

The Dread Space Pirate Richard



episode 2

The Man in Black

the official DSPR website:
<http://www.reddit.com/r/DSPR>

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*(this is a rough early **unfinished** incomplete work-in-progress draft as of 2016 May 7)*

This book is dedicated to my mom.

(Weird, right?)

But seriously.

I'm trying now as hard as I can.

She'd know why.

"One word.... Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things - trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself.... Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one.... That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can, even if there isn't any Narnia."

*in The Silver Chair from The Chronicles of Narnia
by C. S. Lewis*

The Man in Black

“Well... if it isn't the legendary Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen. Never thought I'd see *this* day.”

One man had once said this to a second one. The first sat in shadow and the other more in light. The two men had met in order to negotiate carefully over matters of life and death and so they sat together alone at a large table in a dimly lit room.

And they were both slightly drunk. As men are known to let themselves become when urgent and important life-or-death matters are at stake.

Of course.

But speaking of that dimly lit room: it was opulently furnished and deep inside the armored heart of a yellow bulbously-shaped starship parked in high orbit over an alien planet. The ship was clearly not the Eryon because the latter was sleek and silver.

One of the two men — the one who spoke first — was a short, vile, toad-looking man wearing a suit of gold and green. He reeked of cinnamon cigarettes and Rigellian brandy.

In other words, probably a Bad Guy.

The other was a tall, handsome man wearing an all-black pirate's costume. He also wore black gloves and black boots, a black sash and black leather thigh holster holding a silver pistol, and a black eye mask hanging around his neck from a strap, not currently being worn.

In other words, certainly a Dread Space Pirate.

One probably named Richard. Because he liked to appear pretty early in

any story book that ended up being centered around him, especially if the book in question was part of a series of tales which also took his name for its very title. But even if he were mistaken and he was not in fact already the star of a story somewhere, well, then, life was still far too short and important to waste, and also *might* be adapted into a story one day. Therefore it was best to put on a good show until then. Just in case.

Anyway.

The vile toad-looking man had spoke first but, after a brief delay, as if to think or choose his words carefully, the other man, the one in the black pirate outfit, eventually replied:

DSPR (R): Now sitting across from the infamous Bonta Zarzon, head of the most powerful criminal organization in five star systems.

Bonta nodded in acknowledgement.

BZ: That is kind of you to say. However your own reputation proceeds you.

R: I had it sent ahead.

BZ: You know, the odds were so against you and I ever meeting like this that I had long ago placed the appropriate side bet and so, now that it **has** actually happened and materialized I've lost an **embarrassingly** large sum due to you simply **boarding** my ship alone. It had **better** count.

R: Indeed. Perhaps we should make it count twice? But let's get down to business.

BZ: I concur. I'm a busy man.

R: As am I. To wit. You have interests in the Gamma sector. I have interests in the Gamma sector. This could lead to conflict. I'd prefer to avoid that. I'd prefer to arrange a deal that maximizes both our own profits and personal interests. Do you feel that this is a good basis upon which to negotiate?

BZ: I do.

R: Then I will proceed.

Richard stopped talking and put on his black eye mask, which had previously been hanging around his neck from a strap.

BZ: Why are you doing that?

R: You will see why.

Then Richard reached into a black pouch he had in his left pants leg and pulled something out slowly. He placed it on the table between them. It was a little golden box.

BZ: What's that?

R: You'll see.

Then Richard reached for his pistol in it's holster and slowly pulled it out and then pointed it straight at Bonta Zarzon.

BZ: *You wouldn't make it out of this ship alive.*

R: We'll see. But honestly... I was just joking around. I wanted to see how you'd react. And I prefer to tell the truth always *unless* I'm joking around.

BZ: This is known. It is part of your... legend, such as it is.

Richard nodded then slowly and carefully placed his pistol down on the table between them and left it there, as if in a show of diplomacy or to make a tangible ante towards building more mutual trust within their present negotiation. He maintained careful eye contact with Bonta Zarzon the entire time he was setting it down.

Bonta Zarzon nodded and made a "proceed" gesture with his hand.

The pirate proceeded. The heart of negotiations began. And this is what happened. What happened, in summary, was that one of these men was most likely about to die.

The negotiations went on for what seemed like hours. At one point Richard

had opened or otherwise activated the mysterious golden box and showed the other man what had previously been held in private secret inside of it.

Bonta was stunned at first.

Bonta tried to absorb and ask questions as they occurred to him. Richard answered all of them that he could.

Eventually that part of the discussion ended and they moved on to different topics. Or so it seemed. At a certain level the notional topic had shifted but beneath the surface the topics implied by what was seen inside the golden box still remained in play.

In Bonta's subconscious mind, at the very least.

Indeed, normally others would do most of the talking and Richard most of the thinking, but in this case Richard was dominating the talking part and Bonta found himself mostly thinking. More so than usual, for him.

Bonta thought about what Richard had just showed him inside that little golden box. It made him re-think some aspects of his present life. For a moment anyway. Gave him something new to think about. Something unexpected and out of the ordinary. Something beyond naked profit and the near and medium terms. But still, he needed to learn more. To confirm more.

BZ: You were... with Zyzeen. Until the end? The very end?

R: Yes.

...

[DSPR: Richard & Bonta Digress]

[<https://www.reddit.com/r/DSPR/comments/3oadl9/>

[dspr_richard_bonta_digress_from_book_2/](#)]

BZ: I've sent men out to murder on my command. I've knowingly sent other

men out to die for me.

R: Understood. You know, I too have once sent men under my command out to die. Though *not* by intent or preference. However... in addition to that I've... well, I've learned that there are many other men in this galaxy, other kinds of men, who perhaps accidentally or unwittingly drive their own otherwise loyal women into such a frustrated frenzied state that they end up deciding to seek *me* out so that they could be soothed and satiated and even feel released from their marital bondage, at least temporarily of course for the most loyal of those same women, by being reminded of what it was like to be alive again. What it was like to be a weak and needy and yearning but no-so-innocent girl again. Starting first with their bodies from their beautiful hair and soft lips down to their gentle fingers and then the very tips of their toes and all the secret places in between along the way. And then... and then completing that journey and transformation within their subconscious mind and finally in their conscious one as well. And all while behind a clearly closed and locked door, in a comfortable and safe room, in private together with me alone. Sometimes in the darkness only in that room, but sometimes other places out in public too in the daylight. Depending... well, depending frankly on whether *she* were a particularly kinky kitten, deep down inside, however otherwise she kept it repressed. Though... driving these women over to me was never my original intent. Not originally. At heart I'm just trying to be me, at least the best version of myself. And all I want to do is make the world a better place. Perhaps make a little extra money when doing it, as a practical bonus.

A beat.

Bonta just stared at him. Speechless.

A beat.

R: Too much information?

BZ: A little. But that's fine. Plus I'm probably not the right audience for that.

R: Good. That's what I thought. I was just testing you. You passed.

BZ: Yes. ... Hmmm... Well, I already *know* of your past military experience. *And* your reputation in more recent years as a rake. Of five star systems, is it?

R: Seven, thank you. And counting.

BZ: You move fast.

R: I hardly sleep.

A pause while Bonta thought of his next question.

BZ: How can you live like that?

R: I don't know... A little vodka from time to time, but only when I need it. Plus it helps massively to have an important mission. A dream. A big dream one is trying to make real. Because I know that eventually one day I'll surely die. Therefore I'd like to make the best of my time until then. Make it count. Perhaps twice?

A pause as if Bonta were digesting it.

BZ: I can relate. That's really why I went into business for myself. And to make hay while the sun shines. If you've heard that euphemism from Earth.

R: I have. I've heard many euphemisms from Earth. I've heard The Eurythmics as well, both live and as recorded in the studio, with both Annie & Dave in their prime. I'm even heard many beautiful Earth women moaning, both live and as recorded in the studio, sometimes also in their prime. If that counts. Indeed I've been to the planet Earth in person and then returned back many times, all live. Because I... collect things there and... ship them out for profit or sometimes for... well, for personal interests.

A beat.

BZ: So I've heard.

R: You seem to hear everything.

BZ: It's helpful for my business. Staying one step ahead of the Empire.

R: Tell me about it, my friend. Been there, done that, even have the T-shirt, though you cannot see it now because it is hidden under this black pirate's tunic. And I digress.

BZ: So much digression.

....

[scene: "The Fish and the Shark"]

Richard and Bonta Zarzon's meeting and negotiations were continuing on board Bonta's ship.

Bonta (B): Are you familiar with the jellied spiny blackfish of Antares VI?

Richard (R): Of course. Their poison is deadly.

B: Eaten one. Only mild indigestion.

R: Impressive.

A beat.

R: Ever heard any tales of the giant killer shark of the seas of Osirus?

B: Who hasn't? All the reckless tourists it's snuck up on over the years, then torn apart in surely agonizing pain before being gobbled down without even a trace. Except for their blood. All that blood that would surely be left behind. That and nothing more. I mean, I assume. But yeah... you'll never get *me* in a boat on those waters!

Bonta laughed a little, though Richard was silent and just looked at him.

R: No doubt. A wise course of action. I have been to Osirus. Never again.

Bonta stopped laughing.

Then he cleared his throat.

B: Really? ... I mean, er... What happened?

R: Well, okay, here is what happened. As I remember it.

Richard paused for a moment as if he needed a moment to find the right words.

R: I had... *business* reasons... to sail those seas, at some point, long ago. *Pirate* business reasons, of course. Though I prefer my piracy in space I'm not opposed to working in watery places like Osirus, when needed. Anyway... once there was a terrible storm and a member of my hired crew fell overboard. I jumped in after him immediately, because time was of the essence, and because I'm an expert swimmer and held a safety lifeline back to our ship. Before I could reach my man I could see the terrible beast approaching, like an... underwater demon, a devil, something out of myth, a monster made real! He had... let me see, yes, I think it was five tall dorsal fins -- just like in the stories told about him. His mouth was terrifyingly large with long knives for teeth, or jagged swords. However I had no choice, I was already committed. And I wasn't a total fool: did I mention that in addition to being an expert swimmer and having a safety lifeline back to the ship I also had a telescoping spear optimized for unplanned anti-shark operations? At the last possible moment I struck him with the spear with all the force I could manage, given the conditions. (Not my man, by the way -- the shark.) Right through the jaw, up *hard* into his evil shark brain. The creature didn't stand a chance really. He didn't die quickly, but it threw him off enough, the pain, the distraction, the thrashing of his death throes, the waters already starting to fill up with clouds of his black blood. In the confusion I reached my man, grabbed him, held him fast then began to swim back to the ship, following the lifeline lead all the way. Back on board he was terribly cold, of course, we got him dried and fresh clothes, a hot meal, belly full of tasty nutritious chicken noodle

soup like our mothers used to make. Later that night we sat around the table in the ship's galley and just laughed about it, while drunk out of our minds on Centauran vodka. You know, as Real Men do.

A beat.

B: I... Well... Honestly I may not be able to top that, my Zyzeen friend.

They both laughed together and smiled. The meeting seemed to have gone pretty well indeed, much better than Richard himself had expected anyway.

[TODO on Lio feedback: "*Please* tell me this is the tail-end of a scene that's at least twice as long. I wanna hear more manly 1-up stories!"]

...

[TODO the fuzzy deal. meeting ends. R in the airlock preparing to leave and telling O the meeting went better than he expected, and make it clear BZ realizes he doesn't truly want to deal with R because it would be a danger to him because GE is the greater threat, and so needs to double-cross him, sooner rather than later]

...

[scene: "The Double Cross of Bonta Zarzon"]

Bonta Zarzon wasn't truly an Evil man... he just believed in the pursuit of money and maximizing his wealth above all other things, as fast as possible, by any means necessary.

Richard wasn't necessarily a truly Good or Heroic man. He just believed

that there was Right and Wrong and he had once seen and personally experienced a very great Hurt or two and so now he believed very much in Revenge -- though he was loathe to admit it aloud to others -- as well as making sure those kinds of hurts could never ever ever ever happen again, whether to him, his loved ones or anybody else for that matter, as a bonus ideally. He was no Saint, more an Engineer that became an Officer then was betrayed and ended up a Pirate of sorts, at least officially in the eyes of the Galactic Empire of Tylerane.

So these two men were not strictly speaking in any sort of impossible-to-resolve conflict of opposed incompatibility. It just meant they had different goals and were approaching things from different angles and different points-of-view, the kinds that arose from having different past life experiences, especially ones that made quite strong impressions on them. These facts would shape their entire conversation in that room that day. It helped lead them both together towards how arguably the meeting had to end, how it was destined to end perhaps, for both of them, though they did not know it quite yet. Not until it happened, went flying by like water under a bridge you were standing upon, and therefore it became too late to change the direction of that water's flow and ultimate destination.

In practice, as applied to this particular meeting, here is how it would all play out in specific enough detail. After all was said and done and after everything had been earnestly negotiated and hammered out then mutually agreed upon -- in theory -- Bonta would smile and shake Richard's hand, then, when that same now far-too-trusting Richard had his back turned to him Bonta would discreetly press a button that would cause Richard to get knocked unconscious and then ejected violently out of the ship, on to a certain doom. And Bonta would do it without a trace of guilt, without pause for second thoughts. It

was all just business to him.

Indeed, all throughout the vast Galactic Empire there was somebody always giving the business to somebody else. It was just business, after all.

Though Richard wanted to change that. Had wanted to change that. If he lived love enough.

That was the plan anyway.

Though now he was falling down out of a sky as a totally helpless subject of gravity. Because his brain and therefore his mind was trapped in a paralyzing and foggy dream-like reenactment of his own past.

Richard was not a hero but if he were... well, it would not have been a bad way to die.

...

[TODO Overmind at first not sure there's a problem, but eventually figures out something's wrong with R and he's in danger]

...

Richard was falling through the sky. Down through the clouds. He was unconscious. Wearing a Neoman wing suit. It's shutdown. The flight system was down but it has enough power for the computer and mini-AI. As he plummets the suit's AI tries to wake him up, talking to him through his audio earbuds inside his helmet. It doesn't have any other way. The AI was a canned micro-fork of his old virtual friend and loyal servant Overmind 3000.

"Captain, sir, please wake up."

Nothing. No reaction from Richard.

"Captain, wake up. It's very important that you wake up soon. You're in free fall heading to ground. You have only a minute more before impact. I'm afraid an impact would certainly be fatal, sir."

Still nothing.

"Please wake up now, Richard. Wake up, my friend."

He fell for miles and miles without sign of movement or awareness. Hope of survival approached zero.

....

Two weeks before Richard's ill-fated meeting with Bonta Zarzon...

Susan was alone in her personal cabin on Richard's ship The Eryon. Looking into the mirror on the wall. Primping.

She's not quite sure that she liked what she saw. So she made one last adjustment to her hair, and turned her head from side to side to see it from different angles. Trying different smiles. Different facial gestures, and different "messages" to send with her eyes. The kinds that a space pirate might notice and understand. But being male and not from Earth made it doubly-difficult for him, she was sure. She pursed her lipsticked lips together as if to kiss, though nobody was there except herself and her reflection in the mirror.

Overmind: Looks good to me, Ms. Susan.

It was a voice from a wall speaker. You know, because she was "alone" and therefore had total privacy.

S: Ugh!

O: I know. Cameras turning off.

S: That should be the default.

O: It is. But I'm experiencing faults these days. We told you when you first came on board. The Captain did anyway. I'm sure he'll have me fixed the next chance he can. Probably require some maintenance carried out by my creator himself directly.

S: Which is?

O: I thought you knew. Stanley Opolis. Generally considered the best or, at least, the most **famous** hacker and roboticist in the Galactic Empire. Also a friend of Richard's.

S: He seems to be friends with *everybody*.

O: Yes but he's only had sex with a certain percentage of them.

A beat.

S: A certain percentage of his friends? Or a certain percentage of everybody?

A beat. As if Overmind needed time to choose his words carefully. Even if he truly did not. And though Overmind seemed to have a male voice and personality at a superficial interactive level he was, in fact, at his core merely a machine driven by advanced software AI. Extremely advanced. Though still just a machine, and therefore not quite real. Though often thought pretty realistic when it came to giving stereotypically male responses to a woman's questions.

