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Third Prize, Short Story

A CHILDREN’S GAME

Zack and Sahala heavy-heartedly walked into the scanner room atop the observatory in their capital city. They were on the duty roster for watch tonight, one of the less desirable jobs on Terra. Zack was a nineteen year old with brown hair and a muscular build. Sahala was seventeen with long blonde hair and a lithe body. They walked inside the observatory and took their positions in the scanner room. “Of all the luck!” exclaimed Zack. “We’ve got to sit here for the next six hours monitoring the scanners while everyone else is at Rodney’s for a party.”

Sahala sighed and activated a row of computer screens. “I know what you mean, but someone has to do this work, and we were on the roster.”

“But think of all the fun we’re missing. Rodney promised some good cold grog and I wanted to sniff plant vapors. Frack! It’s the same thing every night - empty space. Nothing ever happens.”

“Well, I think tonight is going to be a little different,” answered Sahala, pointing to a monitor. “Take a look.”

Zack glanced at the screen. “What is it?”

“It looks like a ship.”

“Give me extreme magnification,” ordered Zack.

The screen blurred for a moment and the dot on the screen was replaced by a closeup shot of a ship. Both Zack and Sahala smiled. “You know, we can have a little fun of our own,” said the girl.

She activated a sensor probe and the interior of the ship’s bridge appeared on the screen. The probe zoomed in on what appeared to be the ship’s commander. The man was studying a flight-path line that was traced on a starfield map. He gave an order for a course and vector change and then resumed eyeing the map.

Sahala’s lips formed a smile. “Hey, Zack, do you remember that experiment we studied in our Astro Parapsychology instructional period?”

“You mean the one in which you dispose of senior officers and see what minor officers can do in an emergency situation?”
“Exactly. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”
“I think so.”
“Our planet is hidden from them by our atmospheric screen; the computer can easily pick out the command staff.”
“Well,” said Zack. “What are we waiting for? Let’s have some fun.”

The baseship Seeker was traveling placidly through space charting new star systems that had been on her scanners for two months. Looking forward to a peaceful trip back home, her crew members were performing the final stages of charting the navigational positions of the stars.

Inside the Seeker’s Medical Center, Dr. Russell, head officer, read over the entry he had just recorded. His blue eyes scanned the symbols printed on a small viewscreen connected to his medcom. The sound of the Medical Center’s door sliding open interrupted his train of thought. Dr. Hurt and Nurse Jill Duncan wheeled in a stretcher containing the unconscious body of the ship’s commander, Ridley Stanton. “What happened?” asked Dr. Russell.

Hurt and Jill lifted Stanton onto a diagnostic bed. “Not sure,” said Hurt. “He was on the bridge and fine. One moment later, unconscious.”

Russell ran a medscan over Stanton’s body; he frowned at the readings. He watched Nurse Duncan as she attached monitors to Stanton’s forehead and chest. “Well?” he asked.

Jill ran her hand over the key board. “Heart-pulse - blood rate, all normal.”
“What is it?” asked Dr. Hurt.
“He seems to be in some sort of deep, induced sleep,” answered Russell. “It could be some form of virus but I can’t be sure until we make some further tests. Let’s get him into a test chamber.”

Although the Seeker’s bridge might have seemed still and inactive to an outside observer, there was an abundance of human activity going on. Crew members’ hands were testing dials and gauges whose information had remained stable for some time. Captain John Holmes braced his hands against the back of his science officer and fiancé Sheba Miller’s chair. They had met a year ago at a banquet in honor of Commander Stanton and dated six months before deciding to become engaged. After this tour of duty they planned to be married.

He watched as her eyes searched every horizontal scan line of her monitoring screen. She kept punching new combinations of the same data into her computer setup. The intensity of the scanner picture changed as various profiles of existing planets and star systems were compared with the antiquated conveyance under study. A match was quickly made and the identification appeared in printed form below the picture.

“Computer says an ice-like astroid,” announced Sheba. “Scanners read uninhabitable.”

“Put it in navigational sequence and log it,” ordered Holmes. “By the way, have you heard any more about the commander?”

Sheba turned from her work. “The last report I received from Dr. Russell was that he was still in a coma.”

“Damn,” said Holmes as he walked back to his station.

Sheba pulled out the video scanner tape and walked over to the main computer station. As she walked, a wave of dizziness came over her. She shook her head and the feeling cleared. She activated the computer and the field returned. Suddenly all went black around her and she fell to the floor.

“Sheba,” exclaimed Holmes, as he rushed to her side.

Dr. Russell saw Holmes standing in the doorway, holding the unconscious form of Sheba. “Bring her over here.” He motioned to a bed.

Holmes carefully laid Sheba on the bed and moved back as the doctor examined her. Russell ran his medscan over her body. “Well?” Holmes asked impatiently.

“The same as the Commander. Coma.”

“What is there any way to bring her out of it?”

