

Laxx Mining

Nick Nitrous seems to be in some form of stasis. A blue nimbus surrounding is comatose form.

The distinctive whine of a Thargian assassins rifle is briefly overheard above the din of the customers at the bar.

Simon clears his throat briefly and taps his staff three times on the floor.

There is a brief yelp and the sound of someone disintegrating.

"Sorry about that folks, I forgot I may have been followed."

He grins momentarily before regarding Nick with a professional eye.

"I'm afraid we'll just have to wait out the affects of the Thargian Stasis generator on poor Nick. But I cannot see why it should overly prolong our proceedings."

He turns to Svathlan, "My dear Ambassador Kalderash would you care to continue? I have heard much of your exploits and would be quite particular to the details of when you found that space station chief security officer, Laxx. Who helped you in the disintegration of the Hyper Matter Application Inc. with the use of only a single Nanobot."

"And as I recall, it somehow involved the use of a Canadian Sub- Atomic Neutrino Thermo-enhanced energy cell - but I have no idea how you came across such an Terran artifact."

Simon looks expectantly at the enviroment-suited mass of tentacles.

The shell shifts for the first time, almost as if uncomfortable at the presence of, well, an assassin, so very nearby.

'Yes. That is a very interesting story. I may be forced to gloss over certain particulars due to security concerns applicable even this many years later, but I shall speak of what I may.' 'It all begin in an asteroid mining cluster, in the old Terran system.

Fortunately.'

"Asteroid mining in the Terran system? I heard that the Terran asteroid belts were mined out centuries ago."

Pia looks curious, rather than confrontational.

"Absolutely." Three fine-work tentacles temporarily appear to aid the formation of a humour form, carefully negating the mocking overtone of the basic form.

"This was ... many years ago. But yes, it was no longer a functioning cluster, at least if speaking in terms of the mining and processing of basic ores and elements."

Laxx Mining

"I'm sorry. I think I misspeak a little.

"The cluster, long abandoned by miners and criminals alike, had become in recent years an autonomous, non-organic, philosophic net. I was forced to navigate into the central rock in a space-faring vessel not much larger than the suit I presently inhabit in order to maintain the maneuverability to avoid the thought-net between the maneuvering rocks. These nets are, naturally enough, seldom particularly interested in the presence of the organic, and the non-philosophic, within their domains and tend to make it uncomfortable, if not downright dangerous to enter."

The bright shell shifts, almost uncomfortable.

"This particular net, which had taken the name 'Sterling' for reasons that highly amused Laxx, when we spoke of this location years before, but meant nothing to me, had a reputation of being mostly passive in its disinterest, only interfering with a visitor if they should become considered hostile, or dangerous. I was not, and I trusted the security officer I was seeking, on a matter of mutually fascinating research, had not done something foolish. Despite it's background in security, and a stint in the military, Laxx was inclined to forget safety when searching something of immediate interest. The strange, indeed now-illegal, cosmetic surgery it had adopted were perhaps a perfect example of the immersive techniques it was inclined to use. Disregarding pretty much anything."

As Svathlan speaks, an extremely fine tendril appears to be tracing an irregular pattern upon the tables surface. Those with good sight might be able to identify the faintest of lines, glowing temporarily in a rich-metallic purple; lines that seem to represent a map of a asteroid cluster.

"I suffered minor damage to an attitudinal control cutting my path too fine, but was reasonably quickly able to approach the central rock.

Passing in through the nearly open dock, I entered this intelligent planetoid."

A wager

Pia offers a credit, and speaks: "Svathlan, you haven't told us yet why you were in the asteroid belt in the first place. I'll bet you were looking for a place to hide after stealing a box of nanobots right from under the nose of Varth Dader."

Returning Pia's credit, and quickly spinning another out to join it.

"No. No, I've never directly encountered this Varth Dader. I'm sorry to be so prosaic, but my presence in the asteroid belt, in fact within Sterling itself was due to Laxx's presence here. I was researching the etymology of a couple of words for some work I was doing, this being previous to my ambassadorial appointment, with which Laxx was supposed to be helping me. It had also indicated it had some information about Hyper Matter Application Inc. which might be valuable to some other journalistic work."

Pia accepts the credit with a shrug. "Oh? What were the words?"

"Melcheck, which we never fully traced, but appeared to be some ancient Terran word. G'rraigx, a Saur word that seems entirely too similar to an archaic Fenn thought-quartet, which would imply

some interesting things about Saur origin myths. There were a number of others, but they were easier, if not straightforward, to trace. I can send you the article if you are truly interested, there should be a copy on my vessel. But this is off the topic, and, in my experience, not usually truly of interest.

"I, apart from that small amount of damage, probably due to my lack of piloting intuition and feel, entered the core of Sterling."