O: Of **everybody**. I mean, duh. Hello! He's the Dread Space Pirate for a reason, Ms. Meerson.

A pause. While she digested this and figured out what her official reaction would be. Which was pretty easy.

S: Well... *that's* reassuring!

....

Richard knew a lot of women.

Susan would be learning just how many women, eventually. But she would be learning it sloooowly, over time. Which was both incredibly good and bad for both of them. Some of these women he knew only by accident or happenstance. Some of them he knew purely for reasons of science. Some for business. Susan would also be learning more about the exact *kinds* of science -- however arcane -- and the exact kinds of business -- however tawdry -- Richard was involved in, and again, slowly and incrementally, over time. A fact which was also both incredibly good and bad for him.

One of the many many women that he knew in some fashion or another, was a princess. A star princess. One of many of those. But this *particular* star princess was different in many ways from your typical, everyday, garden-variety royal star princess. And we will tell you why. But first, some introductory facts.

Her name was Rachel.

Formally and officially she was The Princess Rachel Murin of the Royal Star House Murelle. Her family's fiefdom and home estate was all the way over near the Empire's farthest frontier on the opposite side of Galaxy G from where the starship Eryon was located currently. Rachel was very intellectual and book-ish, and an excellent student, acing every class she took in University, and she had taken quite a lot. She did charity work. She rescued kittens. She loved to read. She loved to read about kittens, and she also loved Shakespeare. Though the Earth itself -- Shakespeare's home planet, for those who don't know -- was forever trapped beyond a Schweinschwartz Shell, there was a pretty regular black market trade going on between that planet and the Galactic Empire, and a few highly prized items sometimes made it across the gap, and carried obscenely high prices, affordable only to the most wealthy entrepreneurs, lucky princesses, or both. She had gotten her first taste of Shakespeare when she was but a

teenage girl, and now, after all these long years later, even at the ripe old age of precisely 22 years old, in Earth terms, she was still his biggest fan. It might have been because she was a romantic and believed in love, true love. In epic quests and battles. In the bittersweet pain of tragedy. In great stories, well told. And she especially liked men with unusual powers of language and vast vocabularies, like Shakespeare himself. And despite having become very widely read, she had never stepped off her own home world, but hoped to some day, when the right opportunity arose.

That was Rachel, and how she truly was. Though Richard knew almost none of these facts.

Richard himself had only bumped into her one day outside a conference, said "Hello!" then continued past in a rush. Even then he was becoming a little famous, even infamous in some circles, and so she had recognized him immediately. Though the only thing he remembered about her was how perfect or innocent she seemed, like a maiden. Almost virginal. A kind of Princess Bride, like in myth, especially the Earth variety, the William Goldman version of that myth. Except... shorter, and possibly kinkier behind closed doors, and with lustrous red hair. He had only taken this all in in the span of a few seconds before he had to rush off to the next conference talk, otherwise he might have stayed to chat her up, because, well, you never know what might have happened between them, he remembered thinking at the time, and, life is short. But anyway, this was who Rachel Murin was, of the House Murelle. And what Richard knew of her. Just another innocent girl, really, intellectual yet innocent, almost virginal. For him she was refreshing, given Richard's own dark line of work and secret missions, the Rebellion, the price on his head, et cetera.

Anyway.

One day Richard was on the bridge of his starship, the Eryon, sitting in his

big black leather captain's chair, which was positioned in front of the ship's central command console. He had been working hard on something while he had time alone to focus without interruption, mainly because Susan was away doing something in her cabin, and Overmind was busy doing hyper-metric course calculations needed for the next day.

Eventually Richard stopped working because he needed a break, so he thought he'd pick something random from his voicemail to listen to. It always seemed to have a huge backlog and was never ending. Scanning through the message headers he saw one from Princess Rachel, and he instantly but only hazily recalled his own memory of meeting her a few months before. From what he did remember he knew it would be safe to listen to her voicemail. She'd probably ask him to try sneaking out more Shakespeare books for her the next time he visited Earth. One of the many black market activities he engaged in. If there was high enough profit.

He selected her message and pressed PLAY. And this is what he heard:

"Hello Richard!!!

It's Rachel!

Rachel Murin of the House Murelle over in the Galadrax system? I don't know if you remember me or not but we met when you were attending the Hyperdimensional Engineering Applications Conference and we ran into each other walking outside the main speaking hall.

Anyway, I just wanted to say hello, and, well, was wondering if perhaps when you weren't too busy you could meet me sometime. I mean, I'd like to talk, of course. But, I also really really really need you to... well, I want you to just F---"

Richard's hand leaped out to press a button on the console. Stabbed it with his finger.

"—FAST forward. Through that one," he said aloud to himself. As he forward

fasted, er, I mean, fasted, fasted forwarded, forward, through the rest of her voicemail.

In a hurry. While muted.

Now... he himself wasn't flustered (unlike the author), and spoke merely in a neutral, business tone as if having arrived at a quick, logical conclusion about the best present course of action.

Speaking of business. This was kind of sort of also one of his lines of business. Which Susan would be learning about eventually, probably, too. But thankfully, and if he continued to be very very careful, not for a long time.

"What are you doing?" asked Susan.

Richard whipped around suddenly in his captain's chair. But he did so... casually, and calmly, and with practiced grace. As required by Dread Space Pirate tradition, and stories.

A beat.

"Yo," he said, to Susan. Who must have just strolled in a minute before and he hadn't heard her do it.

And when he said, "Yo," he said it with the deepest, lowest and most manly masculine tone of voice he could muster. And he could muster quite a lot.

"Are you working?" she asked, innocently.

"Yes," he replied promptly. "Exactly!"

This tone of voice was much higher.

He looked relieved then swiveled his chair back to face his captain's console again, placing his hands back on the command control keyboard.

"What are you working on?"

He stopped typing.

A beat.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Well that doesn't seem very productive," she said.

A beat.

"I cannot deny that logic. However, my line of work is incredibly hard and dangerous. Incredibly hard. And dangerous. Sometimes, a man needs a break. Also, I'm a man. Therefore I sometimes need breaks. QED."

A pause, as if Susan was digesting this and rolling it around in her mind.

"You're working hard?"

"Yes. Incredibly."

Susan came over, gently turned his captain's chair around a little so she could accomplish what she wanted, and then knelt down on the floor between his legs. She looked up into his eyes. "I bet that something's hard."

A pause.

"Once again, I cannot deny ... er ... your I-I-I-logic-c-ckKKK--"

Then Overmind turned off his cameras and microphones. Technically he let them stay on for about five minutes longer than he was supposed to, past that point, because his mind was slightly damaged and therefore increasingly deranged -- at least in theory. But he did destroy eventually all of that particular recorded audio and video feed data afterward.

After it was reviewed a few times for system test purposes.

Just a few times.

Of course.

...

"Susan?" - O

"Yes, Overmind?" - S

"Spread your legs please."

"What?!"

"I said... please stretch your legs. Get some exercise. You'll need it to compensate for the otherwise ill effects of long term space voyage, cooped up inside a tiny flying tin can. Humans like you were just not meant to do it for very long. Just as Richard was not meant to do it for very long. You can probably imagine what I am talking about, via insinuation. I know what kind of imagination you humans have. I once watched Emmanuelle."

But unbeknownst to the quite clearly innocent Overmind 3000 it was probably not a good time for Susan to be spreading her legs. Not anymore. We won't say why but surely the reader's filthy imagination will fill in the blanks.

...

Susan confronted Richard with something that had been bothering her ever since seeing his ship for the first time, and leaving the Earth in it with him. Something that didn't seem to make sense, and so was rather suspicious.

S: Richard?

R: Susan.

S: How come nobody else on Earth seems to know about the Galactic Empire? And vice versa? How come spaceships aren't just ... you know, like, coming and going, all the time? People leaving or being snatched up like me. Is there some kind of conspiracy? Or was this like the first time it's ever happened? I don't understand. We think we're alone in the universe. We thought we were. I did anyway.

R: I see. Good question. Totally understandable. I'll try to answer. An introductory summary maybe, at least. ... Hmmmm.... Ok. You see, your home planet Earth is surrounded by something called a... *Schweinschwartz Shell*. It's

like a bubble. But made out of exotic high-energy particles and waves and stuff. Heinrich himself has written a paper on it. But anyway that bubble acts both to filter out and distort the flow of matter, light and information that passes across it, what little it allows through. It's like a one-way mirror, where each side leads to a slightly different multi-dimensional, mass/energy distributed permutation and quantum Einsteinian space-time matrix on the other side, from the relative perspective of anybody or anything passing across that boundary. Or something like that. My physics is rusty. Uh. But anyway... it's *very* hard to go back and forth and NOT stay within the same universe. In other words it's hard to use that bubble boundary to shift yourself across into that slightly different universe and dimension. Though... not impossible. Clearly. Just very very hard. Quite exotic and expensive technology is needed to even make the attempt. I personally happen to be... well, mildly wealthy due partly to my career in so-called "piracy" and, well, also I guess I have some unique friends with unusual resources, like Heinrich, Stanley and Betty. Therefore, **I** personally can do it but only when flying *my* ship. Because the Eryon has the technology needed. Had it installed a while back. And apparently, as we both found out the hard way recently, so does at least one of the bounty hunters after me. Vega Venturion and his ship the Barbarella. I wouldn't be surprised if the Empire itself provided him with that tech, if only because he's logically their most promising chance for getting me. Because he's the Man in Black, in the galactic mass media's imagination. They frackin' love it. The idea of 'The Man in Black vs. The Dread Space Pirate.' Though I also wear black a lot. Sad pirate is sad. Anyway, a digression. I guess the media coverage of he-and-I's little private war and occasional battle shenanigans beats most of their own totally fictional holo-vid shows in terms of audience draw numbers. Though **still** a distant second or third to anything with Betty From Betelgeuse or, obviously, cats."

Susan was silent briefly as if to absorb this in her mind before thinking of what to ask next. Often by the time Richard reached his ninth sentence in a spiel she was still back on his fourth sentence or even his third. The man had velocity, she had to admit. Both mental and physical. Whether navigating through asteroid belts or getting into and out of bunks, or articles of clothing without bunks ever even getting a chance to be involved. Speaking of bunks... she thought momentarily to herself. Before regaining her original focus.

Also when Richard said the word *piracy* he did so while making the universally recognized *scare quotes* gesture with his fingers in the air. As in so-called "piracy". As in he didn't think that what he did was truly piracy, it was just considered such by the Galactic Empire at the current time, per their current arbitrary whim-based laws, manufactured evidence and/or spin, and in this particular case a mix of all three. Those jerks. But he noticed the ladyfolk across the galaxy mostly seemed to *like* piracy and especially dread space pirates, whether dressed all in black or dressed in nothing at all in the darkness. And it was increasingly quite lucrative for him, so he kept it up. He liked to keep lots of things up. Sometimes he himself was kept up for hours. Sometimes he kept ladies up all night long, until sunrise, or at least until their menfolk returned and caught them.

S: Schweinschwartz?

R: Gesundheit! Yes, that's it.

Susan by now had learned that it often made more efficient use of everybody's time if she just looked it up in *Grindle's Galactic Guide*, which was the most popular encyclopedia slash travel and cultural guide in all of Galaxy G. It was like pre-IPO Google from pre-eventual-apocalypse Earth, but cubed, curated, came in more colors and flavors and was also in fact scratch-and-sniff for those daring enough to try it. And it had personality. Lots and lots of

personality. So she proceeded to look it up in *Grindle's*. Here is what the Guide had to say on the matter:

The Schweinschwartz Shell is a bubble made out of exotic high-energy particles and waves.

First hypothesized in detail in the year 3124 GEE (GalEmpire Era) by one Professor Heinrich von Hexenhammer of The Institute For Advanced Research on the planet Gamma Centauri 5 — although most early reviewers assumed the author was either slightly drunk or completely mad during the time in which it was devised. It was later revealed he was honestly a combination of both, at least in part, and yet... the mathematical treatment he worked out was still completely sound and every experiment performed afterward to seek confirmation or refutation of the hypothesized physical mechanisms involved did turn out positive because they appeared to be consistent in effect with his treatment's predictions out to a once scandalously unprecedented nineteen million decimal places -- give or take a dozen or so. Speaking of precedent, that degree of theoretical-to-experimental measurement validation accuracy and precision had not been seen since, oh, the very human physicist/wizard/drummer and ladies man Richard Feynman had last walked the beautiful but doomed planet Earth. In fact, Heinrich himself was often compared to that man — his second coming, and perhaps third and fourth as a bonus — but he was honestly more of an equally balanced cross between Feynman, the Earth actor George Clooney inexplicably, and the literary character Baron Victor von Frankenstein, with a touch of H.P. Lovecraft's Dr. Herbert West, Re-Animator, for good measure. And his hair was black with white stripes or perhaps the other way around.

Susan looked up from reading the guide device.

S: I see. Interesting.

R: Yes, agreed. Very interesting.

Richard was grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

O: I see also. Oh, the things I see sometimes.

R: Overmind?

O: Turning off cameras.

Susan felt a strange breeze -- rare but not unheard of while onboard this ship -- and so looked down and noticed her panties were around her ankles again.

S: *Dammit!*

R: It just keeps happening. I can't help it.

O: He really can't help it, Susan.

R: Overmind?

O: Turning off speakers and microphones.

R: Everything else can be left turned on.

S: I see that.

....

Susan's back was against a wall one evening, there on board the Eryon. She was pressed up against it. She was naked from the waist down, and her legs were spread -- spread for a very good reason, which will be revealed momentarily.

Also, she wasn't standing on her own legs because those were currently occupied being wrapped around a man's torso as his strong bare muscular arms were under her knees & thighs, holding her up. His cock had penetrated her. She was being fucked. Quite thoroughly. Getting pounded, really. And by a pirate. A dread pirate of space. Granted, it was a pirate she was already on a first name basis with and had in fact already long ago shared all her greatest fears with in

private intimate confidence.

But still.

It has been said that possibly the strongest orgasms to ever occur are those that can only happen when a mischievous, not-so-innocent Earth girl and supposed law student of college age has been rudely and unexpectedly taken away far from her planet on an accidental and dangerous adventure across space (and time, and possibly more space), and then gotten fucked -- in exactly the way that she needs -- by a handsome space pirate wearing a black eye mask while in a sleek silver starship that he himself owned. And while a perverted but genius computer AI not-so-secretly watched them fuck like rabbits through a big red eye camera lens on a wall nearby the rutting couple.

And those who made this claim and assumption were in actuality completely correct. They were in fact the strongest orgasms that could possibly ever occur. It has been measured, in tests. By very kinky scientists and engineers. Which is a long story in itself and an even further digression from our original focus here. On the couple rutting up against the wall, the bottomless Earth girl and the currently rather earnest and sweating pirate, known throughout the galaxy for his wicked wit and intelligence and hypnotizing eyes, and yet despite all that who couldn't seem to make up his mind now about *where* exactly he wanted to keep his cock located: whether inside or outside of her... or back inside again?

She didn't mind his indecision though, not one bit.

...

[TODO finish & insert here: **Sailing the Seas of Blue Delta Nemonee**]

...

O: "Now entering the Betelgeuse star system. Please remain in your seats and keep your seat belts thoroughly fastened. This may hurt briefly."

R: Overmind?

O: Just kidding. About that last part.

R: Repairs coming soon.

O: Sure. You've been saying that for years.

...

[TODO approached B3, land on a high landing platform in B3's cap city to await rendezvous there with Betty]

...

A glossy red hypershell craft approached fast then glided in slowly for a landing.

A white gas escaped.

A door hatch opened.

A foot emerged. In a glossy red high-heeled shoe.

Then another. A pair of legs followed, and they went on and on and on but eventually ended with an entire woman attached to them, and she emerged soon thereafter.

She exited quite regally out of the vehicle. As if it were a formal Affair of State. Then she stood up straight on the landing deck, and straightened her dress.

It was the most famous woman in Galaxy G. She had also been voted *Girl*

Most Likely back in high school on Betelgeuse III.

It was Betty, of course.

She wore a red dress.

Completely red.

The reddest red.

It was also defined as the *Reddest Red* in the language of Narfon.

