

Exordium

by AJ Lowell

On the eve of battle the Captain of the “Anunnaki” who was heard yet rarely seen, announced over the intercom that key personnel (mostly civilian scientists) were to be escorted to a nearby planet until the enemy fleet had been successfully destroyed or turned back. We had crossed over into a new quadrant of the galaxy for the sole purpose of exploring this system for natural resources and possible future habitation. We also attracted the unwanted attention of a well-organized and very territorial malevolent species of aliens known as the, “Izigi.”

The Izigi were exiled from their kingdom in the Haratus system six thousand years ago. They've taken refuge in a biplanetary system some sixty light years from us. We thought we were too far away to be noticed. We were wrong. Our ship, the Anunnaki had run into them before while we were on our way to inspect this region of the galaxy. They're ghastly beastly creatures!...Reptilian forms born without compunction. They're unpredictable nature is probably why they were driven from their homeland so many eons ago. Both they, and the mutated lower-forms that support them are now our sworn enemies. They're no slouches in a fight either. They're well-fed, strong & fast and their equipment can take some serious punishment. It was my job to defend the ship. It's my job to fight these guys. I'm a fighter pilot and I fly the ANK-77v tactical interceptor.

I fought them in space. On the edge of a great vortex, our forces clashed on the boundary layer of a singularity. The memory of losing my friends to the enemy, and then watching their burning ships spagettify into the event horizon bothers me still. I shot down five enemy raiders during the last attack. We lost twice as many. So for splashing five of the bad guy's planes, the Captain promoted me. He said I was going to be his first and placed me in command of the

squadron. I thought I would be fighting these lizard-men today. Instead, the Captain has sent the squadron ahead to engage the enemy before they can strike. I'll bet it's going to be a glorious fight. One for the archives...Unfortunately, as a reward for my heroic deeds at the Cygnus Starfield, I've been reluctantly volunteered for a special assignment. I am to escort the shuttles delivering the civilians and scientists to a habitable planet near a main-sequence yellow dwarf star. I don't like babysitting...

I finished zipping-up my flight suit, grabbed my helmet and marched out of the pilot's ready room. I took the elevator down to the flight deck, wondering who would be the first person I would see as I exited the tube. Would it be the Captain, ready with a pre-flight pep talk?...Nah! He's only heard and rarely seen...Would it be the Chief?...No, not the Chief...He only complains after I bring back the spacecraft. Counting bullet holes like a tired man counts sheep. Who then?...

The air-lock doors open.

A stunningly beautiful woman clad in a flight suit stood waiting for me in the corridor. Judging by her suit's insignias, she was probably to be my passenger on this dangerous voyage. The disappointed brooding expression she wore upon her face, tells me she's a scientist...and possibly none too happy about this trip either. I stepped out, smiled and said,

"I'm Major Argillo Teromae. But my friends call me, the Atom."

"You're late, Major!..." She said.

She began marching down the hall, her equipment bag swinging in unison with her...contours. I caught up to her pace until we were walking side-by-side. She darted a glance at me, then her eyes rolled away because I was grinning at her like some idiot school-boy. The bay-doors for the flight deck were just a few meters ahead. Some crewmembers filed passed us, going in both directions. She had this curly black hair that shimmered in the light. I couldn't get over it. Maybe babysitting is not so bad after all. Without looking directly at me she continued with,

“Where did you get ‘Atom’ from? Is that some frat-boy nickname, or something as equally ridiculous?...”

The undertow of sarcasm flowing from her was enough to wash me down the corridor.

“I’m a pilot. It’s my call-sign.” I replied.

“I knew it!” She laughed.

I’ve seen her type before. She was just trying to get under my skin. The pretense was obvious. She was attracted to me. A woman as beautiful as this doesn’t come around very often. Though I’m a little surprised I’ve never seen her before on any of the forward decks. I had to know her name,

“I didn’t get your name, Madam?” I asked.

“It’s Doctor, actually!...” She snapped.

I stopped in my tracks. I stood there and smiled until she turned around. She looked back at me with a puzzled expression on her face. I said to her,

“Doctor I’ll make this simple. We are in a state-of-war here. I’m going to be in charge of your safety. I’ll even give my life if necessary. But before anyone boards my spacecraft...I require, a name?”

