

### *Follow the Manual*

Sotal lounged on his hard, white plastic survival seat. The fixed seating formed a crude semicircle in the center of the rectangular ship. As the sole human in the deep space life-craft, he acted unaffected by the dire circumstances. He was the last one to rush aboard right before the escape pod jetted away from the dying space ferry, but he had no qualms claiming one of the coveted end seats.

Four other creatures from varying planets sat, squatted, or perched in their chairs like stiffened cadavers at an assimilation meeting to the Great Unknown. Thirteen hours after egress, the group, about as odd as most humans still stuck on Earth could ever imagine, needed space from one another, lots of it. However, Sotal preferred aliens to his own kind, but in this scenario, he wished for solitary confinement in his own death pod.

Everyone had donned the emergency language decoders as stipulated by the survival guide except Sotal. When confronted by the others about it, he argued that the universal language was English, and a voice decoder would muck up his vernacular and accent. Then he said to no one in particular, “Besides, the damn things go on the fritz more often than a Tybexiat gets lost

in the high jungle deserts on its colonial planets.”

Sotal’s hatred for riding the space ferries had built up from too many long, mind-numbing trips on the oldest ships in the cosmic fleet. His likeliest demise loomed over him and added to his abhorrence. Although his anger simmered under the surface like the ever-increasing agitation of extra days of transit because of breakdowns, which occurred during every single trip. Foretelling his own fate infuriated him, yet becoming another casualty in the aging universal ferry system made drifting in the metal coffin fitting, if nothing else.

The sterile, cramped vessel continued to drift farther away from the dying monstrosity of a dilapidated ferry and deeper into space towards black nothingness. Locators to detect a life sustaining planet, outpost, or vessel remained soundless after the gadgets whirred to life when the life-craft rocketed away from the mother ship with less than minutes to spare. Multiple homing beacons beeped in solemn steady patterns and the noises, which were boisterous and obtrusive at first, went unnoticed. If a collective hope ever existed, it had dissipated within three hours after evacuation.

“There’re no life supporting planets or outposts anywhere around here.” A blue-skin, reptile-like beast named Xiggle darted six eyes around, each one focused on a different survivor. The left-over eyes remained fixed on the small portal-window closest to him.

Sotal grimaced. “Yeah, thanks for saying what should’ve gone unsaid. Go ahead, blurt the shipping lanes are at least two light years away as well.”

“It’s imperative we finish taking stock of the supplies and devise a plan.” A squat, muscular organism with octopi-like tentacles called Togla wiggled two of them at the survival supplies. Hours ago, Togla and Xiggle piled boxes and crates on the raised metallic area in front of the seats. Each hard-shell box and polycarbonate crate were marked with bold, black stenciled

letters denoting the contents. Togla continued his task of inspecting and recording each item.

“Why should we even bother?” A furry, feathered creature fluffed up the downy fuzz along her neckline as she shook her beaked head. She’d refused to give her name, which irked Sotal. He kept referring to her as squirrel-bird, and she scoffed when he first used the moniker. The other survivors gaped at him with blank stares every time he uttered the term, even though it was a proper account of her appearance.

“I’ve studied the lifesaving manual.” Togla brandished the orange manual like it might save their asses. “Quantifying our provisions, equipment, and devising a lifesaving strategy will help focus our minds on things other than...”

“I’m not even supposed to be here.” A half sized being, similar in shape and size to the aliens from Area 51, stared straight ahead; his angular eyes were unfocused and vacant. He had introduced himself as Oantigal but told everyone to call him Corpse.

“Okay, Corpse. I’ll bite. What in the hell are you talking about?” Sotal asked while he shook his head at Togla, who dug through the supplies with vigor, eight wiry tentacles in frenzied action.

“They bumped me from first class on the Lunar Legacy, the cruise liner to the stars for the stars, because the President of Yerez Twelve went on vacation at the last moment. Random selection, my Reptoids.”

“Damn politicians, eh?” Sotal smirked and winked at him.

Togla’s voiced drifted around the interior, “Forty thousand food pills, a hundred thousand water alternative discs, one hundred solar flares, sixteen atmosphere altering masks, one size fits all, three laser knives, ten...”

“For the love of all things interstellar and microcosmic Togla, shut up.” Sotal stood up

and kicked a carton marked Ration Pills. The box shot across the deck and bounced off Togla's stout, hard-shelled leg. Togla snarled and glared at Sotal.

