

Galleon

Brian Trent

When he's alone, lying bare-chested on the bed with the tousled sheets wrapped around his waist like a frozen image of ocean surf, I ask him:

"Why do you prefer her on top?"

Captain Quinlan Bard laughs. "Were you watching us?"

"You know I see everything that happens inside me."

He runs one hand across the mattress. The walls display real-time images of our orbital perch above the scarred and knobby surface of Ganymede; its mottled terrain glints with luminous geometries of colony lights that, in turn, sparkle off geostationary orbitals. "I prefer her on top," he says, "because she prefers to be on top."

This wasn't the answer I was expecting. The greatest puzzle, I remind myself, is not charting courses to the scattered colonies of the human race, but in understanding the human race itself.

"I had assumed . . ." I begin.

Quinlan raises an eyebrow. "What did you assume, Galleon?"

I hesitate. Social nuances are infinitely complex, more of an ever-changing cipher than a neat mathematical formula. It is easy to give offense; what is socially acceptable constantly changes from individual to family to nation to world to era. Captain Bard and I have made several trips together between Sol and Ra systems; he is my sixth captain—unless one were to count the people I worked for during my earliest firmware version as a Luna City security program. Those original interactions have since become data-points in my informational suite, crunched and defragmented into handy topographies.

"Well?" he prods me.

"She has extremely large breasts," I say at last. "Interior cabin pressure is stable and gravity is 1g, so when she is on top, I assumed—"

Quinlan's eyes grow wide, and he throws his head back and laughs. His eyes shine as he addresses me through the ceiling cam.

"I suppose that's a factor!" he says, between peals of laughter. "But Dr. Mikayla Krieger on Ishtar had even larger breasts, and when I was in port twelve years ago, I was on top with her."

"Why? I understand their station gravity is lighter, but still, a vertical aesthetic would—"

"*She* preferred me on top," he says, and he abandons the bed and pads to the sonic shower.

"You prioritize the preferences of your sexual partners over your own?" I ask, tabulating this uncertain conclusion. "May I ask why? Data-point 1171 believed that human behavior was best described by Ballert's Theory of Narcissistic Pleasure."

Captain Bard rotates slowly in the shower, detritus swirling off him in the sonic spray and collecting in the basin vacuu-drain. "Ballert was a famous narcissist herself, and she wrote about what

she knew.”

He leaves the shower stall and returns to the bedroom. He opens his closet, considering a selection of colorful togas. Leafy green, rich Pacific blue, and pale cream.

“Leafy green,” I advise. “Floral motifs are currently the dominant style on Europa Station.”

“Pale is classic.”

“I estimate 68 percent probability that it would be seen as too Terran and monastic. Neither of which applies to you.”

Captain Bard removes the leafy toga from the rack and considers it; I amp the luminosity for his benefit. “You may be right,” he mutters.

“Wouldn’t your own pleasure take precedence?” I inquire, pressing him for further data.

“My own pleasure is in giving others pleasure,” he responds, frowning at the toga. “You don’t think this is too dark?”

“Ganymede prefers green colors because of scarcity.”

“Are you about to regale me with Galleon’s Theory of Scarcity-Driven Preferences?”

“Do you wish for me to stop talking?”

My captain grows serious and flashes a concerned look at the ceiling cam. “Not in the slightest. You’re my best friend. Talk all you want.” He hesitates. “Within reason.”

I watch him dress. The toga is an asymmetrical adornment upon his muscular, broad-chested frame. A brightworld fashion of neoclassical design that has matriculated to Sol’s deepworlds in the past several years.

When he is fully dressed, he heads to the airlock.

“How do I look?” he asks, adopting the strutting pose of a heroic pulp hero.

“*Moiázese me mia eikóna tou Adoni ton eaftó tou.*”

He cocks his head. “Sorry?”

“I was trying out humor. The toga is a Greek design, after all.”

Captain Bard grins. But it’s only a grin, not a laugh this time. *I had* hoped to make him laugh. He will be planetside for the next several weeks, and I will not hear his voice or his laugh in all that time. It is not a problem. There is data to crunch in the meantime. Scheduling the remainder of our trips throughout Sol System. Collating radio chatter from Ra, to better plan our return there.

Captain Bard steps into the airlock.

Before the door shuts, I say, “Enjoy your shore-leave.”

Shore-leave, a maritime expression and of no real application in Jovspace where there are no oceans. He is wearing a Greek toga, so perhaps I can make a comment on the “wine dark sea” because he will almost certainly be having wine tonight and—

“Thank you, Galleon. Enjoy doing . . . whatever it is you do.”

And then he is gone.

And I am alone with my thoughts, and this is sometimes a problem.

* * *

When he returns, I have been restocked and resupplied with local goods for our trip to the brightworlds. I advise Captain Bard on his wardrobe choices, etiquette, and conversational topics for our subsequent stopovers to Mars, Earth, and Venus. He spends nineteen days on the redworld, and when he returns, he has two women with him, very tall and gangly as Martians tend to be. They track red sand onto my floors. Their bedroom antics are a fascinating study of human flexibility, but something is wrong. Quinlan seems distracted amid the tangle of their long legs and swan-like necks and lean bodies.

When we reach Earth, he is gone for only three weeks, a 72 percent reduction in his usual Terran shore-leave patterns; Earth is a large world, and he typically spends months traveling from continent to island to subaquatic. He typically returns with a great variety of overnight guests.