We had made quite a scene. The crewmembers had slowed the pace of their activities and they were looking straight at her not me. She looked around at their faces. I could tell she felt uncomfortable and out of place. With a sincere tone she replied to my query saying,

“My name is Evie...Evie Costae.”

Feeling on the spot, her eyes begged me to rescue her from the disapproving gaze of the others, for which I did. Walking passed where she stood I said,

“This way, Doctor...”

I marched through the heavy pressure-doors onto the hanger deck. As she followed me through the maze of activity, I made sure to glance back at her occasionally. My facial expression was a little less asinine. I kept a close eye on her because the launch bay was where accidents happen. It’s a dangerous place. There’s a strange choreography taking place here between men & machines.

Overhead cranes balance ordinance from one end of the palatial enclosure to the other. There are robots, high-voltage, force-fields...more than a hundred ways someone could get hurt. I looked back again...She was gone.

I panicked instantly, spinning in all directions looking for her. She was nowhere in sight. I found the nearest safety officer. Seeing me approach, he pulled the speaker away from his headset to hear me over the cacophony. We spoke for minute and then he pointed towards the shuttlecrafts several meters away. I spied her talking to her colleagues, as they began boarding their ships. I hastily made my way towards the careless Doctor, watching her wave goodbye to her departing friends. It was then I witnessed her casually heading towards the bulkhead, making her way to an air-lock marked with the flashing bulletin,

[...Fueling In-Progress...]

She was in serious danger. I started running. Calling out to her...In my peripheries I saw two safety officers also signaling for the nearest crewmembers to stop her. There was an engineer at her feet, working on an APS conduit that stood and grabbed her arm, just as her hand reached for the air-lock release. Arriving at her side I smiled my gratitude to the engineer. She looked at me and said,

“There you are!...A squad passed between us and I lost sight of you.”

One of the safety officers scolded me before going about his duties,

“Maybe you ought to put her on a leash, Sir!...”

As they left off, my slightly confused wayward passenger took offense to their tone calling out to them,

“I beg your pardon! Just what was that supposed to mean...”

I took her by the shoulder rotating her to the transparency overlooking the adjacent room to which she was about to enter. Her naivety of the industrial dangers of contemporary spatial warfare was getting her into trouble. I was about to educate her. I pointed to the sign saying,

“See that where it says; ‘fueling-in-progress?’ Everyone here knows what that means. It means; ‘for the love of God, don’t go in there.’ See those technicians in pressure-suits in there?”

She looked closely at where I was pointing. The men inside, clad in elaborate space-suits attached large gauge hoses to the bellies of the thirsty spacecraft. I continued with,

“They’re dispensing fuel into spacecraft. Not really the safest job on the ship. The propellant we use is RPC-3317d. That’s nasty stuff. Though it won’t burn through your second layer of skin, it is caustic enough to eat right through your clothes, burn off your hair, and liquefy your nails...Instantaneously!”

She interrupted with,

“That doesn’t sound so bad...I mean, it doesn’t sound fatal?”

To which I replied,

“That ignorance is my point. It’s also a potent nerve gas. Inside the booth it’s concentrated to one part per million. It has a powerful amnesiac effect. The smallest exposure will erase away your entire education, experiences and expertise...everything. You won’t know who you are, or where you came from. The only thing you’ll have left is a rudimentary understanding of the world around you, and the basic elementary vocabulary to articulate it...”

“So you’re saying one whiff of that stuff and I won’t remember anything?” She asked.

To which I replied,

“Doctor, the strange perfume in there is enough to reduce that intellect of yours, to the mentality of a fifteen year old school-girl.”

I drove the point home so the lesson doesn’t go, un-learned. I think she got the point, so I decided to get-on with our mission. I stepped back and threw-out my hand in an inviting gesture for her to follow saying,

“Doctor my ship waits. Follow closely, please?”

The good doctor did exactly that. She even ran into the back of me once whilst we made our way to my ship. That type of accident was eternally forgivable. I told Evie to go ahead and put-on

her flight helmet. She struggled to organize herself. Trying to walk and don a helmet at the same time, gave her an almost child-like disposition compared to that of the veterans around her. As we approached our destination, the noise of the excited rocket-engines became almost deafening. Arriving at the launch-tube I had to yell over the noise to tell her to stand-fast saying,

“Stay right here! I have to check my ship, first!”

