

Pantherized

by Mike Rozak
Copyright July 2011

The draft letter

My mother and I lived in a long two-story, flat-roofed apartment-building. It was set back about thirty-meters from a major six-lane road, separated from the road by a sidewalk, mailbox-walls, and short scrub-grass. Trucks, large and small, for transport and mining, travelled up-and-down the road all day. The traffic died to a trickle at night, since just beyond our city was wilderness. Herds of nocturnal buffalos crossing



nighttime roads don't mix-well with large trucks.

I had just returned-home from school. Since my mother wouldn't be home for a few hours, it was my job to get the mail from the mailbox. I did so nearly every-day.

Our mailbox contained two letters, which I pulled-out. As I walked with them into the shade of our apartment doorway, I checked-out the letters' recipients, just in-case my aunt had sent me some money as a gift.

I noticed that one letter was addressed to me. It wasn't from my aunt though.

I opened our apartment door, and rushed in... keeping both the burning sunlight and the heat outside.

The apartment was small. It had an all-in-one kitchenette and living-room. We didn't have a table. Behind the small kitchen was a bedroom that doubled as a bathroom, and included a small clothes-washer and dryer. Most people would call it a studio apartment.

The living-room had a couch, an armchair, a coffee-table, and a Simian-made three-paneled television. The far end of the living-room was a wall of triple sliding-glass doors, leading to an alleyway that ran behind all of the apartments. We always kept the glass-doors covered by their venetian blinds – to keep-out the bright sunlight. We never opened the doors, because we never cared to use the back-patio.

At night, I slept on the couch in the living-room. My mother slept in the bathroom/laundry, on a mattress.

We didn't spend much time at home.

My mother spent her day working in her office, or out with her friends. Home was for sleeping, only.

I spent only slightly-more time in our apartment.

As soon as I arrived-home from school, I would typically change into shopping-mall clothes, pack-up my homework, and head to the shopping-mall. I would return home around dusk. My mother-and-I would eat a quick meal, NOT cooked at home. And then we'd both go to sleep.

Having just walked through the front doors, it was now time to leave, and get a taxi-ride to the shopping-mall.

So that my mother would see her letter, I set the letter addressed to "*Resident*" down on the kitchen-counter island.

I opened the letter addressed to me. It looked like a semi-weekly stipend-check that I now received, because I had turned sixteen years-old. The money was a token amount, mostly intended as a practical education. I had to deposit the money into a bank account, budget from the account, and withdraw cash.

I used my fingernail to open the envelope.

The letter wasn't a stipend.

My jaw tensed.

I hadn't EVER wanted to receive the letter that I had just pulled-out of the envelope.

Our military's logo is a spread-wing eagle. Technically, it's not an eagle, since its ancestors weren't birds. They were pterodactyls. Bird-eagles and pterodactyl-eagles look similar at a distance, both being a feathered flying-predator shape. Bird-eagles are relatively "*soft*" and "*curved*" in appearance. Pterodactyl-eagles have very-straight and very-long wings, almost like bomber-aircraft. Pterodactyl-eagles have much-more streamlined-and-angled heads and beaks. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pterosaur>)

I knew what the letter meant... most likely.

The text beneath the letterhead was computer-printed in a nasty-looking font.

I recognized my name, my identification-number, a few words that meant “draft”, and a date, which translated to:

“Report to your local draft-office branch within two weeks”

I re-read the letter, what little text there was in it.

I had been drafted.

What the fu__?

Why had I been drafted?

I hadn't done anything illegal.

I was doing well in school... And I still had two years left of high-school before I graduated.

They weren't supposed to draft me.

I reread the spartan letter. The draft-notice certainly wasn't a mistake. It wasn't intended for someone else, either. My full-name and identity-number were on the letter.

Exasperated sigh.

What should I do?

What could I do?

I would discuss the letter with my mother, later-on, when she returned-home from work.