“He’s right, Sotal.” Squirrel-bird jumped off of her perch on the seat’s back and paced the small confines of the pod. “We might as well go through the actions.”

“Why squirrel-bird? Xiggle called it. This is a lifeless quadrant. We might as well be drifting in the galactic waste-area of the Nustcallis expanse. And it’s go through the *motions*.”

“The manual says we must remain positive and focused, or we’ll perish.” Togla quit glaring at Sotal and refocused on the supplies. “Does anyone know the purpose of this odd device?” He brandished a black case opened to reveal its contents and glanced around at the others like an enthusiastic pupil ready to learn an unknown fact.

“You’re holding a replica forty-four magnum semi-automatic handgun with a modified clip capable of holding, hmm,” Sotal leaned over and gave the weapon a closer inspection, “fifteen—nope, sixteen bullets. There’s six extra clips and at least ten boxes of ammo to boot.”

Togla’s face contorted like he’d taken a sip of water from a defective urine recycler. “Why’s an old Earth gun part of the survival gear?”

Sotal sat down, adjusted into his former slouch, and chuckled. “Three reasons. One, Corpulends, the ancient Earth corporation which designed and created their own planet to outfit the solar systems with anything someone or something’s willing to purchase—cutting corners is part of their business model—built the crap-ass ferry that took an explosive dump on us. Two, in case we need to calm down a fellow survivor who goes a little deep-space crazy and tries to kill the rest of us by prying open one of the emergency doors or ripping us to shreds.” Sotal yawned and stretched before giving his last reason. “Three, to have the means of ending our doomed lives on our own terms.”

“What do you mean, ending our doomed lives on our own terms?” One of Togla’s tentacles touched the stubbed, chin-like nub on his face.

“For a brilliant Qundestrian you’re pretty slow. It means you put a bullet in your brain, hearts, or wherever it will kill you because some other deaths we’re facing are pretty brutal or worse yet, drawn out.”

“Oh.” Togla’s entire body slumped. “Why not a Exoparabolic Photon Reciprocator?”

“Damn, I wish you were kidding. An EPR will take off your head and half the life-craft with it, much to the chagrin of the other dumbass survivors who’re too chicken to take the bold way out.” Sotal shook his head and slanted a grin at Xiggle, who still had at least one eye trained on him. Xiggle practiced winking as if doing it on purpose was a novelty.

Togla nodded. “Ah. What truth.”

“As the token human, its best if I wield an equalizer of such magnitude.” Togla hesitated. “C’mon, c’mon. Hand me the damn thing before you blow your foot—um, claw off.” Sotal ran his hand along the armrest as if he couldn’t care less about the gun.

“You skeeves have no idea what first class on the LL is like. The food, the drink, the spectacular entertainment, its eminent guests... this is so unfair.”

“Damn Corpse are you going to cry? Well, there’ll be plenty of time for it in the hours or days to come. Wait a nanoblip, do you even have tear ducts?” Sotal hefted the gun and paid no attention to his companions.

“Would it kill you to go easy on him, Sotal? He was being dramatic when he told us to call him Corpse.” In the last few hours Xiggle’s speech decoder started malfunctioning and the tininess made his words whinier.

“He said to call him Corpse, and I’m just trying to be civil. You’ve got to get something

straight; I won't hide behind falsehoods and niceties in my final days of existence."

"Humans. Most of your kind preaches civility yet finding a civil one you of anywhere in the galaxies is impossible." Squirrel-bird stopped pacing and her beak chattered as she glowered at Sotal. "Encountering a hypocrite? Well, that's quite easy to do."

"Oh, I can be plenty civil, but circumstances like these make civility dubious." He racked the gun's slide, unaffected by her clacking her sharp beak in his direction. "Xiggle, I'm uncertain why I care, but why were you on the Neb III?"

"I'm returning from a trip to the great cosmic wonder known as the fluxing Star Bridge. Everyone should visit the tenth wonder of the Ungtson galaxy in their lifetime. It's quite spectacular, a hatchling's dream come to fruit."

"Aw, how nice. By the way you mean come to *fruition*." Sotal stabbed a finger at Togla. "What about you, Qund?"

Togla tensed up as if he was ready to spring at Sotal, but after a few moments of deep breathing, he relaxed. "The manual says normal conversation can ease irrepressible tension." He took another breath. "I'm returning to the University on Mafleck Prime after a nice long holiday on my home planet. I teach Cosmic Physics and the Universal Laws of Mathematics."

