

A SWEET OBSESSION
Dan Barrett

The gravitational anomaly above the power station sliced a turquoise swath through the sunset's orange and red. Talurac fantasized that he might absorb as if by osmosis the energy crackling through the air. How nice that would be! To use the ship's power to fight this thing threatening to consume him.

Lieutenant Shartula Talurac, Linguistics Officer in the Arrissia Uniformed League, permanently assigned to the EES - the Earth Expeditionary Service - was a veteran of twenty-four journeys to the watery planet. Fluent in thirty-eight human languages, he had a passing knowledge of over a hundred more. For twenty-nine lars, roughly twenty-two Earth years, human tongues had been more than his occupation - they had been his passion. He could even recite poetry in Latin with accurate pronunciation. To him, it was not a "dead language," as humans nowadays called it. He knew its sounds and nuances from recordings made by the earliest EES missions over two thousand lars in the past.

Many among the Arrissium considered the study of humans a waste of time, energy, and resources. What was there to gain by chronicling a race that was, well, dim by Arrissium standards, not to mention self-destructive?

Talurac, though, was captivated by humans. The paradox of their individuality fascinated him. How could a species be at once so capable and full of potential, yet so hampered by pettiness and atrocious judgment?

He had begun his study of human languages in school, long before he ever made his first voyage to Earth, and had excelled academically. Talurac believed that his knowledge of their language gave him unique insight into humans – their hopes, dreams, and fears. When the opportunity arose to volunteer for EES missions, he was eager to go. *Now*, he thought with horror, *I would do violence to anyone who tried to prevent my return to Earth.*

Merely thinking about his infirmity made his hands tremble. He tried to put the tips of his fingers together and almost couldn't make the last of his seven digit-joints articulate in the same direction. The headache would come next, then shortness of breath, and then, if not assuaged, near incapacity.

The gravitational anomaly shimmered like a huge liquid jewel as the engines began their final charge sequence, pushing all possible power into the quantum shift storage packs, readying the ship for the journey to Earth. Typically, he relished this part of the process - focusing on the pulsing anomaly, storing the sensation in his physical and psychological memories. Calling it up and meditating on it during the voyage across the galaxy was invigorating.

His craving, though, gnawed at him, preventing him from concentrating.

What have you become? Shame rising from his gut made the tips of his skin-scales go pale.

“Sir?” The voice behind him spoke in English

The sound startled him, but he didn’t move. Only a slight widening of his eyes betrayed his surprise.

“Yes,” he answered, not turning. “What is it?”

“Pardon, Sir. We are nearly at full charge. Departure in two cranks. Has asked the Commander for you. Are you well?”

No, I am not well. Not at all.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m well. And the phrase should be spoken, ‘The Commander has asked for you.’ In English, the subjects usually go first.”

He turned to look at the speaker. She was young – probably thirty lars, which would make her about 23 Earth years. She had been a mewling infant when he first went to Earth. She was the one blanching now; even in the twilight, he could see the color drain from her skin-scales.

“My most profound apologies, Lieutenant Shartula. Just troublesome...Having I...It is,” she stammered, looking at the ground.

He glanced at her nameplate. Mate Tenlo Lanula.

“Mate Tenlo,” he said. “English is a challenging language. Even most humans who are born to it speak it poorly. But it is the primary

language in the region we will visit. Don't despair: by the time we arrive, I promise you'll chatter better than a native."

She looked up at him and replied in an Arrissial dialect he recognized as being from the outer ring of the Daluvial Province. She was aristocratic and educated. "Blessings upon your ancestors for your compassion, Lord. May I be fortunate enough to repay your kindness."

"Your humility is a testament to your breeding," he said in the same dialect, then switched back to English. "Now, remember: as they say on Earth, 'Practice makes perfect.' Keep trying."

Mate Tenlo made a small bowl, turned, and left. He watched her descend the stairs with the sure light grace of youth and felt his age as a weight on the back of his neck.

