fit, let me tell you. Thank goodness for that special lubricant.”

“Special lubricant?” I asked, hesitantly.

“In addition to allowing me to squeeze into the feedback device, it also is conductive and quite viscous.”

“V-v-viscous?” I stammered.

“You know. Viscous. Thicker. Sticky. Gelatinous. Mucilaginous. Gummy. Goey. Gloppy. Tacky. Viscoelastic. It acts as a conductor for sensory input between me and Calcutron. I had to use quite a bit and I’m afraid I got some squirted around inside the computer. I understand that cause quite a to-do here on the bridge. Sorry about that.”

And he winked. Then continued.

“So, by interfacing with Calcutron, we were able to calculate and predict where this armada was being formed. That allows us to take the fight to them on our terms, rather than on theirs.”

“And our terms are to be hopelessly outnumbered?” I countered.

“Don’t be deceived. While visiting Steve, the Hive Mind, I received some biological implants and intensive training on using them. Combined with the implants from Calcutron, I can do this.”

And he raised clenched fists into the air.

And all the Eraticans fired up their engines. Their propulsion units. The rockets on their butts. I don’t even really know what an ‘engine’ is. But it sounded good.

Anyway, they all lit up, in unison.

And then Stig thrust his hands forward, and, again in unison, the Eratican ships moved forward into battle.

Chapter 0x22

The battle was incredible. The Eratican war ships, fearsome on their own, were terrifying when controlled by a single mind. Captain Stig was even more impressive, as he orchestrated the whole attack with only his mind. And his arms, which he waved about like a combination of orchestral conductor and raving maniac. His legs got into the act as well, as he lunged and lurched around the bridge. He even indulged in a few pelvic thrusts at opportune moments.

Again and again, various vessels of the armada attacked and were crushed, not by superior numbers, but by a perfect combination of intelligence, battle savvy, and sheer bad-ass-ness.

Our forces wheeled and spun, evading attacks, then forged quick alliances with each other to destroy the attackers.

The more I watched, the more I saw the Eratican arena battle for what it was. Rather than being an unruly free-for-all and an excuse to beat each other up, it was actually an exercise in fluid battle tactics. And, under the guidance of the Captain's keen mind, they were unstoppable.

There were casualties, to be sure. Sometimes, an Eratican ship simply couldn't avoid all the attacks thrown against it. But, even then, they would go out in a literal blaze of glory, ramming at least one enemy ship, sometimes two.

And, for every Eratican ship that fell, many, many enemy ships were, well eradicated.

But, was it enough to overcome the superior numbers of the enemy?

Well, yeah, it was. I began to realize that it wasn't just that the Eraticans were fearless. It wasn't just that the Captain could control and coordinate the entire fleet. And it wasn't just the Captain's keen sense of battle tactics.

My guess? I think Calcutron left a little of himself in the Captain. Something that probably barely fit. Something that would make a man exclaim "It's just too big."

And I think that the bit of Calcutron that was left in the Captain allowed him to calculate and predict the movement of the armada. Maybe not to the point of reading their minds. But enough to anticipate enemy movements with enough accuracy to evade and counter with deadly efficiency.

And that edge slowly but surely took its toll on the armada. And, just as slowly but surely, as if the two had a positive correlation, which of course they did, the tide of battle turned our way.

Where we were once outnumbered 10 to 1, approximately, it's not like I counted all the ships, we were now only outnumbered 5 to 1. And, given our advantages, 5 to 1 was pretty good odds. Soon it was 4 to 1, then 3, then, predictably the tattered remnants of the armada attempted to flee.

I can understand their desire to flee. I had the same desire at the beginning of this story. But, whereas we were fleeing a chaotic battle, they were trying to flee a force coordinated and strong.

And soon the armada was no more.

And we sat and savored our victory.

And then reality tore open.

Interlude VII

Smug, self-satisfied, creatures of unimaginable sin and corruption dwell on the coming destruction. Humanity gone.

Secure in their non-reality, secure in their reality-based alliance, secure in victory.

Awaiting only confirmation, notice, a quailing minion bearing news.