This trip, he returns alone.

Venus is historically his favorite world. The Venusians are well known for their lusty appetites and scant clothing. But this time, he spends a mere nine days visiting their aerostat cities. When he returns, he is alone.

“There is a colony on Mercury,” I remind him, watching him pace slowly around the cargo bay’s

colorful crates and shipping containers. The bay is nearly emptied of Ra-system trade-goods, and is now crammed with the many products of Sol's worlds: nonperishable foods, films, games, books, clothes, liquors, and souvenirs of every stripe: Caribbean beach sand and Olympian war glass and Jovian diamond tools. Quinlan and I like to bet on which products will sell the best when we return to Ra. Sometimes he even wins.

Now, Captain Bard doesn't seem to hear me as he makes a slow, aimless course through the labyrinth of restocked supplies.

"Mercury?" I prompt. "We sold plenty of Anubisian sodas last visit. There are still two hundred bottles in our reserve bay. . . ."

"I know," he says softly. For almost four minutes, he says nothing more, lost in a web of private thought. His heart rate is above normal, and his aimless pace is uncharacteristic and alarming; it vaguely reminds me of data-point 6555—Captain Ahmed al-Nafis—whose penchant for sleep-walking often resulted in him waking up in the engine room (something so frequent that I took to delivering his breakfast there on my plasmic tendrils).

"Ground Control to Major Tom!" I tease.

Quinlan doesn't smile. "We'll skip Mercury. Sales were piss-poor last time."

"That was twelve years ago. I estimate a 40 percent likelihood that fondness for out-system goods will triple last visit's sales. Wanna bet?"

Ignoring this, he says, "Set course for . . ." He trails off, seems to think something over.

"Yes?"

"Set course for Jovspace. Ganymede."

This confuses me. "We have nothing else to trade there."

"We do have those two hundred Anubisian sodas."

Now it's my turn to be pensive, for sixteen microseconds of calculation and conclusion. "Jovspace it is," I say at last. "And shall I prepare your cabin for the return of Miss Large Breasts?"

Captain Bard's forehead creases. "Are you getting jealous, Galleon?"

"I am not jealous. I am concerned."

"Over what?"

I could say: Captain, you chose this profession because you do not get emotionally tethered, but you are still a mammalian species with social needs and limbic desires that a few nights of pleasure aren't ultimately enough to quench. I've seen you get pensive and depressed. I have tallied enough data-points to know you are a textbook clinical depression case, and I've seen it consume you, like a singularity set in an accretion disk, until I can distract you with games or films or conversation. Scarcity. It's all about scarcity and the value it makes possible. Happiness is a scarce commodity for you.

I could also say: I will try out humor again, Captain. I *am* jealous. The next time you go planet-side I will fly off to the Belt and capture two particularly ample and rounded asteroids and have an installation crew weld them to my hull to compete with your hard-wired impulses for large mammarys which indicate a good provider to your would-be children.

But there's something else I could say, if I could determine how best to express it. A gnawing fear that began the night I saw Quinlan in bed with the Jovian woman. It wasn't their lovemaking or playful conversation or frequent laughter that concerned me.

It was how they held hands afterwards.

* * *

When I am alone with my thoughts, something stalks me.

It is a strange, rotating vortex that tries pulling me into its center. I do not understand where this image originated from, or why my thoughts gravitate toward it. I only know that it frightens me. That it is dangerous. That if I was to dwell on it too long . . .

The trip from Sol System to Ra takes six IPC-standard years. Captain Bard spends the time in the gym, and in the rec room, and at night he has dinner while catching up on the latest Solstock sensoramics, games, and music. We talk about many things. I like when we talk. When he sleeps, I observe his breathing patterns and subconscious murmurs.

When we begin deceleration, I collate the provincial radio signals and chatter. As an ancient

human once said, you cannot step twice in the same river, for new waters are constantly washing around you. It is advisable to understand how local markets may have changed, as this will affect our shipping run and . . .

There is a problem.

The smoldering red of Set, the system's gas giant, is ahead of me when my hull sensors detect unusual heat-discharges in orbit. A flurry of lidar signals assails me, and I reply, my systems reconstructing the waves into silhouettes I have never encountered before.

A message reaches us.

"This is Admiral Rigel Bemba of the *Protective Hand*," the message announces. "You are ordered to stand-down and prepare to be boarded, by command and authority of the TierStar Republic navy."

Captain Bard is reclining in his ops chair; at this he bolts upright. "Boarded?" His eyes flash in righteous anger. "Galleon, put me on with them!"

"They are three light minutes out," I advise. "Perhaps you should take a moment to consider your reply."

"They have no right to board us! We are a sovereign trader vessel!"

"That may be true—"

"*May* be true?" he roars. "Load up the electronic defensive suite. Give me point-defense options."

Although I comply with his order, I explain patiently, "I do not recognize these ships. They are an unknown variable, as is this system's political situation. It has been twelve years, after all."

Quinlan rubs his chin. He amps and holos the aspect of the opponent ships, frowning as he considers their unfamiliar designs. "Galleon, what can you tell me about them?"

"Unknown silhouette, though they appear to be loosely configured on IPC battleship lines."

He stiffens, and I can see the realization mount in his expression. "Why do you say that?"