Talurac glanced once more at the pulsating glow behind him, then walked down the stairs toward the power station. Rather than follow Mate Tenlo through the main doors, however, he turned into a supply entrance.

Once inside, he approached a portal marked with Universal Characters: "Linguistics Laboratory." A dull throbbing pulsed in the back of his head. His hands still shaking, he slid an encrypted access card into the slot to the left of the doorway.

He moved quickly across the lab, past several rows of digitally encoded storage banks – recordings of Julius Caesar speaking to the senate; Hamlet's soliloquy delivered by Shakespeare, himself; Lincoln

intoning the Gettysburg address; countless other actual specimens of human language, demonstrations of its power, its beauty, its tendency to confound, and its capacity for both precision and ambiguity. These were the core of Shartula Talurac's study when not on Earth – he had spent years listening to them, living with them, absorbing them.

Now, however, he didn't even glance at them. Moving past the banks, he used a second encrypted pass to enter another doorway into a small cubicle. He closed and secured the door and turned to an identifier on a compartment in the wall. He spread his trembling fingers like a clumsy child until the two on the outside made a horizontal line while the two middle ones made a vertical diamond shape. Pressing them against the reader, he spoke his name. His voiceprint flashed on the screen, its undulating lines fitting perfectly into the spaces between his fingers. The compartment slid open without a sound.

Inside sat a black cylinder some fifteen centimeters tall and ten centimeters in diameter with a thermal control module affixed to its side. Beside this rested a shallow glass bowl; a pair of metal tongs and a hypodermic syringe lay to the right of the dish.

He looked at the timepiece at his waist. *One and three-quarter cranks until departure.* With luck, he had a quarter-crank to spare.

Talurac reached into the niche and, holding the cylinder between the middle fingers of his left hand, turned the dial on the thermal control to the midline. After a moment, he slid the top of the container to the

side. Equalizing pressure made a sucking sound and a cloud of condensation rose from the black column. He picked up the tongs, reached inside the cylinder, and extracted a pale cube, three centimeters on each side. He placed the cube into the bowl, his quivering hands making the tongs clatter against the glass.

After closing the top of the black tube, he detached the thermal converter and set it next to the dish. He turned the dial toward the top. The air began to shimmer with the heat waves filling the nook. The object in the bowl melted into a puddle that covered the bottom. He reattached the module to the cylinder turning, the indicator to the bottom, where it had been at the beginning of the process.

His breathing ragged and shallow, he had to steady his hands twice before he was able to draw the thick liquid into the syringe.

Turning the syringe toward his face, he repeated a line from an English poem he heard on one of the recordings - "Ask not for whom the bell tolls." He clamped his teeth over the nozzle and depressed the plunger. The fluid jetted into his mouth.

He managed to set the syringe back into the nook before slumping against the wall and to the floor, eyes rolling back in his head, spasms wracking his body.

After a moment, the spasms subsided. His breathing slowed; his body became flaccid. Before sliding into familiar oblivion, he thought of the humans, who had made such a beautiful terror.

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The idea that the telephone was a perfect opportunity for Talurac to speak with earthlings had surfaced ten lars earlier while on an EES mission to the geopolitical sector known as NAUSA-Colorado. Monitoring telephone communications had long been a Linguistic Division tool. One day while listening to a type of interaction known as a “survey,” he turned to a junior Service Officer who was searching through the recordings bank and said, “Would that *I* could ask humans some questions.”

“Since they can’t see you on that device, I don’t know why you couldn’t. I detect no accent to your English, Lieutenant Shartula.”

The young officer found what he was looking for and left the lab. Talurac stared after him, not moving, brain whirring.

