

A futuristic landscape with a bright sun in the sky and a small figure in the distance. The scene is dominated by dark, jagged mountains and a bright, glowing sun in the sky. The foreground shows a rocky, uneven terrain with a small figure standing in the distance. The overall atmosphere is one of a vast, alien world.

Space Swaks!

Christina Engela

Space Sucks! by Christina Engela

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Introduction

I began making up and writing stories literally as soon as I could hold a wax crayon, but I only *really* began writing short stories at high school, frequently as compositions for English class. Thanks to my obsession with self-improvement, very few of those survived into my adulthood as they were originally. Some – such as “The Curse” (1987, revised in 2017) I used as the basis for a whole new series of novels: “Panic! Horror In Space”. Without further ado, I’m proud to present the ones that did make the cut for this new edition of “Space Sucks!”

“Code Red” (1988, revised in 2017) originally dates from my time at high school, and is an exercise in political satire.

I originally wrote “The Devils In The Sky” in 1993. The theme of this story is a test of strength against a sudden hostile alien attack. This story, incidentally, features the very first mention of the colony Deanna – later the setting of my Quantum Series.

“A Really Bad Day In The Life Of Lance Corporal Thomas O’Blivion” (originally titled “Space Sux!” in 1995) is a humorous look at the recent events in the life of a starbase security guard who has just woken up in a hospital bed with a concussion and five broken ribs and no memory of how he got there. Shenanigans ensue as he recalls the events of earlier that day.

I wrote “Beyond” (1998) when I was a closeted transgender woman in uniform. The story addresses the threat of harm posed by homophobia and transphobia in a military environment against LGBT members, and is an emotive appeal for compassion and commonsense. “Beyond” was previously published in “For Love Of Leelah: An Anthology of Souls” (JEA, 2015).

“I, Mac” (2006) tells the story of an insurance salesman, Eric Hawthorne, who arrives home at his apartment on Io Station from a mundane business trip, to find a note left for him by someone called Elvis,

who is asking questions about a cat Eric didn't know he had – and hilariously seeks restitution for past wrongs against the writer! “I, Mac” was also published in “The #Coinage Book One – Journal In New South African Writing” (2016).

I really hope you enjoy these stories, at least as much as I did writing them!

Sincerely,

Christina Engela

Code Red

Imagine, if you will:

Two hundred light years away from home, a lone Samani battlecruiser entered orbit over a planet in a star system marked unexplored on their star charts. The Samani were ordinary-looking humanoids who came from a world they called Plenegal – but that planet had also not always been their home. Like many races living in the dark wastes of infinite space, the Samani had started out somewhere else, and had started over more than once. This latest time around, they'd began building their stellar empire just a short few centuries before, but already laid claim to numerous worlds, unexplored hostile wastes, and ruled other races – some peaceful, some warlike, sometimes worlds with broken civilizations – but always they treated their subjects with respect, and as far as possible, incorporated their cultures into their own.

This particular Samani battlecruiser was surveying the third planet to detect whether it harbored intelligent life. If not, it was a green and wet world that could be utilized for future settlement. If it did, perhaps the dominant species could be treated with to ensure trade or even an alliance of sorts. The captain of the ship was at rest in his quarters, not in the least concerned with the boring humdrum tasks of his crew. The intercom buzzed, disturbing his thoughts. His distraction? A book, printed on processed plant fibers and bound right to left in a glossy black cover adorned with a stylized humanoid skull and red lettering that spelled out the title and author's name in his native language - *Samanii*.

“Captain Latani?” A masculine voice called in a formal, respectful tone.

“Yes?” Latani answered, dropping his copy of “*The Karmenian Crisis*” beside him on his sofa. “What is it?”

“Scanning Officer Aken reporting.” The voice continued formally. “We have found sentient life on the planet below. Our probes indicate the presence of cities and artificial pollution from industrial waste. Most of it

seems to be residual, perhaps from a previous epoch as it no longer appears to be being renewed.”

Latani nodded to himself in the privacy of his chambers. The news brought consequences of their own, their meaning – if not very interesting, at least very clear to the captain. He would have to dust off his best diplomatic hat.