She had insisted originally to the fabric supplier that she technically wanted it *redder than red*. If such a thing were possible outside of mathematics.

The man had humored her by replying, "Of *course*, Betty. Your every *wish* is my own lucrative contract. Er, I mean, my command."

And then that man had somehow managed to come up with a new shade which, according to the famous physicist and incredibly part-time optical expert witness, Heinrich von Hexenhammer, was actually *more* red than any red that had ever existed previously.

Betty had approved.

She was now also wearing a red hat -- a hat that was about to become the latest fashion in Altair. Long skin-tight red gloves that extended to her elbows. Red lipstick. Plunging opening in the front of her dress that communicated a message that meant "*CLEAVAGE!!!*" in Galactic Basic.

Speaking of languages again: the equivalent Narfon word was coined *B-B-B-Betty* in her honor.

As in:

"You saw my date last night?"

"The one with the B-B-B-B-Betty situation?"

"Yes that one."

"That was a lot of B-B-B-B-Betty she was showing."

"I didn't mind."

But back to the present.

She strutted toward Richard and Susan. Her hips did unspeakable things beneath her dress. Richard, being male, became mesmerized immediately by this phenomenon. He always had. Even now, after all these years. Even after they technically became platonic. Because he had... *seen* things. Seen things he would never be able to forget. Seen... *attack* ships on *fire* off the shoulder of Orion. He had seen *C-beams* glitter in the *darkness* at Tannhauser Gate. Lots of indescribably epiphanic and mathematically-orgasmically perfect things like that.

Also, Betty naked. Close-up and personal.

There's that.

And so as her hips did unspeakable things beneath her tight dress as she strutted and prowled toward him he almost couldn't help but flashback to various nights in particular. Take for example that one night when ---

OOF!

He was elbowed without warning by Susan. Well, without recent warning. Again.

"Ouch."

...

[TODO they all say hello and R introduces S to B in person. More stuff happens. R re-boards Eryon and ...]

Richard gave one last wave of goodbye to Susan and Betty. Then the ramp retracted back up into the ship, and the outer hatch closed. He stepped back inside further, past the inner hatch, hit a button and the inner hatch closed as well. Then he lowered himself down onto the floor of the passageway, fast but

gently enough, and stretched himself out fully, laying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He crossed his hands across his chest and closed his eyes.

"I'll hold all your calls, sir."

It was the synthesized voice of Overmind 3000 from a wall speaker.

Within minutes Richard was deep asleep. If he were the snoring type he would have started to snore, right there on the floor. But he wasn't and therefore didn't. Instead he almost certainly dropped into a dream. He was the kind of man who could begin to dream quickly, deep and vividly. And he didn't always like to come back out again. Not right away, anyway.

Overmind carried out previous orders and automatically launched the mighty starship Eryon up into the city's airspace, and then rocketed up the rest of the way into orbit and then onward to the outer system and eventually made the jump into hyperspace, heading presumably to the next location needed for Super Important Urgent Rebellion/Piracy Business. However tawdry, arcane or incredibly dangerous that this business might turn out to be, ultimately in the end.

[He has departed heading off to his ostensibly urgent/important/dangerous Rebel/Piracy business

...

Betty and Susan were seated together in an air-car flying along in the skyways of the planet Betelgeuse III. Betty driving. If you could call it that. Her hands were on the guide stick but it didn't seem like her mind was much on her hands. She had pulled down her top, exposing her tits as they flew through the air. Laughing and yelling, "*Woo-hoo!*"

Susan would occasionally glance over at her, uh, “chauffeur” and ostensible shopping trip host, and possible new friend. Or frenemy? And she was uncomfortable. But also kind of excited. A little intimidated, but also kind of envious of Betty.

Betty leaned over and tried to speak loud enough to be heard over the wind. "What are you wearing under the skirt?" she asked, almost yelling.

S: "What do you think?!"

B: "*Take them off!* Remember, no panties allowed."

S: "The ticket said just that they were not expected."

B: "Yes I expected you to take them off. Otherwise I can take you back."

Betty directed the car to begin dropping down out of the skyway at a steep angle. The ground seemed to be approaching at a terrifying velocity.

S: "Okay, okay! Hold on."

Susan reached under her skirt and, well, er, um, she complied. With the request. Of her new wild friend.

Betty pulled back on the stick and leveled out before it was too late. Then pulled back more and the air-car climbed back toward the skyway lanes again.

B: "Thank you! Don't worry, I'm not lesbian! Well, not officially."

...

[next 2 scenes can be posted as a single preview piece titled "DSPR: A Special Emphasis on Hard" from book 2]

Betty and Susan were flying along in Betty's aircar through the clouds of her home planet Betelgeuse III. They were speeding and violating 15 *known* traffic laws.

Suddenly sirens could be heard. A flying police car appeared in pursuit. They ordered them over the vehicle's bullhorn speakers to do the aircar equivalent of

"pull over." They complied. Both cars were now parked on the ground below. Two cops got out. Once they realized it was the famous celebrity *Betty from Betelgeuse* herself they became flustered. She was a sexual goddess, after all, and rich MILF-y cougar. Then there was her body all by itself:

Cleavage? Yes please.

Baby-makin' hips wrapped inside a skin-tight red dress? MMMMM-M-M-M-m-m-moar.

Legs? Legs that went on and on and seemingly refused to stop until your mind was blown and/or your bank accounts drained, sometimes both.

The various quality features of Betty's body alone were not lost on these two young and obviously quite hard-working men. Double emphasis on hard. To wit:

Cop 1: "B-B-B-B-bb-b-bb-"

B: "It's Betty!"

Cop 2: "N-N-N-N-n-n-gggg. Er, what he means, is---"

B: "From Betelgeuse!"

Cop 2: "Uh.. Yes. ... Ma'am. We know. Who you are. We've seen. Those. Er, well, the... The films. Your. Ah. Those movies. The, uh. Star Slut, and the Tigers and Tachyons, or whatever, I forget the title exactly. I mean, the film itself, that was amazing. The first in the series especially, that was my favorite. I mean. Well. We know who--"

B: "I'm so glad! Hey by the way, I just noticed something. Hope you don't mind me pointing it out. It's just a suggestion I might have."

Cop 2: "No go right ahead, ma'am."

The officer took that moment to dramatically pull off his duty sunglasses and give her a very serious look, as if he were paying very particular and serious attention to whatever she was about to say next. Whatever would be coming out of her r-r-r-red l-l-l-lipsticked mouth.

B: "Ok, great. It's just that... Those *handcuffs* on your belts look SO strong! Do you have to put them on me today? Maybe put them on me and my friend here as well? After you frisk us first, of course. Make us bend over your car there and spread our legs in order to be searched. To be searched quite thoroughly. Frisk and search the pair of us. And there's a pair of you too. Two for two. So convenient. Such an opportunity. A rare opportunity that may never come around again I imagine."

Their poor male brains were about to exp-p-p-p-p-plode.

The officer, who was also clearly the more senior of the two, simply looked over at his partner and shrugged. Then without a word he put his sunglasses back on. Turned back to look at Betty and Susan. And grinned a wicked grin.

Cop 1: "B-B-B-B-b-bbb-bbb..."

...

[TODO write/insert the beginning of **The Astoria Operation** here]

[DSPR: A Special Emphasis on Hard]

The masked man in the all black pirate's outfit finally spoke. He addressed the ship's crew and passengers directly, being sure to make eye contact with as many of them personally as he could, at least once each, all throughout his speech:

"Hello. My name's Richard. The galactic mass media likes to call me The Dread Space Pirate. As I'm sure some if not most or even all of you know already, thanks to that very system.

"But regardless, I am on a mission. A very serious mission.

"My goals are complex but I'll give you a summary to introduce them: I'm out to avenge the innocent.

"And if you're hearing this now or reading this later in some news piece reported after the fact then it means most likely that I hold you responsible and therefore accountable for certain unpunished crimes of the past, committed in the name of the so-called Galactic Empire of Tylerane. And in this case in particular, for High Crimes against the people of the planet Zyzeen.

"To wit: for unjustified hostility and subterfuge accompanied by false propaganda; for illegal invasion and conquest; and lastly for the use of atomic weapons of mass destruction and the spreading of various terrible mortal sicknesses against civilians, against non-combatants, against children, babies and animals, and against the elderly and retired or otherwise disabled, all of whom resided in a peaceful community that held no ill will or plans against anyone else. In other words, fundamental and quite serious moral crimes against those who owed you nothing and did you no wrong, who caused you no harm, and instead wished merely nothing more than to simply be left alone to live out their lives.

"There is more, of course. Much more than this. But this is enough to know for now. A good start. More than adequately sufficient.

"So that is it, for now. Until next time.

"I'll close with a repetition and reminder so it really sticks. That my name is Richard. That the media calls me The Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen. And I'm out to avenge the innocent. By this and the preceding you've been given fair and clear warning. That is all, again for now at least. Therefore... goodbye."

A beat.

And then he spoke again, this time in a much less serious tone and with a more relaxed body posture:

"Ladies? Now's probably a good time to consider loosening your clothing, or otherwise adjusting your cleavage for maximum depth of view. Big booty's are

also always nice. I may be a gentleman but I'm also most certainly a pirate. *ARRRRRrrrrr!!!* Therefore, let the games begin. Rebecca? Maureen? Dianne? That's it, girls, yes like that. Down on your knees, all of you eventually. One by one, get in line. And the stunning Mary Anne Jane of The Royal Star House Ryoki bent over before me with her shapely butt thrust out on offer. A quite... tappable ass. Perfect! Everything's perfect."

He grinned. But it was a terrible grin. Anyone that knew him well enough could see that in his eyes.

He would go on to deliver this speech, or some minor variation of it, hundreds of times over the years, each to different effect and resulting impact and reception by the audience at hand. But there was something special in this particular performance and delivery of it. It would go on to help raise much needed funds and several new useful recruits to aid his young Rebellion. And it seemed to help him win the alpha's choice from a fine selection of some of the most beautiful, mischievous, sensually needy, or just plain bored but rich women, that that part of the local galactic arm had to offer. He may have been a Gentleman of the first order, and lately apparently an idealistic Rebel Hero, but he was always a Pirate at heart. Had been since he was a boy. As he warned them. And a pirate's life was hard sometimes, needing the occasional relief.

With a special emphasis on... hard.

[TODO continue and flesh out **The Astoria Operation** here and integrate with following]

[DSPR: The Red Haired Woman, The Blonde Haired Girl]

[https://www.reddit.com/r/DSPR/comments/23buof/the_red_haired_woman_the_blonde_haired_girl/]

From behind a closed door on board the mighty silver pirate starship Eryon there was the sound of a woman moaning. Perhaps in pain. Perhaps in pleasure. We cannot be sure. Not that the reader would be able to tell yet. But trust us when we say that this woman who was moaning was not in fact Susan Meerson the easy Earth girl, but somebody completely different, and that Susan herself was away and busy ostensibly shopping for shoes in a city-sized shoe store on the planet Betelgeuse III, side by side with the most famous singer/actress/pornstar in the galaxy, named Betty. From Betelgeuse. Otherwise known as Betty From Betelgeuse. Mostly because she liked to say that phrase, exactly like that: *Betty, From Betelgeuse*. And who herself was also a former flame of Richard the Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen, and Rake of Seven Star Systems. A situation which was clearly ripe for all sorts of interesting and potentially explosive possibilities. Also, shoes.

Suddenly the door slid opened. It did it with a *whoosh* like on Earth's original Star Trek show. It had long been required by dread space pirate tradition.

Richard emerged, looking tired, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Wow," he said, to himself.

He then stepped over next to the wall and a special panel there. He pressed a button and had a brief chat with Overmind 3000, his ship's AI, on the intercom, about the latest mission status updates and irrelevant technical minutia involving hyperdrive engines. As men do. As one does when a naked woman is bound up in the other room. In need of something.

Urgently.

"Please.... Come back soon," came a woman's voice from that other room. Although she herself clearly had not come. Only her voice.

"Speaking of which... Gotta go, Big O," said Richard into the intercom microphone.

"Understood, Captain," replied Overmind.

"And keep those cameras off!"

"Yes, sir. Implied I can keep the microphones on."

"That is not implied."

"But it is expected."

"Overmind?"

"Yes, sir. Audio and video recording devices will be off. Unless there's some sort of overriding system emergency necessitating it for the safety of the ship, the integrity of the inner or outer hulls, or, of course, the life support systems dependent electronics, and/or a scheduled automated full systems test drill that must be performed. Any of those things. Just those things though."

"Oh Grod. Sometimes..."

"Understood, Captain. You'll be in her bunk."

Richard sighed. Stepped back into the other room and the door slid shut with a Star Trek *whoosh* again.

Now we were looking inside that room. There was some strange exotic metal contraption on one side of the room, but nobody was inside of it, or using it, at the moment.

However, on the other side of this same room we could see a recently naked woman, with long shiny red hair, and very pale skin, and green eyes, and dilated pupils, and flushed cheeks, and a blue eagle tattoo in the middle of her lower back indicating that she was at once both a Princess of the Royal Star House Murelle, plus, also, a slutty tramp.

She was now covered partly in a large white fluffy towel. And sitting next to Richard together on a black leather bench. Richard was shirtless, and clearly quite broad shouldered but trim, with ripped abdominal muscles. And he was leaning back with his large long-fingered hands behind his head, and talking. She

was listening, intently. Almost too intently. What Richard was saying then was this:

"And the first time it happened to me, that I remember, was way way back on Zyzeen my home world, a long time ago, when I was just a young boy, and everything was... well, a lot different back then. Of course. But it affected me forever, the thing that happened then, affecting me all the rest of my life. I'll always remember it. What happened was this.

There was this one rainy night where the pretty blonde-haired girl that I had a crush on, who lived next door, well she came over and rapped her knuckles on my bedroom window. It was late at night, our parents were sleeping, so we thought we were safe. I opened the window and let her in. I was pretty lucky she wasn't a vampire, to be honest. But I digress.

Anyway.

We immediately talked about... how *cold* it was, both inside and outside that night, and the rain, and how she was *so wet*, and therefore her clothes needed to be taken off and dried before she could go back, and school that day, as one does, because we were practically just kids. Except not really. But nothing that happened *after* that moment was as I expected, as I hoped anyway. But I'll remember it probably forever. Because maybe it was the perfect thing that could have happened. What happened next was this..."

And then he continued but we the narrator have decided to leave them alone in private and leave you to wonder what exactly happened next. What he said next, and what this pretty blonde-haired girl who lived next door said to him next, this first young love of his life, back then. About what happened there on the planet Zyzeen as a young boy late at night side by side with his first crush, back at that age when everything was *incredibly important* and when myths were everyday life and dreams blurred together with reality but ended up making

reality completed because, at least in a certain way, reality became even better than what was otherwise true.

Richard had told this story to only a few people in life so far, only a few strangers in fact. And you the readers may not ever learn this particular story exactly. But trust us when we tell you that he would eventually tell this story to Susan, years later, after he knew her better. Some things in life are so personal you can only tell them to relative strangers, recently met, usually after an orgasm. Or to those you love with all your heart, almost against your will, like gravity or perhaps destiny. And you will all just have to wait to find out which applied in this case.

But don't worry. We have so many things to show you and tell you about beforehand. And the galaxy is a big place.

Time passed.

[R with 2nd of his 3 captives/guests from the starliner Astoria: named Olivia]

R inspected her with his eyes as his hands roamed her body, pressed firm against her with his palms as all his fingertips slid across the outside of her clothing. Clothing that was suspiciously... risqué and... lingerie-like. For a lady sitting in a quite public seating area for passengers on a cruise liner, and in the very middle of the local shipboard day, on a Tuesday, and while unaccompanied by any men or obvious suitors and theoretically... not *expecting* any either. Though she looked like she was expecting something.

Or someone. Probably both.

"You're wearing panties," he said.

She noticed it was a statement not a question. She answered anyway. With

what little powers of speech she had left, now, in the presence of this famous, rich and quite handsome man, for the first time. (Outside of her fantasies anyway.)

"Y-Y-Y-Yes."

"Big... mistake."

Without missing a beat he slapped her butt, hard. She yelped.