Fashioning a device to mimic the tones used on Earth to facilitate telephonic transmission was a simple matter for Engineering. Talurac cleared the plan with the Commander of the expedition, assuring her that at no time would any Earthling contacted be aware that he was not human. His exchanges would be for information gathering only. He would not attempt to stimulate a response or action of any kind, not even to test theories of the fascinating human temper response. Anger and its twin, hostility, were so rare on Arrissia that their prevalence on Earth was the subject of much debate and gruesome curiosity.

“Commander,” he swore, “You have my word as a scientist and a

senior officer of the AUL-EES that I will in no manner interfere with the routine activities of the indigenous population. I understand and believe in the Prohibition. My sole purpose in speaking with humans is to gather information.”

And so began his tumble into perdition.

During one of the “telephone surveys,” the Earthling began discussing the substance.

“I tell you, I think I’m addicted to the stuff,” the human said.

“How can that be?” he asked. “It’s simply food.”

“Man, what planet are you from?”

While he was familiar with the expression, hearing it directed toward him was startling, and he snapped off the connection.

His curiosity, though, was peaked. He had tried human food – at least the items certified by the Biological Protection Unit as non-lethal – and found most of it distasteful. The only exception was the milk of creatures called “cows,” which he consumed only once, not because it was foul, but because he didn’t see the point. The flavor was similar to Arrissium sustenance, but it was far thinner, less satisfying, and not as nutritious.

As for the rest, he couldn’t fathom why humans consumed any of it, particularly animal flesh. The very thought was revolting. The idea that one should derive nourishment from violence was ghastly. That it could be a source of pleasure was unimaginable.

He added questions concerning the substance to his surveys and discovered that human affection for it was almost universal. Some were more partial to it than others, but in three hundred dialogues – excluding those who avoided all foods sourced in any manner from animals – he encountered only four humans who professed aversion to it. Even those who avoided it due to allergic reactions seemed wistful that their physiological responses prevented them from experiencing the pleasure of it. Phenomenal!

He decided to try it for himself.

Earth clothing and latex masks and gloves were standard issue on EES missions, in case they were needed for reconnaissance. Talurac dressed in the garb of an average human of ten or eleven Earth years – blue jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and ordinary tennis shoes – or at least as ordinary as size fourteen shoes can be on a body only one-hundred-twenty centimeters tall – and made a midnight journey to a market on the outskirts of the town nearest the ship.

The portable quantum phase shifter that lifted his body down from the ship and allowed him to travel by “floating” a few centimeters above any surface was adaptable to various tasks. In one mode, it worked as neatly as a key to open the lock on the store’s back door. In another, it charged the atmospheric molecules surrounding the contact points of the alarm system so that they maintained an electronic connection when he opened the door enough for him to slip inside.

Talurac made his way to the freezer aisle and stared for a moment, mystified by the varieties of the substance presented there. Then, he made his choice.

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The sagittal ridge atop Mate Tenlo Lanula's head deepened its sapphire hue as she walked toward Quantum Shift Control. Intense concentration caused the color change, and an earlier encounter with Lieutenant Shartula had her brain spinning.

It was common knowledge that Arrissia Uniformed League Intelligence Officers, or "IOs," functioning in a capacity that humans would call "undercover," accompanied every EES mission. No one on the mission other than the Commander was aware of their identity. Their primary duty was to ensure compliance with the Prohibition: human development was to be unaffected – neither fostered nor hindered in any manner by EES personnel.

Even though Lanula was the youngest IO on this flight and it was her first visit to Earth, her exceptional performance during training had entitled her to Tentar status. This rank meant that, in security matters involving humans, none but the Commander and one other, elder Tentar on the flight had higher authority.

Lanula had made a study of Lieutenant Shartula during the flight. They had been *en route* to Earth for almost four hundred cranks, and he seemed agitated as the journey neared its conclusion. Her intuition, a

rare trait in the Arrissium and one that made her valuable as an investigator, told her that Shartula's essential harmony was compromised.

The grammatical error she made in conversation with him just before their departure had mortified her. His linguistic ability was legendary in the EES, and she had made such a stupid, elementary mistake the very first time she spoke to him!