“Fine.” He replied. “I shall be on the bridge momentarily.”

The security door at the entrance of the ship’s command center hissed and rumbled open. Captain Latani strode onto the bridge, resplendent in his black uniform with shiny black breastplate trimmed with a gold-like material. A functional broad-bladed dagger hung at his side, partly obscured by the dark green cloak that clung to his shoulders.

“Status!” He barked enthusiastically, and seated himself on what seemed like a high-tech ornate throne at the center of the room.

“Reports of intelligent life have been confirmed.” Aken, a tall, thin male crew member dressed in a similar fashion to the Captain reported from his sensor console behind Latani. Aken’s armor was trimmed with silver, indicating that he was the second highest ranking officer of the ship.

“Your appraisal, Aken?” Latani asked his first officer.

“They are technologically far less advanced than we are.” Aken surmised. “Perhaps a century or more behind us in some areas – but maybe more in others. I am currently busy scanning their space-faring capability...”

“*Space-faring?* You mean they’re *that* advanced?” Latani asked, surprised.

“Yes, sir. Sensors have detected several orbiting satellites, as well as multiple launch centers on the surface...based in different political states. Sensors have also detected what appears to be a small colony on the surface of the planet’s moon. A single city, under an atmospheric dome.”

“Is it theirs?” Latani asked. If it was, finding a species capable of interplanetary travel was rare. “Or is their moon inhabited by someone else?”

Aken nodded. It was a good and valid question, so he quickly performed a comparative scan and was pleased to see the results displayed in mere moments.

“The power curve of the moon installation appears to match that of similar installations on the planet, Captain.” Aken reported. “And the life-signs there seem similar to those on the planet.”

“In other words, *yes*.” Latani smiled at his Sensor Officer.

“Yes!” Said Aken, returning the smile. “In other words.”

“Captain!” the Tactical Officer called out just then, “A Jarta star-carrier has just entered this system!”

The Jarta were the Samani’s nearest rivals, a highly competitive and fanatically aggressive species of sentient and deep-space capable arachnid from a remote star system! The Jarta did not negotiate, unless it was with blasters or nukes! Whenever the Jarta spotted a Samani ship, they would open fire anyway – without exception – so it was a foregone conclusion that if they were seen, trouble was going to ensue! Samani military ships were under orders to attack and destroy Jarta vessels and installations on sight – mainly in order to ensure the survival of the Samani ships and their crews! Although no formal declaration of war had ever been issued against the Samani, and all attempts at diplomacy had failed to the point that Plenegal had all but run out of trained diplomats and emissaries, they were essentially at war with the arachnids and had been for years!

“Battle stations!” Latani barked the order without hesitation. “Code red!”

“Battle stations!” The Tactical Officer repeated over the ship-wide intercom. “All crew to battle stations! Code red! I repeat, code red!”

Alarms began blaring all over the ship, echoing along the corridors and acres of deck-space of the Samani battlecruiser. Crewmen raced to take their battle stations. Highly drilled and proficient, the ship reached a state of readiness in seconds.

“Status!” Latani demanded.

“Our shields are active!” The Tactical Officer reported. “Power distribution nodes at optimum level! All systems ready! Weapons ready at maximum! The Jarta vessel is within detailed scanner range – approaching rapidly!”

“Let’s see them!” Latani ordered, shifting in his seat. A huge vessel appeared on the big display screen at the front of the bridge. The sharp, savage lines of the alien vessel reminded Latani of the nature of their enemy. “Have they seen us yet?” He asked.

As if in answer to Latani’s question, blasts of energy weapon’s fire flared against the outline of the enemy ship, traversed the distance and glanced off the battlecruiser’s shields with quaint little *ping ping* sounds audible via the feedback running through the shield circuits. The enemy fire was deflected outward, away into space, and no damage was done this time.

“Return fire!” Latani ordered. Weapons fire from the battlecruiser seemed to have a greater effect than their opponent’s, and struck the enemy star-carrier’s side, punching holes in the hull plating!