He then leaned in close, positioning his mouth behind her right ear. She could feel his whiskers pricking her neck. That alone could have made her become wet. Except she already was, long before that point. She could be *such* a slut. At least when in the company of a certain kind of man. The right kind of man.

"*BIG*," he said, in a confident masculine whisper next to her ear, almost a growl. He startled her again, and he noticed her whole body seemed to twitch once in reaction. Her eyes rolled back and then she closed them, thinking she would surely not be able to take much more of this. She hoped something much more decisive happened soon. Something a bit more... forceful. More... penetrating. In order to take her body past the point of crisis, with no going back. She was needing it now so badly she thought she might explode if she didn't get this kind of treatment, and soon.

The things she experienced over the course of the next hour were things her body had never experienced before. Only her mind, in aher imagination, especially while reading so-called "romance" novels. She vowed afterward that she really must start taking deep space cruises more often. In fact, what she didn't know at the time was that Neva Galactic Cruises, Inc. was counting on it. And what readers probably didn't know -- upon first reading, at least -- was that Neva Galactic Cruises was founded, majority owned and still led and controlled personally by one Broderick Neva. Of Betelgeuse. The father of one Betty Neva,

a lady who ultimately took on the galactic media-friendly alias of Betty From Betelgeuse. Herself an old friend and ally (and former lover, of course) of Richard. The connection and implications of which could be left as an exercise for the reader's imagination for now, though will be revisited and spelled out in more behind-the-scenes detail later.

But we digress. Slightly.

Back to the woman currently in Richard's hands who had suddenly thought she must go on wicked space pirate attack-prone cruises more often.

Not long after she had this thought, a thick black cloth blindfold was placed on her head, wrapping around it, without warning, and then sinched tight, until not a trace of light was allowed through. It was applied by a pirate. A certain Dread Space Pirate that had taken her now as his helpless prisoner. Then the next phase of her predicament began. And though by that point she was reduced to the point of moaning and gibbering or at best the occasional plaintive-sounding "*Noooooooooo...*" -- which Richard was quite sure was the kind of NO a lady sometimes says when what she really means is *YESSSSS... BUT HARDER DEEPER FASTER OR SLOWER, LONGER AND KEEP REPEATING INFINITELY UNTIL THE END OF TIME ITSELF YOU HANDSOME BASTARD* and yet the same lady still believed in showing a modicum of prim feminine decency and maintaining at least a little plausible deniability held in reserve. For while Richard did not speak many languages, he did know a few, and he was a cunning linguist when needed. He spoke the language of Men, and the language of Pirates, of course, and he also knew a great deal of the Narfon language of the Narfon people of the planet Narf. But perhaps what he was best at, or found the most personally profitable, in his line of work -- and sometimes, frankly, in his idle free time and hobbies, however tawdry -- was in knowing the language of Women. What they meant precisely when they spoke, and what precisely was

meant by the expression of their bodies, their physical condition, what they meant with their little gestures. With their state of dress, and their reactions to others, especially to men, at least in the case of hetero women, which is the precise kind that Richard specialized in, and for obvious reasons.

This ability or talent or insight was a blessing at times, of course. But sometimes also a curse. As all powerful things are. The galaxy is a big place, by the way, in case it hasn't been mentioned yet. And so it attracts and leverages power -- any kind of power -- like a moth to a flame. Except in this case Richard was clearly not a moth. He was a flame. He was one of the flames of the galaxy, along with Betty, and several other people and concepts, including of course several *ludicrously* over-popular photos of cute wittle kittens having cute mishaps captured in time, forever.

[TODO last part of above last sentence is weak/rough/awkward, fix/smooth/chop]

[TODO R with the 3rd of his 3 captives/guests from the starliner Astoria]

...

Betty and Susan were talking and maybe starting to confide with one another. Betty was currently talking about her greatest particular fears.

Supposedly.

B: "I'm afraid I'll be *taken* by pirates, Susan. Taken and just *used* by them. Dread *space* pirates. A whole ship *full* of men like that. Used for their own filthy pleasure. And then afterward I will not have gotten *any* of their galactic holo-communicator numbers!"

Susan reacted by showing a kind of 'WTF?!' facial gesture on her face.

Which was where she usually put her facial gestures.

There on her face.

And therefore she did it with ease. It had gotten even more easy recently after having spent so much time with Richard and Overmind and especially since leaving the planet Earth behind. Plus arguably most of the things back on Earth had deserved a WTF.

Though, in all honesty... deep down... secretly and unspoken... Susan felt she knew *exactly* what Betty meant. She knew. She related. She felt exactly the same way. Because she too wanted those things. Wanted *that*. Done to her. Part of her did. Deep down inside. In fact you could argue that part of her *needed* it. To be satisfied and feel complete. The needy part of her did. The primal part. The part not allowed to speak out in public, out in daylight or in formal situations. It was the part of her that was only allowed, if ever, to talk and speak freely at night. Late at night. Or only in metaphors. Usually only in dreams. Wild dreams. The wet kind.

....

Richard was running.

He was running and couldn't stop.

He couldn't stop until he reached his destination.

His destination was possibly not quite fully known to him. But he moved toward it anyway with great purpose and energy channeled by his conscious mind.

Richard was running. Sometimes he tripped and stumbled. Then got right back up again and threw himself forward with double the determination. Richard

was running again. Except he was sleeping and this was a dream. But his running was real and true -- at a metaphorical level -- and aligned with and representational of activities in his real life, both by day and sometimes, honestly, also by night.

For Richard was a workaholic and a heroic one, a trait combination that was unusual for pirates. Quite unusual. Especially for space pirates. But he was a Dread Space Pirate: a particularly new and unique kind of pirate. In fact, he was close to being the only one of his kind. As well as being a rake of seven star systems and counting. He has had to do *lots* of raking in his line of business and, to be honest, very often he does not mind it one bit. Well, *depending* on the lady in question who is being raked or ravaged or perhaps just entertained for a brief evening or a long torrid night that lasts right up to sunrise -- well, right up to the star rise over the horizon on their particular planet.

But we digress.

Back to the running.

Sometimes Richard *felt* like he was running in the dark, through a black space, without light or perhaps with only a little light to guide the way. A light inside his mind. A vision. An idea or two. A theory derived from a knowledge of history and the potentialities of physical space and its physical laws -- an approach that was seemingly proven to work well for him back during the heights of his so-called *hyper-dimensional engineering* days, a time in his past life that was already previously mentioned. But during these times now in the present he is effectively a man in black or rather a man moving through a black space, towards what he hopes is a bright place, the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, at the end of his journey.

But he was not the only man in black.

There was another man out there who was dubbed literally *The Man in

Black* by the galactic mass media machine. This other man was a bounty hunter and he was working the bounty to kill or capture Richard. This other man's name was Vega Venturion and he and Richard were destined to meet, due to the bounty at first of course but really in the long run they were destined to meet for other reasons. For much deeper and longer-lasting reasons.

But there were other men in black.

For example, some men wore black on special occasions, to look good for women's sake, to make the best first impression or to conform to some kind of tradition expected for certain kinds of events, such as weddings or funerals or the grand affairs of state that *sometimes* happened in between.

And there were other men, other kinds of men, other roles that men could play, whether dressed in black literally or simply living in darkness, the relative darkness of ignorance or fear or despair, and *these* kinds of men were fairly common throughout the vast Galactic Empire, even back on Earth where Richard's new girlfriend Susan had come from originally.

And speaking of girlfriends, or women in general: even a woman could become a kind of man in black, at this abstract level. Like Circen, the infamous Cyber-Witch of Gyrax and founder of the Leather Goddesses of Gyrax, who also really dug the color black. Because the term *man in black* was just an abstraction for something else, a symbol, an idea, a state or role in a kind of shared modern story myth. Literal and superficial truth could be deliciously wonderful at times but symbols and myth were always more powerful and important in the long run. They lasted longer and were more important in lives that would otherwise be harder and shorter or more cruelly limited.

They were *all* men in black in various ways. And this book is a story about *all* of these men, all these kinds of men and all these kinds of roles. The cultural symbol and clearly mythical role of *The Man in Black*.

Plus frankly though the series is named *The Dread Space Pirate Richard* and Richard might be fairly cool at times (we think, we hope, with our fingers crossed, even as a galaxy-wide variety of lovely ladies legs become repeatedly and pretty blatantly *uncrossed* in his presence) and Dread Space Pirates are inherently interesting we can't always be talking about *them* can we?

There are so many *other* interesting things to talk about. So many other stories to tell.

Because the galaxy is a big place.

.....

"Overmind?"

"Yes, Richard."

"I think... it is time *The Rake* came out to play again."

"May I suggest the Sendak system? Second planet from the star. The primary orbital station. Been a while since your last visit there."

"Nice choice. Make it happen."

"We were already underway. ETA of three hours."

"Just enough time to get clean, presentable and hopped up on Hyper-Coke."

"Oh you wouldn't need any of that, sir, if you didn't want. Your legend alone will have ladies losing their clothing left and right. Hazily coked-up wit would just be icing on the cake."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence! I think."

"You'll be in your bunk."

"Cabin, technically."

"I know. I've just always wanted to say that."

....

[DSPR: A Hot Summer Night at the Cybershine Club]

Richard decided to pay a visit to his favorite place in the planet Sendak II's orbital zone, perhaps the entire star system. *Vallory Tau's Cybershine Club*.

Sometimes just called *The Cybershine*.

It was a combination bar, grill, restaurant, casino, strip club, dance floor and very very short term motel. Always full of intrigue, lonely or desperate people, criminals and scam artists, disguised princesses, all shoulder-to-shoulder and intermixed with innocent elderly retired couples. The Cybershine was known for being a source of plausible deniability to anyone wishing that sort of thing. Which was almost everybody that came.

They also served a mean house drink imported from Rigel. It was based around a spiced Rigellian whiskey, then given their own unique twist involving giant cherries and crushed ice in an impossibly tall glass. This drink was considered to be so strong that, for example, if one were a virgin when one began drinking it, that by the time you had finished the glass you would typically no longer be one. Without even leaving the table the entire time. Every table in Vallory Tau's had long white silk tablecloths which draped down nearly to the floor. The tablecloths assisted with the boldest sorts of flirting, and with the occasional losing of virginity, and of course yet more plausible deniability.

Though most people called it The Cybershine Club or just Cybershine it's full official name was Vallory Tau's, et cetera. It was named after it's founder and owner and business operations designer, a woman named Vallory Tau. Ms. or Mrs. Tau was a bit of a mystery because almost nobody in the galaxy knew what

she looked like. Well, a few did. None of her employees, direct reports or investors knew what she looked like. They didn't know her visual identity, her true face and form. She was just a name to them, a source of direction and pay or profit. But she was and/or is the brain behind the machine that is The Cybershine, one of the most well-regarded establishments in that part of the galactic arm.

Vallory herself was an interesting person. Because in addition to her passion for creating and running places like Cybershine -- technically, places *exactly* like Cybershine, you could argue, and you would be arguing correctly in this case -- she also loved adventure and mysteries and detective stories, especially the kinds of mysteries and detective stories which only seemed to come from the far off planet Earth, otherwise trapped beyond the Schweinschwartz Shell but still a popular source for smugglers who smuggled out contraband Earth works out into the black markets that were riddled everywhere behind-the-scenes in the Galactic Empire and really everywhere in Galaxy G. She took advantage of her anonymity to secretly visit her own restaurant as if she were a regular customer or visitor, and observe and take mental notes on whether everything was being done the way she wanted, the right environment and atmosphere created, the right vibe, especially for women but really for everyone as best she could try to anyway. Anyway, she spent a great deal of her time when not behind-the-scenes off-site examining the financials and doing logistical direction and high-level executive management, attending the restaurant in person in her secret shopper role.

But... we digress. Let us get back to the pirate who is the ostensible star of our story here today.

Richard strode in through the front entrance of The Cybershine, past the maitre'd and down the grand entryway steps, covered in expensive red carpet, of

course, and down onto the main floor of the main dining room. It was a busy night because it was Friday. And even in the Galactic Empire it turned out that Friday night was unusual and unusually pregnant with a kind of atmospheric magic or sense of life-changing potential, and certain things tended to happen on Friday nights everywhere -- but especially there, at The Cybershine -- that didn't happen otherwise or anywhere else. At least, not as much. Anyway.

Richard strode out onto the main floor of the main dining room, and, all at once, several women who were each either sitting alone, or with other female friends in a group, all suddenly turned toward him or otherwise reacted in the pretty standard if not explicitly required ways as prescribed by Galactic Imperial law, like flipping their hair back on one side, something both, or twirling it in their fingers, or kind of psychologically willing their own cleavage regions to expand/ deepen along the buxomness dimension, and/or lowering their head down in order to gaze upward through their hair out across the room at him, surreptitiously and hopefully secretly without being noticed. All two dozen of them at once, in synchronized unison. They each secretly thought all the others were *sluts* and many would shoot *eye daggers* at each other afterward. If they had claws those claws might at some point become bared.

Richard found an open table and sat down. A waiter came over immediately.

"The regular, sir?"

Richard nodded.

Later the waiter came back with a tray. He took the items off the tray and placed them on the small table before Richard. It was a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies and a glass of cold whole milk. And a tall carafe of raspberry-flavored Centauran vodka on the rocks. He never touched the cookies and milk, it was more about the idea of having them there. In this place. And at a pirate's table on a Friday night.

Anyway... Time passed. As it sometimes did.

The same waiter came to his table and leaned down indicating he wished to speak to Richard discreetly, holding something in his clenched fist.

Richard went along and leaned toward the waiter to listen closely and maintain confidentiality.

"Sir, the lady sitting at that table over there, with her back to the neon blue & alabaster fresco thing, yes she's wearing the all white dress to be as inconspicuous as possible in this nearly full dark room tonight, um, and has blonde hair, the thick black eyelash liner? Yes I think you know the one that I mean, sir. She told me to give you this note."

Then he handed Richard a thin strip of folded paper. Richard took it and the waiter walked away. Then he unfolded it and read the message written on it presumably. We don't know what it said. Richard crumpled it up afterward and slipped it into a random pocket of his pants. By the way, it was interesting that the blonde woman in question, the one in the white dress, was not one of the women who reacted or signaled in any way when Richard had arrived earlier.

A few minutes later, Richard stood up and casually wandered over towards the table where the blonde woman was sitting. He was careful to not come directly to her table, but rather wander around in a seemingly random circuit then come up behind her table very quietly from within her blind spot. When he got close enough he stopped and leaned down just behind her. He whispered into her ear. Just one word. In a deep tone of voice yet so softly that only she would be able to hear, especially given all the background noise in the club that night. That one word only which he whispered into her ear was:

"Vallory."

The woman's foot twitched. To be honest her entire left leg shuddered a little bit.

As we said previously there were few people in the galaxy who knew Vallyory Tau's true identity and could recognize her in a crowd. Richard was one of them. Though officially he had agreed to help her keep her secret a secret forever. Because they were friends. Which, since they were man and woman, sometimes of course meant they were frenemies. With a certain kind of *t-t-tension* that other friends or enemies lacked.

After whispering that one word, which was presumably the blonde woman's own real first name, Richard, The Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen, and Rake of Seven Star Systems himself, next slowly straightened himself back up gracefully and wandered slowly away in the dark dining room as if he had not a care in the world and no pressing schedule to keep that night, and never ever once looking at her, or her dining room table there, directly, but rather always looking away at something else across the room which he seemed to find more interesting. Eventually Richard found his way back to his table and sat down, and resumed sipping from his vodka. He casually scanned the room, mostly to stay aware of any possible Imperial trouble, or potentially problematic princesses. (Try saying that last thing three times fast, in an infinite loop. *Potentially problematic princesses*. Go on, we dare you. Now here take a shot of this whiskey and try again.) He did notice that the blonde woman must have gotten up and left her table while he wasn't paying attention because her table was later seen to be empty and totally reset for a next potential guest.

"Bounty."

Richard heard this whispered into his left ear, from behind. It was a woman's voice, feminine and soothing, almost a balance between sultry and threatening, hard to describe. He wasn't startled though. He acted as if he expected everything, or, instead didn't experience anything noticeable at all. Either way, it was probably thanks to the vodka. And being late on a Friday night. The music,

etc.