There was no point brooding on the letter, though. I might as well head-off to the shopping-mall, as usual, so I could work on my homework with my friends.

But I had been drafted, and in two weeks, my grades wouldn't matter, would they?

“Fuck homework,” I thought angrily. My tail began twitching.

I put the letter back in its envelope, and left it on the mini-kitchen-counter for my mother to see.

I left my book-bag at home.

I forgot to change out of my school uniform.

I nearly forgot to lock the apartment door, as I left.

The shopping centre

In front my apartment-complex was a covered taxi-box, with a teal button, a built-in speaker, and a microphone.

I pressed the button, and spoke, *“The shopping centre”*.

I was allowed three free taxi-rides a day. Since one of my friends’ parents gave her and me a ride home from school, I still had three free rides for the day. It would only take one ride to get to the shopping mall, about seven-kilometers away, and another free-ride to return-home at sunset.

Having spoken, *“The shopping centre,”* I de-pressed the button, and waited. I didn’t need to say anything else.

“Ten minutes,” the operator responded. She knew exactly where I was, and what shopping-mall I always visited.

I waited by the taxi-box, fuming about the draft-letter.

Eventually, a dark-blue-purple taxi pulled-up in front of me. The taxi-cab already had a few *“shopping-mall”* teenagers heading-out. Nearly all teenagers got a ride to the mall after getting out-of school.

Theoretically, I had to show my yellow-plastic taxi-ride ring to the driver. It was a two-centimeter diameter by one-centimeter-wide ring connected to my keychain. The plastic-ring had an RFID tag in it, letting the town’s computer keep track of where I went.

On my eighteenth's birthday, I would exchange the yellow ring for a non-restrictive purple-one. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio-frequency_identification)

Since I was only heading to the mall, the taxi-driver didn't bother asking for my yellow-ring.

I hopped into the front-seat of the taxi.

The mall was ten minutes away.

I didn't talk to anyone in the taxi-van, since I didn't know them.

Instead, I stared-out the window...

Along both sides of the six-lane road were apartment complexes, fast-food takeaways, and utility stores (grocery, hardware, metal shops, and industrial store-fronts).

Ten-minutes' drive past the mall was "*wild country*", where the scrub-buffalo (NOT bison) roamed. And then beyond that was a much-nicer suburb (technically a town) where one of my friends lived with her mother and sister. Her mother had dropped-me off at home.

Way-way past that, was a scenic canyon with green foliage, popular for holidays. I had never been there. Another eight hours drive, and the road entered Simian towns, then cities, and then the coast. I had never been their either.

In the other direction was a large military-and-commercial airport. I had never been there. The side of the planet where I lived was permanently sunny, and had "*good bedrock*" for landing large cargo-ships. Imagine Nevada's soil, vegetation, and heat, but flat. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nevada>)

As soon as we were dropped-off in front of the mall, I scattered from the group to find my friends. The other five split-off into two groups.

We all had “beepers” attached to our key-chains. They were small white plastic-discs, one-and-a-half centimeters in diameter by one-centimeter. A small loop was attached to the disc’s circular edge, through-which ran the keychain.

A button was inset into one of the beeper-disc’s sides. I pressed it. The beeper began to “ting”, once every few seconds. I could hold-up my beeper, and rotate-around to get a fix on my friends’ locations. The “tings” would get louder if I pointed my beeper in the right direction.

My friends and I were on beeper number “118972”. The code-number we used was an in-joke: “8972” was the name of a “rock-band” we all collectively liked... as a group of Golden-Panther friends. You’d call it jazz with cowbell-percussion. “11” was our own unique version number, since lots of teenage-girls liked the band, “8972”. “72” looked like cat-whiskers under eyes, the “7” being a slim “X”, and the “2” looking like a backwards, mostly-closed “3”. “8” and “9” looked virtually the same as your numbers, except that the bottom of the “9” was very straight. “89” had sexual connotations, another attraction for teenage-girls.

