

Toast

by Harald Hagen

Aboard the starvessel VoidHunter-3, crew members had been so eager to return to their home planet after their interstellar expedition that they took a shortcut off the EZI-462 space highway and turned into the gravitational pull of a particularly stubborn black hole apparently headed in the same direction.

Naturally, everyone panicked. Inevitable doom had that effect on carbon-based organisms in uniform. Up and down the hallways ran these shrieking people, many scrambling for escape pods which had long been out of commission due to an engineering strike earlier that year from unreasonable working conditions. Some gave up on that and instead sought the comfort of their friends and families in the residential quarters, hoping to say the things they never said and forget why they never did in the first place. Others still had no idea where they were going but decided to join in on the jog anyway.

In the mess hall, two officers sat at a table near the ceiling-high windows to look at the source of their impending demise while sharing a bottle of Eroan bourbon and having a bit of a chat to pass the time. Officer Pohl was amused at the automatic doors, opening

whenever a screaming crew member came down the hallway and closing again when they kept going. But at least the truncated cries of terror broke up the awkward silences.

Officer Hewitt mostly stared at the black hole. “Well this turned out a bit grim, didn’t it,” she said.

Pohl filled their cups. “We’ve had better days.”

“How is this supposed to work? Surely not just: ‘everything goes dark.’”

“Only if you go head-first.”

“Ah.”

“If it pulls you brain out, then that’s it. No encore.”

“How dull.”

“Feet first—sure, you’ll feel the tug. But it’s a hell of a show.”

Hewitt’s mood lightened a bit. “I thought you couldn’t see anything.”

Pohl shook his head. “All that light it sucks in? It’s all still there. Like layers on a cake. Rumor is that when go in, we’ll see a movie reel of it all on rewind—everything that went in before us, right to the moment it was created.”

They looked at each other, and downed their mugs.

“It couldn’t get worse than this,” Hewitt said, staring into her cup.

Pohl took a moment to think. “Oh, sure it could.”

“How?”

They fell silent. Another shouting crewman zipped past the doors. The starvessel drifted closer and closer into the inescapable gravitational pull of the swirling vortex of death.

“You could have a runny nose.”

“By god, Pohl, you’re right.”

“Silver linings and all.” He seemed quite pleased with himself.

“We had a good year, though,” Hewitt added. “A very good year.”

“Oh absolutely. That one city—well, ‘town’ really—with the toad people on that one planet in the 276th quadrant from a few months back?”

“Of course. With the library.”

“Wouldn’t have finished renovations if we hadn’t helped on supply runs.”

“Exactly.”

“And who’s to say they won’t lift the ban on literacy someday?”

“Hear, hear!”

They again went quiet, and then downed their cups.

“What about what comes after?” he asked.

“You mean *the* After? Well, we still haven’t quite figured that out yet, have we?”

“What about that ‘Heaven and Hell’ business?”

“Let’s go with that for a minute. Which do you reckon we’d get?”

Hewitt and Pohl’s eyes glazed over while their brains flipped through a ‘greatest hits’ montage of their memories but without an out-dated musical track.

They downed their cups. Pohl poured again.

“You’re right, you know,” Hewitt said. “It really could be much worse.”

“How?”

“We could’ve not had this,” she said, holding the bottle.

“Right.”

They stared into their mugs.

“Who knew,” Hewitt began, “Just a bottle of this stuff from the Eroan reservoir and the whole system implodes into a singularity.”

“Petty, don’t you think?”

“In retrospect, the shortcut probably wasn’t the best idea.”

“Still.” Pohl raised a toast. “Might as well enjoy it while we—”