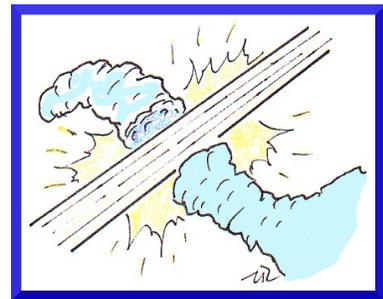


The scream from the Androlien, as my plasma pistol removed several inches of his eight-inch, pulsating nose sounded queer – similar to the mating call of a Carrigean whooping beast. I chuckled at his pain.

Three Androliens stood between me and my space transport. It was behind a large pile of boulders, about one hundred feet across a field of jagged, gray, volcanic gravel in a small group of bushy trees. Although one Androlien was slightly injured, they were succeeding in keeping me pinned down.

The Androlien's scream tapered off to a whimper and then quiet.

The babble of a fairly brisk, greenish-blue stream prevailed over the oppressive silence as it meandered around lavender and rust-colored rocks which were titivated with yellow and green moss (a very slippery yellow and green moss; my smarting left elbow was testament to that).

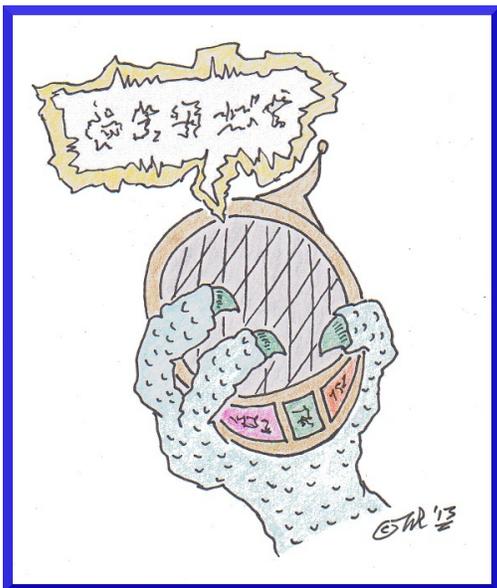


Two blasts from pulse rifles broke the silence and cut away at the bank of sand and gravel I was coiled behind, hurling hot rock shards over me. I felt pain like scores of lit cigarettes burning through my thin uniform cooking my back and shoulders. My first instinct was to jump up and brush them off, but instead I fired my blaster and rolled to my left ridding me of the shards as I did. My previous location exploded as my three adversaries fired a volley of shots detonating everything in the area. When the assault ceased, I heard the sizzle of damp sand exposed to the sudden heat. My nose burned as a foul stench, like rotten eggs, permeated the area.

I peered out across the gurgling stream. My left elbow was in agony and I was about to be captured and probably tortured, but I was strangely enthralled by the sheer beauty and variety of trees. Except for the varying shades of purple it resembled photos of ancient Earth. A tiny valley, the lively stream emptied into, had an encampment – probably Androlien – about five kilometers at the far end. I'd failed to notice it when I landed.

The Androliens had stopped shooting, but I could hear a lot of jabbering and yelling. I didn't know the language and I'd left my interplanetary translator on the transport.

Then I heard what sounded like a garbled voice over *their* communications receiver.



Oh great! I thought, they contacted their camp. Soon every Androlien on the base would be up here. My heart thudded against my breastbone. I could be in a *helluva* mess.

Sweat rolling down my back reawakened the burns there, and my left elbow hurt furiously.

I looked up at the faint ring encircling the planet,

in the mauve sky, speckled with virgin white clouds and an occasional frantic flying animal of some kind. I gazed past all that and tried to look into the blackness of space where my star cruiser, *Aurora*, orbited a few hundred kilometers above me, silent and oblivious to my peril. Why didn't I listen to Sarta – or as we jokingly referred to her, Lieutenant Fifty-Eight (Sambians never use surnames. Instead they place a sequential number at the end of their first names) – my Science Officer and second in command? She was *always* right. She'd talked me into reluctantly taking my communicator.

#

“But it has Earth's gravity and atmosphere/ I'm only going fishing,” I whined, loading the fishing gear into the transport.

“We have enough food on board for the entire crew for the next one and a half solar years,” Lieutenant Fifty-Eight argued. “I fail to understand why you, the captain of a galaxy class star cruiser, feels compelled to fly down, alone, to an alien planet to procure unnecessary provisions. At least let me or a couple security guards accompany you to the surface of this unexplored world.”

