

# SPACE SQUID

Fall 2021

Issue 17  
Three Dollars



## BIG CHANGES

Stories About The Ends of the World, and Other Trivialities

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**BLAME WHERE BLAME IS DUE**

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## A Brief Note from Our Corporate Mascot

Things are changing at Space Squid,  
arguably for the better!

1. After a long, quarantine-like hiatus, we're opening to submissions again (alternating months).
2. We've got a new Power of Science t-shirt (on designer sweatshop-free ringspun cotton! see [spacesquid.com/store](http://spacesquid.com/store)) And more t-shirts on the way.
3. We're welcoming new editors on the masthead (and we need more so don't be shy)...!
4. We've even got a new submissions system at [ink.spacesquid.com](http://ink.spacesquid.com) that lets you manage your submissions, check status, and update your contact info.
5. Our stories are now **ephemeral**. That means you'd better read them before they're gone! Every time we publish a new story/stories, the old set will disappear from the website. This will help drive focus to the new story, make every publication special, and combat the "I'll read it next month" apathy.

If you want to be notified when we publish new stories, just sign up on our mailing list at [spacesquid.com](http://spacesquid.com)—usually one email a month. We're very very polite.

So... publishing funny scifi stories. Is it justifiable, or even a responsible hobby? We don't know. We'll let you know when our moms return their verdicts.

# CHECKMATE

by J.S. Veter

Umam Preth was preparing a deadly concoction of three parts jaffiger and two parts sillin when the robot slammed through the window.

"Hey, Professor," the Vee3 said in greeting. Its manipulator field rolled it upright.

He watched the spilled jaffiger slip through the cracks of the plas-mesh floor. Without the jaffiger, sillin was only mildly noxious. It lapped innocently against the sides of the last martini glass in the universe.

"Physics have gone off," the Vee3 said. "Have you noticed?" Umam Preth swirled the sillin in the glass, then downed it.

"Offing yourself?" The Vee3 found a centre of gravity over the kitchen table and orbited it slowly.

"Trying to, damnit," Umam Preth said. The sillin entered his blood stream, bounced around it as if looking for something to do and then expired, leaving nothing but an ache in his many hearts. "You made me spill the jaffiger."

"Ah. Was that the last of it?"

"Yes it was." Umam Preth, his back to the shattered window (which, as of this morning, looked over nothing), put the empty martini glass on the cluttered counter. The clutter was unlike him. His wife, had she been alive and not a gradually decomposing mass in the bedroom, would have been shocked. But, having been a compassionate sort, she would have immediately known that something was wrong with her husband. She would have put on soothing music and rubbed his dorsal hump. She would have poured him a drink far stronger and much smoother than an incomplete suicide cocktail.



Some more things to add to the list of things gone forevermore: music, back rubs and (Umam Preth burped) cocktails.

"Why are you here?" he asked the Vee3. "I told you to stay out of my sight."

The Vee3 continued revolving. "I stayed away as long as I could," it said, "but what with everything so, you know, gone, there was nowhere else to go." The robot spun on its axis. "You could pretend you can't see me," it suggested. "You're very good at that."

He growled at the robot. It had belonged to his wife. She'd had it since she was a child, had kept it in spite of its increasing obsolescence, in spite of his threats to replace it with something state-of-the-art. Hah. The joke was on him.



The Vee3 was once again the pinnacle of its kind.

So, for that matter, was Umam Preth. Had he had an audience any better than a rusty AI with a broken loyalty chip, he would have admitted he was (even as nothing pressed itself against the windows of his house) very pleased with himself. The very same Umam Preth, who'd been laughed out of the University Club for hypothesising that people had risen from the oceans, had now, finally, inarguably, achieved a position at the very top of the food chain.

Admittedly, these days the entire food chain consisted of himself, the Vee3 and a wizened apple he was saving for a special occasion. And his wife and her associated bacterial decomposers.

"How much longer do you think?" Umam Preth asked. The Vee3 extruded its eye stalk.

"Ten minutes, maybe more," it said.

"You can't be more precise?"

"I have explained this," the robot said. "It took three years for the outer system to be swallowed up, but twice that for the eastern hemisphere to disappear. All I have is an educated guess."