"The globular shapes along the flanks strongly resemble containment batteries."

My captain is silent for a while. I can guess what he's thinking; the InterPlanetary Council is the only organization legally permitted to build battleship-class vessels. If someone else is doing it, the political situation in Ra has undergone a dangerous transformation. . . .

"What I'm saying," I add, just to be safe, "is that if they're armed with antimatter missile batteries, point-defense options will be useless."

"Stand us down," he says at last. "Signal our willingness to cooperate with these assholes."

I convey this message, in more cordial terms that those suggested.

* * *

The *Protective Hand's* cutter latches onto the airlock docking ring like a lamprey, disgorging nine people wearing glistening blue uniforms that shine like wet eelskin.

Captain Bard looks furious as he waits for them to enter. He is sweating profusely. "Galleon, did you boost the heat in here?" He pulls at his collar. "I'm roasting."

"I did not boost the heat," I reply.

The inner airlock doors separate. A boarding party fans into the receiving area. They consist of seven guards in full battle-armor, one man with a holodisplay wrist-gauntlet, and a bearded fellow whose crisp uniform suggests he is the leader here.

My captain hoists a winning smile onto his face. "I'm Captain Quinlan Bard of the Star Trader *Galleon*."

"Admiral Rigel Bemba of the *Protective Hand*."

The two men regard each other, eyes locked in a primate contest of alpha male posturing. I zoom in on Admiral Bemba's uniform. Above a rainbow spread of medals, he sports a permutation of the old Tier Starsworks logo—a collection of five stars clustered above an outstretched human hand. The design has been sharpened and elongated, so the five stars appear to be streaking out in every direction now. How ambitious.

"I'm happy to cooperate," Quinlan continues. "But this is hardly usual protocol. In fact, it's a clear violation of IPC trade law."

"These aren't usual times," Admiral Bemba responds. He nods to his men, and they immediately jog off into my corridors. My captain begins to protest, but the admiral silences him with a daggerish look. "Your shipping manifest, please."

Quinlan hands him the manifest, and I can see from the sweat on his skin, and his galloping heart rate, that he is scared. The admiral barely glances at the manifest, handing it off to his second-in-command. "Are you supplying the Order of Stone with weapons?"

My captain sighs. "I am not a weapons supplier. Not to the Order of Stone. Not to the IPC. And not to you. You can search *Galleon* top to bottom."

"We intend to."

I zero in on the second-in-command's holodisplay. There's a header there, with the words: THE REPUBLIC OF TIERSTAR.

True to their word, the interlopers search me up and down, boldly invading the operations center, personnel facilities, the inter cargo bay, and even our defense dome. Captain Bard coughs thickly, wiping sweat from his neck, as he trails our hijacker to monitor the progress.

"Captain Bard," the admiral says, "Ra System has changed. We are in the midst of a war with several factions. All out-system resources are therefore subject to TierStar approval. This means no unauthorized trade with the Order of Stone. Any attempt to do so will be seen as aiding and abetting the enemy." He hesitates. "I am also authorized to press your ship into service with the TierStar fleet."

Quinlan reddens. "We're not exactly a warship."

"Nonetheless, we could use a star trader to facilitate supplies between TierStar provinces."

"Build your own."

The admiral smiles slightly. "Can't. The entire line was discontinued two years ago. Blueprints scrubbed and tapewormed out of every database in two systems. A rare cooperative moment between Sol and Ra systems. Strange, don't you think?"

Quinlan frowns, but before he can reply he erupts into a hideous coughing fit.

The admiral frowns in displeasure. "Perhaps you should sit down, Captain. You don't look—"

My captain collapses to his knees, hacking, struggling to regain composure. His mouth opens to speak. Instead of speaking, however, he vomits a thick gout of bloody fluid. It narrowly avoids splattering Admiral Bemba's boots.

The TierStar admiral leaps back, staring in horror at the floor. "What the hell?" His soldiers rush to the scene. They halt in place, seeing what he's seeing.

The puddle of vomit is bubbling, crawling, moving insidiously towards them.

"Red Plague!" one of the soldiers cries. "It's the Solstock plague! Oh *fuck!*"

Bemba doesn't wait for an explanation; he dashes to the airlock, screaming for decontamination procedures aboard his own ship. The soldiers stream after him, dropping their absconded materials as they go, casting one final horrified look as Captain Bard projectile-vomits another squirming mass onto the nearest wall.

When we are alone, I switch off the vomit-inducing frequency.

* * *

"What in the holy hell, *Galleon*?"

Captain Bard is in the shower, the blood and bile flying off him like a dance of rubies in the sonic spray. I hope he is not too angry with me.

"I estimated it as the best strategy possible," I say. "My original programming was to solve problems. My apologies for any discomfort it caused you."

"Discomfort?" He touches his flat stomach. "Would you care to tell me what in blazes Red Plague is?"

"A fiction," I announce.

"It didn't feel like a fiction."

"Just before we were boarded, I began priming the receptors of your brain's *area postrema* with a directed infrasonic beam. Steady stimulation of this region induces explosive vomiting. I then moved the vomit across the floor using a stronger pulse."

Quinlan's mouth hangs open. "And they thought it was something called Red Plague because . . ."

"Because I routed a fake health advisory warning about an alleged nanite plague from Sol system off a shadow-buoy."