“There is no virus in her system or the commander’s. It seems to be a natural state and until they bring themselves out of it there’s nothing I can do,” said Russell.

“Doctor, please…”

“Don’t worry Captain. My whole staff is working around the clock for a cure. I’ll do everything possible for her. She’ll…She’ll be all right.”

Holmes bent down and kissed Sheba on the cheek. “I love you,” he whispered.

Reports of command personnel passing out all over the ship had been coming in for an hour. The Medical Center was almost filled with comatose patients. Dr. Russell switched off the medcon and shook his head. He felt strange. Perhaps it was just the strain of trying to find a cure. He couldn’t be sick now. He just couldn’t.

He heard the Medical Center’s door slide back but was afraid to turn. When he did he saw the unconscious form of John Holmes being supported by two crew members. “Not Holmes, too?” he asked.

“He collapsed in the Rejuvenation Center,” said the taller of the two. They lowered him onto a bed. “We don’t seem to be able to revive him.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Russell. He automatically picked up a medscan and ran it over Holmes. He threw it to the floor in disgust. “Damn it! What good are these things. He’s the same as all the rest.”

“Take it easy, doctor,” said the other man. “Things will work out.”

Russell nodded at the two men as they left. He walked over to a communication screen and punched the call button for the lab. Dr. Hurt’s face appeared on the screen. “Yes?”

“Hurt. John Holmes was just brought in. He’s in a coma. I…”” Before he could continue, a sharp pain burned inside his head. He fell against the wall and went limp. Hurt watched helplessly as Russell sank to the floor.
Zack and Sahala congratulated each other. "Terrific!" exclaimed Zack. "This is better than any old party. Did you see the way that doctor hit the floor? He went limp like an old rag doll."

"It seems a rather cruel experiment, but it is fun," said Sahala. "I wonder who they'll put in place of the regular command staff?"

"All senior officers have been mysteriously incapacitated by a comatose illness," Dr. Hurt dictated into the medical log.

He sat on the edge of a desk, deep in thought. The microphone dropped from his mouth before he continued.

"Our one overriding hope is that Nurse Jill Duncan and I can find a cure. A skeleton crew of bridge officers have kept the ship functioning despite the temporary loss of command personnel. Security Officer Kramer is in command while Bill Frazer, Sam Petrov, and Kate Matthews are supporting personnel. The rest of the bridge operations are being handled by computer control. Further reports will be made at regular intervals."

He paused again trying to think of something else to say. All he could do now was to wait and hope. He stopped the recording.

Sahala smiled at the screen. "Well, at least we've got their replacements to observe now."

"Yeah, but it's all too controlled," said Zack. "We have them in a semi-normal replacement situation. It needs some excitement. I want some action. Let's make them do something."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something fun."

"Well... let me see. How about—yes! We'll give them a surprise that they will never forget."

On the bridge, Kate Matthews frowned at the readings her scanner was giving her. "Kramer, I have scanner contact with a powerful alien object approaching us."

Kramer crossed over to Kate's console. "Put it on the screen."

The main screen on the bridge lit up to reveal a large spacecraft coming toward them; the craft was unlike any they had encountered.

Kramer turned toward Petrov. "Put the ship on red alert."

Petrov nodded. "Red alert."

As the klaxtons sounded throughout the ship, the bridge became fully operational for battle.

All combat ship pilots to spacedock," ordered Frazer.

Kramer, satisfied with the procedures, turned toward Kate. "Any contact from that thing?"

"None. I've tried repeated contacts but received no response. The computer reports craft powered by ion propulsion with lightspeed capabilities. Some form of life is indicated but we can't be specific."

"Range?"

"Three hundred thousand and closing."

Frazer walked over to Kramer. "Combat ships ready. Laser batteries armed and ready. Do we wait for them to make the first move?"

"I think they already have."

All eyes turned toward the main screen. The nose of the alien ship glowed bright red. Without warning a red lance of energy struck the Seeker. The bridge shook violently.

"Fire all lasers," ordered Kramer.

The ship's huge laser batteries swung toward their target and fired. The laser beams struck the ship but were deflected.

"Launch all combat ships."

"Spacedock core systems, transfer launch control to all pilots," ordered Frazer. "Launch."

The attack vessels shot out of the launch bay and headed toward the alien ship. They fired upon it but the ship deflected their beams also.

Suddenly, a long sweep of blinding white light surrounded the squadron of ships and transformed them into a mass of fire whose flames reached out toward each other, combined, fell together, and exploded further in a burst that illuminated the entire area.

"My God!" Kate gasped.

Kramer's face was expressionless. "Are there any ships left?" he asked in a low voice.

"None, sir," responded Frazer. "They're all gone."

"Petrov, give me the ship's status report," ordered Kramer.

"Decks four, five, six, and seven are burning out of control. Fire crews are on the scene. Medical Center is reporting heavy casualties. What are we going to do?"