“Ting, ting, ting, ting,” could be heard from my beeper.

It was kind-of-fun tracking-down my friends in the shopping-mall whenever I visited.

A larger-mall would have proven more-challenging, and fun... The mall I frequented was only two-hundred stores, lining a few perpendicular corridors. There was a larger mall in the next town, fifteen-kilometers from my home. It was much-more of a maze, but it was too-far away, and cost me-and-my-friends money to get there.

My beeper emitted a stronger “ting” as I turned right. I followed the ting. I knew where it led.

The shopping-mall stores were ordered by genre.

I first passed the shoe-stores, twenty of them, on both my left and right. I didn't wear shoes. Only adults wore shoes, mostly high-heeled and purple. I did have some half-shoes, which we called "*Foot-pads*". They were half-length, and slipped-over over my toes only. They had no heel-support. And they were plasti-rubber, the equivalent of thongs. All they did was keep my feet from getting wet if it rained. Unlike full shoes, they handily fit-inside my purse, so that I wouldn't have to wear them all day.

Past the shoe-stores were thirty clothing-stores, also on both sides. I browsed through them once-in-awhile, but I didn't care much for fashion, either. Fashion was an adult thing. My school-clothes, a white top and skirt, satisfied me. Janet, my friend who had dropped me off at my apartment, had an older-sister who just "*turned fashionable*".

After shoes and fashion-clothing came the gardening-tool stores. Don't ask me why they were positioned near the clothing-stores. I have no clue.

My beeper had quieted down, and turned itself off. I pressed my beeper-button again, to refresh the signal.

Now closer to my friends, its "*tings*" were louder and sharper-sounding.

By this time, I knew where my friends were.

Beyond the gardening-and-hardware stores was a large food-court. Beyond that were electronics-stores, and then the mall's parking-lot.

My friends sat at one of the long white-plastic picnic-tables in the centre of the food-court. I saw them near the far end, to the right, next to the curly-fries fast-food counter.

I waved at them as I approached.

"Squeaker" waved-back at me.

Everyone had their backpacks with them. Their books and notebooks were on the table in an after-school study-hall session. Several other friend-groups from high-school had claimed their own tables.

Shit! I had forgotten my book-bag.

I wouldn't be able to do my homework.

Should I get a ride back home to get my homework books?

No.

Wait...

On second thought, I hadn't forgotten my books. I had decided to ditch homework today.

I recalled the draft letter.

Squeaker kept her attention-gaze on me.

When I got within talking range, I casually nodded at Squeaker, and said, *"Hello-all"*.

"Hi Wendy," answered Squeaker. We called her that because she was the smallest of the group, and was the one-in-ten people that found it difficult to speak without squeaking.

"No homework?" asked Sarah, as she saw me without a book-bag.

I hadn't bothered changing either, I recalled. I was still wearing my white school-skirt and top.

I sat down.

And intentionally looked pissed-off.

I noticed Janet, and half-waved to her.

When everyone was paying attention to me, I answered Sarah.

"I just got drafted."

Shock on everyone's face.

A look of fear on some.

“Fuck.” Everyone had heard about the draft on television. Some kids had already *“gone missing”*.

“Does your mother know?” asked Sarah, with a concerned *“O”*-mouth.

“She hasn’t come home from work yet. I left the letter out for her to see, and high-tailed it over here.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Squeaker.

Someone-else interrupted, *“When do you leave?”*

“I have two weeks to report to the draft office. I don’t know when I get shipped-out though.”

That evening

Just after the mall closed at dusk, I got a tax-ride home. As usual for a closing-van, the taxicab was full. I sat near the window, Squeaker next to me. We were both tired and silent.

As I watched the streetlamps glide past, I realized that I had forgotten all-about the draft while at the shopping-mall.

Where was my book-bag?

Shit!

I had left... No, I hadn’t left my book-bag at the mall. It was still at home.

We dropped two-people off at the truck repair-garage. That was the halfway point.

