

IN CYGNUS AND IN HELL

A ticket to ride.

BY S. R. ALGERNON

Subject: You Have A Match!

To: BlueDot2093@habitat7.com.titan

From: no-reply@XenoSynergy.com

Cc: mission-control@xizhong.com.au

Damn. I thought I'd cancelled that account weeks ago. They'd better not still be billing me, and if this is another Neptunian real estate scam, I'll —

Greetings, DOROTHY. I am the recruitment director for the Xi Zhong extrasolar colony venture. I am pleased to say that the genetic sample you provided meets our specifications.

My what now? Wait... that logo — a black tortoise with a white feather in its beak — I've seen it before. Their group hung out by the San Francisco Spaceport, giving people white swan feathers in exchange for cheek swabs. They called me in for paid follow-up tests and a 'vision seminar' two months later. I needed the money.

I was just biding my time, after all, until I had my ticket off that dust ball.

"Be patient, Dot," my great-grandfather used to say. He had lived through 80 years of droughts and storms. "In the end, it all averages out. Maybe Mr Right will come along one day, eh?"

I wasn't looking for Mr Right. SS Right, on the other hand...

Due to an incident during the Jupiter slingshot, we have one unexpected vacancy in our maintenance crew. You are the only candidate who is in a position to rendezvous with us on our fly-by of Saturn without causing deviation from our flight path.

I fought back my instinct to search the web for the details of their Jovian mishap.

Don't be hasty. Let's give Xi Zhong a chance. Who knows when the next white knight — or white swan — might sweep me off my feet?

Please follow the link below and indicate agreement with the terms of the contract.

It all comes down to promises. I talked my way to Titan with Sharon a year ago. She swore she knew somebody who could set up berths for us to Alpha Centauri. I had bled my account dry on intra-system ferries, but in the end there was only one opening. Sharon said in her note that she was sure I'd understand.

I'd sworn to Great-Grandpa that I would

never get married, and there I was, jilted at the airlock.

I, the undersigned, being of sound mind and body, knowingly embark on a one-way journey to the second moon of 16 Cygni Bb.

People back in town called it a launch-pad wedding. Without a trust fund, a sky-high IQ or stellar connections, a bloodline was the only way out of the Solar System. You might not be the best and brightest, but your kids might be. Kids. Very plural. A colony needs colonists, so the SOP for any cryo colony ship was for everybody to be pregnant as soon as they thawed out and to stay that way for the next few decades.



I consign my Earthly possessions to the Xi Zhong Colonial Expedition, Pty Ltd, effective at the moment of embarkation. The seed ark is my one possession, and I pledge to guard it at any cost. I renounce all faith in Earthly gods and Earthly laws. There is no salvation, but through my own two hands. There is no judgement, but through Mission Control.

An ark ship. Damn. I don't want to be the saviour of humanity. I just want a way out.

I understand that the planet's eccentric orbit may produce winters below -250°C and summers in excess of 750°C . My survival under these conditions cannot be assured.

There are no sure things in life.

Great-Grandpa told me that everyone leaves town sooner or later. Grandma left with the chief executive of a solar start-up who was going to show her the world. She came back with

bruises and my father in her arms. Dad tried to drag us all off to Mars to help with the terraforming, but I was four at the time and Mom wouldn't leave me behind. He sent us daily e-mails for three years until the e-mails stopped coming.

Through it all, Great-Grandpa stayed in the old farmhouse, counting up the water rations and watching the weather reports as the seasons rolled by. When our adventures ran their course, he would always be there. It would take two or three years to get back to Earth, but I had no doubt that if I did go back, I would find Great-Grandpa sitting on the front porch and drinking his allotted cup of coffee while he watched the sun rise.

I renounce Mother Earth, corrupting cradle of the human species. I accept that in giving life to us she wrought her own destruction. I knowingly accept the white feather and step into blackness.

Great-Grandpa once said that a white feather was a symbol of cowardice. Humanity stands its ground.

I don't know Chinese, but I heard somewhere that white is the colour of death. Black is the colour of preservation. Sometimes, the only way to hold on to what matters is to roll the dice.

I commit myself to creating a new, better humanity, one that will not suffer its planet to die.

My finger hovered over the ACCEPT and CANCEL buttons.

I looked at Titan through the window and saw a blurry muck, like the parched dirt of a barren field.

Was there purpose buried somewhere in that nitrogen haze, somewhere in that icy sameness?

Beyond Titan, light and dark stood out in clear contrast.

Death waited out there, but something else, something quiet and relentless, permeated the void. Maybe it was Great-Grandpa's voice.

"In the end, it all averages out."

In summer or in winter.

For better or for worse.

For richer or poorer.

Click. ■

S. R. Algernon studied fiction writing and biology, among other things, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He currently lives in Singapore.

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