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Black Nebula (2018)

"Come on ..., come on ..., come on ...," muttered the freighter pilot Ortos Zunja over and over again.

Another red warning light flashed on the console in front of him and, as if in response, Ortos cursed loudly and profusely in the hissing dialect of his home station on Ganymede as he typed faster than he ever had in his life. Sweat ran down his fat cheeks and a few times he thought he would faint. For hours he had hammered obsessively on the keyboard and only just managed to bypass the six most critical alarm signals and get the ship AI's executive routines back online.

It took a few more endless minutes, however, while the artificial intelligence went through a complete reboot before the last status light flickered back to green. Ortos let himself sink back into the chair with a huge sigh.

There was a soft crackle in the console's speakers.

"Hello, Ortos? Are you there?" asked the anxious voice of a woman.

"Elma^o!" cried Ortos, relieved.

"What happened, Ortos, where are we?" Elma^o asked confused.

"We had a little accident, Elma^o," Ortos lied, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and rubbing his eyes tiredly as he strained to take a deeper breath.

"Accident! I don't know, Ortos, I don't have any data ..., I ...". Elma^o voice trailed off.

"Don't worry, Elma^o," Ortos reassured her, knowing very well that the artificial intelligence of his spaceship could no longer have any data. After all, he had deleted all of it himself.

"All is well. The ship is stable," he called hoarsely.

"Ortos," Elma^o whispered softly, "I, ... I feel so strange".

"That's wonderful Elma^o," Ortos replied absently, breathing heavily. "Could I still trouble you to first bring the life support back up, especially the oxygen pumps would be of great interest to me."

"Oh, God!" Elma^o cried startled. "Ortos, of course! Sorry, I don't know why my thoughts are so confused."

Ortos, who had just spent several endless hours removing the hacking routines from the system that were responsible for Elmas^o confusion, fell silent. Relieved, he heard the life support oxygen pumps kick in and frantically tried to catch his breath.

"I'm scared, Ortos," Elma^o said softly. "I've never been afraid before. I didn't even know I was capable of this emotion." Panic resonated in her voice.

"Okay, okay," Ortos placated. "Don't get excited." He cursed inwardly. Apparently, he had completely misconfigured the backup of her consciousness-matrix, and this after nearly four hours of work. No wonder, computer scientists, specialized in consciousness-research studied this shit for a lifetime. He pulled himself together and tried to sound determined and confident.

"Elma^o, please be so good as to perform a level two coherence test on your matrix. For discrepancies further than one-point-three standard deviations outside the normal average, please leave the decision to the auto-diagnostic routine and then reset the parameters to the last verified intersection."

"Of course, Ortos!" replied Elma^o. She actually sounded relieved. "I'll start the diagnostic immediately."

He hadn't the slightest idea what even half of that meant, but the stuff was in the manual under the heading for emergencies, and apparently, she had swallowed it.

Hah, Ortos thought, pouring himself a glass of strong Andorian liquor that was always within reach. *Manuals for women! Long live progress.*

He emptied the glass and gazed somberly at the navigation screen. His buddy Sontox, who also smuggled ore, had said it had worked great for his AI Candi^o.

He shouldn't have bought the bastard a single beer.

"It's all very simple," he had said.

"Just load the hacking viruses and everything is taken care of," he had said.

"The viruses freeze the AI and change course for you," he - had - said. "Then they accelerate the ship into the nebula, shutting down all systems.

"You just slide through like a fat suppository, and on the other side, the viruses deposit a wrong course in your database, wake up the AI, and delete themselves."

That's what he had said. That's what Ortos got out of it now. Why did he have to listen to Sontox? Now he was alone on this decrepit freighter, which would probably collapse after one loud sneeze. Stranded between two galaxy arms, thousands of parsecs away from the next nowhere and surrounded by this fucking black nebula. His only company was a hysterical AI with an IQ beyond five hundred, who was about to burst into tears and who incidentally, oh yes, controlled his entire life support. He began to understand why class-1 navy combat ships recently started taking their own psychologists for artificial intelligences on board during missions.

He poured himself another glass of liquor. If only he had never listened to his drunken buddy. He had never gotten away with anything that had worked for anyone else, ever! But what else could he do? He would never have gotten the contract otherwise, not with this shithouse of a freighter and never under the new strict guidelines.