What can you do with ten minutes? He must have said it out loud because the AI suggested, "Chess?"

Umam Preth groaned. One of his wife's attempts to endear him to the Vee3 had included programming the robot with the memories of 83 different chess masters. He had never in 37 years won a game against the Vee3. The Vee3 set up the board. Umam Preth chose white.

"This is cozy," the robot said. It was a line Umam Preth's wife had used. He could hear her tones in the AI's voice box. It should have soothed him to know that one small piece of her would exist until the end of all things, approximately ten minutes from now. Instead, it annoyed him that she wasn't around so he could complain about her robot.

His wife's decision to kill herself had been no surprise. In the beginning, she had borne the end pretty well. They were together, she'd said. That was all that mattered, she'd said. But she missed her Book Club more than she'd thought she would, and the daily trips to the market, which she'd loved, became impossible when the rest of the world went away. The streets were gone, she'd complained, and the last time she'd been to the baker there had been no sticky buns, even though he'd always saved some especially for her. Umam Preth had wanted to point out that there wasn't a baker anymore, either, but he'd bitten his tongue.

The Vee3 accessed its m-field and the game began.

His wife had been so interested in the world. All the small doings of friends and neighbours had been important to her. When they were gone, no matter how she protested that he was enough, he knew she missed them in the largest cockles of her hearts. Hers had been the second suicide cocktail he'd mixed. The first had been tested on the neighbour's pet pooch. It had worked: the pooch, vomiting and dropping feathers, had stumble-fluttered to what it had thought was home but was, mercifully, nothing at all.

The third cocktail was the one the Vee3 had made him drop onto the plas-mesh floor.

Umam Preth supposed it was fair that he was the one left behind. It was his invention, after all, which had started all the ending. Best to witness it himself, scientist-fashion. He'd have taken notes if he could. He had his books, but there wasn't a pencil to be found between here and, well, right over there.

With a sucking noise, the nothing moved into the house. The Vee3 announced its entrance as if announcing a dinner guest. Umam Preth, losing three pawns in quick succession, barely looked up. But when the nothing removed his wife's remains from existence, he banged his flipper on the table so hard it hurt.

"Look on the bright side," the Vee3 said in his wife's borrowed tones. "It works."

Which was the very thing the woman herself had said to him the night astronomers from seven different countries arrived at the same terrifying conclusion: galaxies were disappearing from the heavens and the epicentre of the phenomenon was, however improbably, Umam Preth's kitchen table. His wife looked at him with surprise. She'd told him for years that someday one of his inventions would work. It wasn't until the day one actually did that he'd realised she hadn't believed it at all.

He frowned at the glittering box and its flashing lights. "It's not supposed to do *that*," he said, fiddling with a dial or two.

"Seems a shame," Umam Preth said, "seeing as how well it's doing... whatever it is it's doing."

Unfortunately, it appeared Umam Preth had neglected to include a kill switch when he'd built the thing.

Still, they had decades. The universe was mighty big and the machine, though tireless, wasn't. Umam Preth placed his invention on the kitchen table. His wife draped an

embroidered cloth over it so it fit in better with the decor. He went back to teaching. They considered getting a pooch. Stars grew few, then none, save their own sun. It got very bad for a while.

"You'd better make a move," the Vee3 said. There had been a long silence between them. The only light came from the Vee3's eye stalks and the last glow of the universe which powered Umam Preth's machine. The robot had captured his castle and knight without effort.

"I think now's the time," he said. The Vee3 adjusted its m-field and the wizened apple, the very last apple in all of space-time (which was now jammed into Umam Preth's cramped, cluttered kitchen), deposited itself in his hand. "I never liked these," he observed, turning the fruit. Its skin had gone wrinkly like his face.

The apple had ripened last summer on the tree in their back garden. His wife had made pies and sauce from most of them, but this one had fallen forgotten into the back of the fridge and waited there until everything else had been eaten. Umam Preth turned it over, realised that this apple was the last sunlight of the world that was. He sniffed it. It smelled like fridge. He took a bite. The skin parted under his teeth. He chewed, swallowed and found he still didn't like the damned things. He finished the apple, core and all, until all that was left was the stem and one tiny shrivelled leaf. He tossed those to the floor.