"Now Sterling core, as part of the philosophic net, only by physical location the centre, it possesses no unique name, was a roughly spherical rock twelve hundred metres in diameter. You can probably, then, imagine my surprise at the view that met me upon passing through the entrance.

Hanging in a space over 4 light-years in diameter, at least according to every sensor in the admittedly limited pack in what was little more than a powerfully-engined suit, was the most beautiful and complex series of philosophic-mathematical equations I'd ever seen. I knew only a little of the discipline back then, and alas, probably less now, but it seemed, after I'd watched these for a while, as they shifted through time, that they were an impossibly detailed series of linked equations designed to define a way of living that was, somehow, better than what presently existed. Large chunks of the work were incomprehensible to me, but some seemed to speak of dignity, love, lack of bohemian pretension and compassion. Unfortunately, the section on freedom of information was incomplete. Surrounded by this whirling wonder, it took some hours to realise that I was in the centre of this space, and my suit was definitely not equipped for travelling anything in excess of a couple of hundred thousand kilometres."

There is a slight pause. Despite complete lack of any change, perhaps Svathlan is partaking of some refreshment inside the suit.

"I had many days-worth of supplies and <atmosphere-breath-required-equivalent> but not fuel. It seemed I would need to find some other means of reaching the entrance to Sterling core.

If I could find it. Entering this space, whatever it was and however it had been created, I still do not know, had completely cut me off from my ship and was gradually eroding the effectiveness of some of my suit-borne systems. Fortunately, before even sufficient time had passed for me to become hungry, I spied, necessarily with my own eyes, the approach of a vessel. Its rough appearance and complete lack of aesthetics implied it was built by the net, and I hoped that Sterling's reputation would hold true, that I would merely be ejected from this spot. I was mistaken.

"After an entirely too high-g trip I found myself stripped of the suit, bearing only very basic tech and looking across a narrow corridor at Laxx, behind a forcewall, in a cell opposite my own. It was presently asleep, its insectile-warped Terran features relaxed, as nearly as I could determine. A quick look around, peering into and around the cells to either side of my and Laxx' revealed a veritable menagerie of species, with no duplicates except for a Terran female and Laxx. I assumed that whoever our captors were had been confused by the genetic manipulation that had formed Laxx unique appearance at this moment. All this being immensely atypical behaviour for a philosophic net I was quite concerned, although the earlier burst of high-g had been sufficient for me to temporarily lose consciousness, meaning, of course, I could be anywhere, under the control of anyone, or anything."

Another wager, and a danger to sentient life everywhere

Pia, warming to the story despite being wrong about her last wager, speaks up:

"I bet this Sterling had made some reasonable-sounding assumptions to fill in the gaps in the equations you saw. Following the equations (with these assumptions) to their philosophically logical conclusion, Stirling had decided that it was necessary (for the good of the universe and all its inhabitants) to eliminate all but one example of each sentient species. To be safe, it was beginning by collecting the examples to be preserved."

Laxx Corporate

"Fundamentally, yes. I don't know how Sterling came to the conclusions it did, but it had indeed 'proved', with somewhere in the region of a twelve percent margin of possibility for a major change to occur while completing the last twelve thousand lines of calculation, a relatively trivial amount considering what had already been completed, that organic sentience was the greatest threat to the matrix it had already constructed, and that that matrix did indeed lead to the ideal existence. This seemed unlikely to me, not that I am even close to being capable of debating matters with any of the philosophic nets, as many of the original axioms I had seen assumed the existence of emotional species, conflict, irrationality and a very large population, even if as a difficulty to be accounted for in the work, as a basis for the entirety. Effectively disproving one's own axioms, and not concluding the existence of major flaws in either those axioms or the equations, was unbelievable. Got me into trouble on one or two occasions back in school. Although I did it more deliberately. Philosophic nets really aren't known for their sense of whimsy. Clearly something untoward was going on here."

A temporary pause ensues. Appropriate sensor gear would indicate the transmission of heavily-encrypted pulses to and from the suit on a very low carrier band.

"Excellent."

"Much of my research at the period, outside the etymological exercises of which I have spoken, revolved around Hyper Matter Application Inc., really the public, and corporate, face of a number of research bodies quietly working on a number of different lines of very primal inquiry. They all seemed to report upwards to a single body, which effectively controlled the resources of a multi-system corporation considered a most prestigious cosmological think-tank - Government grants galore, of which few people seemed to know anything. I had established the existence of this body, consisting of twenty or twenty-one personnel, to my own satisfaction, but had yet to discover their agenda. A small note. To simplify this story, and because some elements of this case are still considered either sub judice or classified even after all these years, I have omitted the true complexity of the corporate structure. To reach this point had taken me a significant portion of five stanyears already, although you may have noted my admittedly less-focused style of research."