"I guess the emergency book of lies has some truth in it and the rest is, well, shocking." Sotal gave a half nod to squirrel-bird. "What about you?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." She resumed pacing and stuck her head further up in the air as she passed behind Sotal's seat.

Sotal scoffed. "How appropriate, our nameless companion becomes an even greater mystery."

"I've yet to meet many Earthlings on these ancient space ferries. Why were you on

board?” Corpse turned his fiery gaze on Sotal.

Sotal cringed. “I’m glad you asked me, Xiggle. I set sail on that piece of junk boat with the rest of you because...”

A sudden impact to the craft cut off Sotal’s words. The vessel shook, and the lights flickered off and on. When the movements and eerie light display became prolonged, the quietness among them became insufferable. Worry and concern darted from face to face as the tremors and flashing continue, except for Sotal who’s focus became intent on the forward entrance.

Togla’s apprehension receded before everyone else. “Another life-craft auto coupled to ours. The escape pods link up if they drift within a certain range of each other. The larger mass is easier to spot and detect by passing ships.”

Togla nodded his head at the lifesaving manual on top of the stack of supplies when squirrel-bird made a gesture, more reminiscent of squirrels than birds, that questioned his information.

“Once the vessels attach, we can move back and forth between them.” Sotal’s unease increased as he spoke.

“That’s right.” Togla wheezed before finishing. “The manual depicts movement between pods as a necessary safeguard that can increase our chance for survival. The doors will interlock at any moment. Air pressure will release into the small locking chamber when the connection is complete and allow for safe passage.”

“Some good news.” Sotal sighed, “and some bad.”

“Why bad?” Xiggle trained his eyes on Sotal.

The air pressure whooshed and hissed, cutting off conversation for over a minute. Soon,

the entire group gaped at Sotal, waiting for the answer. Even though the jarring had stopped, Squirrel-bird remained motionless with her head lowered, eyes narrowed.

Sotal moved to the edge of his seat. “What if the survivors in the additional craft are less sociable than us? This trying ordeal or distasteful living conditions could’ve put one of them in a foul mood. Hell, maybe the whole pod’s gone savage.”

“Oh. Yeah, they could be quite hostile by now. Xiggle's skin color flashed from pale blue to bright orangish green as he processed the idea. The previous times his chameleon-like skin changed hue had been more subtle compared to this longer, more drastic coloring.

“What should we do? Barricade the door?” Togla’s tentacles waved a crazed dance as he searched their faces.

“Nah. Let’s wait and see what happens. Can anyone get a glimpse inside the other craft?” Sotal remained seated as he fired off the question. The others got up or moved to peer through the portal-windows.

“I’d like to report otherwise, but something disturbing has taken place inside that craft.” Corpse spoke the words in his calm monotone.

“Corpse, is there any chance you want to elaborate?” Sotal licked his lips. His eyes remained fixed on the entry.

“The portal-window has a film of green, luminescent blood and pieces of flesh stuck to it.”

Sotal wished his instincts were more fallible. “Are you sure?”

Corpse gave an exasperated shrug. “Well, it’s not another mandatory sushi fight on the Legacy.”

A loud rush of air erupted as the small docking chamber finished equalizing in pressure.



The survivors jumped from the noise except Sotal. He raised and aimed the magnum in a flash of skilled movement. For many moments, the craft's interior remained silent and motionless. An unnatural scratching noise from the other side of the thick steel hatch grew louder.

When the release handle of the hatch moved, Togla sucked in a gasp of air through his modified gill like breathing ports. Xiggle squinted at the door with greater concern in half his eyes than the rest. Squirrel-bird and Corpse acted like they were in an Earth doctor's waiting room in desperate need of more alien-centric magazines and chairs.

Corpse moved away from the bulkhead. "We should barricade the door."

"I'll make a real corpse outta you before you can do your best E.T. waddle anywhere near that hatch."

"We're just going to sit here like Dortmanders in a Gulluck?" Xiggle snaked his arms to emphasize the question.

"Yeah, whatever the heck that means." Sotal gritted his teeth and eased off his seat for a steadier position.

The hatch sprung open and another creature like squirrel-bird burst into their escape pod. Its eyes, locked in primordial attack mode, found Sotal and it lunged ahead. Four thundering shots rang out from the magnum. Three bullets ripped into the alien's upper chest, but the last shot strayed. It hit the portal-window next to Togla's head, ricocheted and caught Xiggle in his sinewy shoulder.