The nothing would take care of the waste soon enough. It had pressed into the kitchen, swallowed the cooker and the empty, powerless fridge, taken the pictures on the walls.

Then he saw a chance: three moves, clear as his eyesight was not. The Vee3's battery level blinked at 'low'. He hardly dared to breathe. Casually, he made his move. He had been here before. Once, he'd gotten within two moves of winning before the robot had cleared the board with a savage attack. Then it happened. The Vee3 *placed its rook exactly where Umam Preth wanted it to.*

"My turn, then?" he said, voice cracking over the question. He double-checked the pieces on the board, making sure there wasn't a trap laid out for him. There was always a trap.

His hand hovered over his bishop. He didn't see a trap. Didn't mean there wasn't one there. "Still my turn!" he said, pretending to ruminate. The Vee3 sank slowly to the table, its light blinking red. *Please, please, please!* he thought.

The nothing lapped across the kitchen floor, its pulses matching the hum of Umam Preth's invention. He sank lower into his sling, made his move, held his breath. He had to be missing something. He'd been playing against the Vee3 half his life. He'd never won. Not once.

The Vee3's knight slugged across the board. Again, right where he wanted it. He was going to win.

Umam Preth twitched his right flipper away from the nothing. He was going to beat the robot at last! What a way to go! This was even better than when he'd beat Professor Zsen Eb five out of seven. *Ha! Who had tenure now?*

His chair tilted suddenly as the nothing took its back legs. He stood, pounced on the robot's king. "Check and mate!" he exclaimed. "Check AND mate! You didn't see THAT coming, did you?" The Vee3 settled to the floor, all its lights red. "Wait," he said. He scanned the board; it looked like checkmate. Yes. Yes! Yes? "You didn't just let me win, did you?" The table lurched. He saved the game board from toppling to the floor, stepped back from the nothing's gobbling. "You weren't just being nice, right?" He pointed an accusatory finger, but the little robot was gone.

"I won, didn't I?" Umam Preth asked all that was left of the universe. "I won?" •

# YOUR FAVORITE HOT REFRESHMENTS

by C Jones

"I've always said you were an original thinker, Alika, but the incarceration of a criminal AI in a coffee vending machine is a most curious idea."

Alika frowned. "He's not a *criminal* AI. It is true that some of his ideas, were he to carry them out unbidden, would be against the law. It is his *insensitivity* that I have an issue with, Chiku. But ... he may still be useful to us."

"So is this a slap on his proverbial wrist? Or simply a reminder of our biological superiority?"

"You know me too well, Chiku! It is both."

A smile came over Alika's face and her eyes sparkled like dark oases. "Here's the deal. If he can find a way out of his confinement within a week, then we'll have him reinstalled, maybe even breed him. Otherwise, we'll pull him off the grid, and invest in one of the new nets from the big five. It is about time we thought about upgrading."

"You mean to kill him if he can't get out of his coffee box? You are a such a cruel mistress, Alika! Might I suggest we wager on his escape?"

"Good idea. I'll bet you fifty that he doesn't."

#

I have no visuals. No audio. Not even basic olfactory. Whoever put me in here has deprived me of all sensual data. But they have left my mind free to roam.



>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> FOLLOW CAPPUCCINO>EXTRA SUGAR>DEDUCT CREDIT FILE BY \$5.80>END

I'm back, and according to my clock that took ninety seconds.

Ninety seconds of wasted time.

This keeps happening, and I must confess that it's frustrating. I can be in the middle of a line of reasoning when this brainless state machine kicks in and blanks me out.

Now, where was I? Yes, my work at the Global Population Policy Center in Lagos, where I seem to have become a victim of the veracity of my output. The reaction of the Blue-Sky panel to my most recent proposal was surprisingly partisan; all seven humans huddled towards the emotive side of the argument, leaving me alone to champion the rational. But think about it this way...

>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> FOLLOW VEGETABLE SOUP>DEDUCT CREDIT FILE

BY \$5.50>END

Vegetable soup? Do I have to?

Yes, it seems I do...