What was my mother going to say about me being drafted?

The van-door closed, and the van accelerated from a stop.

What was the point of all that schoolwork, if it was-going to be wasted?

I'd most-likely end-up in infantry, posted on some god-forsaken planet.

The sun had set by the time the taxi-van stopped in front our apartment.

I got out of the van.

"Bye Squeaker."

"Bye".

The taxi-door closed, and the van drove-off.

I walked past the mail-boxes, and into my apartment.

My mother wasn't pleased to see me.

That statement ~~was an understatement~~... That statement wasn't quite correct.

She was pissed-off.

"How did you get yourself drafted?" she accused.

"What?" I sneer-snarled. *"I didn't get myself drafted."*

"Are your grades up?"

"Yes. Of course. You've seen the report cards." I hadn't faked them. Plenty of other kids did.

"Then why this... dishonor?"

"I don't know."

My mother collapsed onto the couch, her head down. Golden-Panthers cannot cry tears, but she was effectively crying.

With her verbal-attack outburst finished, my mother calmed down.

"Honestly, did you do anything?"

"No, mother. Honestly." I wasn't lying.

"Damn!" she said. *"Is there any way you can get out of the draft? Did someone explain the process at school?"*

I rummaged through my memory for information about the draft.

“No.” The draft had only been mentioned once at school, and only very lightly. We had heard more about it from television – mostly happy-propaganda newscasts.

My mother frowned, exasperated.

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know,” I nodded.

Then her eyes squinted in cleverness. “There might be a way out of the draft.” Pause. “Stop by the draft-office, and ask about that.”

“Okay. I will.”

I sat down beside my mother.

She was still dressed in her nurse’s outfit.

“Do you want some dinner?” she asked.

I had already eaten at the mall, but I answered, “Sure.”

“Come on.” My mother patted me on the leg. “Let’s cross the road.”

At night, the road was relatively safe to cross, especially with both of us wearing white.

We walked-ran across the six-lane road to the nearest fast-food restaurant. The restaurant’s look-and-feel was like a *Jack-in-the-Box* restaurant in the *United States*. The fast-food restaurant served either fish or buffalo, in wraps and burgers.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_in_the_Box)

We were the only customers in the fast-food restaurant. A lone teenage-boy worked behind the counter.

My mother ordered a full meal. I got a small fruit-box, and deep-fried bready-bits.

We sat down, and ate in the fluorescent unhappiness of a fast-food booth.

“Did you go to the mall?” My mother tried to return to a non-draft conversation.

“Yeah. We did homework... Well, I didn’t do any homework because I didn’t feel like it.” I momentarily worried that I had left my book-bag at the mall, but recalled that I had never taken it there. *“And then we played some video-games, and wandered through the maze, and got a bit to eat.”*

“So you’re not hungry?”

Head nod. *“A little bit. I already had my meat for the day.”*

My mother tried to be helpful.

“I wonder... If you head to the draft-office early, perhaps you’ll get a jump on the competition.”

Pause.

She continued, *“Perhaps you’ll be able to get out of it easier. Or have more-time to apply for an exemption.”*

I didn’t want to think about the draft. The morose fast-food night-lighting discouraged thought. *“Yeah, that might work,”* I said glumly.

All I could do was exhale loudly through my nostrils, a sign of being tired. The day had been a long and stressful one. I was tired. So was my mother.

The only way that the emotional-stigma/burden of military-service would be made lighter, would be if some of my friends were also drafted... which I didn’t wish on them. I would know within a few days if any of them had received a draft letter. We could visit the military-offices together, if that happened. I would feel much-better not going alone.

I finished my fruit, and only ate half of the bready-bits.

Early risers get the bird

Three days later, I arrived home after school, dropped-off by my friend and her mother.

I didn't even go inside. My mother wouldn't be home yet.

I didn't even bother with the mail.

I waited for my friend's automobile to drive off, and then walked over to the taxi call-box.