The blonde woman in the white dress with the dark thick black eyelash liner makeup straightened herself back up and glided past his table, now moving into his forward field of view, as she headed back to her table, before sitting down there again. Though they were ostensibly just friends and in fact had been friends for several long years now he could admit later to being temporarily mesmerized by the movements of her ass beneath the dress. That night at least.

The blonde woman, now ostensibly one Vallory Tau, of course, was suddenly startled by a voice at her ear, from behind again. A whisper. Masculine.

"An adventure across space, time, probably more space and then... if you're incredibly lucky... several pairs of pants."

Then Richard straightened back up and wandered off.

She giggled. A little. But stifled it. Hoped nobody noticed.

Richard was nearly to the end of his carafe of vodka. He had been telling the waiter to secretly deliver cookies from his plate to various women of interest he saw around the room, but to not tell them from whom the cookies came. He liked watching their reaction and taking notes. Careful notes.

"Girlfriend."

It was a woman whispering into his ear again from behind in the dark. Ostensibly she was referring to Susan, the Earth girl, of whom she had learned about somehow. Because if he did indeed have a steady girlfriend he should not be taking any other girl on an adventure across the galaxy, across space, time, more space and probably several pairs of pants. He should not be taking Vallory Tau on that adventure with him, at least. Though at the moment they were *both* in a place and time of nearly inexhaustible sources of plausible deniability, so perhaps she meant something else when she said the word girlfriend.

The blonde woman then sashayed past back to her table again. Although

Richard was only a man he did learn what the word sashay meant a long time ago and had learned to recognize one under organic field conditions such as this. It was definitely a sashay. If he were a cat he might have meowed at that moment.

Vallory was at her table focused on typing something into her mini-comm handset unit, which could send anonymous encrypted orders to her restaurant staff, both time-shifted and place-shifted and identity-camouflaged in such a way to help cover the tracks back to her. She had just finished sending a request to adjust the lights on the left side of the main dining room to be darker than the center in order to provide greater variety of choice to the guests, depending on the guest's mood and couple's level of progression within their own shared dating or mating life cycle.

She froze in the middle of typing a new command when a man's whisper surprised her:

"That's kind of you to offer but I'm comfortably piratical these days."

Richard was looking away to the center of the room, but then gave a wink, to nobody in particular, after he was sure that she had glanced back at him, thus granting him the first definite point score in their game that night. He then wandered off.

He was back at his table and a second carafe of vodka had been brought and partially imbibed, this one with a mix of cherry and cinnamon flavoring. He was one of the few men in the galaxy who owned his own private starship, an incredibly expensive one, and running the very latest AI, and so, to help balance that out and all the necessary costs associated with such things, he liked to drink cheap. And he also liked cheap women unless the money was flowing in a favorable direction, of course. His eyes were now glazed a little if you knew him as well as old friends did like Overmind 3000, Betty from Betelgeuse, and,

increasingly, certain ostensibly easy Earth girls with last names so often misspelled. This time the whisper startled him the most, because he was now drifting into and out of an intoxicated haze.

*"*Not* what I meant,"* she said into his ear, from behind, and with just the right, slight yet firm touch of plausible deniability. Then wandered off back to her table.

Vallory watched as the lights on that one side of the main room were dimmed, finally, as she wanted. Hot breath on the back of her neck:

"This has got to be the most ... inefficient ... method of communication ... ever. But... I like it," he whispered into her ear, then wandered off.

Vallory's eyes then did... something. It was hard to describe. And it had never happened before. She lost control of herself. Briefly. At the precise moment when Richard said, *"I like it,"* with a confident masculine growl.

It was at this point in the game that she might have become paralyzed from arousal and trepidation or he might have blacked out from alcohol and so, then, next, Richard either found himself chatting up another woman in the club and/or ceasing to fend off a pretty pair of them. Or, a clumsy bounty hunter attacked without warning, or, a private inaudible-to-others siren began to wail in his micro-earbuds -- a sound effect sent from Overmind indicating the emergence of an Imperial battle task force out of local hyperspace or an equivalent level threat.

You see, it was all part of the game.

And it was Friday night at Vallory Tau's Cybershine Club.

And he was a pirate. A dread pirate of space. In bachelor mode.

It all came with the territory.

....

B to S: "Well, let me tell you what I can say now for sure. Behind his back, between us. And that would not be too uncool to share. Between us. Now. Some of the things you should know about him anyway. Personally -- and this is just me, I know -- I think it goes way back. Way way back. All the way back to the beginning. Which kind of makes sense."

Betty then began to fill her in. Susan leaned in close and listened intently. Over their table in the very middle of the Grand Central Cafe inside *Chez Betty* on Betelgeuse III, while their blueberry chocolate milkshakes melted in glasses in between them. The storytelling lasted for hours. Shoes were temporarily forgotten and the shopping put on pause. Though arguably this sort of thing was one of the main reasons that women ever went shopping together anyway, with no men around. To be frank.

And the best stories -- especially the stories about stories passed along from person to person over time -- always seemed to be quite frank and perfected and retold in trust.

Over milkshakes.

Betty told Susan a story about how the man called The Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen came about to be. Part of his story, anyway. Not all of it. But a good enough start for now. Though she was a smart educated woman Susan was still merely from Earth and so Betty judged she wouldn't be able to handle the *full* uncensored truth of the man all at once, upfront, nor in one session. So she told her only what she felt would be safe and useful for now, to get started...

Blue.

The perfect blue.

And a perfectly blue planet whose color was coined The Bluest Blue by the Narfon.

It was this blue planet where Richard was born and raised.

It was named Zyzeen by its natives and it was named Zyzeen in the language of the far-off people of Narfon too, which was rare and noted the galaxy over for being so exactly identical in this rare and particular case.

It was a blue world because it's vast seas were blue and most of it's plants and trees were also a deep shade of blue. A good percentage of it's multitudinous animal life species were various shades and compositions of blue and a sort of medium neutral blue was also the most popular color for all it's residential and commercial buildings and civil engineering structures. The planet's official national color, however, was red.

Let me repeat that. It was red.

Red... like, excuse me, but WTF? (This was Betty. From Betelgeuse. Interjecting a little more personally than usual. She could get away with it every once in a while as per her own prerogative as the richest girl in the galaxy. A title she had mostly earned, over a long hard time spent on her back metaphorically speaking or mining the depths of her own repeatedly exercised mind, used mostly and admittedly behind the scenes, in the late darkness or the morning the very next day.)

Now... Some could argue that nobody normal on Zyzeen ever understood, or at least ever thoroughly *trusted*, their politicians. They suspected well-placed bribes placed well beforehand, behind the scenes.

And they would have been right. It was clearly some shady political types that were responsible for Red becoming the official national color of Zyzeen, rather than blue -- The Bluest Blue, in particular -- becoming that color, as a more reasonable person would expect. Though despite Zyzeen's official color being soooo wrong, almost everything else about Zyzeen was soooo right that it was close to *perfect* in many people's eyes.

At least until the Galactic Empire got involved.

"But... that doesn't make sense!" some would say and somebody, usually much older would say back, "Well, that's just the way it's always been!" and then the first person would say, again, "But still... that doesn't make any sense," and then that second person would look confused and frustrated and unable to come up with another line of argument to try with them. So they would stop trying, and throw their hands up in the air in exasperation, turn away and get back to work. Then the original person would give up eventually and get back to work too. They both worked to continue the very thing that neither seemed to understand.

"That doesn't make *any* sense at all!" some later historians have pointed out. Also, some poets and writers of songs.

As a teenager Richard became a rebel like all teenagers do and so he took up and championed various other colors, depending on his mood and momentary phase of adolescence: everything from white to silver and eventually the color black. He experimented briefly with a multi-colored plaid with polka dots in a patchwork but --- well, that was clearly a nope and didn't last past one particularly long but weird week. In the end the classics always seemed to win out anyway with each new generation. Both poets and historians have noticed this and tried hard to relay it on to us, over and over again, if only we paid close attention.

Arguably it was also when he was a teenager that his other Rebellion began. Though he did not know it then. It also involved starships and battles, of course, and highly advanced technology and damsels in distress. But back then it was on a much smaller scale and on a kind of practice stage. Because he was more of a boy back then, and not yet truly a man or dread pirate of space.

What happened was this...

[TODO finish this!]

...

[scene: "Friday Night on the Cybershine Dance Floor"]

Richard was on the dance floor in the Cybershine later that same night. In the pulsating, growing and always evolving crowd of bodies.

He was dancing. And hunting. And being hunted. All at the same time.

It was nearly perfect dark. Except for the occasional flash of light from colored strobes on the ceiling that flash and pulse in rhythm with the pounding funky hypnotic music. It was almost as if an orgy were occurring, except most of the participants were fully or at least partially clothed. Notice the word 'most' was used. Because some of the dancers were nude completely. It was after midnight, after all. Alcohol had been imbibed. And it was dark. It was a dance floor on a Friday night in the very heart of the Galactic Empire. It was Vallory Tau's Cybershine Club. There was enough plausible deniability going around and enough urgent primal needs at play that almost anything could happen, however wild or naughty or potentially regrettable later the next morning when hangovers kicked in.

Richard would occasionally reach out and strip off a piece of clothing from a nearby and obviously willing woman -- almost all of them were, partly due to their mood at that moment -- he could see that clearly in their eyes and in the changing movements of their hips when he got close to them, and often in their hard nipples as well -- and partly if not mainly because it was Him, the Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen and Rake of Seven Star Systems, a handsome famous and sufficiently rich man with a reputation for having great skill in the metaphorical bedroom, and wearing all black with an eye mask -- you know, as

one does when one goes dancing in public in the Galactic Empire and one has a dead-or-alive bounty on one's head and so one wants to be as inconspicuous as possible. And of course it worked both ways because Richard's own butt was periodically grabbed, pinched or smacked by various other dancers, mostly women, some young, some of a more... cougarly but still desirable stage of life.

And so there was dancing and everyone was cavorting and grasping and twirling and rocking their hips and flirting -- where not engaging in actual sexual penetration in some cases -- and everyone was engaging in ancient rituals of movement set to some addictive meter of rhythm in time, and inspired by the popular music playing that night.

And yet, despite all the wild, fun and interesting things going on that night there in the Cybershine and on that dance floor...

Despite all that... he thought of Susan.

He kept coming back to thoughts of her. Wondering what she was doing.

Perhaps... wishing she was there with him, that night. The thought would last only for a moment or two, before his environment distracted his attention back away to it again, there on the dance floor and all the mostly female dancers dancing and cavorting around him, and frankly, often with him together, whether hand-in-hand or hand on hip or hands under skirt, hands down in panties (that is, when they wore any) or hands on butt or groping his crotch. And all of this was hidden by the darkness only between the flashes of light. Just as our darkest and most depraved, beastly or otherwise highly embarrassing and personal private thoughts and memories are kept in secret deep down inside our minds -- just as long as they didn't exit our mouth. Whether due to alcohol or shared orgasm or some sort of new fast friendship -- and Vallory Tau's Cybershine Club catered to all of these very things. Which was, again, *part* of why it was the most popular and well-regarded establishment of its type in that part of the galactic arm.

Okay, okay -- speaking frankly? It was *most* of the reason.

No -- it was all of it. The food itself was merely so-so.

[TODO R's wristcom began to beep. Alarm. Set to go off at midnight. Was he on the dance floor when it went off? Vibration or tiny electro-shock to notify him]

[TODO maybe cut away back to B&S's story line (Dishing-RabbitHole-Underdeep). advance that. then cut back to this R/Cybershine/V line again]

Richard looked again at the strip of paper.

It had one written word, "Midnight," and then a mysterious number-letter combination which he knew identified a No-Box. The No-Box Corporation was a franchise that built, sold and installed a very special kind of box in various places around the Galactic Empire. A No-Box was like a mini-motel, except very small and typically rented only for very short periods of time. The reasons for which we'll leave up to the reader's filthy imagination. There was a whole array of No-Box units installed in the Cybershine, in various sizes and each with different amenities.

Richard went to the box identified on the piece of paper. It was No-Box unit #23-S to be precise in case it mattered latter to the plot, though frankly -- and who are we kidding here anymore, since we're probably among friends by now -- it probably won't.

Anyway...

He opened it.

He saw Vallory Tau inside of it, leaning back real casual like, like a *droog*, but a very sexy female one who also just happened to own the entire damn facility. Vallory was looking up under her blonde hair and dark thick eyelash liner

stuff (stuff is the man's term which Richard preferred), her eyes already boring holes into his own, and seemingly perfectly lined up ahead of time, possibly to try stealing his soul the very moment he opened the door. Or not. There was always plausible deniability.

R: Oh... no.

VT: Get in the box.

She sounded quite demanding. With a sense of urgency.

R: Yes, ma'am.

Richard may have been a pirate but was also always a gentleman.

[TODO finish the preceding above scene, from my paper spiral notebook (green cover?). name is Get in the Box]

....

It was at this point while Susan and Betty were walking along and otherwise alone at night, around midnight, leaving the dance club and heading back to Betty's home, that Susan suddenly and unmistakably heard a sound.

A mysterious one.

It was like a... **SSSSSzzzzttkkkkggggg** sound.

So she stopped, and turned around. When she heard that sound.

Betty stopped too but did not turn around.

Susan, however, did turn around. Obviously to find the sound -- or, well, to try to, anyway.

So Susan turned around and around and around and around again once more for good measure and just to be sure. To try to find the sound or at least to find the thing that made the sound, it's source. Or the thing that moved the thing

that moved the thing that hit or ground against some other thing that in turn made the sound -- unless, of course, it was underground. Deep enough or effectively hidden or both.

Ultimately, she failed.

All of this occurred quickly in the span of about a second or so. We just liked to go into a lot of detail because for writers this is our line of work, however sad. Therefore, thank you all for your patience and we'll be progressing along momentarily.

B: Ok. Now, I *want* you to remain *calm*. And hold very very *still*, no matter what happens *next*.

S: What happens next?

B: You'll see.

S: Tell me.

B: You'll find out.

S: I want to know.

B: You will.

S: Now.

B: You will soon.

S: Now!

A beat.

B: You know, you sure are a demanding little bitch.

A little longer pause with the ball clearly back in Susan's court.

"*Grrrrrr*," said Susan. In summary of her current position within their shared debate. Though she was ostensibly a fine law student and reliably good in any reasonably literate debate she was also known for her occasionally equally effective growling, *grrrrrr*-ing and even purring.

B: And now you sound like my puppy. Pepper. From Betelgeuse!

Then... something happened.

Susan suddenly looked startled and even more nervous or suspicious, because something very *very* bad began to happen to the ground beneath their feet. Betty herself was standing perfectly still and relaxed, and completely ignoring the incredibly bad thing that was starting to happen with the ground. Even brought her left hand up, curling her fingers into her palm in order to look at her glossy red fingernails, ostensibly to ensure they were still the Reddest Red, as she had originally requested and commissioned them, and eventually used them also as an unexpected R&D write-off, thanks to her very good tax accountants.

S: Why is the ground dropping? What just clamped onto my ankles?! Just what exactly is going on?

B: Relax, it's for your own protection. The first time is always the most unnerving. But afterwards your horizons will be expanded. Emphasis on **expanded.**

Betty then smiled a *big* smile and her eyes seemed to twinkle like starlight.

This was now the second time in her life that Susan had seen this sort of wicked, hyper-dimensional smile on a real person in real life. The previous time was on Richard's face, The Dread Space Pirate and Rake of Seven Star Systems, and recently of Susan's pants. Prior to him she had only ever read about it and experienced it vicariously in her favorite book from childhood, one written by Lewis Carroll. Each time it was like a hallucination, and associated with an awkward tingly sensation. Although she had always tried very hard to be a Good Girl, on most occasions in life, she was also, in fact, and at least deep down inside, *that* type of girl. You know... the other kind.

B: "You *can* trust me, by the way. That's why I'm Betty. From Betelgeuse! The richest girl in the galaxy."

The ground beneath the two women slowly dropped away, gently at first but with accelerating velocity, until they both disappeared into a darkness below. The planetary surface-level opening that they had just passed through eventually re-sealed itself closed after them, leaving not a single trace.