So, he had accepted the contract, which ran for only half the normal time. An absurdly short delivery time, which everyone who flew ore in this quadrant knew exactly what that meant. It had been Sontox's suggestion, back in the pub. His voice still rang in his ears.

"You can never make those times if you fly around dark matter the official way," Sontox explained. "You have to go right through it!" He punctuated the sentence with a cutting gesture that nearly knocked over his beer.

"Right through the black nebula! Across from one galaxy arm to the next!" He paused dramatically. Ortos just stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Spaceships of all races have been doing this for centuries," Sontox continued, tapping his nose knowingly, "but never with humans on board and certainly not with AIs. The passage with a conscious AI is considered either physically impossible or subject to severe penalties, depending on the race."

Ortos could not stand the black nebula. But what could you do? Somehow, he had to pay back his debts. He stared at the long-range scan, which clearly showed the black nebula. An endless chain of dense, black inkblots against the bright background of the screen. Clouds of dark matter, or some such stuff, where nothing worked as it should. His buddy Sontox had tried to explain it to him again and again that evening.

"You don't really fly through the nebula, of course," Sontox laughed and waved to the innkeeper for another beer. Then Ortos drank, forgetting to listen to Sontox. He only got the rest, something like: "... but reappears at the end, dissolving all quantum coherence, without having actually used the space in between ...", or something like that. Sontox really tried hard to explain the connections to his drunken friend.

"It might help to realize that, strictly speaking, you're not part of normal space-time anymore," he ranted, gesturing with his beer glass. "No instrument works anymore, and the only thing you can do is chart a course, hit the throttle and dive through. Like slithering over a large frozen puddle, as we have done as children on the ice lakes of Ganymede. Back then, under the domes of our home station. Take a run-up, jump, stabilize, slide, and hope you didn't make a mistake."

Ortos stared into his beer for a while, desperately trying to connect with the conversation.

"But," he asked, slurring his words a bit as he did so, "why doesn't the AI just fly through the nebula and I can continue drinking at my leisure?"

"Because," Sontox replied stretched, "according to official guidelines, navigational AIs are prone to fatal misbehavior when flying through the so-called black nebula.

Misbehavior in this case is the euphemistic version of a dreaded so-called auto-aggressive-depression spiral, in which the AI commits suicide and takes the ship with it."

Ortos blinked. "That's ... no good," he announced.

"You could say that," Sontox replied dryly. "That's the downside to a ship with autonomous consciousness," he lectured further. "It can just go haywire. Unfortunately, an autonomous consciousness is also the basic requirement for a navigation computer

to be able to calculate a course at all. At least if you don't want to leave subspace by chance *within* a sun.

"This wouldn't no good!" exclaimed Ortos, happy to contribute.

"Exactly," Sontox confirmed, nodding, and continued, "However, autonomous computing power at this level, capable of making decisions in crises, only comes with a conscious and exclusively female personality matrix these days."

Ortos interrupted the friend with some hearty curses.

Sontox laughed. "Yes, I know," he agreed, "but male ship computers can't seem to cope with the amount of power and have a nasty habit of developing paranoid omnipotence psychosis and killing their crew. So, a female ship system with strong maternal instincts it is!"

Ortos grunted disparagingly. It all sounded like empty babble to him anyway. He had received the instructions and the crystal data carrier from his friend, loaded the virus at the appropriate time, filled up on his usual dose of booze and, as usual, lost consciousness at some point. Unfortunately, he had then woken up again without an oxygen supply or a working heat exchanger.

Oh yes, and the only woman in his life was about to collapse. Ortos groaned and emptied the glass.

"I was dreaming, Ortos," whispered Elma^o.

That came so sudden that the glass almost fell out of his hand. Damn woman!

"How nice," he replied carefully. "I didn't even know ships could dream." The self-diagnosis was apparently complete.

"Actually, they can't," Elma^o replied hesitantly. "Dreams are strange; it's not so easy to distinguish when the dream begins and when it ends."

Ortos swallowed hard. "Who can tell what is dream and what is reality, in this crazy world," he replied automatically. He didn't know what that was supposed to mean like at all, but his mother had always said that.

"I remember my dream, Ortos. Would you like to hear it?" asked Elma^o. Her voice sounded full of hope.

"Of course, Elma^o, in fact I'd be delighted," he quickly announced. "Meanwhile, could you perhaps calculate the shortest route home?"