I thought, *Spoken like a true Sambian*. Although they can be a real pain in the ass, Sambians make the best first officers because of their genuine concern for ship and crew.

“You don't understand,” I protested “it's not about catching fish, it's about getting away from everything for a few hours. I haven't been on terra firma in six months, and although I know it's not Earth, I have got to get away by myself with no security personnel or Sambian first officers and just walk along a secluded stream.”

She glared at me and said, “You don't even know if there are fish down there.”

“*That is my point!*” I roared. She gaped at me with wide eyes. “Look, I'll call on my communicator should anything happen. You could have someone down there in five minutes. Okay?”

“A lot can happen in five minutes,” I half heard her mumble.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” she replied as she stuck something into the sleeve pocket of my jacket, zipped it, and gave it a couple pats. “There, I fixed it, Ron,” she said, casually.

For a second, I was caught off guard by her lack of protocol and didn’t quite get her message. “Excuse me?”

“I apologize, sir, I meant to say Captain Turner.” She smiled and batted her green, catlike eyes like a teenage girl.

Confused, I shrugged and put the remainder of my gear in the transport.

“I’ll call you when I set down.”

I could tell she disapproved as she clomped across the metal decking of the transport bay toward the main multi-lift – security people close behind her.

“Watch the store!” I yelled, as she exited the bay.

“Yeah, I’ll watch more than --” The rest of her comment was cut off as the large magnetic bay door *swished!* closed.

“Women,” I muttered. I shook my head, poured my lanky six-foot plus frame into the tiny gray and white transport, and closed the hatch. The pilot seat immediately conformed to my body and slid velicia webbing over me to hold me tight.

“Computer.”

“Yes captain?” the metallic, female voice of the computer replied.

“Initiate start-up sequence.”

“Yes captain.”

The main plasma drive engines rumbled to life. After checking the numerous readouts I said, “Open bay doors.”

“Yes captain.”

With joystick in hand I eased the transport forward from the loading bay into the vastness of space.

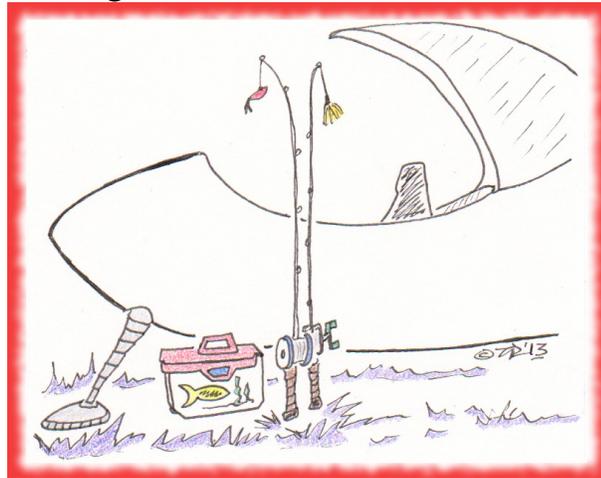
For a moment, I hung between the Aurora’s huge white bulk above and the soft violet planet below. It’s always a

humbling experience to float next to the mother ship and view her massive almost kilometer long bulk, her thousand twinkling lights, and her twelve giant blast tubes, which propel her into hyperspace. I guided the transport leisurely down the Auroras length looking for dings or dents from the many asteroids we'd encountered; but it appeared the plasma shields did their jobs protecting her.

I directed the transport to the right and dove for the uninhabited planet we were orbiting – Titus Thirteen – with its pink, broken ring circling the equator.

I set the transport down next to the first little stream I found, checked the exterior air on my instruments, and disembarked. I was so enthralled by the

view I forgot to contact Lieutenant Fifty-Eight.



For the first time in many months I inhaled real air, clean and crisp, unlike the recirculated crap on the *Aurora*.

“Ahhh,” I sighed, “now this is air.”

I grabbed my fishing gear, closed the hatch with my elbow, and rushed to check out the angling potential. Like a little boy on a treasure hunt, I hopped from rock to moss covered rock down the middle of the stream; oblivious how slick the moss was, and that I was being targeted.

