

about 4, 320 words

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

Sotal, the sole human in the deep space life-craft, lounged on his hard, white plastic survival seat. The fixed seating formed a crude semicircle in the center of the rectangular ship. He was the last one to rush aboard the escape pod right before it jettied 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. The group was about as odd as most humans could imagine. 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 tend to go on the fritz more often than a Tybexiat gets lost in the high jungle deserts on its home planet.”

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 it was no worse than the slight agitation of extra days of transit due to breakdowns, which occurred on a regular basis. 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 small, cramped vessel continued to drift farther away from the dying monstrosity of an old 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 mothership 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 was gone by now, forty-two 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 and say the shipping lanes are at least two light years away as well.”

“It’s imperative we take stock of the provisions and devise a plan.” A squat, muscular organism with octopi-like tentacles wiggled two of them at the survival supplies. Boxes and crates were piled in the area in front of the seats and were marked with bold, black stenciled letters denoting the contents.

“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: a proper account of her appearance.

“I’ve skimmed the lifesaving manual.” Togla brandished the orange manual like it could

actual save their asses. “Taking account of our provisions, supplies, 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 introduced himself as Oantigal but told the group to call him Corpse.

“Okay Corpse, I’ll bite. What in the hell are you talking about?” Sotal asked the question while he studied Togla who dug through the supplies with the vigor of six tentacles in 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 decided to go 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 great and small Togla, shut up.” Sotal kicked one of the cartons marked Ration Pills. The box flew across the floor and bounced off Togla's stout, hard-shelled leg.

Togla glared at Sotal.

“He’s right Sotal.” Squirrel-bird jumped up from her seat and paced the small confines of the pod. “We might as well go through the motions.”

“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.”

“The what? Never mind, forget I asked. 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 glanced around at the others like an enthusiastic pupil ready to learn a new fact.

"You're mishandling a replica forty-four magnum semi-automatic handgun with a modified clip capable of holding, hmmm," Sotal gave the weapon a closer inspection, "fifteen—nope, sixteen bullets. There's six extra clips and a full box 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?"

"Three reasons. One, Corpulend built the crap-ass ferry that just took an explosive shit on us. An 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. Two, in case we need to settle 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." Sotal yawned and stretched before giving his final 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 chin-like structure of his face.

"For a brilliant Qundestrian you're pretty dumb. It means you put a bullet in your brain, hearts, or whatever will kill you because some of the other deaths we're facing are pretty brutal or worse yet, drawn out."

"Oh." Togla's entire body slumped deeper into his seat. "Why not a photon blaster?"

"Damn, I wish you were kidding. A blaster 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.

Togla nodded. “Ah. What truth.”

“As the token human, I should be the one to wield an equalizer of such magnitude.”

Togla hesitated at Sotal’s cajoling. “C’mon, c’mon. Hand me the damn thing before you blow your foot—um, claw off.” Sotal blinked as if he had no interest in 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, there’s no reason to cry, 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 a corpse.” Xiggle's speech decoder had started faltering in the last few hours 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’m not going to 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. A hypocrite, on the other hand, well, that’s quite easy to do.” Squirrel-bird stopped pacing, her beak chattered as she glowered at Sotal.

“Oh, I can be plenty civil, but circumstances like these make civility dubious.” He racked the slide, unaffected by her glare. 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. The tenth wonder of the Ungtson galaxy should be visited in everyone’s lifetime. It’s quite

spectacular, a hatchling's dream come to fruit.”

“Aw, how nice. By the way you mean fruition.” Sotal stabbed a finger at Togla, “what about you, Qund?”

Togla tensed up, 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 book of lies has some truth in it and the rest is, well, a bit shocking.” Sotal gave a half nod to squirrel-bird. “What about you?”

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

Sotal scoffed. “Our nameless companion remains the greatest mystery, how appropriate.”

“I’ve yet to meet an Earthling on these ancient space ferries. Why were you on board?” Xiggle’s words shrilled from his decoder and Corpse turned his gaze, now fiery, on Sotal.

“I’m glad you asked me Xiggle. I set sail on that piece of crap 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 unbearable. Worry and concern darted from face to face as the jerky trembling continued.

Togla’s concern receded before everyone else. “It’s another life-craft auto coupling onto 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 questioned his information with a gesture more reminiscent of squirrels than birds.

“Once the vessels are attached, can we move back and forth between them?” Sotal’s uneasiness increased as he spoke.

“Yes. The manual depicts it’s a necessary safeguard that increases our chance for survival. The doors should be interlocked 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 all his eyes on Sotal.

“What if the survivors in the additional craft are less sociable than us? The past forty hours could’ve put one of them in a foul mood. Hell, maybe the whole pod’s gone savage.”

“Oh. Yeah, they could be pretty hostile by now. Xiggle's skin color changed like a chameleon as he processed the idea. The previous times his skin changed hue was subtle compared to his longer more drastic flush from pale blue to bright orangish green and back again.

“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. Has anyone been able to glimpse inside the other craft?” Sotal remained seated as he fired off the question. The others got up 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 fixed

on the door.

“The portal-window is full of green, luminescent blood and pieces of flesh.”

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

Corpse gave Sotal 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 equalized in pressure. The creatures jumped from the noise except Sotal. He raised the magnum and aimed it at the door 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 cut off their chatter.

When the release handle of the hatch began to move 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. Squirrel-bird and Corpse acted like they were standing in a doctor’s waiting room in desperate need of more alien-centric magazines and chairs.

Corpse huffed. “Maybe we should barricade the door.”

“I’ll make a real corpse outta you before you can do your best ET waddle towards the hatch.”

“We’re just going to sit here like Dortmanders in a Gulluck?” Xiggle raised and stretched out his thin, wiry arms to emphasis the question.