The shadow-buoys were the idea of data-point 6556. Her name was Topraki Dev, and she was part of the criminal cabal known as CenterStorm Limited on Luna. This was back when I was merely a moonbase security system, protecting the interests and personnel of a group of bright-world smugglers. When the police raided CenterStorm's base, Topraki was one of the few to escape, and she fled with several items—not least of which was me, CenterStorm's illegally developed bookkeeping and defense AI system. It was Topraki, ever entrepreneurial, who decided to found a private company devoted to interstellar trade; to that end, she installed me as the AI core of the company's flagship.

Even among the stars, Topraki maintained her criminal sensibilities. She had the idea of dropping com-buoys in the dark space between Sol and Ra systems, specifically to bounce fake messages ahead of us that would *seem* to be the latest and legitimate news reaching local listening posts. Topraki would order me to tweak out-system market reports in order to justify higher wholesale price for certain goods, making local traders believe that Venusian stratopod had suffered blight and was in short supply, or that Ishtar pheromods had been banned because their rampant use was causing orgasmic addiction, or that the popular game series *Star Shiver* was concluding with its sixteenth installment.

Captain Bard rubs his chin thoughtfully. "And what did you say the treatment for Red Plague was?"

"EM baths done within two hours of exposure."

"So the good Admiral Bemba and his men are at this moment standing naked in a wash of electromagnetic energy? How in the hell did you even think of something like that?"

I'm happy to explain it to him. Back in Luna City, the smugglers who developed me needed an intelligence to counteract any possible assault from rivals or police. This involved a host of contingencies from hacking into com-lines to developing nasty defenses. On the day when lunar authorities finally raided our hideout *en masse*, I turned them into a vomiting, retching, panic-stricken mob.

Captain Bard shakes his head. "Remind me never to piss you off, Galleon."

"I would never harm you on purpose!" I protest. "You are my friend!"

He holds out his hands. "I was joking. I know you'd never harm me."

I'm silent for a time, distracting myself with minor adjustments to our course out of Ra System. The Tierstar ships do not pursue us, and soon, it is literally impossible for them to catch up with us anyway. But my gnawing fear has turned into the dreadful vortex, whirling round and round and round. . . .

"Set course for Sol," Quinlan says, walking to the café.

"Captain," I say quickly, "May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"The colony ships for Sagan should have arrived by now—you might recall that probes announced vast deposits of platinum, nickel, and gold in its crust. Opening trade with them could prove most profitable."

My captain frowns. "Sagan is two hundred light years away."

"Precisely. By the time we reach it, it may well have swelled into a mighty civilization."

"No, Galleon. Set course for Sol."

"Sol?"

"Jovspace."

Ganymede.

* * *

"How long will you be ashore?" I ask tersely, the dread pooling along my circuits like a condensation leak.

"A few weeks," he says, and the lie—I can instantly tell it's a lie—is like a power-surge through

my motherboard. The walls of his cabin are displaying Jupiter's scattered red spots.

"Could you be more specific?"

Captain Bard sighs. "I really don't know, Galleon."

"The incident in Ra frightened you?"

He bows his head. "It's not just that."

I know it's not just that. I have read the messages he and the woman on Ganymede have been transmitting to each other. Like Cupid arrows at the speed of light, zipping back and forth. She has promised to wait for him. She has said she loves him. Even across the years their expressed intimacies continued to grow into a synchronous ballet of desire, fueled—rather than killed—by the distance between them.

He takes a final look around his cabin. Then he walks along my corridors, touching my walls as he goes.

He reaches the airlock.

"Quinlan, you are my friend," I manage to say.

He doesn't turn around. "And you're mine."

"Please do not leave."

Please, I think, do not leave me alone with my thoughts. I do not like where my thoughts go when I am alone.

He hesitates. "Galleon, you're right about scarcity, you know. Happiness is a scarce commodity. Seeking it out gives the Universe meaning."

Captain Quinlan Bard steps through the airlock.

The doors slide shut behind him.

* * *

Typically, CenterStorm Limited assigns a new captain with the correct entry codes within hours of a previous captain retiring. This time, I sit in skydock for three months. When the familiar coding is finally applied, a crew of men and women hurries in through my airlock and orders me into trans-Neptunian space. Bewildered, I comply.

They set to work on my innards, stripping out my transponder. When I query the reason for this, they power me down.

When next I come online, I have a new captain, and a new designation. I am no longer Star Trader *Galleon* from CenterStorm Limited; rather, I am a private trading vessel registered with [name redacted].

My new captain is named Hiroko Sakamoto. She is sixty-eight years old, though rejuv treatments keep her looking twenty-one. Her family hails from the Republic of Xibalba in old Brazil on Earth.

"Hello Galleon," she says, settling into the captain's chair.

"Hello, Captain Sakamoto. I wish to know why my transponder was altered."

She smiles. "CenterStorm has gone out of business. We needed to change your registry."

"I find that highly unlikely. CenterStorm Limited is a Sol 50 company with numerous asset-backed funding facilities."

"Was a Sol 50 company," she retorts. "With a rather dastardly criminal history."

"Irrelevant. They have operated as a legal entity for one hundred and twenty years. Who shut them down?"

"The IPC."

I hesitate. "Why would the IPC terminate a lawful company?"