To hear me over the engines roar, she leaned on me. I took notice that it was warm and trusting...Almost intimate despite its brevity. I left to inspect the ship. I think she's beginning to like me.

I couldn't stand him. Embarrassing me the way he did. Letting those men talk down to me. Who does he think he is? I'm a scientist for God's sake! These jar-head fighter jocks are all the same. He's so cocky and self-assured. It's down-right nauseating. I mean, just look at him...He's just an ape with a uniform. Despite his obvious well-toned physique, why would I ever consider bonding with a man like that? She thought, as the Major examined his...craft.

I spoke with the Chief. He handed me a situation report and wished me luck. Like grooming a great metallic bird, I caressed the underbelly of my ship looking for surface defects following it all the way to the nose. I grabbed the antenna and gave it a good shake. I looked at the landing gear, sensor tubes, and internal weapons bays. Everything was acceptable. I climbed aboard, sat down and plowed through the check-list. Rotating the control-stick I fired a burst from each of the upper and lower thrusters, then the braking thrusters. The ship bucked against the suspension of the landing gear, lurching to one side and then the other. I checked the computer and scopes...Three lights in the green.

That meant it was time to go. I checked the communicator by speaking into the microphone of my helmet's headset I said,

“Doctor, can you hear me?”

She glanced around, then centered herself realizing the voice was from inside her helmet. She replied,

“Yes, I read you...”

Waving her up, a pair of ground crewmen assisted Doctor Costae up the stairway through the cabin section of the fighter plane. Evie crawled into the seat behind me and buckled herself-in. I said,

“Welcome aboard, Doctor...”

“Oh, maybe this was a bad idea?!...” She said.

“Nonsense, you'll do fine.”

Finally, the crew snaps closed the last of the facets and pulls the chocks. We were free to taxi into the launch tunnel. I moved the ship into position. The air-lock leading to the hanger closed behind us. It was dark in the tunnel with the exception of the planes strobes, and the red glow emanating from the cock-pit. I radioed the operations control tower for final clearance. We were told to stand-fast. We both watched the shuttlecraft launch before of us to our port side. The ship vibrated, as the hissing atmosphere within the launch tube was removed and recycled back to the Anunnaki. The hanger doors to the front of us opened. At this moment, we seemed to have the whole universe to ourselves. The obsidian tapestry of endless night stretched into eternity. The crisp stars stood out as pristine punctuations, their numbers as infinite as the cosmos itself...

The radio traffic from the control tower shattered the moment. We were clear to depart. I did a final check of the reactor and shields, then radioed back saying,

“ir-Roger! This is, Alpha Seven-One-Six! We are on our way!”

I looked back at the doctor. She looked nervous. Having a little fun at her expense I said,

“Hold on Doctor! In the next twenty seconds, we will be doing roughly half the speed-of-light!”

“I suppose it's too late to change my mind?” She said copingly.

“Yep.”

Full thrust, the plane's engines roared. The ship accelerated faster and faster, pressing us into our seats. The plane continued to accelerate exponentially, until it had tapered-off at 35,763 meters per second. We were officially...away. I banked starboard, and did an

orbit of the Anunnaki, then followed a course to the shuttle crafts. We had some time to pass before we would be nearing our destination, I decided it would be best to get to know my passenger, a little better. I opened-up by saying,

“So what do you have planned for tonight...Anything?”

Laughing she said,

“Oh...I thought I'd take a moonlight stroll through the stars.”

“You were so quiet, I was beginning to think I left you back on the ship.” I said.

She said,

“Forgive me, this whole experience has been kind of?...”

“Almost surreal?” I ventured.

“Post-hypnotically surreal.”

We finally caught up to the shuttles. I pulled-up next to the lead ship and slowed the plane down to 28,512 meters per second. We exchanged greetings with the shuttle pilots. I looked back at Evie and asked,

“So, Just what kind of doctor are you...Doctor?”

“I'm a geneticist.” She replied.

“Really!...Tell me about your work?” I asked.

“Not to sound cynical, but what possible interest could you have in what I do?” She said.