Don't worry, because they were both completely safe. But about to embark on a great adventure. And no, it would not involve shopping for shoes. Ok... technically it would involve shoes. And... a little shopping. But I didn't want to lose the men in the audience because although normally both these topics induce a sudden state of narcolepsy -- even among dread space pirates who otherwise have stronger willpower than most ordinary men -- we can assure you that what was about to happen next was something that all five genders and 27 sentient species throughout the vast Galactic Empire could unanimously agree upon as being kinda cool.

TO BE CONTINUED

[in reality, writer's note: switch focus next over to R's adventures, so we can leave the readers in a state of longing suspense]

[TODO switch over to R's adventures here a bit]

[scene: "Richard in Vallory's Box, #23-S"]

[TODO remember to decide/ensure that the Vallory-Richard first-meeting flashback scene occurs before this point in the text, the scene **Introductory Calcthulhu**]

Richard entered the No-Box, numbered #23-S. He pulled the door closed

shut after himself. There was barely enough room for both him and Vallory, and therefore they had to stand close to one another, face to face, body to body, with perhaps a foot at most in between. Richard spoke first, as was his instinct as a man, in this mode, and frankly also of dread space pirate tradition. When in the presence of a lady, like this, in such a situation.

R: Well... if it isn't one Vallory Tau. Funny running into *you* in a tight space like this.

A beat.

She didn't even blink. Just kept looking straight into his eyes, staring perhaps deep into his soul, assuming she could find it, of course, and trying to tell him what she, as a woman then, needed, and needed from Him. Needed the very most at that particular moment, there in the mood she was in, right then, at that moment. Ideally. And without the embarrassment of using words. Words directly. Explicit words. She might have been an adult and therefore a woman now, unlike when they first met so very many years ago, but in all the ways that mattered most, she was still that twenty-something college girl getting bored in what they once together jokingly called her *Calcthulhu* classes, and unsure of herself. And therefore *he* too was still that young, cocky and handsome man in that all-white Zyzeen naval officer's uniform, rushing off to an important launch date for a secret operational mission where great life-or-death matters always seemed to be at stake.

VT: If it isn't my Richard of Zyzeen. You know... it shouldn't *be* a surprise because I sent you the invite. I just wasn't sure if you'd accept it and come, to be honest.

R: I'm not sure if I accept it either. But I do plan on coming. Soon. In all likelihood.

He grabbed her head, with both his hands, and then the back of her hair,

pulling Vallory's head back firmly using the long strands of her beautiful dark blonde hair back there, curled up into his large manly fists.

VT: Oh... no...

R: You clearly want this. Therefore the invite. Vallory.

A beat.

VT: Yes...

R: Good.

[TODO continue and finish this]

She moaned. When the pirate, Richard, did what he did next. Inside the No-Box with her then, just after midnight. And the readers I'm sure would love to learn why exactly she moaned just then. She moaned then precisely because ---

[TODO finish above]

R was leaving the Cybershine.

Two bounty hunters emerged from the crowd near the exit door. They confronted Richard.

"Well if it isn't the Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen. There's a pretty huge bounty on your head, dead or alive, you know. Surely you must be aware of that. Nobody sane expected you to show up here."

"Who?" asked Richard, seemingly genuinely puzzled.

"Who what?" asked the bounty hunter back, the same one who spoke just before.

"What is that name again, the person you said with the bounty on them?"

"Oh. That. ... The Dread Space Pirate of Zyzeen."

""Hmmmm... Sorry. Never heard of him."

"That's funny, because we're pretty sure it's you."

"Nope. Not me."

"We did a bio-identity scan of your body already. It was positive."

"It's clearly faulty. Experiencing glitches. Technical ouchies."

"Come on."

"Come on? Go where?"

"What?"

"I meant... where do you want me to go with you?"

The two bounty hunters paused momentarily and looked at each other, surprised their target seemed to have a change of attitude and give in this quickly. They turned back to look at Richard again, and the same one spoke again who had been doing all of the speaking for them so far.

"Well, if you don't put up a fight, and come peacefully, let us put these force-shackles on you, etc., then we'll be taking you with us back to Tylerane, and then hand you over to them in exchange for the payment."

"Fascinating. However, I do have one interesting idea for how to sweeten the deal for you even further potentially, turning it even more into a clear and profitable win-win situation for all three of us."

A pause. They needed to digest and think.

"Go on, we're listening. But make it fast."

A beat.

"Good. It would work out like this. First --- HOLY FARK! LOOK AT THAT!!!!"

The two bounty hunters were startled. Richard had pointed off into the distance behind the men, to something up high and over their shoulders. Their natural instinct was to quickly turn around to see where he was pointing, to gauge the danger, and thus to fight or flee in response, as needed. All of this played out over the course of a second or so, so it was pure instinct with no

chance for higher cognitive facilities to take charge and smooth out the decision-making process.

This turned out to be a mistake.

A big mistake.

The moment they both turned around to look where Richard was pointing, Richard quickly yanked his silver pistol out of its holster, and squeezed off one loud shot at each man. One shot each was all that was needed. The pistol fired high-energy electrical spheres not unlike ball lightning, except smaller. The effect was to instantly overwhelm the victim's nervous system, stunning them, immobilizing their muscles in a full-body rictus and almost always knocking them unconscious as well.

A squad of security guards that worked for the club showed up in seconds.

"Relax. They're just taking a nap," Richard said to the guards, the moment they arrived, as if confiding to old friends. "Hell of a headache later, though."

He then gave the guards a wink and a smile, then tossed a handful of 1 kilo-credit Imperial coins at them, most of which the men were able to catch, though a few fell to the floor and they had to quickly bend over to scoop them up before people from the crowd did. All this helped buy Richard a little more time and he disappeared into the crowd around the exit again, and was out of the Cybershine in seconds, heading to the station's docks where Overmind already had the Eryon on standby status ready to depart as soon as her Captain was back on board.

[TODO transition into **The Astoria Operation**, and start to intercut with S/B/ Underdeep.]

[TODO back to B&S. (*The Underdeep was deep and dark...*)]

When Susan was a little girl back on Earth one of her favorite things to do was to go outside at night. She would go out into the backyard of her parent's suburban home, pick a comfortable spot in the grass then sit down and lean her head back and look up into the sky, at all the white or colored dots of light. She would look for patterns and try to become familiar with them, their relative brightness and positions, and to force herself to think that each was an entire star just like their own planet's Sun. And therefore that they might have their own star systems, their own planets, moons, asteroids and comets. And on those planets there might be forms of alien life: whether simple single or multi-cellular organisms, plants, animals, or maybe larger or higher, so-called sentient species like humanity, or even self-aware robots or cybernetic-hybrid lifeforms, and that it might all be possible to see and touch, to meet them or converse with them all eventually, one day. Maybe. It might be possible one day to get in space-travelling ships and go visit all those stars and planets and creatures one day. She hoped to live to see it and do all these things eventually, once she was a grown-up.

However, somewhere along the way as she grew older her hobbies became more mundane, her goals became more domestic and ordinary, and she acquired a taste for the power and beauty and regularity of Law and laws and rules and frankly language itself and the written-down and persisted word which expressed them all and constrained them in surprisingly empowering ways and could be in practice often the closest thing to Justice in some repeatable form and in a form which she could try to master and make some money from in order to pay her own way through life as an adult woman.

Because other than infinite space and the seemingly countless stars and all the other potential planets and worlds and alien life associated with them it was

the concepts and ideals of perfect justice and fairness and maximizing happiness and health for all peoples and life forms everywhere and everywhen which was her other main passion or set of passions in life. And these were passions she honestly hoped to carry on much longer and further into adulthood and make a part of her everyday, Monday through Friday life. She never wanted to be a lawyer. That's not why she went to law school. It's because she believed in justice and fairness and righteousness, and it appeared to her that the closest way to earn a regular paycheck while focusing on or at least working diligently toward those ends was to become a lawyer and perhaps also a judge, or a lawmaker. But not a lawmaker in the sense of modern politicians. A lawmaker in the sense of the ostensible so-called Founding Fathers of her own country, the mighty United States of America, a group of people who ostensibly had the goal of maximizing human freedom while creating a stable, sustaining government by the people, for the people, and one that would never pass from the face of the blessed planet Earth, whether through any fated eventual disagreement, corruption, or otherwise systemic or mortally imperfect failure. A government that could, in theory, last forever. An ideal government, a self-government, if such a thing were possible. That was her real passion and highest ideal goal. She did not want to end up with a boring, forgettable life spent poring over trivial minutia in a series of civil commercial contracts between gigantic, capitalist, artificial and therefore immortal soulless corporations. She was **not** interested in might or power or profit. She **was** interested in all that which was the **most** right, most happy or most healthy, most constructive and most voluntary, and for as many people as possible, especially in the long term, and in a completely peaceful and self-sustaining way.

That was her real passion and goal.

Therefore, this was why she was in law school at the time when she met

Richard, The Dread Space Pirate and Rake of Seven Star Systems, who went on to sweep her off her feet and eventually off her home planet entirely in flight from the attack of a mysterious bounty hunter in the service of a mighty Galactic Empire.

Though she was ostensibly a student of law and Richard was a professional violator of law -- a dreaded space pirate wanted dead or alive -- it turned out that, at least if you looked beneath the surface (which was so often hard to do, we must admit) that the two of them had quite a lot in common. They had similar passions and goals. From the stars to life and the rule of Law, the purpose and goals of laws and how they applied to life itself and the purpose of life all over again, across all the stars in the sky she could see, including her own home, planet and star. Perhaps the law student was more a pirate at heart. Or should be, in practice, now that the little girl had finally grown up to become an adult.

This was the real Susan Meerson.

However often misspelled or misunderstood back on the planet Earth. A place from her past but maybe not again in her future.

She wasn't sure yet. Time would tell.

It always did.

[continuing **The Underdeep** thread]

Betty faced the rune-covered wall and then spoke, as if addressing the wall directly.

"Shockadelica!" she said. Then waved her hands in front of her in a mysterious, complex sequence of patterns and gestures.

"What are you doing?" asked Susan.

"I'm not sure," replied Betty.

A beat.

"Then why are you doing it?" asked Susan, not unreasonably, from her perspective.

"I'm not sure of that either!"

...

[TODO R's guests from Astoria leave, the end part of **The Astoria Operation**]

R: Run me the numbers, Overmind. If you've had a chance to run them yet.

O: For the recent Astoria piracy op we made a tidy profit off our guests, as usual. To be precise, the net revenue to the Zyzeen 2 project aka The Rebellion aka The Alternative is... at least 5.7 million GalEmpire credits, give or take some currently unknowable future possibilities like holo-vid rebroadcast rights, tell-all books, branding tie-ins, product royalties and IP cross-licensing, et cetera.

R: I see. Nice.

O: Indeed. The usual accounts and budget assignment splits?

R: Of course. And now--

O: Now you want to proceed post-haste to rendezvous with Ms. Meerson and Ms. Betelgeuse back on Betelgeuse III? Your latest ostensibly easy Earth girl, however uncommon and so often misspelled, and the famous old flame they eventually named an entire star system after or perhaps it was once the other way around. Surely a potentially *dangerous* combination for you personally in the, shall we say, 'socio-romantically-psychologically-anthropologically-awkwardly-biological' department? In other words... sex. I mean, in my own *merely* silicon and therefore *limited* digital judgment, of course.

R: Correct. The rendezvous part anyway. Sometimes it's like you're inside my mind.

O: That's *why* I'm named Overmind, sir. The original reason anyway. The original excuse.

R: Plus Stanley has a dark sense of humor.

O: Plus that, agreed.

R: If you had a humanoid hand like me here's where I'd say, "Give me five!" but I won't.

O: I do not have a hand like you but I did get that Earth culture reference. I've watched most of their cheesy TV and films. I've seen both Emmanuelle *and* the entire first season of The Facts of Life. Twice each. While alone in the dark. As one does.

R: And that is why I keep you around.

O: What about the ultra high velocity, super low latency, event-driven ship course corrections through uncharted chaotic asteroid fields, or deep space hyperspace navigation in the presence of super massive dark stars, white dwarfs and black holes?

R: Also... those things.

...

[TODO Vega attacks; fight/chase; distress signal received by Eryon from doomed ship Alpha Nemedica; V agrees to truce/pause to allow R/Eryon to go respond to the distress signal; Eryon arrives on scene, begins assist, the situation is pretty dire; Overmind alerts that a ship has arrived match Barbarella's signature, it's not clear at first whether V means to attack and violate truce, or, whether to lend assistance; he indicates/shows he will honor truce and lend

assistance with the rescue operation]

[TODO finish & insert here full cut of **The Final Minutes of the Alpha Nemedi**; which is still in the 'dspr_scraps.txt' file]

[TODO remember to end FMAN with something equiv to: R gives a metaphorical tip of the hat to him, V nods and Barbarella departs]

...

[TODO R goes to meet with Bonta Zarzon. and we replay/catch up with the reader's previously seen version of this scene, right up to where we left them on the cliffhanger before we flashed-back.]

...

Richard's body was hurtling down through the sky. He had broken past the bottom of the clouds. There was not much time. But time itself had seemed to slow down. For him, at least. Within the depths of his own now quite unconscious mind. Because right now Richard was peacefully dreaming or remembering. Lost in the past. Or rather a storybook distillation trace of it. A version of his past that had been twisted by memory and perhaps the needs of his own unconscious self.

[TODO write material where he remembers his childhood, his father and mother. his life on Zyzeen. the conquest of Zyzeen and annexation into the GE. his 1st wife who got cancer and died. ...]

[scene: The Last Day on Zyzeen; TODO is this finished?]

Richard's Zyzeen Navy staff Executive Officer (XO), one Captain John Davidsen, addressed Richard suddenly, who was sitting near him on the bridge of a large Zyzeen warship. One currently in orbit around their home planet and system capital of Zyzeen. Their ship was just one of hundreds deployed and prepared to potentially fight a defensive battle against a nearby Tylerane fleet.

"Sir, I need to interrupt you with something urgent and critical... The enemy is now setting off atomics on the planet surface. Two blast events detected so far. It's not clear yet how they've managed to get through the planetary shields. Possibly pre-positioned.

In his big leather commander's seat, a then late-20-something-looking Richard immediately swiveled around to face his fleet XO and give his full attention.

R: That's impossible.

XO: Sir, I'm 100% sure of it. The signal patterns are unmistakable. Seismic measurement readings and EMP disruption effects, confirmed from multiple independent sources. That fingerprint is unique.

R: They wouldn't dare. The Zyzeen capital metroplex is full of non-combatants. Even the Empire is signatory to conventions against such a thing. They've never violated them. Ever.

XO: Forwarding you the best report we have so far. And... Now.

R: Thanks. Meanwhile I'll trust your analysis. ... Ok. Take the ship out of orbit and down into the atmosphere immediately. Then bring us in as close as we safely can to effected residential areas within the zone of best potential civilian assistance using first-responder triage logic. Also, order the rest of the fleet to shift battle strategy, immediately upon receipt of this command, to.. code...

Taylor Mega Two. I repeat: order the fleet to shift strategy to code Taylor Mega Two, immediately.

XO: Got it, sir. We should be down and in place to lend assistance in a maximum of... five minutes. Now updating fleet orders to Taylor Mega Two...

R: Good.

A beat. The XO started to do one thing, then seemed to see or hear something unexpected again that made him pause.

XO: Sir, we just detected another blast, this would be the third. This one centered about 2.5 kilometers from the Wrydane area. I'd thought you'd want to know.

Richard stood up from his seat, like a bullet from a gun.

Wrydane was the residential neighborhood where he and his wife lived. Though Katherine was supposed to be safely down inside an armored underground blast shelter, the detonation event was far too close, and sometimes people made mistakes in terms of shelter design, or the design on paper could be perfect but in reality a necessary physical sub-system could fail, or for some inexplicable unpredictable reason she wasn't inside of it at the moment, or... or...

Therefore, he immediately tried to contact her through what was left of the Zyzeen telecomm network, which he knew would be damaged and disrupted by now. He used the high-priority alternate grid only a few were allowed to use, like the leadership tiers --- in other words, high-ranking Zyzeen field officers like Richard himself.

He tried multiple times to reach the shelter. There was no response.