“Enemy vessel still closing – range one hundred thousand twenty four tarsels!”

“Take us out of orbit!” Latani ordered. “Turn us to meet them head on!”

The Samani ship moved away from the planet to meet the enemy. The larger vessel fired another barrage of energy bolts at them, but missed narrowly this time. The battlecruiser fired, but this time their weapons were deflected away. The Jarta was getting closer too, and Latani knew the Jarta liked to ram their enemies if they couldn’t make enough headway with their weapons – and their ships had the better armor to do it with!

“The Jarta vessel is heading straight for us!” Aken reported.

“Standby main weapon!”

The most powerful weapon aboard was activated. Circuits around them on the bridge hummed with feedback as power rapidly built up, ready to be unleashed.

“Main weapon active and ready to fire, sir!”

“Fire!”

A radiant green energy beam lanced out from the battlecruiser, and struck the Jarta star-carrier’s shields – slicing clean through them with hardly a pause, causing them first to glow with the impact, then fade, and vanish. The beam struck the Jarta ship’s hull, causing the whole thing to be lit up, green, glowing! Then, as the glowing radiance vanished, the enemy ship slowed to a stop – drained, immobilized, dead. Just like its unfortunate arachnid crew, Latani knew. But there was a cost to their victory – a price to be paid – the battlecruiser had drained its own energy as well in firing the weapon!

All the systems on the Samani ship were demanding power from an exhausted supply that needed more time to replenish itself than was convenient. The outcome was expected, and unavoidable – in seconds, the entire ship was plunged into darkness. Instruments and controls ceased to function. The bridge view screen went dark. The only thing still working was the climate recycler and gravitational system, which ran independently from the main power grid. For the time being, their ship was now almost as dead as their enemy’s!

Latani sighed. With luck, the proto-nuclear reflex-furnace would catch up with system demands within moments. It did. Primary systems soon started coming back online, lights, control systems, engines, thrusters, weapons, shields, computers – and sensors. The view screen display lit up again, with stars – moving to indicate that they had started to drift and seemed to be in a slow tumble, probably the result of their last maneuver just before they lost power!

“Status!” Latani snapped impatiently, just as a proximity alarm came online and started tweeting hysterically. They were too close to something – and they all knew there was only one thing in the area that could be! The Jarta ship appeared on the view screen – perilously close! They were almost upon it!

“Emergency maneuvers!” Latani shouted. “Try to regain control!”

The steersman took evasive action as quickly as he could – but it was already too late!

“Thrusters are still unavailable!” He cursed, looking at Latani for guidance.

A collision was unavoidable! The battlecruiser, now an out of control missile traveling at speed, struck the Jarta ship squarely amidships, the jarring impact causing them to swivel round! The Samani ship tore loose from the wreckage, and moving on impetus alone, continued past it – towards the planet below! That seemed to be over deceptively quickly.

“Hull damage detected!” Aken reported from his station, where his control desk was making disconcerting beeping noises. “Third deck, sections 12 to 16 – point of impact!”

“Dispatch repair crews at once!” Latani replied, just as another more urgent alarm started torturing his hearing.

“Atmosphere breach!” Aken shouted.

“Seal it!” Latani ordered. The breach must be sealed – or the ship would depressurize! “Close off those sections!”

“Emergency containment barriers are not working!” Aken said, his face suddenly ashen. “Rapid depressurization on third deck imminent!”

“Evacuate third deck!” Latani ordered. “Steersman – take us down to the planet! Quickly!”

The battlecruiser plunged downward at emergency speed, hitting the atmosphere and continuing toward the denser air nearer the surface – where the higher air pressure air inside the ship would stop rushing out through the tears and holes in the hull – and hopefully equalize! The ship burst through an array of cloud banks and a vista of a watery blue planet flashed by on the bridge view screen.

“Entering lower atmosphere!” The steersman reported. “Control fully restored!”

“Internal pressure, third deck, equalizing!” Aken added. “The nearest land mass is at 43 degrees!”

“Should we land?” Latani asked, looking at his Tactical Officer.

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