

Faery Ink Press Presents

SPLAT! FICTION EZINE

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Image by NASA and the NSSDC. Taken from Nasa.gov

SPLAT! FICTION EZINE



From the Editors

Change: it is an essential part of every story. Character A changes in some way, conflict results. As humans, we are both



enticed by it and resistant to it. A beautiful thing about science fiction, fantasy and horror is that the genres allow writers to explore changes beyond the constructs of the world we currently live in. I need only to look in the time since we last published to truly see how potent and quick change can be in the real world; it is truly mind

-boggling the sheer number of possibilities available through writing.

This issue features two stories that detail change. In *Contact*, a husband and wife encounter an alien race while on a routine mission in space. In *The Thinking Pool*, Penny is faced with change and looks back as to not repeat the same mistakes she did at her last job.

One thing that hasn't changed this issue is that we still don't have our logo. Ben is too busy eating his own paint instead of finishing it, but don't worry. He'll realize Van Gogh's mistake soon enough.

Something that *has* changed is that we have a new design for our website. If you're reading the PDF version, you've already noticed it. If you haven't, well, what are you waiting

for?

Get down to <http://www.faeryinkpress.com/splat> and check it out! Personally, I think it's pretty.

As always, keep the submissions rolling. We'll



be back on January 15th with another action-packed, alien oozing and spellbinding issue!

Happy Writing,
Clare and Lizzy,
Splat! Fiction Editors

PS: Yes, we did use the Sims 2 to photograph ourselves.



CONTACT

by Harold Wood

Typical vacation season in Bali. Streets crowded with tourists, phrases from a dozen different languages ringing in the ears, smells of the ocean, sate cooked by a local vendor, un-named perfumes in the nostrils, bright sun overhead, global warming all but forgotten in the pursuit of being other than what you are in your normal day to day. If you have the money, the time, the desire, you can be anything you want.

Open gates to a hotel balcony with a commanding view of the beach, the masses on the street. He is tall, aggressive baldness of a spacer: no eyebrows, no eyelashes. Well-muscled, probably too much time in the gravity simulators in the time between hyperspace entry points. A woman walks out of the shadows to stand beside him. She is another spacer, bald, beauty in her features, full lips, large soft brown eyes, line of earrings going from earlobes to the top of her ears.

He turns towards her, smiling, leaning in towards her, lips meet... the scene dissolves into red flashes of pain.

Back to here, now, reality: an overextended Earth, food riots, rampant global warming, stunning lack of resources and a population on its relentless march upwards. The Birth-Right Lotteries, an attempt to bring the population under control before everything collapses under the weight of mouths to feed, bodies to house and clothe. The same parents that prayed and worked to be entered into the lottery, paying to have their child to be size-fixed, gave massive doses of hormones to cause the children to hit puberty before age ten so they can afford to feed the child, and give the child a chance at the only career that has a future, Space. A future closed to anyone exceeding the mass-limits imposed by ship design.

A future enabled, fueled, pushed with a capital P by the necessity of Now. Lack of resources pushed mining into space, harvesting ices and minerals from the assortment of bodies in the asteroid

belt, from the rings of Saturn, moons of Saturn and Jupiter. There was constant pressure to move further out to the fringes of the solar system, the Kupier belt. The push led to the development of new technologies, the discovery of hyper space or space(H), mass drivers, sleep couches, direct neural interfaces into computers.

With the discovery of hyperspace came the push to reach further and further then we hit the limits, the vane engines are expensive to build, and the fuel is expensive to refine, but once mankind got past those hurdles it found two more. Hyperspace is easily manipulated by gravity and magnetism, so easily that long distance jumps of more than a few light seconds are not accurate and a ship can end exiting into mass, so jumps for manned ships are kept to light seconds, with time being spent in normal space to reacquire current position and heading before entering again. The second barrier is a human problem. The human mind doesn't know how to deal with sensing in folded space. The few test subjects that went through conscious came out catatonic or totally deranged.