He had been kind about it, though. Perhaps the rumors about him might have some truth to them. Some said that he spent so much time studying Earthlings that he had begun to adopt some of their characteristics. He had "lost his detachment" and had "become emotional." As a general proposition, the Arrissia Scientific Corps, the AUL, and particularly the EES scorned such things.

The Lieutenant intrigued Lanula, though. She intuited that something important lay behind his eccentricity and something human was the key.

An academic expert in Human Sociological Foundations, she knew that Earth dwellers could just as quickly, and just as likely, be brutal as tender. Listening to Shartula Talurac speak in English classes about the drama, poetry, and romance of human language, Lanula came near to believing, as the Lieutenant did, that there was something inherently valuable in the creatures. Sometimes, she found herself considering the Earthlings' struggles as noble rather than pathetic.

Of course, she could never say such a thing. Among her contemporaries, the accepted view was that humans posed an opportunity for scientific investigation. Full stop. Beyond that, they were to be derided or pitied, depending upon one's inclination. The fact that neither she nor any of her peers had ever actually seen a human was of little consequence to the discussion.

Lanula never missed a session with Lieutenant Shartula, at first because she felt it an appropriate response to his kindness at the time of her gaff, and later because she sensed an erratic preoccupation in his behavior. He offered two classes in each thirty-crank segment. The crew was required to attend a minimum of two lessons per ninety-crank cluster. So far, she had been present at twenty-six classes – seventeen more than mandated by the Service.

During the lecture about four cranks earlier, Shartula had not been well. She noticed that his fingers were trembling, his skin-scales were paler than usual, and his eyes had a pinkish tinge to them. His appearance sparked a recollection of their encounter just before departure. Her *faux pas* (an “adopted” English expression but actually a French phrase, so she had learned during the first session) made her forget that she had been concerned for his health then, too.

Then, not half a crank ago, she saw him coming out of the linguistics laboratory. When she spoke to him, he acknowledged her but looked as if he might fall over. He was no longer trembling, but he was

still pallid. His eyes were dull and yellow, the pinkness gone. When she asked if he were well, he replied that he was fine. Weary, but fine.

“I’ve been listening to recordings, trying to master the dialect called ‘Cajun’ from the area we will be visiting. It’s quite intricate, Mate Tenlo.”

Of course, he was lying. But why?

He went on to compliment her syntax and say that he was on his way to his quarters to rest. He trusted he would see her at the next class?

Indeed, he would. They parted. The change in his appearance and manner had been so striking. What did it mean? Her sagittal crest throbbed.

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Talurac felt as if mold might be growing under the edges of his skin-scales. The ship sat in a swamp some thirty Earth miles north of the population center called “New Orleans” in the sector designated NAUSA-Louisiana. Although he found the language captivating, he hated this region of Earth. The climate was dreadful, and the vegetation was suffocating. Even the wildlife was repulsive.

The serpents were a good example. In the western portion of the NAUSA geopolitical territory, they were beautiful, elegant life forms whose skin and nictitating membranes made one feel an almost avuncular affection. Their southern cousins, however, appeared slimy and nasty. The same silent locomotion that appeared so graceful in the

sand seemed devious here in the bog.

In the sweltering heat, the substance had gone from being the focus of most idle thoughts to a consuming preoccupation. The intervals between gratifying his craving grew shorter. Now, less than a hundred cranks passed before his fingers began their telltale tremble.

The ship's location caused him problems not only because of the ambient environment but also with replenishing his hoard of the stuff. He had requested this assignment, reasoning that the more isolated locale would provide easier access to stockpiles of the material. More urban settings meant more humans awake and about at more varied hours. A fundamental principle on Earth appeared to be that the natives in rural areas retired earlier. What he had not counted on was the scarcity of outlets.