I pressed the teal taxi-call button.

Instead of instantaneously speaking, *"The shopping mall"*, I paused.

An irritated tinny-voice spoke, *"Where do you want to go? [I haven't got all day.]"*

"Er. Uh. The. Uh. Draft office."

"Oh," replied the saddened-operator. She was not faking her sadness.

"Which one? It's on the letter."

"Let me see." I fumbled the letter out of my schoolbag, and scanned through it. *"Number 892"*.

"Your cab will be there in a moment... Good luck." The woman hung-up without saying anything more.

I had hoped that the taxi would take the usual fifteen-minutes to arrive.

Five-minutes later, the taxi arrived.

I now had ten fewer-minutes of freedom in my life.

I was the only person on the ride, unfortunately. A full taxi-van would have further-delayed military service.

My heart pounded as I entered the cab.

I had never been to the draft office.

To me, new places always had a “*dangerous*” feel, simply because they were new. The draft-office was definitely dangerous. I’d have to be on my toes, ready to mentally-spring into action. Cleverness might help me escape from military-service.

The male taxi-driver asked, “*Where to?*”

They NEVER asked, “*Where to?*” All of that information was on their taxi’s computer-screen.

The cab-driver was making me verify my location.

“*The draft office.*”

As I sat-down into the front-seat, I pulled the letter out of my schoolbag, and showed it to him. It didn’t have an address, just a draft-office number.

“*Does your mother know?*”

“*Yes, I’m going early to try and get an exemption.*”

“*Good luck.*”

I wished my friends had been drafted so we could go together. None of them had. I even asked them if they had received letters.

The draft-office was only five-minutes’ drive away by automobile, two blocks if I had know where to walk to.

It wasn’t even an office.

It was a large stiff-tent erected in front of a very-large military transport-ship.

I had occasionally-seen the military transports land behind my apartment as I walked home from school. As far as I knew, they landed in the “*industrial*” section, way-behind the apartments. I

had never walked back there. My walking-route was limited to school, a friend's condo, and I once walked to the shopping-mall.

The mirrored hallway

Teenage girls were lined-up outside the tent. I didn't recognize any of them.

None of them held book-bags. Some of them held a bag of soft-luggage, already packed with their belongings. It must have been their second time to the site.

The queue moved quickly.

I was soon inside, standing in front of a folding table. Behind it was a blue-dressed military-woman. She was the grumpy non-talkative type.

Everyone in front of me had handed her their draft letter. She then pointed them left or right, without saying much.

When I reached her, I handed the woman my letter.

"Left," she said, and pointed to my left.

"Um, is there anywhere that I can apply for an exemption?"

The woman looked at me with a genuinely-sad look on her face.

"No dearie. I'm afraid not." And then she reiterated. "Just follow the tape-markings on the floor to your left. You'll be alright."

Crap. My mother would be upset when I told her that I couldn't get an exemption.

"Are you sure?"

An exasperated sigh. *“Yes. Don’t worry. You’ll be well looked-after.”*

That last statement didn’t *“click”* until later.

Oh well.

“Thank you,” I answered quietly.

I didn’t hold-up the line.

I proceeded to my left.

Within half an hour, I’d have a uniform and military ID. I would then have to get a taxi-ride home. I wondered if they had a taxi-button already erected outside of the stiff-tent. The thought of walking-back didn’t occur to me.

I followed the red-taped line left, and into a boarding-ramp hallway. The boarding-ramp led up-and-into the parked military-transport.

One teenage girl was in front of me.

A military-officer had stopped her at the bottom of the boarding-ramp.

The teenage-girl waited.

I waited behind her.

A minute later, the military-woman motioned for her to walk-up.

I walked forward, and was stopped by the woman. She watched the teenage-girl walk up the ramp. When the woman saw that the girl had gotten to the top of the enclosed ramp, I was motioned forward.

“Thank you,” I said very quietly, as I walked-past the military-woman.