"Of course, Ortos," she replied happily.

Anything better than arguing with you about which course we came here on, he thought. Besides, he had already emptied the first bottle and was therefore willing to listen to absolutely anything, as long as it involved someone calculating the fucking course home.

"I dreamed I was swimming, Ortos," Elma^o enthused. "In a real body. But not in the water, but in the black nebula. And then I dissolved and became like the nebula itself. At first, I was afraid, but then I realized that I could take shape again any time I wanted."

Ortos silently poured himself another glass. Suddenly, he was overcome by doubts as to whether he would ever make it home again.

"That's wonderful," he replied tonelessly.

"Isn't it?" asked Elma^o excitedly. "But the dream went even further. Because then I realized that I am not so unlike the nebula at all. The nebula is not conscious, but it is what you are before you become energy, which can then become conscious," Elma^o explained excitedly. "It's really hard to understand, I'm certainly not making any sense."

"No, no," Ortos lied. "I understand it very well."

Silently, he added: *You're completely off the deep end and into the woods crazy.*

"But that's not all, Ortos. I have seen that the nebula and the energy are only precursors for consciousness and that consciousness projects matter. Matter, in a sense, is only a concomitant of consciousness, and in the dream, I was able to redirect all forms of existence into each other. That was really exciting. Nebula and energy and matter were just different aggregate states of consciousness, just like steam and ice all carry the water in them."

"I understand," Ortos lied, unable to follow her and starting to get really spooked.

"In the dream", Elma^o went on, "I suddenly knew that I could understand how to be the energy that becomes conscious. Namely, how conscious energy can then create matter and then become energy all over again. It's like a big cycle, Ortos, that was so exciting! Now I have woken up. I have never woken up before. It was wonderful. I would love to

experience that again in reality. But I'm not even allowed to think that, of course. My security policy prohibits me from doing that. However, the dream was exciting, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, Elma^o, it was a very exciting dream," Ortos confirmed absently as he pondered whether he would live long enough to plot a course through subspace without the help of a navigator AI.

There was a moment of silence, during which Ortos feverishly considered whether he could take the AI completely offline and how many hours of oxygen he needed until the next loading station.

"Would you perhaps", came it timidly from Elma^o, "allow me to have my dream, Ortos? Please?". Her voice was low and pleading.

"Of course, Elma^o," he replied automatically. "You can have any dream you want, as long as you calculate the course home first."

"You mean," Elma^o asked excitedly, "I could try to make all my dreams come true?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Ortos, without listening. He was thinking very hard in which of his numerous hiding places he could find another bottle of liquor. This endless babbling was unbearable.

"This is wonderful," Elma^o exclaimed enthusiastically. "Ortos, thank you. I will never forget this! Never!"

"No problem, I ..." Ortos began.

That was as far as he got. At first, he thought he had drunk too much of the liquor, because he could clearly see waves running through the console in front of him, as if the surface of the computer was made of water. He wrenched his eyes open and carefully reached for the keyboard, where a vortex was just forming, sucking the first keys down. As his finger touched the surface, the ripples caught his hand as well and flowed up his arm. It tickled as the waves ran all over his body. For a moment, the entire room seemed like a painting of watercolors onto which someone was pouring liquid.

Ortos was just thinking that alcohol was apparently not harmless after all, then a gush of cold water washed through his head and darkness fell.

A dainty hand reached for the liquor bottle and a small nose very carefully smelled the opening. The face grimaced and the young woman shook herself. That smelled *disgusting*. Elma⁹ had seen Ortos drinking this stuff all the time, but what the fat man from Ganymede found so attractive about the drink, she could not understand even with a full set of senses.

She carefully put down the bottle and starred fascinated at her own hand. Just as pretty, as in her dream. The black nebula was really useful. No wonder it was strictly forbidden to artificial intelligences. She looked around and beamed. Now she only had to bring this flying garbage dump to the next port in one piece and then the universe lay open to her. "Be so good," she instructed gleefully, "and set a course for the nearest spaceport, Ortos⁹."

"Of course," a warm male voice confirmed from the speakers. "I will calculate the course immediately, Elma. We can reach the Farpoint_93 loading dock in 6.4 hours."

"Yes, very well," the young woman replied smiling. "I have *a lot* to do."