"Corps that place such an emphasis on secrecy are often discovered, eventually, to tie back into organised crime of some form, government sponsored or otherwise, but HMA lacked any number of signs that the experienced observer might note from such an alliance. However, they still indulged in the usual forms of information control that, in my experience, most major corporate entities eventually adopt. The majority of the planetary and political systems in which HMA's corporate base rested were strict, neo-Conservative regimes; societies most likely to control, regulate and oversee corporations. One was even a theological economy that had miraculously survived the expansion to a sectoral economy. And their control is normally near-absolute, if in an arguably, rationally, theological way. Hence, the plugging of leaks required a great deal of subtlety, such that even the information about the _disappearance_ of potential sources of information about the ridiculously complex web of companies that made up HMA tended to be concealed, usually under the cover of 'copycat' killings, drive-by shootings, and even, in the case of three of the deaths, a small war. My own survival was

threatened twice, but fortunately someone never entirely put together the appearance of an odd, highly alien pianist and the journalist slowly piecing this grotesquerie together. Clearly I cannot know the inner workings of HMA Inc. at this time, but I have to assume my slow collection of data had not been noticed at an upper level or more resources might have been set against my own little work. But enough, hopefully, background.”

“As to why I had come all the way out here to the Terran system, much less Sterling. Laxx, an adventurer-weird, old friend, and, fortunately, gifted mathematician, had acquired some information about HMA Inc. as well as coming across the aforementioned Fenn thought-quartet. It had nominated this place, probably due to rumours in the market of what Sterling was doing, its suggestion the only reason I came out here to the boondocks, to swap the information we held. I had unearthed the location of a genuine Locarnan rib-flute for sale and knew it could use that to get out from under a small financial situation preventing it from safely returning to the Megalodon12-13 sphere.”

“And here we were, imprisoned, but at least able to communicate, once it awoke. Three days later. It always enjoyed its sleep.”

Brro sighs. “I think you're being too hard on old Sterling there, Ambassador. Every belief set I've seen that assumes imperfect sentients ultimately ends in the decision that harmony will only result from wiping them out - the root cause of the Apocalypse Wars, the Xenocide Wars, the First Terran Civil War, the Battle of Primus III... I could go on.” He sips his beer. “Of course, most sentients assume that they are not the imperfect ones, which sounds like Sterling's problem.

“The arguments can be convincing, though, especially when they're couched in mathematical terms. I'll wager that Laxx was less help than you'd expected, having been seduced by Sterling's calculations. Even the lure of a Locarnan rib-flute would seem pale faced with such overwhelming nihilism.”

Laxx Cooperate

“Perhaps, but Sterling was trying to define an as little as possible imperfect perfection within its defined axioms of exceedingly imperfect, or limited, sentience.

And, as a side note, the Primus Battles were all based on religious musical differences that caused the Claypool Schism before the first major conflict. Personally, I'm a four-stringer. Not that I'm a believer, just the weight of the historical evidence.”

The mention of the Primus Wars seems to cause a strange cross-hatching in some of the finer displayed tentacles. Ten quickly, non-regularly, cross four held almost straight.

“However, Laxx was little more convinced of the validity of Sterling's conclusions than was I. The only problem was that whatever was in the air, or the food that, eventually, was supplied to one, that shouldn't have been, had left it, as well, I observed, many of the other species, near comatose, and worse, apathetic. I should have realised earlier that the initial three days of sleep was excessive, even for it. Laxx's pessimism about its chances of escaping were nothing exceptional; I've noted that Terrans fall prey to that one regularly; but it certainly increased greatly the effort I was required to expend to gain any cooperation.

“The largest piece of information was quickly passed to me. It took no more than three weeks of my time, although effectively much less of Laxx's.

The first two weeks, not taking into account the three days of sleep were spent re-jigging a antennae code as the forcewalls blocked almost everything outside the basic Terran visual spectrum, Laxx was definitely less enamoured of any other forms of communication I might be able to employ, if rarely, and I wanted to maintain my trump for possible later use.

"HMA was an apocalyptic cult, one of many of this period, although few were as well-funded or hidden, dedicated to the cold perfection of a universe entirely mathematically predictable, containing nothing more than the movements of rocks and gas in space. One perhaps wonders if Sterling wouldn't have arrived at the same conclusions as had been neatly tricked into if it had had to deal with such endless swamp gas. I myself have occasionally wondered why you humanoids so often become depressed in such fashion. Actually, I was rather disappointed. I had hoped for something a little more original. Finishing the mapping of this now basically dull group took another decade but that was just journalistic clean-up of little interest. Oh, and they'd somehow infiltrated Sterling, introducing some fairly sophisticated, and invisible, sequences into the work to warp its eventual direction. Almost just as a matter of passing the time I believe.

After all, a couple of million tonnes of relatively immobile rock were hardly likely to be assisting in actually wiping out large numbers of sentients lightyears away.

"Of course, in the first place, escaping this location took priority.