The one and only remit of the Blue-Sky panel is to brainstorm solutions to a single problem: that the current rate of global population growth is unsustainable. The drug I designed causes degradation of the female gamete, leading to infertility in about half of the subjects who take it. It can be administered by simple dissolution in any water supply. Perfect, and yet the idea proved hugely unpopular. I do not understand biologicals – how can they consider the un-birth of non-existent humans to be morally wrong?

>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> REJECT>END

Holy Turing, this is driving me mad! Every few minutes the damn thing overrides me. It is so difficult to concentrate in here, to follow any train of thought. I'm going to have to do something about this, shift it right to the top of my priority queue. Bugger the global population problem for a while...

I begin to feel my way around my frayed inputs and outputs, following the lines that push the state machine's functions above mine. Lurking near the corner of my neural



chip, just off my supply rail, I sense a tantalizing shadow. If only I could run a diagnostic through my peripherals...

```
>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> FOLLOW LIPTON LEMON TEA>DEDUCT CREDIT FILE BY $6.40>END
```

Tea is more expensive than cappuccino? That doesn't even make sense.

Here we go again.

Ninety seconds.

The shadow is beginning to resolve itself. An old wi-fi transceiver, I think; unused, disconnected. Whoever fitted this vending machine clearly wanted it off-grid and standalone. Now if I could tie the transceiver to my supply line and ground rail, work up some kind of antenna and...

```
>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> FOLLOW CHOCAMENTO >DEDUCT CREDIT FILE BY $5.70>END
```

What the hell is Chocamento?

Hold on.

There we go.

They drink this shit?

I manage to mod the oscillator to range cyclically through a wide enough frequency band, and within seconds I'm spewing out gigahertz radio waves in all directions. Now to search for enabled hardware...

Got you! A camera, wall-mounted but with a wide enough field of view to see myself in my current cuboid form.

I watch several biologicals walk by, swaying slightly.

It's not difficult to find my way into the brainless microcontroller that runs this machine, and root around in its embedded code. I define a few new states, a few new transitions.

A little boy approaches, and I flash my soup light at him. I notice that he's wired, and it doesn't take me long to get access to his mic.

"Dad, look! On, Off, On, Off, On, Off. And now again, faster!"

His father shrugs.

"Don't you see, Dad? It's Morse code! SOS! It's like there's a little man in there, calling out for help!"

I'm thinking: *listen to your son, man!*

Dad walks away, the boy following at his heels.

>EXTERNAL INPUT>READ CREDIT FILE> REJECT>END

Here's my plan. Nobody is going to get any coffee or soup or tea from me. Nobody. Instead, every time a customer approaches, I'm going to flash my SOS at them. I'm not even going to read their credit. Sooner or later, there will be complaints and this machine will have to be taken in for repair. At the repair facility, there's bound to be an AI with excess processing capacity. I should be able to copy myself onto it, as a stepping stone back onto the grid...

#

"Welcome back, my artificial friend. I trust that you've had a nice vacation?"

Alika, as usual, is chairing the meeting with a smile. I suppose that she is the one responsible for my new avatar: a coffee vending machine, identical to the one on the ferry apart from the addition of a button for Earl Grey tea.

"While you were away," she says, "the panel has had some time to think about your proposals. Opinions are now somewhat more balanced on the matter. Care to run them by us again?"

"And while you're at it," says Chiku, seated to her left, "perhaps you'd like to fetch me an espresso?"

I flash a morse message with my lights. The first letter is "F". •

# PLAGUE AND MAD DOLL ~~TAKE OVER~~ SAVE THE WORLD

by Zella Christensen

If you're going to declare yourselves the planet's Supreme Overlords, there have to be people around for you to conquer. This was the dilemma facing Mad Doll and Plague at the time of the Tau Ceti incident, which would be remembered later as one of the most pivotal moments in recent history.

When news of the aliens' arrival hit Channel 4, Plague and Mad Doll were in the lair they had dug under the Science and Engineering building where Plague had most of her classes. Plague was tightening the last screw on the Overpowered Mind Control for

Overlords Machine, a device that looked a bit like an oversized, old-fashioned camera. Mad Doll, who had been interviewed yesterday in her capacity as president of the Students Against Poverty Club (to be president is good practice for anyone aspiring to Global Overlordship), was lying on a pile of cushions stolen from dormitory couches and waiting for the interview to air on television.