My right foot had just made contact with a large mossy rock in the middle of the stream when the foot slipped out from under me. I fell back into the water striking my elbow on a rock. Simultaneously I heard a pulse rifle shot destroy a sapling across the stream.

I scurried/swam to the bank and glanced back toward the stream where my fishing gear, and communicator, disappeared further down it. I pulled my weapon from its

holster, and with my first shot, ruined one of my three assailants noses.

Patrolling this outer quadrant prevented personal contact with most alien life forms, including Androliens, for some time and that was all right by me. Huge, slimy brutes, eight or nine feet tall, faded blue in color with massive chests and a waist to match. They had large, bulging eyes straddling an eight inch, obscene -looking nose that pulsated in and out when they spoke. Their wide, thick-lipped maws were not unlike a large mouth bass's and their muscular legs gave the mistaken impression they could jump long distances. The legs were most likely overdeveloped from carrying around their massive bodyweight. Their hairless bodies were covered in scales like a lizard – but their overall appearance was more froglike. They reviled humans and would go out of their way to employ a slow death by torture when they caught one.

I heard an alarm sound off at the base. *Oh shit! What am I going to do now?*

My mind returned to Lieutenant Fifty-eight and how she looked the last time I saw her.

Two more blasts struck the embankment. Gravel and sand rained down on me. . . . Yeah, these boys wanted me.

Lieutenant fifty-eight looked pissed when I last saw her, but why?

I shot back at their stone fortress and looked to my rear, toward the Androlien base. I saw several repel vehicles, with large pulse cannons, slowly making their way up a sloped path toward my position. My blood froze and my body trembled. Panic cut through me like a honed scythe as I debated my next action.

I saw her standing there with her hands on her hips, arguing with me about taking a security person along. I should have listened to her--she's always right. I guess it has to do with male ego or something.

After much consideration, I came to a conclusion. I'd rush them. They wouldn't expect that. Nobody in their right mind would expect that. Capture was not an option though --

I'd heard stories.

My sweaty hand tightened on my weapon as I crouched in a low runners stance.

Lieutenant fifty-eight was standing there smiling at me.

My mind wouldn't focus on the task at hand. I closed my eyes and in the midst of a small prayer, I saw her talking to me again.

She'd stuck something in my jacket pocket, zipped it, and said, "There, I fixed this, Ron." She called me Ron. I'd never called her by her first name, Sarta.

I could hear the repel-vehicles getting closer. I rose in my stance a bit, set to jump over the bank and sprint.

"There, I fixed it, Ron." . . . She fixed what?

I lay my plasma weapon on the gravel, unzipped my jacket pocket, and pulled out a small, black box – about the size of a pack of cigarettes – with a display and several push buttons. It was the remote for the transport vehicle that she'd been working on for the better part of a month.

"I don't believe it," I muttered as I turned it over in my hand. *Dink*, I switched it on.

"**WELCOME**," scrolled across the display screen. Then, I was instructed to select an option. Eagerly, I chose weapons. "**ION CANNONS ACTIVATED**," scrolled across the display screen. "**POWER?**" It asked next and gave four options, "**ONE QUARTER . . . ONE HALF . . . THREE QUARTER . . . FULL POWER.**" I selected full power. "**ENTER COORDINATES**," came the next display.

The coarse sand scraped my cheek as I scrunched my face firmly against the river bank and peered through a steaming pulse rifle furrow. I saw most of the tail of the transport, but the ion cannons were situated toward the front and blocked from view by the boulders that protected the Androliens.

Well, that's just ducky.

Something tickled my hand. I looked down. A small multi-legged creature crawled, indifferently, over it. I shook it off and visually searched for a better location to

execute my new plan.

About thirty feet to my front/left was another group of boulders – smaller than my enemy’s stronghold – but adequate for my purpose.

The drone of the repel-vehicles grew louder. I needed to get over there fast without being blown apart by their weapons.

I decided to fire my plasma gun in rapid succession as I jumped up and ran for the small cluster of boulders. When I reached the stone fortification I’d dive, tuck, and roll to safety behind them.