Momentum carried the large brute forward as it fell upon the floor. The hulking form slid across the deck until it came to a rest a foot away from Sotal's boot. An iridescent color of wet pumice trickled down Xiggle's arm as he howled in pain. The small indentation in the portal's glassy, impenetrable material held Togla's gaze, his mouth agape.

Sotal barked out commands. “Corpse go check out the other pod and find out if anything else in a foul mood is going to surprise us. Squirrel-bird pull one of the med kits of the bulkhead and start tending to Xiggle. Togla if Corpse gives the all clear help him haul the body back to the other craft and close those hatches. Make sure squirrel-bird’s brethren is deader than a quazar before you get close enough to grab him.”

“Who put you in charge?” Corpse scowled at Sotal, his former sullenness gone.

“Do you want to argue with the guy who’s got the big gun?” Sotal brandished the forty five and nodded towards the dead squirrel-bird.

Corpse narrowed his eyes and spoke even softer. “That’s a negative.”

“Good idea. Now get to the damn pod and make sure there’s no more threat.”

Corpse got up and rushed to the door, moving a lot faster than expected. He took a moment to collect himself and then ducked his long narrow head around the open hatches to scan the interior. Sotal stepped forward and took up a position behind his bait man. He waited to let loose another round of bullets. Togla prodded and poked the lifeless body as if it was a specimen being dissected in Cosmicopolitan Biology Class. Anguished cries of pain came from Xiggle as squirrel-bird worked on his injured arm.

“There’re a lot of dead bodies in there and no movement. Maybe upwards of six, it’s hard to tell.” Corpse relayed the dire news with the same irritating calmness as before.

“Oh, man. Any chance they’re playing possum?” Sotal lowered the weapon as he peered past Corpse to check out the carnage.

“The survivors in there are dead. What’s a pause some?” Corpse sauntered over to help Togla with the hulking body.

“Forget I said the word. Squirrel-bird you and the dead bastard were compatriots.” Sotal

stared at her and waited for an explanation.

Squirrel-bird's head twisted and shuddered like an agitated parrot. "Wait a minute. I'd never do anything to..."

"I doubt you've heard the phrase, but I'm not about to have the fox guarding the henhouse." Sotal gave her a glib smile. "You'll be enjoying the rest of this spectacular space outing in the gorier pod."

"I'm not going into a blood-soaked craft, alone. You'll have to kill me before I go in there."

"Lady, I avoid giving propositions for a reason." Sotal pointed the gun at the other pod. "If we must add an extra body to the pile that's up to you, but I'd prefer to do it with less flash and bang. Plus, there's a lot more food for you in the other pod than there is in this one."

"C'mon Sotal, please let her stay with us, it's horrible in there." Togla followed Corpse out of the grislier craft.

"Do you want to end up like those unlucky critters?"

"No, but she seems..."

Sotal smirked and cut off his words. "I'm sure the dead guy acted all stellar and starry when they first evacuated."

"Our males are often less tolerant in extreme situations." Squirrel-bird motioned to the dead guy.

Sotal squinted. "Explain that to your new companions, maybe they'll listen better than I do."

"Yuck, he's been eating the bodies." Corpse squealed the first few words, but his flat tone returned when he noticed the others were gawping at him.

Sotal cringed and then recovered before any of them witnessed his reaction; the carnage continued to hold their attention. “Aw shit, I was kidding about having a large food cache.”

Togla nodded, childlike. “Nope. He munched on most of ‘em, no doubt about it.”

“It’s well known the species will eat anything or anyone to survive.” Sotal waved the gun around. “Come to think of it squirrel-bird, have you taken any of your food pills?”

“Our systems won’t allow us to ingest anything other than unprocessed tissue, bone, and native foliage. A natural defense mechanism to avoid the impurities found outside our home planets.” Her beak chattered, but otherwise remained motionless as she finished wrapping Xiggle’s arm with a large close-knit surgical cloth.

“Thanks for the zoology lesson. What did you plan on eating during this fabulous excursion since nobody knows what’s in those awful ration pills?” Sotal waved the magnum around as if it were more natural than his hand.

“I’m trying not to think about it.” She stretched her neck.

“That’s some damn good information you should’ve shared with the rest of us when we first jettisoned.” Sotal retrained the gun on her.

“Well, my mind is on more important things.” One of her paws smoothed an area on her fuzzy stomach. “I’m gravid with twins.”