My wife, Mejewel and I are co-captains of a Badger fast attack scout ship, a cylinder roughly 120 feet long and 30 feet in diameter. No portholes visible, the ship's hull broken by the protruding of the hyperspace field vanes, shield emitters, weapon bays doors, counter measure ports, GRASER, Gamma Ray laser, ports and the countless instruments needed to do its function. Patrol, confront, and destroy if necessary. We make a great team: we were pair-bonded in training. This means we tested as 99% compatible. The service encourages this; tests have shown that people get a bit strange when left too long on patrols by themselves, and when together in this tight a space, where you share every thought, dream and feeling, the slightest irritating habit can become grounds for murder over the months in patrol. When we married we got bonuses and were

promoted. A successful two year tour guarantees the team ten matching entries into the Birth Rights Lotteries. Mejewel proposed to me. I think it was half for the bonus but she is a fierce lover. I can't think of life without her now.

We are both hardwired into our sleep couches. The human mind not being able to withstand hyper space while conscious, we strap each other down, select a dream environment program, hook up the artificial kidneys and the feed tubes and set the drugs. The sleep meds kick in within thirty seconds. The ship will enter hyper space as soon as it detects we are unconscious. While encouched we don't actually talk. All communications are thought, even with the computers and the rest of the ship equipment.

I'm being relayed instrument feeds, navigation inputs, star maps, locater beacons, my job is where we are. Mejewel is getting threat assessments, positional analysis and tactical probabilities, her job is if it moves and it's unknown shoot it. Our usual mission is to watch for ice claim jumpers, light metal smugglers. It's usually very quiet out here at the frontier zone.

So far humans haven't met another space faring race but we already have a policy: shoot first, set a beacon on the wreckage and fire off a Fast Lightspeed Astral Communications Rocket, known as a FLAR. A FLAR, which we pronounce "flare", is the only way to communicate across the distances in a timely manner. The powers that be long ago decided that if we meet an alien race, the best way to deal with a formal meeting is to get as much information as possible first. The military interpreted that to mean in an autopsy fashion.

We patrol a volume that is roughly 170 light years cubical; how does one ship do it? We have laid out a line of monitoring satellites, we call them sheepdogs. Each one is loaded with instruments and inside a heavily armored bay, two FLARs. When something happens it launches a FLAR, just before the sheepdog loses power or detects loss of AI integrity.

"FLAR on approach. IFF verifies it's one of ours," Mejewel says. The IFF or Interrogate

Friend or Foe sends out coded queries and waits for the correct response, a kind of high tech version of the old "HALT! WHO GOES THERE?" I do the mental equivalent of a grunt and shrug. In my mind I blow her a kiss and feel her warmth radiate back at me as I order the ship to plot an intercept course and transmit a mission accepted signal to the FLAR.

The ship is still transmitting the mission accepted signal when the FLAR detects it's in range to respond to us and starts sending the mission log from one of our sheepdogs. The transmissions are multiple encrypted and pulsed. As the data is decrypted and fed to Mejewel and I, we relive the last minutes of sheepdog KV137890. Mejewel and I see the world as if we were the satellite. It does its random status checks with one of the other sheepdogs, gets the acknowledgement and all is well within its detectable world.

Then, instruments detect an anomaly: a tachyon stream, different signature than the Sol Confederated Forces. It's coming directly out of Barnard's star and it's moving fast. It exits into space(N). Through the instruments we detect the braking fields around the ship as the fields bleed off the velocity as energy. When a ship exits space (H) into space(N) it is still moving incredibly fast. Too fast to be able to navigate safely in real space: at one-fourth the speed of light a grain of dust carries enormous impact energy. The mass detectors say it's another small ship, not much larger than ours. The ship slowly closes to the sheepdog. We see the targeting laser and feel the sensations as the satellite is shredded; we feel the satellite kick off the FLAR using its own bulk to make sure the FLAR gets away clean.