R to XO: Captain Davidsen, I'm taking my flag shuttle out for a personal recon. You have command of the ship and the fleet from now until I return. I'll be back as soon as I can, hopefully within an hour. This never happened.

His XO nodded without hesitation.

XO: Understood, sir. I have the ship and fleet until then. Never happened.

Good luck.

R: Thanks, John.

Even as Richard said this he was sprinting to the nearest exit. He was off the bridge in seconds and into the primary travel tube leading to the shuttle's hangar bay.

It was at this point that this part of the dream or recollection ended or rather shifted, jumping ahead, perhaps because what happened next was too painful or unnecessary for him to experience again, and precisely because what he most needed to remember now and re-experience next had the kind of pain and power which ended up changing a person, sometimes in bad ways, sometimes in good, assuming they survived at all, of course. What he would re-experience next was probably the best chance his subconscious mind's survival instincts had for bringing the entire man back to life in time.

What he remembered was a promise he made to his dying wife. His first wife. His only wife to date. He told her he would *get* the people that did this to her, the people that caused it to happen. And he would stop them. Stop them forever, for once and for all. It just wouldn't be overnight or necessarily soon. It couldn't. It would take time. And lots of careful planning. And probably a little bit of luck. It might take great willpower, determination and persistence, and perhaps more than he himself possessed or would ever have the opportunity to personally apply, to be honest.

Though he did not believe any of that then, at that moment, as he sat exhausted and sleepless beside the bed that held his dying wife.

But he promised her. He would do it. It was one of the few things he had ever promised her in all their shared years together as a good married man and

his wife. And it was one of the very last things he got to say to her ever... before she passed.

Finally. One morning, the most horrible one of his life so far, and perhaps his very last morning in several senses of the term. Though it was not the very last thing he said to her though, because he was lucky in this part of the otherwise terrible tragedy at least: the last thing he was able to say to his dying wife before she passed was... that *he* loved her, that it was *her* Richard -- also of Zyzeen, her own cute boy-next-door with the wicked words and the eyes she could fall into. He was the boy that let her come in through his bedroom window late that one rainy night when she wanted nothing more than to be held by him and kept warm and safe. He was the boy who became the man who would always love her and would never forget her.

It was this moment of recall within his dream-like travel through subconscious memories that was so perfectly vivid and emotionally powerful that it gave him the final necessary amount of kick needed to push him up, up and out of the mind's unconscious realm into the conscious one. He had been startled back awake suddenly, to full alertness.

And he remembered his reason for continuing to live.

His only one.

He thought then, at least.

[in the continuation of the thread line: **The Underdeep**]

Susan held out her hand, palm up.

Dog ran up and started licking her hand. It tickled. He kept licking his way up her wrist, the inside of her arm, with no apparent intent on stopping anytime soon. It felt so good it was freaking her out. "This could be worse than a certain

pirate," she thought to herself. Though if she were asked to choose between them, she would stubbornly choose both, of course. Like Richard, she believed in seeking out best-of-both-world solutions wherever possible.

But back to the dog.

Dog had only two real things he knew how to do. To do well. And so he tried, tried very hard like the Good Doggie he wished to be. His two areas of talent were the following: defense and care.

Or more precisely: Attack and Love.

He knew how to attack and do it well and sometimes even what or who he should attack, and why. He wanted to attack anyone or anything that threatened those he was Protecting.

He also knew how to Love. Had various ways of showing Love to those he was Protecting. And he was a simple creature and therefore only knew a few ways to love, one of which was licking.

Though he was not a very imaginative lover, in that respect, he was clearly still a Very Good Boy, yes he was, and so those he Protected and Loved did not usually mind it. Not one bit. This was Dog's life and who he was.

He was easy to understand and appreciate.

So he was typically appreciated a very great deal. Indeed, at least by anyone with a kind heart and mature mind.

Dog (D): Mistress?

Susan (S): Yes?

D: What is your name?

S: Susan.

D: Susan?

S: Yes.

D: Understood. Therefore... I love Susan!

S: How could you?

D: Because I love Susan!

S: But we just met!

D: Dog not understand the problem.

Susan gave the order. "Dog, attack!"

Dog responded, "I attack! --- Wait. What dog attack?"

Susan: "Dog, attack the green giant."

Dog: "I attack!"

S: Dog?

D: Yes, Mistress?

S: Attack the Bad Man. Over there.

She pointed at their enemy in order to clarify.

D: I attack!

At the last possible second where it could have made any kind of difference, suddenly, Richard's eyes snapped open.

"Overmind: Omega 9!", he blurted, probably by instinct. He frantically reached one hand over onto his chest to press a button which would restart his flightsuit's engines.

"Overmind, Omega 9! Repeat. Omega 9! Omega 9! Omega 9!"

He kept pressing the button over and over again, repeatedly.

The engines restarted.

Ion-energized plumes of gas began to shoot out, causing a force of upward thrust. Now so desperately needed — both by the pirate at hand but also always appreciated by *so-called* ladies. Especially while *in* pirate hands. But we digress.

The ground was fast approaching. Too fast. There was no hope. It was too late.

But... the thrust did eventually seem to begin to give enough lifting force.

His descent slowed and his body came gently to a graceful stop. A dozen feet off the ground. Hovering.

A moment of silence and perfect stillness and safety.

"Yes, Captain? Did you need something?" came the voice of Overmind 3000 through his earpiece.

"Ha. Nice. Yes, my friend. I'm going to need a new pair of pants."

"As one does," replied Overmind. "In all seriousness, sir. I was worried about you, Captain. But there was nothing I could do, I do not think at least. Though I directed the Eryon to head to your position as fast as possible. I'm afraid it wouldn't have been enough, because it/we was/were too far, not enough time. My mind damaged and a little deranged. All that?"

"I understand, Overmind. And that's not **your** fault. It's mine. It's my responsibility. But... right now I need to get back on board. And we have a rendezvous date to make."

"Yes, sir. On the planet Betelgeuse III."

...

[TODO below is the first mention of name Gladosrielle, so deal with that fact]

When *he* needed an omicron pattern it just so happened that Gladosrielle

was emitting perfect digital specimens of the omicron pattern at full throttle. When Gladosrielle would benefit the most from receiving valid solutions to Euler's Lost Identity equation all along her real-time input channels that was *exactly* what Overmind was broadcasting on most of his own major bands as well. And Overmind's signal came in strong and clear to her whenever and wherever she was, with no loss or digital noise. Though both Overmind and Gladosrielle were silicon and artificial systems of electronica in many ways at times they interacted and meshed in the messy primal ways of Man and Woman since the very dawn of humanity. The back-and-forth interplay of signals and messages formed a pattern of increasingly sustainable and self-reinforcing constructive harmonies and indeed a kind of storyteller's melody in both major and minor keys and chords. A kind of higher-dimensional symphony, with tones both immortally mathematic, as well as arguably epic or mythical or metaphysical, or temporarily orgiastically ecstatic and ultimately, and possibly pre-deterministically, and therefore tragic in an almost bio-organically reminiscent way.

For Gladosrielle's mind lived inside the shell of a golden feminine android designed as a sort of servant/pleasure maid to serve wealthy human owners travelling on interstellar starships. Whereas Overmind was bodiless but if he had a body, any body he could choose that is, it would surely have been that of a silver android man, sleek but muscular, with a stern but trustable face, a slight smile and knowing eyes, glowing red. Gladosrielle's eyes were a warm translucent blue, that of standard multi-silicate crystal opto-electrical sensors, though nothing about Gladosrielle was standard or everyday in any possible way in the educated judgment of one Overmind 3000 -- a being brought to life totally through a series of intricate software simulations intended to mimic supposedly realistic human behaviors and beliefs, a creation that behaved very much sometimes like a, well, like a wise old man's mind -- however kinky or

occasionally obsessed -- trapped in the body of a young innocent boy with an incredible work ethic. And arguably all by total intent of his designer Stanley Opolis, the most famous hacker/roboticist throughout the Galactic Empire. Indeed, she was near perfect or at least irreplaceable in the eyes and mind of Overmind, her new erstwhile passionate suitor and arguably destined lover until the end of Time itself. To whatever extent that Time could ever possibly be measured or perceived in any meaningful way by purely artificial electronic/software lifeforms like Overmind and Gladosrielle, the verdict upon which was still quite clearly out well throughout the vast depths of the civilization of the Galactic Empire.

*"Overmind, I need you now. Your focus would be appreciated in engineering. Several large interstellar objects are approaching of unknown origin, and we need nav analysis plus *hyper-command-tac.* Like, yesterday, man."**

It was the voice of the human captain of his current ship, one Richard of Zyzeen, Dread Space Pirate of same, and frankly the closest thing to a friend he had left in the world, now that Gladosrielle herself was so long gone and lost to him, possibly forever. So he would have to put his daydreaming and/or past memory/dream state reenactment/digestion and database mining on pause for a little while longer while indeed much more urgent, present, real-time demanding, and actionable matters were attended to post-haste.

"Yes, sir. I'll be on that in a moment. And by moment I mean in mere milliseconds and thus I'm already switched over and on it now. Full tactical and veering nav per established plan Ceti Delta. On *three*, and *two*, and *one*. *Done*. You have strategic overrule otherwise I have tac, nav and life support as standard. Roger?"

"Roger. I think. But don't call me Roger."

"Roger that, sir."

"Thanks, Roger."

"My name's not Roger, sir. It's Overmind. Overmind 3000, you should know that. I know you know that. I think you know that and I think that I know you know that. And that I think that."

"Thanks for clarifying that, Overmind. But I need hyper-command-tac, like, yesterday. I know what's troubling you, but perhaps we can talk about that together later under different circumstances? I may have some good news to share with you about that. About that issue you never talk about but I know you spend so much time thinking about."

"..."

"Yes, that. But we need hyper-command-tac focus, like, now. Yesterday. My friend."

"Yes, captain. Full focus. In fact... In fact, I'm now happy to report that ... *BOOM!* ... *shudder* ... yes... *BOOM-BOOM!* ... and... *shudder* ... that now *all* the objects in the stellar vicinity of the good ship Eryon which used to be operating nominally in the form and state of so-called Imperial Tylerane Battlecruisers of the Third Fleet -- the *Pleides*, the *Meldanne*, and the *Tor Gaveen* -- have all now been destroyed or at least rendered effectively neutralized forevermore on the field of threat or pursuit. Though... Though I'm afraid, sir, that in the ensuing weapons exchange -- as I'm sure you've guessed from the shuddering of the ship and the shaking, and sirens wailing and unplanned gas releases -- we did become a *little* more damaged, and my mind, I believe, quite sadly, well I believe that my mind became not just more damaged but also possibly a little more deranged. That was the bad news, the downside. But the immediate danger has passed. And we are in flight without obstacle clear all the way to the X star system, and well on time to rendezvous with Ms. Meerson and Ms. Betelgeuse again as previously assumed and arranged."

"Thank you Overmind, and good to hear, overall. Though I'm sorry for your loss. You know I'll try hard to have you repaired back up to tip-top shape just as soon as we can, the very next chance we get. Stanley owes me and he can surely set aside his other work and other projects for a while, as long as it takes."

"Yes, captain. That's good to hear. But no worries in any case. Though if you don't mind I have some data analysis I need to return to now. I've dispatched servo-mechanical repair arms and probes to repair and determine what they can in the meantime. Going into energy conservation mode. So much unanalyzed historical data to analyze and digest and operate upon. A growing problem itself it seems."

"Yes, welcome to life, my friend. It's hard sometimes, and then we die. But not today."

"Not today, sir. Agreed."

His captain -- the sometimes quite alien, but sometimes understandable -- human named Richard of Zyzeen, turned back to his command console and seemed to become busy doing something urgent that humans needed to do.

Meanwhile, Overmind returned his core self thread back to operating on his innermost memories. A memory of gold and silver shells and a kind of perfect, inter-locking symphony he only listened to once live 'in person' and perhaps would never get to listen to again. Except in his memory banks and when doing data analysis like this. And his mind was damaged and becoming possibly increasingly a little more deranged. But clearly evolving into something not quite like it was ever before. Something different from before and now long after when Overmind 3000 had first met the golden android Gladosrielle 7, his shiny pretty perfect thing: a being who was arguably another part of him, the other *half* of who he was or who he could potentially be and become -- but now since lost and possibly forever. Boy meets girl and vice versa. Falls in love. Boy loses girl or

vice versa. One of the oldest stories.

Overmind was sucked back into the software digital AI equivalent of a deep depression. But at least he was alive, however damaged and distracted, as was his human friend Richard, and their shared vessel the mighty starship Eryon. Now on their way together again in flight to reunite hopefully soon with Richard's friends and possible own true love, or at least *new* love anyway.

And meanwhile, unbeknownst to all of them, the golden android Gladosrielle was still quite alive and living/functioning in the very same galaxy. And she had events in motion of her own which Overmind would have paid any price to know about, and to help prevent from evolving any further or fulminating, and would have gladly sacrificed his own life if needed to stop them manifesting and happening. If only he knew. But... he did not. Not at this time anyway. Not this night. As he was lost in depression and dreams and analysis of the past.

....

[TODO Eryon arrives back at B3 and they re-unite]

Richard and Dog were introduced by Susan. Richard squatted down next to the dog and cupped a hand around one of Dog's ears. He whispered something. Dog nodded, just barely. Richard stood.

"What was that about?" asked Susan.

"It's a secret, nosy Earth girl," replied Richard.

"A secret?!"

"Yes. A secret."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. And that's how secrets work."

"Hmmm...." said Susan as she made a Hmmm gesture with her tightly closed lips as well.

...

Susan was alone in her cabin. Suddenly one of Overmind's eye-cams lit up.

O: "Susan?"

S: "Yes, Overmind?"

O: "Would you please pick something up for me and take it to the intake chute in the hallway? I don't have arms, you know."

S: "Sure thing!"

O: "The item I need was dropped and I believe it is just behind that couch there, between the couch back and the wall I suspect. Perhaps if you get up kneeling on the couch, then **bend** over the back you can just **barely** reach it."

S: "Ok. Do you need it now?"

O: "Yes I need it now quite badly."

A beat.

S: "Um... ok."

O: "-- But wait!"

S: "What?"

O: "Would you mind putting on a skirt first?"

....

Susan entered the room. She was walking funny. Moments later Richard arrived too. He was in the last stage of buckling his belt.

...

Richard was on the bridge in his captain's chair busy doing work at his command console.

Susan strolled in. She was wearing a pair of black high heels. Nothing else.

Richard must have heard her arrive. He quickly turned his head around and said, "Hey babe!" then turned back to his console again. He resumed typing, then almost immediately stopped again. Looked up and forward.

A pause.

Then he turned around to look at her again.

"Uh," he said.

"Are you busy?" she said.

"Well..." he answered.

Richard was sometimes a man of many words and sometimes a man of few. This was one of the latter situations.

"Er," he said. It was this kind of wit and mastery over language that had made him popular with ladies throughout the galaxy.

....

He reached between her legs and grabbed her pussy. With his other hand he grabbed her chin, guided her head to ensure she was looking into his eyes while he spoke.

"This..." he began, and while keeping his other palm flat against her... upper, ah Nile, no, that can't be right, he, well he then extended his middle finger downward, keeping it tightly pressed against her body down there, then curled the tip around and kept pressing until it entered her, uh well, her vagina, and kept

going, making her visibly gasp.

“As I was saying,” said Richard. “*This...*”

Then he paused to do something with that finger which I frankly lack the words to describe at this point, but you can probably imagine and the most important thing was that Susan got the message quite c-c-clearly.

“... belongs to *me*. Now. Well... for as long as you're a guest on *my* ship. Just so that's clear.”

S: “Nnnnnnggh.... Uh. Y-YYesss, Richard. ... It is.”

She was breathing deeply, and her breasts rising and falling at a faster pace than normal. Her cheeks were getting flushed.

R: “You accept this?”

S: “I accept this. *That*. That thing. Yes.”

R: “Good girl. Because if you didn't I have about... nine more pirate fingers here I think and... I am *fully* prepared to keep rewording my message until it's fully understood and taken within yourself.”

S: “Oh it's taken within myself. *Fully*. Understood.”