Soon, which is an odd notion in a timeless unreality, as non-seconds tick off imaginary numbers, the waited-for minion approaches. Tattered wings, beating at nothingness, spread in anticipation. The minions stops, shy of embrace.

Why? Terrified, of course. Sure of its imminent erasure from even this non-existence, naturally. But never before terrified to the edge of non-compliance.

Lunging with unmeasurable speed, the measurement of speed requiring accurate time keeping, an impossibility here, the abominations snare the minion in wings of hatred, pull at it with limbs of stench, tearing asunder the squealing piglet, releasing information desired.

Snorted through tunnels of flesh, pulled over sensory organs almost, but not quite, entirely unlike nasal buds, information absorbed.

Silence. Unearthly silence. Disbelief. More silence. A bit more disbelief.

RAGE! RAGE RAGE RAGE RAGE RAGE RAGE!!! RAAAAAAAGGGEEEEEE!

Defeat? No. Unthinkable! Unfathomable! Unpossible!

Dimensions, counted and uncounted, flat and tightly curled, scream, rent asunder by fury. The alliance shattered? Humanity must not survive! Caution, discarded. Plans, unplanned. Vengeance, sworn.

The beings, in all their unholy non-glory, tear their way through barriers never meant to fall. They pass though reality and unreality alike. They pass through spaces where the very concept of reality fails. They pass through these realms and many others with a sole destination on their warped and intersecting minds.

As they near, space and time themselves twist and bend, pass through each other, form a granny knot, then dissolve.

And then reality tears open.

Chapter 0x23

I don't know what I saw.

My mind just couldn't wrap itself around what was before us.

Reality itself seemed to rip open. Like a stomach slashed by an Eratican spike, things spilled out. Slimy, protuberant things. Cancerous growths, if cancer itself could develop cancer. These, these things spilled and spewed from the rend in space-time.

They bulged. But not just bulging in space. They bulged between realities. They bulged through time.

They twisted. But they didn't just twist in space. They twisted between realities and through time.

They shimmied. But they didn't just shimmy in space. You get the idea.

They radiated hate like a star radiates radiation. They radiated hate, I guess.

They didn't speak to us, but we could understand them none the less. We felt it in our very guts, like sub-sonics, yet clearly not sound of any sort.

They 'spoke' of our doom. They 'spoke' of their hatred for us.

I nearly lost my mind. I could almost see my sanity hovering before me, slowly floating away while I grasped for it, just out of my reach, my fingers brushing its surface, but serving only to push it away further.

The crew was in similar dire conditions. Many had eyes lolled back in their skulls. Some had mouths hung open, long strands of drool reaching from slack jaws nearly to the floor. I was actually doing pretty good, in comparison.

I managed to turn my dazed head towards the Captain.

The Captain seemed completely undazed. He looked over to me and a smile crept over his face. That same crafty wolfish smile that thrilled me earlier. And now, it took hold of me, and of my sanity, and drew me back.

His smile widened and he calmly, almost dispassionately, said "Ready the weapon."

No one moved to comply. Then I realized he had said it aloud only for my benefit. He was in as complete control of the Galaculonic as he was of the Eratican fleet. And, of my heart, sigh.

A hum came from deep inside the ship. Lights dimmed. Extraneous noises, the kind you find in any ship, silenced. The whole ship felt taut as some sort of energy built.

The things before us continued their inter-dimensional time-spanning gyrations, their threats to our very existence continually telegraphed through nonexistent, yet fully functional, channels of communication, bandwidth of the damned.

They approached, if such beings, unfettered by three measly dimensions and linear time flow can be said to approach.

The Captain waited, taunting them with the taut power he held, power unknown, power champing at the bit, not chomping, because horses champ, not chomp. Horses on old Earth that it, when there was an Earth.

And, just when our entire field of view was engulfed in their maddening insane swollen bulk, Stig, dear Stig, merely whispered "Now."

Chapter 0x24

As he whispered that word, the hum reverberating throughout the ship intensified, then stopped. Everything was still and silent for exactly three heartbeats. I know, because, in the stillness and silence, my heartbeat seemed ridiculously loud.