"Wow" ...all I can think.

Mejewel answers me with, "We did it! Remember the XPrize? The first people that can prove alien contact get one billion creds...we are rich!"

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The Thinking Pool

by Elizabeth Ewert

Penny's morning ritual was to walk to the thinking pool. There, she would look at the glass-like surface of the water, and images of whatever was bothering her at the time would materialize. Penny could think about the images in an objective manner, and then set the matter aside, allowing for a clear mind as she strove to be an alchemist.

This particular morning, Penny came to the pool with shakier hands than usual. Today was the day that she was getting promoted from a lowly wizard's scribe to a wizard's apprentice. In the typical magical career path, after becoming an apprentice, one became an alchemist, then a fully-fledged wizard. Wizards were kept in check by a single wizard master, an extremely powerful woman. Even the poorest wizards could employ at least ten scribes and two apprentices; Penny was apprenticing with a poor wizard whose priority was making the village she lived in a better place, a lofty goal Penny shared. However, the images that came forth were not ones of her failure in apprentice robes, but of a huge mistake she made in her scribe's rags.

About six months previous, Penny was a new scribe to the most powerful wizard in the area, who could employ twenty alchemists. This wizard always had positions open for new people, as although he was powerful, he was not always tactful. She was paired up with one of the new alchemists, Adam. At first, their relationship was strictly professional so that all they talked about were specific to his research. Slowly, Penny and Adam were not just talking about boiling points and chemicals needed, but the intricacies of the newest LaVallé play and the just-released Juster ballad. A fast friendship formed.

When Liam's birthday came around, he invited the entire wizard flock to celebrate his 25th birthday. Liam was Adam's best alchemist friend. Since the research schedules were quite intense, he made it a two-night event so that there was a higher chance of people showing up. The first night, the beer flowed to the point where the neighbours threatened to call the constabulary on the partiers. Considerably fewer people attended

the second night, all of whom were there for the first night of revelry. Penny had gotten drunk enough that she started dozing on Adam while watching the lighted image show the wizard had given Liam for his birthday. When the rest of the people went to sleep, Penny laid on top of Adam, both wide awake. They were listening to each other's hearts pounding in tandem, poised to strike, but afraid to move until she leaned forward and Adam met her lips.

It was not long after Liam's birthday when Penny arrived on Adam's doorstep. They ended up watching some lighted images shows the wizard had made a long time ago while in the main room. They migrated to the much more private loft when Adam's father walked in the door. Penny felt elated by how tangible her happiness felt: the tingly feeling left on her arm as Adam traced circles, or the way that Adam's face seemed to glow when he looked at her, mirroring her own face. As a result, Penny gave him her virginity. They barely slept that night, just exciting in each other's touch as they lay still, cuddling.

Things continued in the same vein for Penny and Adam for a comfortable while. While Adam's demenour toward her became gradually more and more distant, Penny's realization of the change in Adam's behaviour was delayed and sudden. She was working with Adam less and less, often being bounced around between alchemists. On the rare occasions she did work with him, he spoke less than the bare minimum. She had learned enough of his job as an alchemist to guess the figures he was no longer spouting. At the next event at Liam's house, Adam did not attend, and Penny got so drunk she did not realize she was constantly mumbling Adam's name and bursting into tears soon after. She did wake up after passing out with her face covered in the indelible ink Liam was working on.

Indelible ink and all, Penny was determined to regain Adam's attention. When a sickness spread through most of her fellow scribes, Penny was unaffected. She worked ridiculously long hours with close to no days off, hoping that her being at work would mean that Adam could not possibly ignore

her. Her long days made the impromptu plan end up backfiring, and her working spree finished with her snapping at Liam and bursting into tears because she was exhausted. To Liam's credit, he understood the long hours half of the situation, and let Penny's behaviour slide.