“You’re pregnant?” Sotal slapped his forehead. “That’s great... things keep getting better, if escalating means better.”

“Aw, congratulations.” Togla and Xiggle crooned.

“Thanks guys.”

“You’re going in the other pod, right now.” Sotal stepped back into his shooting stance.

“Sweet iridium, show some mercy, she’s expecting.” Xiggle’s tinny voice crackled

through the pod as Squirrel-bird moved backwards until her long feathered tail pressed against the bulkhead.

Sotal closed his eyes. “When it comes down to her children’s survival or yours, what do you think will win?”

Xiggle’s eyes widened. “Oh. That’s a valid point.”

“Listen I can go a long time without food if I stay hydrated.” Squirrel-bird pointed to the boxes of provisions and said, “we’ve got plenty of water discs.”

Sotal snorted. “Water alternative discs trick the body into recycling water back into the blood stream, but that’s sustainable for three to four weeks at most. We lose tiny amounts of water every thirty hours, give or take depending on the species, number sweat glands, and natural water retention. We must find water soon or we’re all going to die.”

“If that’s true, then why’re there so many discs?” Togla stepped closer to the supplies while he kept a watchful gaze on Sotal.

Sotal rolled his eyes. “Think about it genius.”

“To give us a false sense that our water is almost endless.”

“A professor, huh?” Sotal eased his stance, but kept the weapon trained on his target.

“Yes.” Togla shrugged and his voice cracked, “None of this is my strong suit.”

“Well, maybe you can start working on how to get our asses closer to the shipping lanes. Squirrel-bird get moving a little quicker. My finger’s getting twitchy.”

Togla stood taller and smiled. “That’s a great idea.”

“Can you do it?” Corpse looked as if he might kiss Togla.

“Perhaps. A little speed, velocity, direction, and distance calculations—nothing to it.”

Togla braved passing in front of Sotal to retrieve the lifesaving manual. He kept glancing at

Squirrel-bird as she eased her way towards the other pod.

“Do you know any of that information?” Xiggle moved to his chair and sat down, fidgeting with the wrap around his arm.

“No, but the manual has an entire section on how to figure it all out using the pod’s basic systems.” Togla’s eyes twinkled. “I’ll have it figured out before you can say nebular anamorphic phototroph dissuasion.”

“How do you know so much about ferries, rescue pods and where to put bullets into my kind?” Squirrel-bird reached the interlock chamber. “We’re not an easy species to kill.”

“I’m glad you asked me that and I’m also grateful you’re cooperating. I set sail on those buckets o’ rust more than I care to remember because...”

The pods jolted and shook, knocking everyone off their feet. The stack of supplies became missile hazards, sliding and soaring in all directions. Sotal’s head and shoulder slammed against the bulkhead. The magnum flew out of his hand and slid across the deck, coming to rest near Corpse’s three-toed foot. He snatched up the gun and directed it at Sotal before anyone else could regain their feet, talons, or claws.

“Damn, more debris, but that’s gotta be the last of it.” Sotal got up off his hands and knees to find the gun barrel jutting at him. “Hey, whoa, why are you aiming the mag at me?”

“You’re the one going into the pod with the dead bodies. We’ll make do without a tyrannical leader in this one.” The enormous gun in his undersized hand was too comical.

Sotal snickered through his scowl, which confused most of them, as did raising his hands in the air. “You’re touched in the head.”

“No, I’m saner than any human I’ve ever met.” Corpse’s face remained cold. “Get in the other craft before...”

Sotal lowered his voice. “You’re making a big mistake.”

Corpse chuckled. “I know your type. We’ll be much better off without you.”

“Do you even know how to shoot...”

Another loud crack from the weapon echoed through the craft and the others, including Sotal flinched. The bullet missed him by a few inches. If he had moved the wrong way, his banishment would’ve been as a dead man. He glowered at Corpse as he made his way into the other pod. Sotal slammed the door with a loud bang. He took a few moments to gather himself before turning to face the mess.

He stepped closer to the carnage, sighed, and began digging through the body parts. Before long, the viscous blood of six alien life forms saturated his pants and sleeves. After he pulled the last body over onto its side, he found what he’d been searching hard to find.

Sotal shook the body fluids off his hands and picked up the hard-shell case labeled survival weapon. He loaded the replica magnum with a full clip and placed it into the back of his pants. After a quick breather, he went to work trying to make the door inoperable. After toiling for ten minutes, he gave up the lost cause. Goddamned fail-safe doors were dumb. Keeping one eye open at all times was going to make his isolation a bigger bitch.