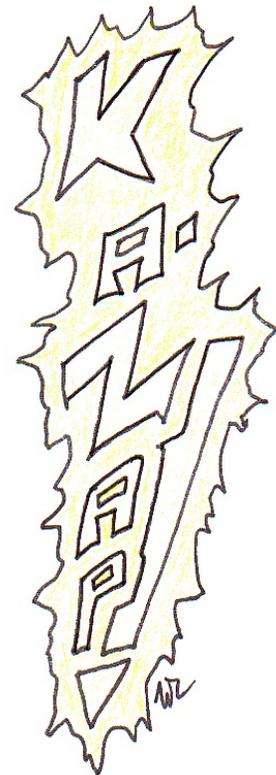
I’ve never known a plan to work the way it was intended.

I fired rapidly, jumped to my feet, and hurtled the river bank. But my foot slipped on the wet sand and I fell, in the open, on my face. A shot howled just over my head. With no time to plan my next move, I fired a succession of shots, hopped to my feet, and ran for all I was worth. I reached the rocks and dove, but just before my tuck – *ka-pow!* – a pulse shot exploded a section of the rock near my right leg. I cartwheeled over the rocks and landed on my head.

My head was whirling. I vaguely heard muffled voices; I heard blaster reports. I was seeing double. I had to think. It wasn’t easy. I had to do something. They’d get up thought I was incapacitated.

Where was my blaster?

I looked for it, but when I opened my eyes my double vision made me nauseous. So I closed them and felt the ground around me and around the rocks that protected me. I grabbed something, but it slithered out of my hand. *Did I hear a footstep? Where was my goddam blaster?* I opened my eyes briefly and saw two blasters under a vicious looking



thorny bush. I reached out and grabbed one. I was back in business.

I snaked my arm around the base of my refuge and fired a succession of wild shots toward my opposition. I heard shouting, in Androlien, and running. I closed one eye, and that solved my diplopia problem, but not my depth perception. I peeked around the bottom of my granite shield. The Androliens had ventured into the open, but thanks to the volley of shots I'd unleashed, were ducking back behind their stronghold.

Something warm trickled down past my eye, over my cheek, and around my mouth. I stuck out my tongue and licked the streaming fluid. It tasted coppery, salty.

Blood.

I explored the top of my head with my fingers and felt a nasty gash from my unorthodox landing.

My thoughts returned to Lieutenant Fifty-eight and the way she'd asked me, last month, if I wanted to go swimming with her in *Aurora's* pool. 'Thanks,' I'd said, 'but I'm much too busy. Maybe some other time.' Come to think of it, she'd asked me a number of times in the past year to go swimming, but I was *always* too busy. What was I thinking? Growing up on a water planet, naturally she'd like swimming. Despite the webbing at the base of her fingers, and probably her toes – which all Sambians are born with -- she was kinda pretty. Five foot tall with short, greenish-blond hair, dark tan skin, and that Sambian figure. I bet she was mighty fetching in a swim suit or whatever she wore. Mom use to say about love, "Men are always the last to know." I never understood what she meant until now. And why swimming? Was it a form of Sambian foreplay?

I studied my situation. My screaming left elbow hampered my thoughts. Blood, from my split head, dripped from my chin to the gravel with a *pat, pat, pat!*

A mild breeze stole its way up the valley and wafted the elegant and violet flower petals on the many trees that encircled my location.

Snap out of it! Focus, and stop daydreaming.

If I activated the ion cannons on the ship and aimed them at my rivals, they'd probably hear the drone of the mechanism. I needed a distraction while I rotated the turret. A string of plasma fire would do it. I glanced over my right shoulder and saw the lead repel-vehicle rounding a bend about a kilometer away.

It's now or never.

The first volley of cover shots, from my weapon, echoed down the valley and I activated the turret. It worked perfectly. The Androliens to my front returned fire, little realizing they were camouflaging the *whirr!* of the ship's turret mechanism. When they stopped shooting, the ship's cannons were pointed at their backs – or as close as I could get with my vision problem and my vantage point. I realized scoring a direct hit would be next-to-impossible, but I just needed to scare the hell out of them.

With a thunderous report, a cannon shot from one of the repel-vehicles removed a half meter of terrain, directly behind my legs.

That was it! I had to move, now!

Holding the remote in front of me I pushed the fire button, point blank, full power. . . . Nothing happened. I looked at the display and a short message scrolled across the screen, **UNABLE TO COMPLY**.

No shit! What the hell's wrong with this thing?