I replied saying,

“Believe it or not, I am a veterinarian...and to fly a ship this complex and fly it well, requires a mastery of physics and engineering. So, try me?”

She explained,

“Alright. Several of the abandoned planets that we've visited in the last two years, had populations that required at least thirty couples or pair-bonds to perpetuate a healthy community or gene pool.”

“Why so many?” I asked.

She elaborated,

“I don't know? I've heard of other species of sumatrids, whose genetic-coding was so elegant and comprehensive, they only

required two. The first generation would be all twins and all females. Each capable of spontaneous progeneration."

"How is that even possible? I find that hard to believe." I said.

"Smaller, less complex lifeforms have simple genetic codes. Larger species, like we sumatrids have elaborate genetic codes. It is possible, we have all the stored information to do just that..."

The conversation was interrupted by an alarm flashing on the instrument cluster. The pulsing audible tone echoed in the cabin. I looked over to the shuttle pilot, he had strange look on his face. I switched the frequencies and called over to him. As the channel broke-in, I could hear the panic in his voice. I caught his transmission in mid-sentence.

"...traffic over the radio! They're being butchered! Check your scope!"

"Stand-by!" I said.

My passenger became alarmed. She added to the chaos by chiming-in.

"What's going on?!" She said.

"Just sit tight, Doctor!" I replied.

She was taken aback by my commanding tone. I didn't have time to be polite. The information coming at me had to be prioritized. I checked my scope. I couldn't wrap my brain around what I was saw...The Anunnaki was being overwhelmed by the enemy. The Izigi is assaulting our mother-ship with everything they've got. Even though my friends are putting up a valiant fight against them...My comrades are dying, wholesale. The shuttle pilot pipes-in over the communicator.

"They're dying, man! Can't you hear them?!..." He pleaded.

"Look, just calm down. I'm going to circle back, you go on ahead."

The alarm flashed again on my instrument cluster. It was a proximity warning. Apparently, a squad of Izigi fighters broke-off their assault on the Anunnaki and turned to pursue us. The attack was imminent. I was going to have to take them on, and I was going to do it alone. It was my duty to defend the shuttles.

"Hold on Doctor!..." I said.

I banked the ship hard to port. We pulled over nine times the force of gravity turning 180 degrees. Evie screamed over the intercom to protest her discomfort.

"What are you Doing...?!"

She now had a clear picture of what we doing...

Closing on us fast were four Izigi fighter-planes silhouetted against the outline of the now, "swarmed" Anunnaki. As I energized my weapons, I could see wave-after-wave of enemy ships making unchallenged attack runs on the hulking starship's engines. Every part of me flooded with doubt and dread...This was very, very bad. I had to do something and quick. Evie gasped in terror and disbelief. My targeting scanners clicked down by the numbers until I had a perfect target lock...Four!...Three!...Two!...One!

"Hold still you sons-a-bitches!" I railed aloud.

My ship whispered as it launched several high-speed torpedoes from the internal weapons-bays.

"You're not attacking them are you?!" Evie asked.

"Just sit tight, Doctor!...Are you a woman of faith?!" I asked.

I banked the ship hard back-and-fourth in a defensive pattern. My weapons were moments from detonating.

"What?!..." She said.

"...Do you pray?!" I yelled.

The enemy fighters counterattacked, sending four times the ordinance back at me. I launched counter measures...The torpedoes lost their track fell away.

"...Yes!" She expelled.

"Then pray for us all!" I said.

Two Izigi raiders broke off to pursue the shuttles. They were slipping passed me. I switched to my gun system and closed on the pair in front of me. Evie started to get in the spirit of things. She interpreted her scope and began calling out targets.

"They're going after the shuttles!" She said.

"Yeah. What's their range?!..." I asked.

"Ah?...Forty thousand kilometers!" She replied.

I had a gun-lock on the fighters. They started to set me up in a pattern...I've seen it before, and was an effective tactic. I had to act quickly or become a victim of the Izigi scissor.

"What's the speed of those other two fighters, Doctor?!"

"Wait!..." She said, dawdling.

"...C'mon?!" I jolted.

I fired my primary weapon. The guns moaned as brilliant iridescent bolts of plasma rapidly poured from the nose of plane. Incinerating the trailing Izigi fighter.

"36,400 meters per second!" She said.