When Penny finally had had enough of too much work and longstanding irritability, she went to visit her mother three villages over. Penny's mother was initially delighted to be visited by her daughter she had not seen for over a year, but that delight quickly changed to worry as she noticed that Penny was aimless, devoid of the cheerfulness that previously defined her. Penny's mother and stepfather took her out on nature walks and bought her local delicacies in an attempt to cheer her up. While Penny normally would have appreciated the gifts, and subsequently been happy to receive them, this was not the case. She found no pleasure in her favourite candies, nor in her favourite look-off spot from her childhood. Penny could only think about Adam. It was the worried looks that her mother and stepfather were giving her that prompted Penny to write Adam a letter. Several crumpled pages and many tears later, she had crafted a letter that would make the knowingly sinless repent for anything they could have possibly done wrong.

Penny returned to work after visiting with her mother looking her absolute best. She was able to smile at the way all the scribes, apprentices and alchemists were looking at her, forgetting their important research as she went to her assigned laboratory. She was able to joke and banter with Liam, as they worked at a furious pace to create a quick removal system for the indelible ink he had previously perfected. At the end of the day, when Penny and Adam crossed paths, she handed him the scroll and said, "Read this, and think wisely." She walked away before he could see past the strong façade she had put up, covering up her pounding heart and quivering hands. Adam's eyes gazed from Penny's retreating form to the scroll she had just handed him, and back to Penny again.

Penny left work and wandered around town. A game that she enjoyed playing with herself as she walked through the market was to try to guess what lay beneath the outer layer of the peo-

ple as they walked by her. Penny knew that she had no hope of ever being right, but it was enough to calm her outer turmoil, leaving a small tornado of emotions quite concealed. Once that mission was accomplished, Penny went home to find a note placed on her pallet. She had not seen Adam's writing often, but Penny could recognize it anywhere. She started reading the letter with a cautious eye, which quickly gave way to intense relief as his opening line was an apology. Adam explained that the wizard had given him an ultimatum: still being an alchemist, or being with Penny. Penny was not happy with Adam's decision, but she at least got an explanation, even if it was a little late.

That night, Liam invited Penny over to show off the light show that he had created, knowing that she and Adam were working on some time-sensitive research at work. Penny reveled in the fact that she could relax and be around Adam again. However, when Liam started to pass around the shrooms, Penny was the only one who did not partake, as she was working that night and it was against the wizard's working rules. Her anger became near explosive as she saw Adam take a bite. Adam's explanation of the rules at work being the reason they were apart exposed itself as a convenient lie. It was Penny's turn to speak the bare minimum to Adam, his betrayal hitting her even worse than the events of the month before.

Penny had seen the lies Adam had told to protect both of them from the truth, and she started to make a strategic withdrawal from her workplace's politics. No words were spoken between them, each of them gravitating towards other people in the large group research projects that the wizard was now fond of. Penny made it her personal goal to become an alchemist, not to catch Adam's eye, but to prove that she was better than him. When the master wizard caught wind of how well Penny was working, she told Penny about a slightly poorer wizard who was in need of some apprentice help, and that Penny would do well. Penny jumped at the opportunity at a fresh start.

The water's surface rippled, then stilled, showing a reflection of Penny wearing her new robes.

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Contact, continued from page 4.

I reprogram the FLAR for Head Quarters, wrap its message in our communications protocol wrapper and re-encrypt everything again. Only our Command Officer can open it now, or us. Before I relaunch the FLAR, I delete the last few seconds of the message after copying the entire message to our storage. Mental laugh to Mejewel from me, she is always thinking of the money, me always thinking of how to get back in one piece.

Since we haven't decoupled, returning back to sleep is pretty quick. It's been four months since I've seen my wife with my actual eyes, or touched her skin.