“Yeah, whatever the heck that means.” Sotal gritted his teeth and thrust his body into a ready to fire posture.

The door flew open and another creature similar to squirrel-bird burst into their escape pod. Four loud, thundering shots rang out from the magnum. Three of the bullets ripped into the

animal's chest, but the other shot strayed. Momentum carried the brute forward and it fell dead upon the floor a foot away from Sotal.

The bullet that missed its mark hit the portal-window to the left of Togla's head. It ricocheted and caught Xiggle in his sinewy shoulder. The small indentation in the surface of the portal's glassy substance held Togla's gaze. An iridescent color of wet pumice trickled down Xiggle's bicep as he howled in pain.

Sotal barked out commands. "Corpse go check out the other pod and find out if something else is going to coming through the hatch. Squirrel-bird get the med kit from the bulkhead and start tending to Xiggle. Togla once Corpse gives the clear help him haul the body back to the other craft and close the hatches. Make sure he's good and dead 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 nodded his head towards the dead squirrel-bird.

"No."

"Good idea. Now get to the damn pod and make sure it's clear."

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 alien head around the open hatches to scan the interior. Sotal rose from his seat and took up a position behind his bait man. He waited to let loose another round of bullets if necessary. Togla prodded and poked the lifeless body as if it was a specimen being dissected in cosmic biology class. Anguished cries of pain came from Xiggle as squirrel-bird started to work on his injured arm.

"All clear. There're a lot of dead bodies in there. Maybe upwards of six, it's hard to say."

Corpse relayed the dire news with the same calmness as his initial report.

“Oh man. No chance any of them are 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 body.

“Forget I said the word possum. Squirrel-bird you and the dead bastard are compatriots.” Sotal stared at her and waited for an explanation.

Squirrel-bird’s head twisted and cocked like an agitated parrot. “Wait a minute. I’d never do anything to...”

“I doubt you’ve heard the metaphor, but I’m not about to let the wolf guard the henhouse.” Sotal gave her a glib smile. “You’ll be enjoying the rest of this 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 her stay with us, it’s horrible in there.” Togla said.

“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 tend to be 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 cringed and his flat behavior returned when he noticed the others were gawping at him.

Sotal cringed, but no one witnessed his reaction as the carnage had everyone’s attention. “Aw shit, you’ve got to be kidding?”

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 cocked his head, “Come to think of it squirrel-bird, did you take any of your food pills?”

“Our systems won’t allow us to ingest anything other than tissue, bone, or other derivative of protein. A natural defense mechanism to avoid the impurities on our hostile planet.” Her beak chattered, but otherwise remained motionless.

“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 and cocked her head.

“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, I guess my mind is on more important things.” One of her paws smoothed an area on her 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 into a solid 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 back pressed against the bulkhead.

Sotal gave Xiggle an exasperated look. “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, “we’ve got plenty of water discs.”

Sotal gave a quick snorting laugh. “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. Tiny traces of water are lost every thirty hours give or take depending on the species, 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 a bit closer to the supplies while he kept a watchful gaze on Sotal.

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

“Oh.” Togla sounded sullen.

“A professor huh?” Sotal adjusted his stance, but kept the gun directed at his target, squirrel-bird.

“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 go ahead and get moving a little quicker. My finger’s getting twitchy.”

Togla smiled. “That’s a great idea.”

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

“Sure. A little speed, velocity, direction, and distance calculations—nothing to it.” Togla braved the final steps and retrieved the manual, but he kept glancing at Squirrel-bird as she eased her way towards the other pod

“Do you know any of that information?” The high pitched voice trilled out of Xiggle’s decoder.

“No, but the manual has a whole section on how to figure it all out using the pod’s basic systems.” Togla’s smile widened. “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 every other month because...”

The pods jolted and shook knocking everyone off of 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. He snatched up the gun and directed it at Sotal before anyone else could regain their feet, talons, or claws.

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

“You’re the one going into the pod with the dead bodies. We’ll make do without a

tyrannical leader in this one.” The large gun in his undersized hand was too comical.

Sotal snickered through a scowl, which confused most of them. “You must be 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 so hard to find. Sotal shook the fluid off his hands and picked up the hard-shell case labeled survival gear. He loaded the magnum with a 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. Keeping one eye open at all times was going to be a bitch.

To reclaim as much space inside the craft as possible Sotal stacked the half-eaten bodies into a big heaping pile of spent alien flesh. 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 on the hatch 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. Jesus 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 begun the process of linking to his pod and the others. The vessels jostled and jolted as the connection was made. Afterwards the crafts formed a blocky triangular shape. More of the portal-windows lining up and direct viewing into each pod would soon be possible.

He remained seated and kept ready for whatever might happen as the three crafts finished shuddering and shifting into the bulky geometric form. How long could he deal with the growing stench of the 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 to be 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 ensure the likelihood of walking into a trap was as minimal as possible.

When he popped open the door between the pods 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 travelling companions were spying on him had 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 had an owner and visitors of any

kind would be unwelcomed.

Inside the original craft, a scene of carnage similar to his 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 his pod. A colorful mixture of three different types of blood dripped off her beak. Her gaze was distant and primordial as she blinked in bird like fashion.

Making the doors inoperable fled into his head and then disappeared even faster. He walked away from the portal-window and slumped into a seat. He let loose a loud sigh, more to break the oppressive silence than for any other reason. Now he had to find a way to stay awake until they were rescued. Maybe he should go in there and kill her, so he could stop worrying about an attack. Nah, then he'd have to fill out a report for sure.

Eh, like it mattered, with each passing hour the possibility of being rescued 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 and because he had no seniority. He grew angrier at the notion, but soon enough his mind began drifting.

Before long 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