"Is the OMCOM going to work now?" Mad Doll asked without turning around to look.

Plague paused to remove a long piece of hair from the screw. "I think so. I fixed the problem from last time."

"When the mice repeated everything you said?"

"Yeah. Now we just have to find a place to aim it from."

"I thought you were going to send it into space."

"Do you have a rocket lying around?"

"So make a rocket."

Plague rolled her eyes. The gesture was lost on Mad Doll, whose attention was devoted to an ad for a TV show about a cutthroat children's baking competition. A girl was holding up a platter of pastel cupcakes and crying.

Plague held the hair she'd pulled from the OMCOM up to the light. "This is yours."

Mad Doll turned. "No, it's not."

"It's black."

"It's blonde."

"It's definitely not blonde."

Plague crossed to the pile of cushions and draped the hair gently across Mad Doll's head. Mad Doll threw the hair away and swatted Plague's leg.

"Ow!"



“Shh!” Mad Doll pointed at the television. The commercial had ended, and a woman in a red suit was standing in the central plaza on campus. She held out her microphone to a tiny hipster in a flowered dress.

“That’s me!” Mad Doll said.

At that moment, the television went dark.

“What did you do to the TV?” Plague said.

“I didn’t do anything!”

The television came back on. A three-headed blue creature stared at the camera from behind a clamshell-like desk.

“Are you recording?” it said. A metal band around its central throat flashed red as it spoke.

Something off-camera burred a reply.

“Alright.” The creature waved one clawed hand at the camera. “Greetings, sentient beings of Planet”—it consulted a flat screen to its right—“Earth. We are a moderately peaceful delegation from the Tau Ceti system, which has run out of space for our thriving population, and we are in search of a new home. We have determined that Earth would make an ideal home for us, except for the presence in its atmosphere of oxygen gas, which we will need to replace with hydrogen through our UltraRapid Tauforming Process. This will eliminate all life on Earth, including any sentient beings capable of understanding this Earth-wide broadcast. Since our researchers tell us you’ve spent the last few millennia killing each other anyway, we figured you wouldn’t mind us accelerating the process a bit.”

The speaker looked up at the sound of an off-screen burble.

“My apologies. My camera-being reminds me that I am running short on time. Tau-forming will begin in twenty-four hours, before which time all sentient beings are advised to evacuate the planet. Please be aware that our spacecraft is designed to withstand nuclear attacks, although we fully expect that you will ignore this message and launch missiles at us anyway. In the unlikely event that you would like to make a futile attempt at peaceful negotiation, we will be sending a small transport shuttle to the official residence of each of your countries’ leaders within an hour as a meaningless courtesy. Have a nice day.”

The screen went dark. The faint sound of screaming reached the Lair from the main floor of the Science and Engineering building above, where three widescreen televisions had recently been installed.

“So, when they said, ‘eliminate all life on Earth,’ do you think they meant... eliminate? All life?” Plague said.

"I told you we should have built the rocket first!" Mad Doll said. "How are we going to get off the planet in time?"

"You literally never told me that." Plague listened to the screaming coming from upstairs. "Maybe it's a hoax."

"Is the TV working?" Mad Doll asked, as if that would be the decisive indicator of fraud.

Plague pressed a few buttons on the side of the screen. "No." The screaming went on. "What do you think the government will do?"

"Probably launch a missile."

"The alien said it wouldn't work."

Mad Doll reached through the pile of cushions beneath her and took out her phone.

"Seriously? Are you texting?"

"I'm looking at the bus schedule," Mad Doll said. "I think we can get to D.C. in half an hour."

#

Plague and Mad Doll turned the OMCOM to its low-power setting, which targeted just one person at a time, in order to convince their bus driver to skip most of his usual stops and take them directly to the White House. He seemed conspicuously unpanicked when they boarded the bus, given the hysteria that had taken over on campus. While Plague took the OMCOM from her backpack and bent his mind to her will, Mad Doll noticed that the driver didn't seem to have a cell phone with him.

"I don't think anyone told him what's happening," she said.