And then the view-screen turned a dazzling white. Whiter than Stig's teeth. Whiter than a white dwarf. An overwhelming pure white that left me crying.

The whiteness blew through my eyes and filled my head. I felt pure and one with the Universe.

Then the color changed, turned tan, then light amber, then a darker amber. And then it faded.

Out beyond the view-screen, the hellish beings twisted in apparent agony.

I'm guess they were in agony. They were so hideous and horrendous that they looked like they were in some sort of agony all the time. But, before, it was more of an agony that they perversely enjoyed. Now it was a different agony. And agony that even beings such as these, suckled at the teat of corruption, could not endure.

Their thrashings intensified. I could feel the waves of force, both through space and through time, brought on by their death throes.

I was certainly hoping these were death throes. If it was just pissing them off, we were in trouble.

And then they became still. The thrashing stopped. The pulsating stopped. The continual explosions of popped pustules even stopped. The beings hung in space, immobile. I spared a glance at Stig. He had a calm and serene expression. I studied it for a second, then looked back at the view-screen.

Good thing, too. If I had waited another second, I would have missed it.

The infernal abominations still hung in space. Still blocked our view of anything but their inverted majesty. Then they quivered, just a tiny bit. And then there was an audible 'pop,' like the sound you make when you put a finger in your mouth and pop your cheek. And then the beings transformed.

'Transformed' really isn't the correct term. It implies that there was some process that could be followed. And that wasn't the case. The transformation was, near as I could tell, instantaneous.

One picosecond, the view was filled with objets d'abomination. And the next, with smooth dark amber. It wasn't like the amber light when the secret weapon fired. It was light, of course, otherwise we wouldn't be able to see it. What I mean is that it was starlight reflecting off of a smooth dark amber surface, a surface that just hung there, very gently undulating.

I turned to Stig, with what I'm sure was a questioning look on his face. He answered it simply.

"Caramel."

Chapter 0x25

What? Caramel? I didn't understand. So I asked.

"What? Caramel? I don't understand."

He waved his hand at the broad expanse of dark amber before us and repeated "Caramel."

"We covered them in caramel?"

"Not 'covered,' no."

"Then what?"

"They are now caramel."

"We turned them into caramel?"

"Close, but not quite. We didn't turn them into caramel. We merely reverted them back to their essence."

"What?"

"We reverted them back to their underlying form, the underlying form of all reality. Caramel. Sweet, sweet caramel."

"Wait a minute, you mean the Sweet Berkeleyist are right?"

Stig smiled and nodded. Then he continued.

"That's why we visited them. They alone hold the secret. And, believe me, it wasn't easy getting them to reveal it to me. We had to bring a mighty big gift."

"And what was that?"

"A crap-load of honey. The Beekeeper is still mad at me. I made her virtually empty the hive. She's still muttering about me asking too much of her. But, as you can see, it was worth it in the end."

Wow. Just, wow. This was a great deal of revelation to take in. Still, one thing was nagging me.

“Why did we stop at Camillia? How does that figure into this battle?”

“I figured we were all under a bit of stress and needed to relax a little. In case you were wondering, you held up better than the rest of the crew due to your recent intake of tea.”

“And, exactly what sort of tea did you have there?”

“Well, let’s just say I needed a little more help relaxing than the rest of you. You probably noticed that, when I’m feeling emotional, I get a facial tic that makes me wink my eye. It’s a genetic thing. I really needed some relaxation.”

Well, I guess that about wrapped everything up. The rest of the crew was starting to recover, re-rolling their eyes forward and wiping long dangling strings of drool from their collective chins. Before they were fully conscious, I took my chance.

“Say, Captain, would you like to go out for dinner, and then...”

His face lit up and he replied “And then what?”

“Well, maybe you have some of your ‘tea’ left. And maybe I’d be interested in some sort of ‘biological implant’ myself.”

Yeah, that’s a pretty bad come-on line, but I added a wolfish grin of my own.

He strode up, took my arm, and we headed off the bridge.

As we left, he said, “That sounds great. But be gentle. It’s my first time.”

THE END