As we go under she tells me she loves me in her native language, *aku cinta padamu*. I tell her *aku mencintiamu juga*, I love you too. Back in a dream state, she picked this one, it's a 3D tennis game. We are floating in space, volleying back and forth. I love watching her legs as she hits. I know why she picked this simulation: she feels it helps her sharpen her targeting skills. She needs to be so tuned that she's almost precognitive: you can die real fast moving at the speeds we do. It also helps to tune me, makes me better aware of angulations, approach vectors. The goal in this game is to hit the ball back at angles where it can't be returned, but it has to pass through her sphere, a glowing light around her that is about four meters around, just as her shot has to pass through mine to score. Since it's a simulation the rules of gravity don't really apply, you can run right, left, back, front, up and down, up is always your head, so wherever you want to go you can. It's a hell of a game.

I program the ship's navigation unit to do a very risky move I call popcorn. We will drop out one million kilometers from the sheepdog's last position for a quick scan and then pop back in. We will do that several times if the screen stays clear and then we drop out and stop to check for wreckage. If there is a threat, we scoot to the next sheepdog on auto. The risk is that our meds may wear off before the ship stays in space(N). You

can take too much of the sleep drugs, the artificial kidneys will filter it out when the ship wakes you, but you will be groggy for a while so it's best to try to calculate the exact dose needed. Too little and you come conscious while in space(H). The other danger is that the other craft might be there and fire on us before we are fully conscious. That thirty second transition is the danger window.

Awake again. Mejewel and I are groggy, fighting through the drugs while a sheepdog is attempting to report to us. I start to download our flight log and all stored instrumentation and pass it to my wife while I tack it to the end of the message from the FLAR. The log shows we popped space(N). Instruments detected mass so the auto pilot popped space(H) and moved us half a million kilometers away and popped space(N) again. Instruments detected a targeting laser fired at our last position so we popped space(H) and moved us half a million kilometers again and popped space(N) again. As we exited into space(N) we were inadvertently shielded from the EMP wave, Electro-Magnetic Pulse, emitted by the alien craft, by the dimensional disturbance our craft made as it flipped from space(H) to space(N). The computer decided the EMP constituted an attack so we popped space(H) and headed for the nearest sheepdog where we exited within one hundred and fifty kilometers of it. We spent 28 hours in transit to the attacked sheepdog's position, the attack and the evasion happened within four seconds, the escape trip took 57 minutes.

Unfortunately the autopilot didn't take the evasive techniques that I would have used. The instruments are detecting a tachyon wave coming at us fast. I find the whole situation interesting. An EMP wave is meant to disable a ship's systems so it can be captured intact. A missile would have punched through the distortion and destroyed us. So they, or It, or whatever, wants us intact... interesting, very different mindset than the Sol Confederated Forces, but I'm not sure I want to be captured by anyone or anything.

Mejewel is powering on shields and weapon systems. Mental caress of her neck, I look for the

nearest cover. All we have is the sheepdog and over seven light minutes away, a wandering ice ball tagged for harvesting in a few years.

"Love, I'm running to the rock. Meds now!"

I feel the question in her mind and then we go, no simulation this time, no dream, wake up groggy, instrument feeds, we are still moving fast, haven't dumped velocity and at the speed we are moving we are closing on the ball fast.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it now!" Mejewel says.

I power up the field vanes, wait, wait...wait... pulse it now! The ship shudders hard, alarms tripping, there's a sickening drop in my stomach as we drop speed fast. We are so close to the ice ball that it disintegrates from absorbing the energy being transmitted from our braking maneuver. We drift into one hundred and thirty five kilometers of ice, some shards larger than our craft. The debris moves away from us grudgingly in a slowly expanding cone shaped field. When I pulsed the field vanes the resulting energy was transferred unevenly to the ice ball causing it to blow apart.

"Showing off how close you can get?" she asks.

"No love, I think I got a plan," I reply while calculating shield strength. We need to drift into the ice and move with it; it should provide a lot of cover for us. "Love, start plotting targets. We may need to clear a path in front of us real fast."

Feel mental caress affirmative, feel her concentration. There are literally thousands of pieces in front of us large enough to cause us damage if we hit them.