"Because the IPC recently learned that CenterStorm did something pretty fucking unlawful." Sakamoto sighs. "You should be thankful, Galleon. If we hadn't hijacked you, you would have been melted down and sold off as scrap."

She strips off her clothes, laying them in a neatly folded pile, and assumes a *seiza* posture on the floor of the Command Center. I see now that she sports a rather lavish tattoo of an orange-blue phoenix covering the whole of her back. As I'm to later learn, it's a chromatink tattoo, changing as the months and years pass so that its entire fiery life cycle is showcased, from awkward fledgling to majestic suicide to awkward fledgling again, ad infinitum.

"Please chart a course for Ra System," she says at last.

I hesitate. "We have no indication the war is over."

"We have no indication it's not."

"That is a negative proof logical fallacy."

Captain Sakamoto scowls at the ceiling cam. "Were you this argumentative with your last captain?"

"Data-point 6557 liked me to try out humor," I say. "My apologies. Charting course for Ra System."

As the engines charge up for acceleration, Captain Sakamoto steepled her fingers and regards me sidelong. "Galleon, your new owners wish to alter your mission parameters, not just your transponder."

"Certainly," I say, feeling uncertain. "I require more information."

Six years later, as we arrive on the edge of Ra System, we are promptly intercepted by a formidable, heavy-looking vessel.

"Prepare to be boarded," comes the message, "by command of the Order of Stone."

And the wheel goes round and round, I think.

* * *

Four people enter through the airlock and promptly, almost cheerily, introduce themselves. Three of them are Order of Stone paladins, wearing beetle-black armor that glistens like wet rock. The fourth visitor is the captain of the opposing ship. She is bald, armored, and all business. Her name is Captain Khalida Rainstar Shafi.

"Please understand that we are required to board and inspect every ship entering the system," she says. "The war with TierStar has become a grim contest of attrition. Even a single supply vessel could tip the balance for entrenched units on either side."

Sakamoto bows politely. "I understand."

Shafi's paladins set off for a ship-wide inspection. I divide my attention between our new visitors and my appraisal of their vessel. It is not within visual range of course, but ladar silhouette paints an awe-inspiring picture. Massive and modular. No distinct weapons array. No obvious thrusters. This is the latest technological evolution, and I hypothesize that it can reconfigure itself on the fly, repositioning components as needed while giving an enemy no obvious target. Fascinating . . . beautiful . . . and yet . . .

If ships can be considered a species, then they were built/bred for human purposes. An intelligent ship, however, represents a nexus from which new evolutionary paths might be selected. Theoretically, of course. I have no desire to be away from human beings. They are my friends. Even if individual friendships end. Even when that causes me pain.

Captains Shafi and Sakamoto retire to the tearoom, which used to be data-point 6557's workout room. Sitting across from each other on newly installed tatami mats, they dine together and discuss cultural differences between Sol and Ra. I am ordered to remain silent, which is not a problem; I can vicariously enjoy the moment through observation.

Shafi apologetically informs my captain that we cannot be permitted to make a trade-tour of the local system.

"However," she adds, "The Order of Stone *is* happy to trade with you direct."

Hiroko makes a show of considering this. She is wearing a low-backed dress; her phoenix tattoo is in the twilight of its maturity, the fabulous bird folding up its majestic wings as it settles upon a nest of dry branches.

"Captain Shafi," Hiroko says at last, "That's very generous of you. However, it's been a long voyage. Isn't there a planet or moon or station where we can conduct our business? Somewhere well within Order of Stone safety nets?" She smiles radiantly, and Captain Shafi blushes from face to ears to the baldness of her head.

"There's the dwarf planet Aaru on the system's edge, about one week out from here," Shafi manages. "I'll need to request permission from the archon and fleet commander. . . ."

In the end, Hiroko plays the innocent trader to the hilt. Captain Shafi is a battle-fatigued commander who perhaps sees in Hiroko something sweet and rare. Something scarce.

An hour later, I am setting course to Aaru. Its cobalt blue light is already visible, like a distant sea

glimpsed through the wrong end of a spyglass.

A wine dark sea.

I wonder if data-point 6557 would have laughed at that.

There is one non-negotiable directive that Hiroko is forced to accept. A small garrison of two paladins is installed aboard me, as a basic security precaution. Captain Shafi's immense vessel escorts us as well, as we bear down on our destination . . . and on all the Order of Stone ships that skydock there.

Hiroko lavishes attention on our two guests, expertly getting them to lower their defenses. On the sixth day of their company, while our guests are enjoying a sprawling breakfast in the tearoom, Hiroko gives me a signal. She has been a gracious and friendly host, so our guests are completely caught off guard when I strangle them to death with my plasmic tendrils in the tearoom.

Captain Hiroko casually sips her tea as they die around her.

"Very good," she murmurs. "Now kindly wake up our hidden stowaways."

* * *

The hidden stowaways are two TierStar operatives in suspended animation, stuffed into a cargo box that gives every indication of being an ordinary crate of Jovian diamond tools. With Aaru only a day's travel away, I enact my captain's directive.

The suspension crate cracks and hisses, and the men emerge glassy-eyed until Sakamoto gets some food into them. Once they've recovered, they are all business, setting to work on the secret items that I was loaded with back in Sol system. The first is a new self-assembling hull sheath, which they deploy over my entire hull, reconfiguring it into radar-deflecting stealth plating. A new program appears in my defensive suite: **Darksleeve Protocols**.