His was a discriminatory compulsion. The shops nearest the ship were tiny, fetid places with stock that gave him a reference for the English word "stale." He finally located a larger store, but a full crank's travel was required to reach it. He made a reconnaissance mission the evening before and believed that he had, indeed, found a grocer with pride enough to keep fresh inventory.

He requested permission from the Commander to be off of the ship for the better part of the night, ostensibly to set up recording equipment in the town where the precious cache lay waiting. As luck would have it, a political rally was to be held there the day after tomorrow, and he

wanted to capture the speeches and random conversations. He tripled the actual time he estimated the task would require, reckoning that he could not only replenish his supply but also indulge. Why wait for the quivering to start? The Commander accepted the ruse and granted his request.

He was checking the charges on the thermal converters attached to three small black canisters when the chime to his quarters announced a visitor. He switched on the viewscreen and, although the face appearing in it was attractive and friendly, Talurac was irritated, nonetheless.

Although she professed fascination for the study of English, Talurac suspected that Mate Tenlo was infatuated with him. Rather than merely paying attention in class, it seemed that she scrutinized him. And he was convinced that their constant “coincidental” meetings were contrived.

He stepped on the pad at the base of the portal, and the metal door slid down into the floor.

“Mate Tenlo,” he said. “How may I help you?”

“In truth, Lieutenant, I was hoping that I might help you.”

“And how might that be?”

“I noticed on the duty roster that you will be off ship for the night. The Commander told me of your plans to obtain auditory evidence from an important human gathering. When I mentioned my fascination with your work, she said that you might require assistance, despite your

protestations that you function best alone. She has issued me orders to accompany you.”

Mate Tenlo held out the order card for his inspection, and he snatched it from her fingers. He tried to focus on the card’s images, but they seemed to recede a great distance. Blackness crept in from the edges of his vision. He knew that his nictitating lenses had closed and were filling with blood. He turned and walked to a chair, fearing that if he didn’t sit, he might fall.

Lanula remained in the doorway, as protocol demanded. She could not enter his quarters without an invitation.

He sat at an oblique angle to her so that she could not see his eyes and stared at the card, breathing deeply until his vision cleared a little. The orders were clear enough to read even before his secondary lenses retracted.

“Well, then,” he said, still not facing her. “I suppose that it will be the two of us.”

He made his face blank, rose, and walked toward her, holding the card by its edges. She held out the fingers of her left hand; he dropped the card into them.

Before, he had seen Tenlo as a young, pretty, and slightly troublesome junior officer of the EES. Now, he saw only an obstruction, an impediment to the gratification of his needs. Panic and rage sparked in his chest.

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Lanula opened her eyes. She was cold, and her head throbbed. She could see part of the latex mask covering her face reflected in a jagged piece of glass. She felt nauseous. A gagging or choking sound came from behind her. And what was that thick, cloying odor?

She remembered –

They departed the ship at twenty-three hundred hours, Earth time, and made their way to the site of the rally in silence. Luckily, it was deserted, and no extraordinary measures had been necessary to prevent being detected by humans.

Lieutenant Shartula spoke only in response to her direct questions, and then only if the situation compelled a verbal response. “How to” questions prompted silent demonstration rather than verbal instruction. Finally, when she wondered aloud about a detail in the placement of an aural collection unit, his annoyance surfaced.

“Mate Tenlo,” he said. “I requested solitary assignment not simply because it is my preference; I am more efficient when performing these tasks alone.”

Rudeness was not as rare on Arrissia as anger. Still, offensiveness from one typically so well-mannered surprised her. It strengthened her resolve to get to the bottom of Shartula’s strange behavior.

Most of the next two cranks passed without either of them speaking. Lanula observed Talurac as he went about the business of

positioning the units, assisting only when it was apparent that an extra hand would be convenient.

He muttered occasional thanks in a common Arrissial dialect rather than English, which she found quite odd. It was the first time she had heard him speak Arrissium since before departure for Earth. She noticed that his fingers were quivering, and the hue of his sagittal crest had deepened.