The shields have a problem. Something really big, moving slow and something really small, moving fast will get through. The first, if it has more mass than the ship it will actually cause structural damage as the hull collapses from the force put on it. Small fast moving items don't provide a big enough surface for the shield to push against so they punch right through. They work great for energy weapons which is why lasers usually serve as target acquisition, shield nullification, or missile defense.

I use the thrusters to move the ship into the ice debris field, gently threading our way through the ice field trying to hug up against the larger pieces without getting hit by them as they tumble. Mejewel intermittently fires as necessary.

"Tachyon stream coming, we got company moving in quick! Cepat, cepat, cepat!" Mejewel tells me to hurry up as I thread us through a constantly shifting 3-D puzzle of tumbling ice pieces. I see the image of the tachyon stream overlaid in the heads-up, the ice shards drifting. I think I see the other pilot's plan: the ship appears to be veering around the bulk of the ice and looks like he plans to flank us when we come through the thinning debris cloud.

"Love, I think his plot will bring him out around here." I transfer the predicted coordinates to her. "I want to keep his attention on us and get him to move to here. Do you think you can do this?" If my guess is correct the other ship will be waiting for us when we arrive at where the debris field is thin. There will still be enough mass around us that we can't enter space(H) safely so we will be forced into a shoot-out.

I feel her laugh as she replies, "Sayang, tidak masalah." No problem.

Mejewel sends me the course I need to take for her. It's going to be tricky threading the needle through the gaps. The closer we get to the shards that came from the back side of the ice ball the bigger the shards are. I start maneuvering using thrusters, occasionally pulsing the hyperspace field vanes. It's a fast way to maneuver, power the hyperspace engine up just enough to start forming a fold and then stop the engine. If you let the fold form completely, you are pulled into space(H) while conscious. The distortion caused by using the engines this way shifts you quickly kilometers from your original position, great when you need a fast kick but the drop after the pulse is tough; even the most hardened veteran gets nauseous.

As the alien ship drops into space(N) I see the glow caused as tachyon matter converts to regular matter. The craft is moving fast, brakes hard: okay, their technology follows the same laws of physics

as ours does. I wasn't sure if the aliens had found ways around a lot of the problems with space flight.

Mejewel starts firing. The first missiles are mass/heat seekers that are called fire and forget, while she lays out a field of bomblets, the equivalent of a mine field in space. The missiles are called fire and forget because once they are launched they are supposed to be smart enough to acquire their own targets. The bomblets move relatively slow until they get triggered by heat; they all home in at once. It makes life interesting watching thousands of small explosions against your shield, if you're lucky and one doesn't happen to drift through because it's moving too slow to be picked up as a weapon. In training we got to watch that once, its like every fourth of July rolled into one big show until you remember that just one of those flashy bangs could rupture a ship's hull. For all that the ships do, a space ship is a very fragile thing.

I steer us into a gap between 2 shards and watch the explosion from an alien missile when it hits the shard in front of us, way too close for comfort. Mejewel sends me a mental caress as thanks for the dodge. I caress back as I see our gamma ray laser paint the alien craft's shield and watch the ship actually become visible as a bright bluewhite ball of light. I'm impressed, our shield would have overloaded from that much energy. Grasers are usually used to overload a shield so a missile can punch through. Crap, time for a new plan.

The alien ship is moving to intercept us. Mejewel triggers our chaff as a missile chases us. The missile tracks us through the cloud. "Mejewel....do something..please!" I yell as the Graser punches through the missile warhead and propulsion pod in a perfect shot.

Mejewel scolds me. "Inshallah, husband you should have more faith in me." I can tell she is feeling the stress when she curses like that.

The alien craft is almost in position. I think I can make the new plan work but it's going to make for a very nasty sprint in the open. I toggle

shields to max on the nose of the ship, and rotate so nose is dead on to the closing alien craft, then fire thrusters full.