After some quick calculations I concluded we had just enough time. The lead fighter banked hard, trying to slip beneath me. Another tactic I was familiar with. I massaged the controls to orientate the ship's nose at him. I activated the stabilizer, and fired the port thrusters. This gave me a perfect parabolic fix on his broad side. The serpent pilot's fatal mistake...Gun-lock! I fired a generous burst into his ship. Stripping away his shields, his plane exploded...

Changing course I fired the main engines, accelerating to 75%. Behind us, the Izigi press home their attack. The engines of the Annunaki were super-critical. A final wave of fighters launched a volley of innumerable high-yield torpedoes. They impacted...Critical mass. The engines detonated.

Our mother-ship, our chariot to the stars...had been destroyed. The blinding light enveloped the cabin yet faded quickly with our speed and direction.

Evie asked,

"Was that?..."

"Yes...I think it was." I shamefully replied.

"This cannot be happening." She cried.

"Pull it together, Doctor...I'll need your help!"

She said nothing in reply. The cabin remained silent for time. We closed-in on the two remaining enemy fighters, rapidly. Occasionally I could hear Evie weeping behind me. To her credit she fought back

the tears...We were now orphans. We both watched as our destination planet grew bigger in the ship's transparency. We could now make out the first shuttle, trailed by the twin Izigi raiders...They were closing fast.

"Two minutes until they intercept the shuttles..." She said.

"...Got it!" I replied.

The Izigi planes separated and began targeting both vehicles. The atmospheric entry was only minutes away. I negotiated a target-lock with my scope. I closed on the aft section of the trailing ship. He opened fired on the hapless shuttle just as I drew a bead on his engines. The shuttle pitched hard to starboard and fired his counter-measures. The last of my ship-mates are in serious jeopardy, I zealously loosed a full-spread of torpedoes. Satisfied with their track, I banked the plane to port and continued after the last ship. My torpedoes detonated, destroying the Izigi fighter. A small laugh escaped my lips as I watched it disappear from my scanner. The first shuttle was safe and began to enter the planet's upper-atmosphere. As we closed on the 'last' reptilian foe, it began to fire on the second shuttle. I launched my last two torpedoes...Dammit I wasn't fast enough. The Izigi's weapons tore through the shuttle before my torpedoes made impact. I broke-off...Not knowing whether or not the enemy was destroyed, or the status of the second shuttle. We had to begin the entry cycle. The heat-shield activated and slid over the canopy, blinding us to the outside world.

"...Now what's happening?" Evie cried out.

"Relax Doctor it's just the heat-shield." I said.

Passing into the atmosphere was supposed to be a seemly normal operation of my ship until a torpedo, loosed by the Izigi at the last second rocked our ship.

...BOOM!...

We both cried out. Multiple alarms go off in the cabin! The ship started venting gases into space. Both the shuttle and the Izigi fighter disappeared from my scope.

"We're venting life support!" She exclaimed.

"At what rate?!..." I asked.

"Five-hundred per, and falling fast!" She relayed.

The ship begins to reverberate and shake. Light from our plasma-wake starts seeping-in passed the seals. I was busy controlling our decent and calculating the rate of loss in our life-support system...

"We're going to make it! Entry takes two minutes!...We have three minutes of air left!" I said.

"No we won't! The rate has changed!....It's exponential!" She said.

"Damn!...The plasma-stream must be burning it out of the tanks!"

We were only one minute into re-entry. The Ship was reverberating violently now. The experience of it was becoming jarring to the senses. My plane began to creek-and-moan. I was having serious doubts now. I gave our chances of survival, fifty percent. The planes structure was beginning to buckle under the strain. It certainly made speaking to each other a challenge...

"Doctor, can you hear me?!..." I said.

"Yes!..." She said.

"When the ship lands and comes to a complete stop, I want you to run away from it as fast as you can!...Understood?!"

The quaking of the ship reached a crescendo. The sound almost deafening.

"Yes!...I understand!" She said.

The turbulent quaking of the ship had tapered-off until it abruptly stopped. Even the light had faded from the small seams of the transparency. I retracted the heat-shield. It was night...and peaceful...and we were falling uncontrolled 9.8 meters per second, per second. A single alarm was sounding in the cabin. No power to the engines...I tried a low-compression restart, but the ship's reactor injectors were off-line.