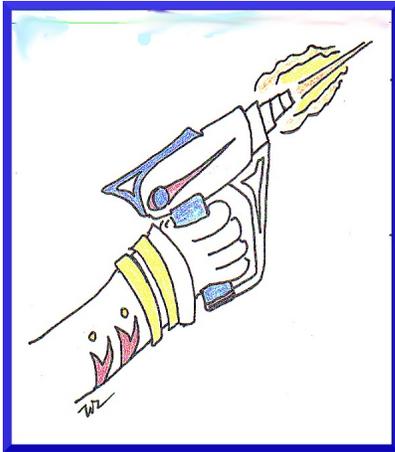
A more powerful explosion, from the approaching enemy to my rear, took down a large tree on my left. The Androlien repel-vehicles were zeroing in on me. The next shot would be in my lap.

I shook the remote frantically (as if it would help) and looked at the display screen again and the message, **UNABLE TO COMPLY**, was still scrolling. I looked closer. In the bottom-right corner I saw a small message in red letters, '**SAFETY ON**'.

Of course, now I remember. That's what Sarta was repairing--the safety feature.

Anxiously, I rotated the remote to locate the little red safety switch on the back. The hum of the repel-

vehicles grew agonizingly louder and I heard the Androliens to my rear shouting to each other in their queer language. I turned off the safety switch and pushed the fire button . . . point blank . . . full power. The resulting explosion was deafening, as a huge boulder violently detonated not more than four meters from my adversaries. I jumped to my feet. Through raining rock, with one eye closed, blood streaming down my face, and yelling like a madman I charged.



The Androliens to my front were rising to their feet and shaking their heads as I fired a volley of shots with my pistol. One of my blasts hit the first Androlien's head and it vaporized into a pink mist. The second Androlien leveled his weapon and fired, but I tripped over a limb of the downed tree and his shot screamed past my ear I rose to my knees and fired another series, one of which struck him in the chest. The last of the original three Androliens — the one with the shortened snout — threw his weapon at me and took off running across an open field. I let him go.

I ran toward the transport vehicle and safety. I could hear the large guns on the Androlien attack vehicles shooting at me, but I guess they weren't use to firing at a moving target. My knees buckled when I reached the hatch of my ship — panting like an old war horse. I put my hand on the sensor pad. The ship recognized my bio signature and *swished!* the hatch open. I dove onto my comfortable, preformed seat, told the computer to close the hatch, activate force shields, and contact the Aurora.

“Complying,” replied the computer.

Within seconds, I heard a familiar voice, “Lieutenant Sarta here.”

“Lieutenant, I'm in trouble,” I said, as I watched my enemy take positions around my ship.

“Should I send help?”

“No, our technology appears to be superior to theirs. I think I can make it out of here, but keep on your toes in case I need assistance.”

“Yes sir, stay in contact.”

The Androliens fired all they had at me, and although the power levels dropped, the shields held.

“Computer! Start engines.”

“Yes captain.”

Normally, I prefer to let the engines warm up a few seconds, but I was in a hurry to leave so I lurched her up and away – out of the grip of the Androliens. I could feel the detonations from their large pulse guns exploding behind me as I zoomed skyward. I couldn’t resist diving back to the planet to buzz just over the wounded Androlien’s head who was still running across the open field. Looking at my rear view monitor I saw him fruitlessly throwing rocks at my ship.

I noticed, as I zoomed skyward, that four attack fighters had blasted off from the Androlien base and were headed my way. I pushed the controls to full throttle and screamed towards the safety of the Aurora. My pursuers were gaining on me. They fired a series of shots, jarring my little transport and reducing its power levels dangerously low.

I was soon in the shadow of the Aurora and I heard Sarta’s voice say, “Looks like you have company. Shall we dispatch them for you?”

“No. They’re no threat. Just tractor me in, I’m a little cockeyed.” My order was implemented and I was soon in the transport landing bay, waiting for the pressure to equalize. It seemed to take forever, but eventually Sarta and a host of security personnel were gathered around my little ship. I opened the hatch. The security personnel gently pulled me from the transport and lowered me to the bay floor.

“After we take you to the infirmary, what orders do you have for us?” asked Lieutenant Fifty-Eight.

With help I stood, put my arm around her slender

shoulders, and said, "After I visit the infirmary, get your suit and we'll go swimming - Sarta."

She looked into my eye and her face erupted into a smile. She put her arm around my waist, helped me from the landing bay, and said, "Sambians don't use swim wear."



End

Contest

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