To reclaim as much space inside the craft as possible and block the door, Sotal stacked the half-eaten bodies into a big heaping pile of spent alien flesh against the afterward hatch. Then he settled in to rest on the cleanest seat he could locate. He placed the mag on top of his lap, fixated his eyes a foot or two above the butchery, and waited. A few hours passed, but at some point, he fell asleep.

An abrupt jerking motion of the vessel roused him. He sat up, lifted the mag to chest level and aimed it at the hatch. Yahweh, those bastards could’ve come in and killed him. He

glanced around the pod, searching for movement, but motion outside a portal-window drew his attention.

Another life-craft had linked to his pod and the other craft. The vessels jostled and shook as the crafts' automatic linkage worked as designed. While the crafts moved into position, Sotal realized they'd form a blocky triangular shape. More of the portal-windows lined up and direct viewing into the new pod became possible.

Even after the air stabilized with a loud *whoosh*, he remained seated and kept ready for whatever might happen. The stench of death wafted about, and he covered his nose. How long could he deal with the growing fetid of dead bodies? Maybe the new group of survivors would be more accepting of his pleasant company and impeccable leadership.

Once everything returned to steady, motionless drifting, he got up and went to the portal-window. He peered into the additional craft, expecting angry, hideous eyes glowering back at him. Instead, an empty interior, void of any sign of life, made him blink from disbelief. For fifteen minutes, he stared into the craft to minimize the likelihood of walking into a trap.

Sotal didn't miss Earth often, but at times like this he would get a pang in his heart to return. An urge to sit in the bay of a lander and remark to a fellow traveler during the approach that the dramatic curve of the blue planet had no rival in all the galaxies. If they agreed, he'd friend them for the duration, maybe even buy the first round on entry, and if the new acquaintance argued he'd part ways before an exchange of names.

As a young man leaving Earth for the first time, he rode on the bridge of a colossal galactic tanker ship. The last glimpse before the ship jumped to hyper-light velocity lingered in his mind like a holographical imprint. Of all the other planets he'd been to, none had ever competed with the image.



When he popped open the door between his pod and the empty one, he found a pristine life-craft in need of an occupant. He shot a quick look to the overhead and then grinned at his silliness. Could his luck be turning around?

After taking a slow walk through the vacant craft, he stepped up to the portal-window. An odd sensation his old traveling companions were spying on him fixed itself between his shoulder blades. Checking on them was the surest way to allay the feeling. He also wanted to make sure they understood the additional pod contained a new owner and visitors of any kind were not welcome.

Inside the original craft, a scene of carnage like his former pod made him recoil from the portal-window. Squirrel-bird caught sight of the movement and rushed to the source. Her head titled and juddered as she stared into the interior of his pod. A colorful mixture of three different types of blood dripped off her beak: pumice, brownish green, and amber. Her gaze was distant and primordial as she blinked in bird like fashion.

Making the doors inoperable fledged into his head and then disappeared even faster. He walked away from the portal-window and dropped into a seat. He growled as loud as he could, more to break the oppressive silence than for any other reason. Now he had to stay awake until the unlikelihood of rescue, or the most probable outcome: death. Maybe he should go in there and kill her so he could stop worrying about an attack. Nah, he thought, then he'd have to fill out a report for sure and it would give her the advantage.

None of it mattered anyway, each passing hour the possibility of anyone or anything coming to rescue them became a more dismal statistic. If he survived the ordeal, then the Unified Space Ferry Marshals could go fuck themselves. They'd make him write up the report while he recovered for spite. In two more years, he'd have the seniority to forgo a report and use vulgar

effigies. He grew angrier at the notion, but soon enough his mind began to drift and write the report.

Space Ferry Ridership Program  
Trip 23: NEBULA STARGAZER III  
Full Report to follow, *Inshallah*  
Inspector Gravenswelk  
United Space Ferry Marshals Service

*Departure from weigh station, \*8.4.HT—21++, alias Frigshank's Anthill, delayed by two days due to mechanical failures of the main radioisotope converted engines and all secondary hydroberinium battery vaults. Twelve hundred passengers, two hundred and five crew, thirteen thousand animals of varying species, fifteen million tons of cargo, and...*

An abnormal scratching noise began on the other side of the hatch. The claws-on-metal sound started out indistinct but grew louder until he could hear nothing else.

End