"Kramer," it was Kate's voice. "Audio transmission coming over channel Beta."

"Let's hear it."

A burst of static came over the loudspeaker, then a voice, a cold, harsh mechanical-like voice, "Seeker prepare to be terminated."

"This is Security Officer Kramer. Identify, please."

Kramer's request was ignored. "You will be terminated after we take what we need from your ship. One of our warriors will be transported to your ship. Do not interfere."

"You expect us to cooperate?" asked Kramer.

"You will cooperate or die sooner," the transmission ended.

"Kramer," called out Petrov. "Alien activity is being picked up in corridor nine on deck twelve."

"They didn't waste any time, did they," said Frazer.

"Try and put it on the screen," ordered Kramer.

"Visual coming in now," responded Petrov.

The screen revealed a corridor inside the ship glowing brightly. The glow was soon replaced by a large, humanoid form, glistening in silver armour. It carried no weapon. Only its size seemed ominous. "What the hell is that?" asked Petrov.

They watched as the enormous creature stalked down the corridor and turned down a corner. The ship's internal camera system followed the creature's movements as it approached a door marked, MEDICAL CENTER. It paused for a moment, then entered.

"Frazer, Petrov, come with me," shouted Kramer.

"Doctor Hurt! Look out!" screamed Jill Duncan.
The creature walked slowly into the Medical Center. Hurt and Jill watched as it walked past them and stared at the senior officers. It walked over to Commander Stanton's cot and raised a massive arm toward the medical monitors above his head.

"Get away!" shouted Hurt as he lunged for the thing. The creature turned and delivered a crushing blow to the side of Hurt's head. The doctor collapsed on the floor. The creature then turned toward Jill. "Stay back," she ordered.

Jill backed away as the creature advanced toward her. She grabbed a glass specimen container and in vain threw it at the creature. The glass shattered against the thing's chest but it left it unharmed. It turned away from the woman and headed out into the corridor.

Kramer, Frazer, and Petrov arrived in Medical Center in time to see Jill bandaging the head of the unconscious Hurt. "What happened?" asked Kramer.

"It was that thing.... Hurt tried to stop it from killing the Commander. Help me get him on a cot," Frazer and Petrov lifted Hurt on a nearby bed.

"You okay?" asked Frazer.

"I'm fine. Just shaken."

"Hold down the fort, Jill. Come on, we'd better find that thing before anything else happens," ordered Kramer.

The three men ran down the corridor in search of their alien "visitor." After several minutes they cornered it at the end of a hallway. "Is this luck?" asked Kramer.

The creature stood its ground for a moment, studying its enemies. Without warning it lunged, knocking them to the floor.

Kramer drew his laser pistol and fired. The beam was deflected, much to his surprise. It bounced off the creature and on to the wall. The smell of scorched metal filled the air.

Frazer and Petrov tackled the creature in a desperate attempt to subdue it. Once again it threw them off.

"Everyone fire at it all at once," commanded Kramer. All three fired. Instead of the laser beams being deflected, they enveloped the creature and it disappeared.

"Did we kill it?" asked Petrov.

"Hell if I know. Let's get back to the bridge," said Kramer. "I want some answers."

Kate looked relieved as her friends entered the bridge. "The alien transmission is coming back in but this time on a different channel," she called out.

"What now?" asked Kramer. "I can't take too many more surprises."

They watched a figure of a young man, in his twenties, with black hair and wearing a military looking uniform appear on the screen. Another young man and a girl stood beside him.

"Baseship Seeker?"

"This is the Seeker. Security Officer Kramer speaking. Who are you?"

"I am Atar of the planet Terra. I must apologize for all the trouble we have caused you."

"You caused?"

"Yes, your entire ship and crew have been the subjects of a textbook experiment."

"Experiment? Like guinea pigs?"

"Unfortunately, yes. You see our species is one that ages very slowly. Childhood on Terra lasts for several decades instead of your fourteen to nineteen years. You and your ship were the victims of a game. A children's game. I only found out that Zack and Sahala were tampering with your life forms."

"Tampering! Our ship is burning and our senior officers are mysteriously ill, not to mention the murder of an entire squadron! What about all of that?"

"My dear sir, it was all an illusion. Your ship is not burning. All of your senior officers will be fine in moments. As for your pilots, they are all sound asleep in their beds. I repeat it was all an illusion. It never really happened. Please accept my apologies."

"Well, it seems that's the only thing we can do. Just see to it that your friends don't try it again."

"Be assured. Zack and Sahala will be properly punished. Thank you and good bye." The main screen faded out.

"I can't believe it," declared Frazer. "Two kids almost incapacitate an entire baseship, stage a battle, send a creature to scare the hell out of us, stop and then say they were sorry and that it was an illusion."

"Some kids," replied Petrov.

"Some illusion," shuddered Kate in remembrance.

"Indeed," said Kramer.