"Where are we?..." Evie asked calmly.

She was oblivious to our danger. As I wrestled to gain control of our craft, I said...

"We're on the shadow-side of the planet, doctor!..."

"I wish you'd stop calling me doctor, major!" She said.

"Okay Evie...Can you do a scan and tell me just what's below us, so I know where to land this thing once I get this..."

...BOOM!...

The ship is rocked hard by an explosion.

"...What was that?!" She exclaimed.

"It's the enemy fighter! Give me his range and bearing?" I expelled.

"He's right behind us. Five thousand meters and closing..."

He tried hitting us with his guns but we we're so far out of control he couldn't get a fix on us. We watched the bolts of plasma streak away benignly. I jammed my index finger hard into the ignition switch, jogging it into an engine start-up.

"C'mon, c'mon!...Start already!" I plead.

"Life support is failing!" Evie said.

Our ship was spiraling out of control now, with a bandit on our tail and now we're going to suffocate and crash. I just need to...

"Dammit start!..."

The Izigi continued to close-in on our position, firing another burst. The bolts nearly strike the canopy. Just as it seemed all hope was gone...Miracles really do happen. The main engine kicks over and starts.

I had to hold the controls to one side and release them occasionally to tease the ship out of the fall. Then finally we found ourselves back in controlled flight.

"Life support has failed!" Evie said.

"I know!" I replied.

I could feel my lungs starting to pinch. I had a few shallow breaths left in my helmet. I had to get to a lower altitude where we could baffle the usable air of the troposphere into the ship. But first I had to dispatch this last reptilian bastard to the nether region...The Izigi pilot continued to close within one kilometer. I saw the high altitude cloud layer below us in my scope, and formulated a plan of attack. I nosed the plane over in to a dive. Evie and I started

coughing. We began the slow process of asphyxiation as we choke on our own waste gasses.

"We're...'cough'...passing through the cloud layer!" Evie said.

"...'cough'...Stand-by, doctor!" I said.

As soon as we entered the clouds I banked the ship wide to starboard putting us into a slow descending orbit. The Izigi followed us into the clouds...his course hadn't changed. As I circled back around I found myself squarely on his six o'clock. Gunlock!...I fired my guns steadily into his engines. He ejected from his escape pod as his ship breaks-up into fiery pieces. I banked hard to port as his fighter explodes. It was a hollow victory...We we're alone.

We continued to dive down, we're just minutes from passing out. Evie remembered to scan the area below. We both interpreted our instruments. I've really got to hand it to her, she's been a real trooper throughout this whole mission...She can fly with me any day.

"We're...'cough'...directly over a...'cough'...rain-forest of some kind."

"...I see it!" I said.

I could also see the Izigi pilot's capsule on fire, deploying a golden metallic parachute shone by the light of this planet's single crescent moon. I watched him fall...He fell into another cloud layer and disappeared into the abyssal night.

I was starting to see stars in my peripheries. My vision was fading. I couldn't get the baffles to work. There was no way of funneling breathable air into the compartment. I adjusted the glide slope of our spacecraft for a good landing approach near a desert on the edge of the jungle below. I was just seconds from passing out. I think I managed to engage the automatic-pilot before I collapsed...Unaware now of anything that was happening. Both of our unconscious bodies limp in our seats.

We crashed hard...The fuselage of the ship broke open. The canopy tore away and we were ejected separately from the wreckage, thrown only a few meters away we both had been

completely soaked by the fuel. It saturated everything...It disintegrated everything...The polymers of our spacesuits liquefied and melted away. The runaway chemical reactions reduced everything down into carbon and ash...We had hairless pink naked bodies, baptized now by the rain and the night. The mud crept-in and swallowed our bodies, sweeping us away from the crash-site...

It was dawn, and the light of the Solarian star warmed our bodies and stirred us into consciousness. Alone, I had no earthly idea of where I was or how I got there. I stood-up and felt the gentle sensation of the earth beneath my feet. I looked about and found myself in a lush garden. Plants of green and animals sang melodically with the coming of the new day. The figure of a woman appeared along the wood-line and approached me...We smiled at one another. Spontaneously, I introduced myself....

"Madam, I'm Atom!"

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