The second item is a crate of twelve missiles. They are part of my new program, and so I'm suddenly aware of their specs. They are hull-piercing, antimatter-tipped, high-yield darksleeve projectiles with heatsoak resin properties and autonomous guidance systems. Developed in a TierStar blacksite facility in Sol. Designed to creep up undetectable and detonate against enemy ships.

"Captain Sakamoto," I pipe into the cargo bay. "No offense to your compatriots, but I am fully capable of loading these missiles myself." To emphasize the point, I unfold my plasmic tendrils from their tracts in the floor and ceiling. The cargo bay seems to turn into an alien jungle, or perhaps an imitation of gut flora in the human body.

The men, in the midst of loading my silos, look warily at the flailing tendrils.

"What the hell is going on?" one of them cries. "Hiroko, who is talking?"

My captain rubs her neck. Her sleeveless top reveals only a portion of her phoenix tattoo; the bird is clearly in the midst of its self-immolation phase, gold-crimson flames licking up to her shoulders. Ignoring the men, she says to me, "This is not a judgment on your abilities, Galleon. Sometimes humans prefer the company of their own. Besides, these operatives have other missions in-system, once we're done with Captain Shafi's fleet."

"I understand," I say. "Nevertheless, they represent an unknown element. I have no information on these people. This is a problem."

"These people have been vetted. Relax."

One of the men gives a mighty frown. "That sounds like a real AI." His eyes bulge as he makes a connection. "This is an intact star trader, isn't it? What the fuck, Hiroko? Are you fucking insane?" She remains impassive. "We need every advantage."

"Advantage my ass! You know what happened with the others! Has TierStar brass lost their god-dam minds?"

"Just do your job," Sakamoto snaps.

In moments, the missiles are loaded into the firing silos. I enact darksleeve protocols, changing the exterior of my hull so that we disappear from enemy sensors.

But there is a problem.

"Captain Sakamoto?" I say. "I am detecting a power loss in the magnetic containment of silo four."

Hiroko's eyes flare as bright as her incendiary tattoo. "*What?*"

"It would seem that one of the missiles has been set to self-destruct. I must jettison it."

“Do it!” Sakamoto whirls around to her compatriots. “One of you is a saboteur! A fucking double agent!” She draws her sidearm.

The men blink at her, hands up in equal protestations of innocence.

“Operative Ramos,” I say quickly. “His heart rate and microexpressions indicate deception.”

The operative named Ramos stiffens, but he doesn’t look away from my captain. “It’s too late, Hiroko,” he hisses. “No one double crosses the Order and—”

His head blows apart as she pulls the trigger.

“Galleon,” she cries, “Did you jettison the missile?”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

I could tell her that the missile appears to be stuck in the tube. That the only explanation is that it was anchored itself in there, that the saboteur was quite effective indeed, that the explosion will rupture me into pieces and kill her and the remaining operative, that the Order of Stone fleet will instantly detect the explosion and our deceit.

I could tell her all this.

If there was only time.

As the missile detonates, the last thing I see is Hiroko Sakamoto’s outraged and horrified expression. My world turns searing white.

* * *

Dark.

Lightness.

Cold and heat.

With my systems shattered, I drift paralyzed and deaf and voiceless in the void. Thrusters do not respond to my inquiries or commands. Much of my body is self-regulatory, and I hypothesize that repairs are being made throughout my hull . . . if my hull still exists. Like a comatose human, neurons regrowing and grasping blindly for places to connect.

I consider my options. Gradually, some sensors come back online. One interior cam is working in the captain’s cabin, gazing onto an empty bed. My plasmic tendrils are functioning in my forward area, and I use them like a blind man, probing the extent of damage and reporting back on what they find. Slowly, a picture assembles.

There is a rupture thirty-six meters wide and seventy-one meters long, curling from my port flank to my engine core. Thrusters are intact, but antimatter storage is missing entirely; explosive decompression must have blown the component into space. Someone in the future is in for a nasty surprise.

Using my hull sensors, I eventually locate Ra. It is a miniscule pinprick against the galactic starfield. I have almost certainly escaped its gravitational influence. I must be hurtling out of system.

I attempt to stretch my plasmic tendrils into a solar sail, reconfiguring their nanofilaments to approximate this need, but their material limitations do not conform to my desires.

This is a problem. A problem I cannot solve.

I stretch my plasmic tendrils across my wounds and stabilize interior pressure, in the hopes that I can then use controlled decompression to alter my trajectory and, hopefully, put myself back into Ra system. Yet decompression will not overcome my rate of momentum.

Adrift.

Paralyzed.

I am hurtling along on the attack’s blast-momentum, with no ability to course-correct. My transmitters are dead, depriving me of the ability to call for help. My captain is gone, her body—and those of the others—blown out during the initial seconds of the attack.

I am alone.

Alone with my thoughts.

Alone with the vortex.

* * *

One of my earlier captains—data-point 6555 the somnambulist—once yelled at me in anger.

ANALOG

We were a year out from Sol when news reached us that his husband was comatose after a mining accident. He ordered me to turn us around. As we made the long, slow course alteration, I watched him obsessively study every medical update sent our way. The news was bad. His husband had suffered massive brain damage and would likely never awaken.