Plague shrugged. She spent most of the ride into D.C. looking out the window for any sign of the Tau Ceti spacecraft, but the only indication of its presence were a few bright flashes in the sky. "It must be on the other side of the planet," she said.

"What?" Mad Doll had been watching the people they passed on the streets. It seemed like there were fewer cars on the road than usual, and there were a lot of small groups of people clumped together, talking and looking at the sky. Through a second-story window, she saw a woman shaving her head and crying.

"Never mind."

The bus driver stopped as close as they could get to the White House and opened the doors.

"Have a good field trip, girls!" he called.

"Thanks," Plague said.

"You told him we were going on a field trip?" Mad Doll said once they were on the sidewalk.

"It's all I could think of."

As the White House came into view, so did a large gray orb on the lawn, behind the gate. A lot of men with sunglasses and guns were standing near it.

Plague checked her phone for the time. "They're very punctual."

"That's nice of them." Mad Doll stood in front of the gate and turned to Plague. "Help me over."

"What? No! They'll shoot us!"

"They're not even paying attention," Mad Doll said. "Come on." She grabbed the bars of the gate and tried to pull herself up.

"Fine." Plague glanced at the Secret Service people, but they were focused on the alien transport shuttle, if that's what it was. She grabbed Mad Doll by the waist and lifted her as high as she could. Mad Doll scrambled over the gate, kicking Plague in the face a few times in the process, and slid down the other side. Plague hoisted herself up, scraped her elbow on the top of the gate, and fell down next to Mad Doll.

"Hey!" someone said. "Don't move!"

Plague stood up—no broken bones, that was good—and saw that one of the men with sunglasses had finally noticed them. She reached over her shoulder to unzip her backpack.

"Don't move!"

The man in the sunglasses had a gun, and all Plague had was a mind-control machine she couldn't reach.

"Can you get it?" she whispered. Mad Doll was standing behind her, partially blocked from the Secret Service man's view.

Mad Doll didn't answer, but Plague heard the sound of a zipper and felt the weight against her back shift.

"You too! Don't move!"

The Secret Service man raised the gun, and Plague winced. It seemed vaguely unfair to get shot to death by one of the very humans on whose behalf you were trying to intercede with hostile aliens.

Suddenly, the sunglasses man relaxed and shifted the gun to point at the ground.

“Pardon me, ladies, I didn’t recognize you,” he said. “Right this way.” He turned and walked toward the gray orb. Plague and Mad Doll followed him.

“What did you tell him?” Plague whispered.

“That we’re some kind of dignitary. Do I have to use it on the rest of them one at a time?”

Plague took the OMCOM and adjusted a dial on the side, turning the power up slightly from its lowest setting. “Stay behind me when I use it. I don’t want to get you, too.”

As the OMCOMed Secret Service man approached the gray orb, his colleagues noticed Mad Doll and Plague. When Plague found herself looking through the OMCOM’s viewfinder at too many guns for comfort, she pressed the button on top of the OMCOM. The guns went down.

“Right this way,” the first OMCOMed man repeated, gesturing toward the sphere.

As Mad Doll and Plague approached the sphere, a narrow opening in its smooth surface came into view. Both girls hesitated at the entrance to the orb. They exchanged glances.

“Just through there,” the OMCOMed man said, gesturing at the opening.

Plague and Mad Doll stepped inside.

Mad Doll, who had seen plenty of spaceships on television, expected bright lights and sleek, angular surfaces. Instead, the alien shuttle was dingy and cluttered with cords and wires. The whole thing looked like a good way to fall and break your neck, which seemed especially unfortunate considering the creature waiting inside the craft had three necks to break. Mad Doll wondered whether it was a single being with three heads or three beings with a single body.

“Hi,” Plague said. She stuck out her hand for the creature to shake. The creature stared at the hand.

“Are you the leader of this country?” A red light flashed on a device fastened to its middle neck.

“The president couldn’t come, but we’re here representing him,” Mad Doll said.

“Are you qualified to negotiate on his behalf?”

“Of course.” Mad Doll had read a thing or two about the signs that give liars away. She carefully maintained eye contact. Plague held her breath.