After hiding the last unit behind a multi-colored banner on the platform she understood would serve as the area from which the speeches would be made, he turned to her.

“Now, Mate,” he said, still speaking Arrissium. “Your orders are to assist me. You must believe that the most assistance you may provide at this juncture is to remain here for the next two cranks. I require solitude. As I am your superior in rank, you may consider it an order within your orders.”

Without waiting for comment, he turned and, using his portable quantum phase shifter, floated away behind the platform and out of view. Duty and her oath as a member of the Uniformed League forbade her from disobeying a direct order. Shartula knew that. What Shartula did not know, however, and had no way of knowing was that in this instance, she effectively outranked him. Since she was Tentar and this was a situation involving human affairs, he had no authority to issue an order to her.

Using her own phase shifter, she followed him, traveling silently and staying close without attracting his attention. She observed that his entire body seemed to be quivering as his fingers had been, and he was unable to maintain a level height above the surface of the thoroughfare. He rounded a corner and she fell back, hiding behind a building in case he had become suspicious, after all.

She peeked around the structure in time to see him enter the rear of an establishment that she believed was called a “supermarket.” Doing this was a dire breach of protocol; they had no orders permitting this activity.

As she approached the door through which he had passed, she noticed that he apparently had used his phase shifter to disable the alarm mechanism connected to the opening. Another serious breach. She followed him inside.

A butcher’s counter stood to her left, not far from the entryway. The stench of blood and ripe flesh gagged her. Suppressing her disgust, she closed her olfactory orifices and began to search for the Lieutenant.

She had never seen such a place. She glided past row after row of shelving units stuffed with all manner of items, none of which were familiar to her. Some appeared hard, some soft, some wildly colorful, and some plain. The entire scene baffled her.

Finally, she came upon a row of low open containers that must have been connected to thermal converters; the temperature in the

immediate area was at least twenty degrees colder than elsewhere in the building. On either side of these were taller glass-clad cabinets. She touched the front of one and found that it, also, was cooler than the ambient air.

She spotted Lieutenant Shartula at the far end of the row in which she was hovering. He knelt, facing away from her, surrounded by containers of various colors and shapes that he must have removed from the cold troughs. His latex mask lay on the floor beside him.

Enough is enough, to use a human expression, she thought. She had no choice but to terminate these activities, place the Lieutenant in restriction, and return him to the ship to answer to the Commander.

She switched off her phase shifter and walked up behind him. He made no sign that he heard her approach. Withdrawing her Tentar identification for display, she addressed him.

“Lieutenant,” she began. “I must ask you . . .”

Shartula spun around at the sound of her voice.

She remembered noticing that the skin-scales of his face had paled nearly to white and the nictitating membranes covering his eyes were hazy with blood.

She also remembered his roar as he leaped toward her. His body collided with hers, propelling her backward into one of the tall cabinets, her head shattering the pane.

She recalled hearing shards of glass tinkling on the floor as she

fell, as if in slow motion, before blackness sucked away her sight.

Now, she lifted her head and pain shot down her neck from the back of her head. The cloying smell seemed stronger as she turned toward the gagging, which was growing fainter.

Shartula was lying on his back amid the strange containers. The choking, which came from him, changed to a gurgle and then ceased. Spasms jerked his body once, twice. Then he was still.

She fought the pain and dizziness, rose to her feet, and went to him. His open, unseeing eyes were their normal yellow. His mouth gaped, a pale, semi-solid, melting substance filling it and oozing down the sides of his face, collecting in pockets between the scales and overflowing onto the floor. The sweet stench came from this material.

She knelt, removed her latex mask, and knew even as she placed an ear to his abdomen that she would hear no life within him.

She looked at the container from which the material in his mouth had come. It was round, mostly blue, and bore the words “Homemade Vanilla Ice Cream.”

She reached a finger inside, scooped out some of the stuff, and touched it to her tongue.

=The End=