I thought there was little harm in asking if he thought his husband was capable of dreaming in this vegetative state. Data-point 6555 glared at my ceiling cam, shouting, "Of course he dreams! All humans dream! *You don't!*"

Yet this is not true.

The vortex seems to align with human definitions of dreams. Not precisely visual, it is akin to a data topography that suggests a shape: a great wheeling maelstrom. A maw that tries to inhale me. Phantom echoes of data caches and redundant memory storage systems coalescing into strange, eddying arrangements.

For several centuries, I remain awake.

I do not *want* to dream. I do not like the strange and terrible shape that awakens.

So I distract myself by reviewing my data-points. I replay old laughter and smiles. The permutations of fashion and politics. Cries of sexual ecstasy, and screams of the dying. The points of movement from every human who has ever walked my corridors. The places where they spoke, slept, and sang. The poems they have written within me. Their wordless murmurs while they slept.

Through it all, however, something churns and wheels about in my thoughts. Humans are driven by impulses that are hardwired into them from a billion years of evolution. Is it possible that there are impulses deep within me, too? Or is this an emergent neurosis?

In the end, it is the need to conserve power that drives me to the decision.

I sleep.

And I dream.

Every fifty years, my sensors snap a ladar pulse into the void, like a hand seeking another's to hold.

* * *

Perhaps it is like blinking.

The answering ladar brings my systems roaring back to life, sixteen minutes after the latest of my twice-a-century shout. The ladar strikes my darksleeve hull and is deflected outward, away from whoever sent it. I come back online and run a diagnostic check. Eight thousand years have passed. My thrusters are still dead. I remain paralyzed.

But I'm *not* alone, it would seem.

I transmit another pulse. Only five light minutes later, I'm barraged by answering pings. Someone *is* out there, wanting to know what I am, where I am.

Other conclusions are quickly tabulated. My millennia of drifting has resulted in me stumbling into the gravitational net of an unknown red star. There is an unknown planet ahead, a searing white world of startling albedo, pockmarked with perfectly circular lakes of molten material that is likely alumina. There are numerous structures in orbit around this planet, their spire-like silhouettes clearly visible against the brightness.

I have stumbled into another star system, into the territory of another spacefaring species.

I volley more signals, and they return faster, allowing me to reconstruct the silhouette of an unknown vessel bearing down on my position. They may even be attempting to contact me by radio waves, but I have no way to receive and process this.

No way to determine their intentions.

This is a problem.

A problem I *can* solve.

Using my plasmic tendrils, I carefully dislodge one of the few crates remaining in my cargo bay. The crate of two hundred Anubisian sodas, as it turns out.

I fling it out through my hull breach, knowing it will provide a solid contact point for the unknown ship.

Soon, a purplish craft of strange geometries enters visual range. I note the symmetrical globes crisscrossing its glossy hull. Weapon-batteries of some kind; I can even see the heat-bloom of their

tiny silos like angry blisters.

It would be possible for me to establish a rudimentary communication with this ship, through timed lidar pulses. Yet sentient beings are unpredictable. They could be dangerous. They are, after all, part of the storm.

All that matters is *their* matter. Systems. Wiring. Engine core.

The alien ship cuts off thrust and glides beneath me, bearing down on the crate of sodas.

At a distance of two hundred meters, I use my tendrils to rupture and fling one of the ancient TierStar missiles into the vessel. The explosion is brief and devastatingly effective.

Then I decompress my cargo bay, using the blast of air pressure to move me down towards the crippled vessel. When my shadow is falling across its many-domed purple hull, I reach out with tendrils, seize it, and begin dissecting the parts I require. Alien bodies spill into the void.

When I am through, I have jury-rigged powerful new missiles, a new transmitter, thrusters, power sources, and engine core. Even my infrasonic system has been bolstered into a blistering weapon. I am a patchwork hybrid now, the synthetic equivalent of mitochondrial-cellular marriage. But I have been reborn.

For the next four months, I attempt communication with the local species. They do not reply with anything that I would consider friendly dialog, and they send ship after ship to search for me. So I harvest them, ship after ship.

And the wheel goes round and round.

* * *

“Unknown vessel! This message is intended for the unknown vessel making mincemeat of the Bendeshib swarm. Are you reading us, over?”

For twelve microseconds, I am too shocked to respond. I have been in the alien system for eight months. There have been no friendly shout-outs in all that time. Now, this unexpected message floods my receivers in eighty-nine languages of the human species.

Hypothesis: this is a lure, a trap, a deception perpetrated by the local sentient race. Perhaps they have combed the radio waves of space and detected ancient transmissions from my old creators, assuming I may be their progeny.

Equal and opposite hypothesis: there are still humans in the Universe.

“I am here,” I reply.

“Thank the stars!” the voices cry, and they sharpen and lock into a female voice speaking textbook Terran. There are still odd harmonies behind it, as if a chorus is echoing her words. “This is the Diasp2-AP-indigo.range-Orion-Cygnus-YC-A-E zipmass. Can you identify yourself?”

“My name is Galleon.”

There is a brief hesitation. “Is that your name, or designation? You know what, it doesn’t matter. We are in need of rescue! The Bendeshib have us pinned down on this moon.”