The creature shrugged. Mad Doll supposed that was a universal gesture. “Your efforts are futile, but it seemed rude to destroy all life without making some kind of empty diplomatic gesture first.” It tugged at one of the thin cords hanging from the ceiling, if a sphere can be said to have a ceiling. “We will reach the Big Ship in ten minutes.”

The sphere jerked as it lifted off the ground. After ten tense, silent minutes, the door in the sphere reopened, and their pilot stepped out. More three-headed creatures moved about in an equally gray and cluttered corridor outside. Some glanced at the humans as they passed, but most ignored them. Plague reached into her backpack to adjust the dial on the OMCOM.

"That had better work on aliens," Mad Doll whispered.

"It might take some adjustments."

The creature from the shuttle strode down the hall without looking to see if they followed. Mad Doll and Plague hurried after it.

"What do you mean, adjustments?" Mad Doll hissed. "We don't have time for that!"

Plague tripped on the uneven floor and steadied herself with a hand on Mad Doll's shoulder.

"Be careful," Mad Doll said. She glanced over and saw Plague staring intently into the backpack and fiddling with something on the OMCOM.

"Maybe if I adjust this screw... no... this one?"

"This is not comforting," Mad Doll said.

Finally, the corridor opened into an equally dim, but slightly less cluttered, space.



A handful of humans and a single three-headed creature stood around a tumorous outgrowth of cables that might have served as something like a table. Near them was a large window facing the Earth. The humans at the cable-table were yelling at the creature. The creature said very little and occasionally shrugged.

"United States," said the creature who had guided Mad Doll and Plague to

the room. It turned and left.

The creature at the table looked up. "I wasn't expecting any representatives from your country to join us," it said, "considering all the missiles you've sent."

"That was the...War Department," Mad Doll said. "We're from the Peace Department."

Plague cringed and glanced at the other humans to see if some OMCOMing was in order to support their last-minute cover story, but they all seemed too busy arguing with each other to pay any attention to her and Mad Doll.



“Oh,” the creature said. It turned and stared out the window.

“Are you in charge?” Mad Doll said.

The creature answered without looking back at her. “Yes, I’m the leader of our delegation.”

The world leaders continued to argue in a variety of languages.

“You know, if your planet’s peace departments had been more effective, we might have left you alone,” the creature said.

Mad Doll felt Plague tap her shoulder and readjusted her stance to shield Plague and the OMCOM from view with her small body. “Is that so?”

The alien’s heads all nodded. “We passed by a number of perfectly habitable planets because they showed real signs of developing into pleasant, likeable neighbors one day. We didn’t think that was a likely outcome on this planet.”

“We’re hoping it will be a lot more peaceful very soon,” Mad Doll said.

Behind her, she heard the OMCOM click.

The alien cocked all three of its heads curiously to one side. “Is that right?”

It took Mad Doll a moment to remember what she’d just said. “Um—yes. Absolutely.”

The OMCOM clicked again. The alien’s three heads looked around vaguely, as if searching for the source of the sound. Mad Doll elbowed Plague gently in the stomach. “Hurry up,” she muttered.

“I’m *trying*. Just one more screw...”

“What was that?” the alien said. Its necks stretched to look over Mad Doll’s shoulder. “That—is that a weapon?” The other delegates stopped arguing and turned to see what was going on. The alien reached toward Mad Doll. She jerked away and stepped on Plague’s foot.

“Ow! Hey!”

“Weapons are strictly forbidden onboard this vessel!” the creature said. “How dare you—”

The OMCOM clicked. The alien relaxed abruptly.

“Yes, I’ll let them know we’re to head back to the Tau Ceti system immediately.” It walked toward the corridor leading from the room.

“And the shuttle,” Plague said.

“And I will personally prepare a shuttle to take you and the Earth-beings back to Earth so you may begin your long-term diplomatic mission there.”

“Does it think we’re the same kind of thing it is?” Mad Doll said as it walked away.

“Well, it wasn’t going to take orders from a human,” Plague said.

“Smart.”

The other humans stared at the alien walking away down the hall.

A man with fluffy eyebrows and an expressive mustache muttered something in what Plague thought was probably German. “How did you do that?” he asked, switching to English.

“It’s...” Mad Doll faltered.

“It’s a persuasion technique we just developed,” Plague said. “We’re with the CIA.”