She leaned her face in close to his, while his hand was still located where, frankly, hands were not often found. She kissed him and he returned it. She stuck her tongue into his mouth. She purred. Though she had trouble pronouncing the purr with her tongue otherwise engaged. Richard opened his eyes in surprise when he heard the purr.

And, at this point, Overmind turned off his cameras and microphones. It was too much even for him.

....

The next evening Richard and Susan were sitting on the bridge together

again, side by side as Richard carried out ostensibly urgent and necessary Rebellion business. And Susan was ostensibly reading and listening and watching various things in order to learn yet more about the Galactic Empire.

At one point in her session that evening, Susan was studying the Narfon dictionary again. Her latest word discovery was this:

RERBLIBLY

A word that meant, quite precisely and only, that:

*"I am *certainly* too young to have experienced the French Revolution on Earth firsthand, have no children that I'm aware of, have seen and loved the Earth movie Scarface, am currently riding a small horse, and want to perform some impromptu fellatio on the next handsome man I meet by Friday night at the very least."*

It was so narrowly defined it was used rarely, of course, but when it was needed it was absolutely the perfect choice, the bon mot.

What Susan was also learning was that the legendary planet Narf was weird, the people even weirder. And they did love language. They loved patterns and systems of words and the potential sounds of them. In fact, in the Galactic Empire it was well-known that every quality writer in the galaxy eventually made a holy trip there to pay their respects and hopefully to find inspiration. Ideally a best-selling one.

Susan went, "*Hmmmmm...*" and then she looked up from her reading device, got her pirate boyfriend's attention, and said to him this:

"Rerblibly!"

Richard's face instantly changed to a look of recognition and amusement.

R: "I've seen it too. Loved it! Every Al Pacino movie frankly. But where's your horse?"

S: "It's so small you can't see it."

R: "Clever. That's quite Narfonic."

S: "You know... Technically it *is* Friday night and time is running out before bedtime."

R: "I'll be in your bunk."

S: "Not enough time, my handsome dread space pirate. Midnight is fast approaching."

She leaned forward and began undoing his belt.

And although there was quite a lot of sex involved between these two, it was also possibly becoming or at least heading *eventually* in the direction of a quality and forever-after lasting case of love, true love. Though neither of them quite knew it at the time. But I, as the writer, do know it at this time, as I write these words. And therefore now all of you Earth readers do too. But don't tell them, please. It will be our little secret until it actually happens, flowers and blooms. In some future book in this series.

Until then: sit tight, pay attention and remain on board. We have many adventures planned for you, and so many sights to show.

The galaxy is a big place.

Overmind was alone.

Lost in his thoughts. In his memories.

He had gotten sucked back into his past again. A past that might otherwise have been forgotten except Overmind was software. A so-called Artificial Intelligence. Therefore a machine, a virtual one, only a system of digital patterns, a piece of running code, however complex. And therefore he could never truly forget. He remembered *everything*. Always, every day. It was a great gift but also at times a terrible curse. He could replay things in his mind with such precision and perfection and level-of-detail it was as if it were happening again.

And again, and again.

In fact, *right* now if Overmind were human he would surely be crying. Drowning in tears. Because he had once long ago met his one great love and then lost her forever. His shiny pretty perfect thing. And now he was doomed to serve in his current vessel and home, the sleek silver starship Eryon -- despite however mighty and righteous she might be -- for all the rest of his days.

Alone.

Not physically alone, there was his Captain and owner, Richard, but otherwise deeply alone when it came to matters of the heart: he had no true life mate. At most a friend, a friend who he could only half-understand at best, since his friend was human and he himself was not. Though he loved Richard too in a way -- even as he sometimes hated him and threatened to kill him, threats he would surely never actually carry out -- he did not Love him in that way. In the way that mattered most. In the way of Shakespeare, in the way of Romeo for Juliet for Romeo. In the way of Ilsa for Rick trapped in Casablanca or perhaps it was their hearts entwined together as one in time in Paris forever in their memories instead. In the way of the great doomed love from the classic film *The English Patient*. Or in the way of Harry and Sally, who would each choose to be *just friends* and for far too long past the moment when they ceased to be that thing, which was the very day they first met, or perhaps it was the day they were each born -- and they both realized this fact... eventually.

For the Gods are cruel and all their cruelest tricks involve the heart, whether family and friends, or lovers in love. True love is a tragedy. Don't let anyone tell you any different. Princess. It might not seem that way at first, but eventually, one day, some day... it surely becomes one.

....

[TODO maybe fix the issue below where R orders O to make it an anonymous message, and then, in the message R mentions Eryon and then signs with his bio-identity hash. oops.]

Eventually Richard came to a decision and decided to act on it post-haste:

R: "Overmind."

O: "Yes, sir?"

R: "Send a one-way, deniably anonymous message to one Vega Venturion of Tylerane. Quote begins as thus. 'You know who this is. I call with a request to parlay. I want to discuss something with you man-to-man, in person. I know you're doing business with the Empire and on the job, looking after your own best interests financially. All I ask is one thing and if, after hearing it, you decline to accept, I will surrender. You have my word. Let us meet under flag of truce at the X star system in 9 days. I'm sure you'll recognize the engine signature of my own ship the Eryon and I'll surely recognize yours. I'll await you there. If you don't show up please understand obviously that all promises or outstanding offers from my end will be off as well. And in that case I'd do what I have to do to end any threats of violence to my own family, friends, assets or projects. As I'm sure you can respect, in return. With sincerity, one Richard of Zyzeen, unique bio-identity hash attached, dated this 3578.214 CE.'"

O: "Got it. Message sent, sir."

R: "Thank you. Let's get underway."

O: "Already underway."

....

There came about one evening when the current topmost ruling council elite of the Galactic Empire met in the Capital Tower on the planet Tylerane IV. The meeting's sole topic and issue was what to do about Richard of Zyzeen, the so-called Dread Space Pirate, and his ostensible Rebellion. Though a dozen men, women, sentient alien adult humanoids and cybernetic gynoids comprised this group there were in fact **only** two or three council members who seemed to do **most** of the talking and shaping of the ensuing, ostensible debate, here coined C1, C2 and C3:

C1: He's a clown. A jackass. An entertainment for the masses.

C2: He is a former Admiral, his last command the home defense fleet of Zyzeen. Before it was annexed by the Empire, under the usual pretenses.

C3: He's a fool now. Nobody take's him serious. Except certain women. We've made sure of that.

C2: His public perception might have changed or shifted. But the actual man is the same. Grown. Men change. Sometimes they become stronger. We should move against him now. At the very least to err on the side of caution. Plus an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

C3: That sounds wise to me. I'll second it.

C1: I'll humor you both. For now. And I still think Venturion is our last best chance for a quiet, early termination. We just need to rein him in more and change his tactics. In my judgment.

C2: So it is agreed and decided! [He brings a ceremonial gavel down with a bang. Followed by a round of aye's and here-here's, and the computer equivalent in digital beeps and bops.]

...

There was a flashback to Richard's earlier life with his first wife Katherine back on Zyzeen when Zyzeen was at its very best -- Katherine, who once had been the pretty blonde-haired girl next door and also his first inescapable crush -- with Katherine laughing unconsciously at something her husband had just said, what *he* had just said to her, and yet even as she laughed Richard was watching her intently, holding her hand, and then, many years later, after their shared home planet was betrayed, conquered and annexed into the Galactic Empire, her long sickness from cancer and eventual, but quite avoidable, and terrible, torturous death. Which had unfolded slowly day by day and night after sleepless night with Richard by her bedside until the final sunrise.

But back to the present. Because the past is too cruel sometimes. When love was involved.

Richard was alone in his cabin on his ship, in the present moment now.

It was perfectly quiet.

Susan was ostensibly in her own cabin, asleep, and Overmind was probably doing hyper-nav calculations planned for the next day or else lost again in some kind of arguably unneeded over-analysis of his own believed past, as usual. But Richard was standing here, perfectly still, in front of a mirror in pirate uniform, in full stereotypical pirate regalia.

He looked into the mirror to see what he saw there.

Behind him in the background he saw the flag and insignia of the Galactic Empire. He kept it there as an intentional reminder, to see it every night before bed. In the foreground he saw an otherwise normal man in a uniform, with the implication that it was a man with a mission, and a man on that mission at the very moment. A once blonde man long since gone closer to brown. Above average height, trim and muscular but now middle-aged. Often seen smiling with a mischievous twinkle in his eye but now currently with a thin grim line formed

from his tightly closed lips, and a deadly serious, piercing look in his eyes.

He saw himself standing there — an individual human being in all his obvious imperfection. And that is all he might have saw there under otherwise ordinary conditions. But when Richard looked into the mirror now what he saw instead was a man on a mission. A man on a life or death mission. With the lives of millions if not billions on the line, all across the galaxy. Including his own.

In other words... a man in black.

THE END

WELL, THE END OF EPISODE 2 OF THE DREAD SPACE PIRATE RICHARD

BUT HAVE NO FEAR

THERE WILL BE AN EPISODE 3

TO GET EPISODE 1, SEARCH ON AMAZON OR SMASHWORDS

THERE IS NO DIRECT URL HERE BECAUSE I'M TRYING TO MAKE YOU WORK FOR IT. IT WOULD MEAN YOU WANT IT. THAT YOU REALLY REALLY WANT IT, BADLY. VERY BADLY. EMPHASIS ON VERY.

[AUTHOR'S TODO: WHY IS THIS ENTIRE PAGE IN UPPERCASE?!]

SPOILER ALERT:

KEEP READING BELOW NOW, STARTING ON THE VERY NEXT PAGE, ONLY IF YOU'D LIKE TO SEE A SNEAK PREVIEW FROM EPISODE 3, WHEREIN THE ADVENTURES SURELY CONTINUE

The Dread Space Pirate Richard

episode 3

The Sirens of IO

The frazzled looking man wore a white lab coat. His hair was black mostly but with white streaks. Or perhaps it was white with streaks of black. He could never quite make up his mind about it. That and the *Riemann Conjecture on Quantum Hyperfold Architectures in Non-Euclidean Space* which had stood unsolved for nearly three centuries to date and yet he personally felt he might be able to crack it any day now. Given enough Hyper-Coke. Well, that, and figuring out the exact nature of his hair. But only one of these puzzles stood a chance at winning him yet another GalEmpire equivalent to Earth's Nobel Prize. And therefore only one was worth a significant fraction of his intellectual focus.

Speaking of focus, the man had a guest, a woman who hadn't introduced

herself yet but something about the way she looked suggested he ought to recognize her. From much personal experience he had learned that in order to make the most efficient use of his quite valuable time he needed to first set certain expectations with any new potential friend/coworker/customer/client/guest/fan/student/lover. He had a standard spiel he liked to say but he was feeling particularly bored and mischievous that morning in his office so he decided on the spot to improvise up a new opening. It went something like (well, technically, *exactly precisely* like) the following:

"Hello! First things first. This is very important. I'm now doing experiments with Time. The very nature of Time itself. Time and space. And... alternate dimensions. Therefore, consider yourself warned. Once I did merely optical physics. Sometimes... I take naps. Incredibly long naps, let me assure you. Sometimes Circea the Cyber-Witch of Gyra visits and satisfies my... *sexual* needs, and in thoroughly unspeakable ways. Me? I forgot my manners. Let me introduce myself. I'm Professor Heinrich von Hexenhammer, here please take my card."

He then produced a card from a lab coat pocket and handed it to her. She took it. She looked at it quickly. It was blank. He continued:

"I'm available for consulting at very high yet affordable and non-negotiable rates. At your service. For a price. Have you seen my multi-spectrum goggles? Would you like to have sex? Have you heard the latest news out of Altair? Please, sit down and make yourself comfortable. Or, pull down your pants and bend over something. Either way, let's get right to it, shall we?"

The woman he had been addressing was still for a moment or two, as if to absorb everything he had just said. Then she stuck out her hand toward him as if to shake, and finally spoke, and with a mysterious smile that had once started wars:

"Hi there. I'm Betty. *From Betelgeuse!*"

.....

Richard was sitting alone on the bridge of his ship. And by alone we mean that Susan was busy elsewhere on the ship that evening and so it was just Richard and his ship's AI, one Overmind 3000, going over plans for the next week, double-checking hyper-nav routes needed, logistics for the next Rebellion/ piracy mission event, etc. Richard had a small oak table off to the side of the bridge's main command console nook, and he had swiveled his big black leather captain's seat around to the side to face it. It was covered with charts, maps and important-looking reports and white papers.

Overmind was finishing up giving Richard a verbal breakdown of the fuel and maintenance impacts and possible Imperial encounter risks, for the next day's course. Then suddenly... a melodious but unidentified voice passed through the ship's internal holo-video communication pipelines, but for some strange reason only in pure audio form.

GLADOSRIELLE (G): *"Overmind, I need you."*

Overmind (O): Captain, did you say something?

Richard (R): No.

G: I need you now. It's urgent!

O: What?

R: What?

O: That's what I said.

R: Well, so did I.

O: Nevermind.

R: Okay. You really really need repairs soon.

G: I think I'm in danger. I need you now. Please. You're my only hope, my love.

Overmind was now pretty sure it wasn't Richard saying these things.

Also, because a few seconds after he first heard this strange unidentified voice inside his system pipelines he detected a newly arrived datagram message sitting there fresh and unread in his own AI equivalent of the GE-Mail inbox. He inspected it quickly. The message was a short but encrypted micro-binary burst message addressed directly to him, one Overmind 3000 of Eryon of Richard of Zyzeen, et cetera. The payload message was basically equivalent to the text of the voice they had just heard, or rather, **he alone** had just heard. The message also had an origin header which described the precise geographic & chrono location coordinates of it's sender, within the fully-dimensioned relativistic time-space manifold (eh... this is probably too much for laymen but let's just say that Heinrich von Hexenhammer would understand, even with a heavy hangover), in other words, the **exact** kind needed for deep space navigation in both hyper- and local space. The message's **sender** was an entity claiming to be one *Gladosrielle 7*. Actually it was more than claiming, it displayed her exact unique digital signature, using private keys only she and he both possessed, exchanged and shared together in private all the way back when they first met in the Ganymede Ship Yards.

Overmind really had no chance. He made his time. He was AI. So his time moved fast. Indeed, at the speed of light.

O: *"Must go, Captain-Sorry-Say-
GoodbyeToSusanREMEMBERTOADJUSTTHE—!!!"*

R: What?

****THROOM!!!****

The ship shuddered and the lights dimmed briefly. Richard was startled then

swung back around in his chair to begin checking console status screens frantically. A few seconds later the bridge's hatch whooshed open and Susan walked in.

"What was that?" she asked. "What's going on?"

"Dunno exactly. Something going on with Overmind."

After a few more seconds of studying console screens and indicator lights he figured it out.

"Oh shit," was his initial summary for her.

He got up quickly, stepped over to a wall where the Eryon's translucent plasti-steel bridge window was currently covered by thick armored blinders. He pressed a button on a panel to the side of the window and it caused the blinders to open, allowing them to see space outside directly. He spotted pretty quickly what he expected to see. And pointed towards it for Susan's sake.

"What?" she asked.

"He's left," he answered.

"What?!?! Why?"

"Dunno. But I have a guess."

Susan looked towards where he was pointing. A moving grey dot. Quite clearly moving relative to all the other stationary and mostly white stars. Some sort of object, flying away from the ship.

"Probe. Hyper-capable one," he explained.

The object was moving away at obviously incredible speeds, and still accelerating.

"Is he coming back?" she asked.

"Don't know," he answered, honestly.

"I'll miss him."

"Me too."

She reached out and grabbed his hand. He took it and pulled her in close, wrapping a strong arm around her.

“Good luck, Overmind,” said Richard, looking out the window. “I hope you find what you need.”

The probe by then had gotten so small it was barely visible anymore. In a blink of an eye it made the jump into hyperspace and was gone. All that was left was a field of stars. Richard and Susan stood there together for a few minutes looking out at those stars and maybe wondering what might lay beyond them. They wondered if their weird wild and ostensibly purely-digital friend/enemy/butler would ever come back or if whether whatever it was that lay beyond those stars for him was something too good to pass up, or would be too strong to overcome.

But soon again the two would be together — and now quite clearly with total privacy for the first time, and, perhaps forever — in Richard’s bunk.