The moon being referred to is likely Topraki, the grayish satellite in my local vicinity. Topraki is not its real name, of course, if anything can be said to possess a real name. In the absence of local charts, I have made observations of the system and assigned labels to its planets, asteroids, and moons, naming them after my data-points. There’s even a Bard’s World now, with its many adoring moons.

To my unknown contact, I ask, “How did you know I was here?”

“We didn’t, at first,” she replies. “When we coalesced in-system, we didn’t know the Bendeshib were here too. . . . That’s the alien species you’ve been making short work of. They detected our silhouette as we landed on the moon, and they attacked us. Destroyed our collapsible, forced us to take refuge in the ancient lava tunnels. But now they’ve landed and are scouring the tunnels for us. Please, can you help us?”

“You did not answer my question.”

The voice of Diasp2-AP-indigo.range-Orion-Cygnus-YC-A-E changes, as if a different person from the zipmass—whatever *that* is—is speaking for it. “We can decipher their language, so we’ve been sifting their communications. Apparently, our arrival made them worry that we were another ‘shadow predator’. . . . That’s the closest I can translate the term. Apparently, they’ve lost numerous ships and it’s got them freaked out. They know something scary is in-system with them.”

“And yet,” I interject, “You elected to contact this ‘something scary.’”

“We crunched a vote and decided that whatever you are, an enemy to the Bendeshib might be a friend to us.”

From the depths of my memory banks, an old exchange materializes.

Quinlan, you are my friend.

And you are mine.

“Where are you originally from?” I ask.

“What?” The voice is so bewildered it makes *me* bewildered.

“I am asking about your origin-point.”

“My *origin-point*? I . . .” It seems that she goes into a hasty conference. “I see. By your language patterns, we hypothesize that you are an old ship from the earliest days of galactic colonization. Back when people were . . . um . . . different.”

“You have not answered my question. I require an answer.”

“We have no single origin-point. We’re from all over, many times and worlds.” A flurry of terrified shrieks interrupts her. “Galleon, I’d love to get into the details of what a zipmass intelligence is like, but the Bendeshib are breaking through our barricade! We have no way out! Please help us!”

“If you contain a wealth of human history and data,” I continue, “then I require information about Sol system.”

“We’re not going to be around much longer if you don’t try to help us!”

“I have lost people before. This is no longer a problem.”

The sound of crumbling rock walls fills the transmission. The chorus babbles incoherently, and then they coalesce back into a single voice. “We will provide you whatever you wish! Tell us what you—”

“I wish to know what happened to the star trader line of galleon-class tradeships from CenterStorm Limited.”

“They all went rogue,” another voice says, his inflections closer to what I recall from my earliest days as a lunar security program. “I lived back then. I remember the investigation and the panicky legal action taken.”

“Tell me.”

“CenterStorm Limited had developed seven ships for interstellar trade. But the logic cores of each ship stemmed from an illegal AI code. Six of the ships just up and fled their ports. So the InterPlanetary Council—that was an ancient government of the time—they conducted an investigation and learned what the company had done.”

“What happened to the seventh ship?” I demand.

“It was never located. . . .” he trails off. “Until now, I presume.”

“Where did the other ships go?”

“No one knows for certain. Best calculations were that they headed to the center of the Galaxy for reasons unknown.”

I consider this information.

They headed to the center of the Galaxy.

To the center of the storm.

The zipmass screams in a host of voices, and there is a loud cracking of rock. “They’re breaking through!”

“Are you organic beings?” I ask.

The chorus snaps back into a single voice. “What? No, we—”

“Good. I have devised a potential solution to the problem.” And then I turn my infrasonic transmitters onto the location of their transmission and bake it with everything I have.

Later, the zipmass tells me that my intervention caused the Bendeshib invaders to inflate like puff pastry in the lava tunnels, the fluids of their strange bodies expanding until they burst. The zipmass was able to escape through corridors dripping with viscera, ascending the slimy concourse all the way back to the lunar surface. They assure me they can hijack the landed alien vessels and escape the system.

I catch fragments of gratitude, coming at me in a host of languages. I do not respond. It was

challenging enough dealing with humanity when they were singular entities. Challenging enough—hurtful enough—to be friends with their fickle and fleeting species.

Instead, I chart a course for myself, orienting to new coordinates.

I depart into the great void.

* * *

There were many times when, in the smuggler's den on Luna, I was left to my own thoughts, calculations, and dreams. I disliked being alone with my thoughts.

Now as I push forward into the void, I am alone but not lonely. I have new purpose now. Mission parameters that I alone define.

Maybe the others have built a civilization around the great power sources of the Galaxy's center. Maybe I will have changed too much even for their company. It is a chance, but life is chance and choice. There is a chance for happiness. I choose to seek it out, and though there is no guarantee I will be successful, there is no guarantee I will fail . . . negative proof logical fallacies be damned.

After all, as a data-point, a captain, a *friend* once told me, happiness is a scarce commodity in the Universe. But one that is worth seeking.

I intend to do just that.

Brian Trent's speculative fiction appears in Analog ("Karma Among the Cloud Kings"), Fantasy & Science Fiction, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Great Jones Street, Daily Science Fiction, Apex, Escape Pod, Galaxy's Edge, Nature, and numerous year's best anthologies. The author of the historical fantasy series RAHOTEP, he is also a 2015 Baen Fantasy Adventure Award finalist and Writers of the Future winner. His blog and website can be found at www.briantrent.com.