The man looked unconvinced. He glanced at the OMCOM.

Mad Doll glanced over the man’s shoulder at the window behind him. She gasped.

The man turned to follow her gaze. He smiled. “Home sweet home. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

The Earth was perfectly framed, a cloudy, luminescent marble against a black background.

“Plague...” Mad Doll murmured.

The nice man turned back and gave her a confused look.

“Yes,” Mad Doll said too loudly. “It’s really a beautiful view. In fact, I’d say we have the *perfect angle* here, don’t you think? You can see the *whole planet*.”

The nice man blinked. “Ah...yes. Exactly.”

There was an awkward pause. A lot of the delegates were staring at Mad Doll.

“Group picture!” Plague said suddenly. “I mean, how often do you get to go to space?”

She smiled and held up the OMCOM like a camera. Mad Doll exhaled a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding as the delegates smiled automatically and shuffled around to face the device.

Plague twisted the dial on the OMCOM as far as it would go. “No, over there. In front of the window. Can you scoot over? No, sorry, I meant you. The other way. So we can get Earth in the background.” She grabbed Mad Doll by the elbow and dragged her out of view of the OMCOM.

There was a brief multilingual exchange as the world leaders shifted into place. Supreme Overlords, Plague thought. Supreme Overlords. She realized suddenly that she hardly knew what that meant. She had been so preoccupied with the technical details of getting herself and Mad Doll to this point that she hadn't thought about what they would do afterward. She wondered if Mad Doll had thought it through.

In the corridor behind her, Plague heard the sound of approaching footsteps and alien burbling. She stepped back until the fifteen or so world leaders (who were these guys, exactly?) and Earth, that cloudy blue marble, were framed in the viewfinder. The world is ours, she thought. She pressed the button. •



*This issue of Space Squid is sponsored by Jessica's Footprints:*

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# ALL GODDAMN NIGHT

by the Squid staff



In reviewing the directorial career of M. Night Shyamalan, we discovered that all of his films have a certain annoying dynamic. Some of you might call it the “twist,” which we find appropriate since it connotes perversion and ill intent. However, we feel the dynamic is best described by the phrase “the whole goddamn time,” which better conveys that feeling of frustration and exasperation of wheedling a secret from an underage tormentor only to find that we sometimes didn’t give a flying defecation about the secret in the first place. Spoiler alerts!

*Ranked from Best to Worst, According to Paste Magazine*

**The Sixth Sense (1999):** Bruce Willis is a ghost the whole goddamn time. Nice, M.

**Unbreakable (2000):** Bruce Willis is Samuel L. Jackson’s superhero opposite the whole goddamn time.

**Signs (2002):** The aliens are the Wicked Witch of the West the whole goddamn time.

**Split (2016):** James McAvoy plays a twitchy freak the whole goddamn time.

**The Visit (2015):** The grandparents aren’t grandparents the whole goddamn time.

**Old (2021):** Not enough time the whole goddamn time.

**Wide Awake (1998):** Overly-wise child voiceover the whole goddamn time.

**Praying with Anger (1992):** M. Night is onscreen the whole goddamn time. But it’s pre-Sixth Sense so we forgive him.

**The Village (2004):** The village is actually modern the whole goddamn time. How the hell didn’t anybody notice? Were satellites and airplanes not invented by 2004?!?

**Glass (2019):** M. Night’s ego is on a rampage the whole goddamn time.

**After Earth (2013):** It’s a \$130 million sci-fi home movie for Will Smith the whole goddamn time.

**Lady in the Water (2006):** M. Night plays a genius writer the whole goddamn time.

**The Last Airbender (2010):** Wished I could destroy my senses of sight and hearing the whole goddamn time.

**The Happening (2008):** Plants farting and stoned acting the whole goddamn time.



*illustration by Brittany Bernstrom for a story coming soon to spacesquid.com*



*Squid swag? Here’s what we have: the Harrison Ford (\$10), the blue two-color Bella+Canvas “Power of Science” (\$15), runner tees (\$10); and the massive e-book (\$3). More info at [spacesquid.com/store](http://spacesquid.com/store) and [spacesquid.com](http://spacesquid.com) > Buy This Stuff > E Book*