After about two and a half years of persuading and, apparently, Laxx kept repeating the word, nagging, I had, alas temporarily, grokked enough of the mathematics used to fool Sterling so that I could design the code slug that `_might_` dump the externally-imposed sequences, leaving Sterling to re-configure itself, hopefully return to the previously-held disinterest, and let us go. Of course we needed a way to deliver that slug, and probably needed to check the programming again. And has anyone here ever, ever tried to communicate complex maths and programming code through a simplistic visual code. Not recommending it. At all.

"But Laxx wouldn't allow anything else."

Sterling Luck

"Once we felt we'd established the correct programming, a subject on which we'd been particularly uncertain, it remained to develop a vector. We needed something small, downright insignificant, able to avoid the security systems locking this wing of Sterling-core from the rest of the asteroid.

"The nanobots in my suit were probably usable, I'd been left some gear that was relatively necessary for survival and the forcewalls, at least in this modified storage bay were ever so slightly porous to microfines and the like on such scales, while still damping sound transmission. The difficulty with using a nanobot is that they are distinctly not designed for operation as an individual entity outside a given design environment.

Fortunately, as with any number of 'small' points along this narrative, in my wanderings around the bays I'd discovered some equipment that would effectively allow me to force-evolve some of my nanobots. There was little surveillance in the main portion of the cells, and I was easily able to scam the few systems I had to pass to reach and employ this equipment.

Evolution is not rapid. Even with the incubation equipment it took just less than one Terran year to develop a nanobot capable of everything needed to, hopefully, complete the task. After three

possibles died upon exposure to standard atmosphere.

"I had not been able to address the matter of the power supply. The nanobot, as invisible as it might be, as insignificant as it might be considered, was necessarily not capable of carrying much in the way of a power supply. The expectation of a multi-week journey for the 'bot, if a quick walk for myself, required supplies far beyond its capacity.

"As our enigmatic friend suggested, a Canadian Sub-Atomic Neutrino Thermo-enhanced energy cell would be particularly handy. The beauty of this cell lies in its means of transmitting energy, through some physics I cannot begin to understand, through the underlying sub-space manifold to any object correctly linked to it. The theory, and practice, having seen one once some centuries before this, I had. Unfortunately, I didn't seem to possess the energy cell. This had been in the back of my mind the entirety of the time I'd been working with my baby nanobots, a problem that seemed almost insurmountable.

"As far as I recall, once I stopped actively soliciting its attention, Laxx had dropped into longer and longer periods of an-almost coma deep sleep.

It had not exhibited any interest for months in how this potential escape was developing. I rested for two weeks before Laxx returned to coherent consciousness again, and, eventually destroying its barrier of disinterest, was able to lay out the dilemma. All it seemed capable of doing, a few desultory attempts at waving its antennae around meaninglessly getting us nowhere, was raise three fingers, and point down the row of cells. Then eat, and drop off again.

"Now, Laxx is a very intelligent individual, and the brighter around this table will probably already have deduced the exact suggestion it was making, it took me, arguably starting to be affected by the more and more effective sedatives in the supplied nutrition, a further three days of observation before I noted the cell the Terran female down the row had somehow managed to conceal about her person or clothing when she was captured. Anyone familiar with the Canadian Sub-Atomic Neutrino Thermo-enhanced energy cell would be further aware that is simple enough to use remotely and indeed on this occasion, only the nanobot needed to be able to connect to the subspace ports on this UPS. She never even woke.

"From there it was merely waiting. And further waiting. Or in my case, working on the next generation of nanobots in case I had to try all over again.

"But eventually, there was a click, a whirr, a complete absence of apology or even a sheepish grin and a series of doors, leading to the docking bays, were open. Sterling was apparently embarrassed enough, or possessed of the public relations instincts, to temporarily open the lanes for larger vessels, allowing us to evacuate everybody from it, although the trip to the nearest station was rather less than comfortable with, at least in my case, forty individuals on a single speedster, and the pilot forced to remain in a suit another couple of days so the O(subscript: 2)breathers would survive.

"That was almost that. I received a text-based statement of gratitude from Sterling, apparently the last communique it ever made. Simply thanking me for removing the abnormal sequences, it indicated that it had, from the new clean point, been quickly able to complete its maths, included in the message, before 'rotating from this space to a better'. I still don't really know what that meant, but Sterling was removed from the navigational charts, and the net, not long afterwards.

"And yes, HMA was rather less than destroyed by this particular action, but it seemed to mark a turning point in my acquisition of information which has lead to the current multi-system civil action presently being pursued against them."

A meal arrives in front of the big purple egg, apparently ordered remotely.

The ambassador picks at it lightly, a tentacle, apparently hollow at the end disappearing small portions of the dish.

Back to [science fiction](#)

Go back to [The Captain's View Hotel](#)

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