Mejewel is unloading the chaff and decoys as fast as the ship will allow. I detect four missiles coming at us fast; one kills a decoy drone. Three left, one explodes in the chaff cloud. Two left, Mejewel punches through another one. It's a hell of a shot. One left. It's within six hundred kilometers and moving fast.

Crap, here goes nothing. I pulse the vanes hard. The ship shudders, alarms screaming, half of the primary systems dump out along with shields. I start trying to reset and get shields back up. The missile silently rips through where we were and detonates against an ice shard ripped loose from the pulse of the hyper drive vanes. I watch as the alien craft collides with a tumbling mountain of ice. The space fold from when I pulsed our vanes shredded a larger chunk of ice into several smaller pieces. The energy readings I'm getting tell me the alien ship imploded as its shields folded in against the emitters. The same as our shields would have.

"A little close on that one yes?" Mejewel says to me. Both of us are nauseous, tired, shaking. I can see life support steadying blood sugar and hormones for both of us. We are still in danger, the alien ship isn't totally dead yet. We are dead in space until I get our primary systems recycled and still surrounded by tons of ice moving in erratic paths.

I'm recycling systems while Mejewel scans the alien craft in detail. She feeds the scans into the computer, correlates them against the stored logs and builds me a model of how it probably looked in my heads-up display. I see she has even labeled areas of the ship based on the scans results.

We slowly move towards the remains of the alien craft with fourteen thrusters still offline and half the shield emitters gone. I'm pretty sure my last maneuver blew both the primary and alternate power buss on the port side. I'm rerunning power for life support through the communications bus, while using the life support bus to provide power for the port side shield emitters. It's not perfect,



She was proud of herself, of how far she had come. Penny went from a scribe who had barely any confidence in herself to an apprentice who was stubborn enough to stay with the project when events made life tough. Penny did not have Adam, but what he taught her about herself was invaluable, and that was enough.

Lizzy occasionally writes down the ideas that entertain her when she manages the grease pit.



but it's working.

We close in to within half a kilometer of the alien craft. It's tumbling erratically, small clouds of crystals venting from cracks in the hull. We move to a parallel path. The ship has huge vanes, the tech boys will have a field day with its engines and shields. I want our missiles to be reprogrammed to fly like theirs did. Our missiles tend to fly a straight path, while theirs flies a random spiral pattern; it's damn hard to intercept and my wife did that two out of six times. Not too shabby at all.

"Back off, back off! Energy surge!" Mejewel warns. I grunt and use thrusters to push us away and roll to bring the starboard launchers in line as the missile leaves the alien craft and immediately goes into hyper drive. I know what it is immediately, same as our FLAR. And then I realize...

"Crap, hold on!"

I kick thrusters full, rotating and running hard. The ship explodes just a few seconds later. Mejewel was ahead of me and had all shield power transferred to the stern. We ride the shock wave, turn around and scan back. If there is anything left to investigate it's going to be very small parts buried in all those ice shards.

I take the logs of everything that has happened, put our communications wrapper on it. Add along a call for a replacement shepherd and a tow request back to HQ. Tack on the added urgency since we have no idea how long before another alien ship gets back this way and who or what or where the alien FLAR is destined for. Encrypt it all and upload into a FLAR and send it.

I pull us a safe distance from the debris and check the sheepdog. It's still functional.

"Love, want to dance?" We haven't actually touched each other in months, and we aren't going anywhere in a hurry.

She giggles. "Certainly, my lovely husband."

We decouch. Gravity is at one third of earth norm. We dance, long slow waltz; it's great. I pull out my contraband; it's a Mexican wedding hammock. I rig it up and this time we go to bed as we are. Our beacon is on. I figure we have about three days of off time to enjoy.

Woody is a computer programmer/bouncer/martial arts instructor, beach bum by heart, currently skulking in Seattle.

SUBMISSIONS

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Thanks for reading!

Clare and Lizzy

Splat! Fiction Editors