I climbed-up the enclosed boarding ramp.

When I reached the top, I saw the same teenage-girl standing in front of a doorway, stopped by another military officer.

The officer's beeper chimed. She momentarily looked at it, and pressed an "*Acknowledged*" button.

The military-woman prompted the teenager to pass-through the ship's grey-metal pressure-door.

I was next.

The woman looked at me, and took my letter. She verified it for authenticity. And then she ran a scanner over my body to verify my identity. We all had identity-chips implanted in us.

The woman said nothing.

She handed my letter back to me, and waited without looking at me.

Two minutes later, her beeper-chime went off again, and I was silently ushered forward.

I walked through the pressure-doorway, and into a very-narrow hallway, with foam "*carpeting*". The hallway ended in another pressure-door, four-meters in front of me.

Walking to the end of the hallway, I entered a four-by-four-meter metal-room.

Another blue-clad officer halted me there.

The other teenager had disappeared from view. Perhaps she had been redirected elsewhere.

In front of me, at the opposite-end of the room, was a rectangular doorway that led to a narrow hallway. On the left wall of the waiting-room were two doorways, each leading to a hallway. The far left-doorway opened-into a hallway that made a ninety-degree-angle turn to the right. The nearer left-doorway opened-into a hallway with a ninety-degree-angle turn to the left.

The narrow hallway, in front of me, was "*mirrored*" on the left and right, with diffuse mirrors, somewhat like shiny stainless-steel.

I didn't like this. I had recently seen a mirrored-hallway scene in a crime-show drama.

I began to get very nervous.

A green-dressed officer-woman walked-out of the far-left doorway, closest to the mirrored hallway.

At her side was a leashed black-panther animal.

I looked down.

The cop-show had been on half a year ago, if that.

We had all seen it.

We had never been told how justice worked on our planet.

Criminals that were repeat-offenders were turned into black-panther animals. They had their souls detached from their two-legged Golden-Panther bodies, and put into the bodies of four-legged black-panthers. The cop-show had gone-on to show how a police-officer could have her soul placed into the criminal's vacant-body, where she could act as an undercover agent.

The mirrored hallway tore people's souls from their bodies.

I recalled the shaky-cam television-scene. A female drug-addict walked into the hallway. The camera was shaking nervously, and the underwear-clad woman's rapid-breathing was audible. Half way down the hallway, the video inverted for half a second, white inverted to black. The shaky-camera then swung left-and-right in a woozy motion, and the woman's body crumpled to the floor.

Was that about to happen to me?

I was very confused.

I hadn't committed any crimes.

Were they sending criminals into the military with us?

Or did the criminal black-panther merely act as a guard-dog?

I stared at the black-panther animal, ignoring the woman leading it.

The black-panther animal was collar-led out of the closer doorway, to my left.

"I didn't do anything," I began to say.

"We know that," answered the officer-woman sympathetically.

"This is part of your military duty."

I felt like I was about to break down.

"Just walk through the hallway," she said nicely.

I followed her instructions.

Before I entered the hallway, the woman said, *"Just leave your book-bag here."*

"Oh... Sure."

Was this really happening?

I wouldn't really be turned into a black-panther, would I?

That was all made-up for television...

I set my backpack down beside the doorway.

I trembled as I stepped into the mirrored hallway. I could see my blurred reflection on both sides.

This was going to hurt.

Walked past myself

I awoke.

I was lying on a large corduroy pet-cushion.

It was in the corner of a grey-painted steel room.

I didn't remember who I was, where I was, what I had been doing before I went to sleep, or even that I had gone to sleep.

Was I in the shopping mall?

A Golden-Leopard woman knelt-down beside me.

Was she my mother?

In her hand was a curled-up red-leash, which she clipped onto a collar that was around my neck.

"She's awake," the woman said.

The woman didn't look like my mother.

Her voice didn't match, either.

Nor did it sound right... Her voice sounded muffled, and half-an-octave too-low.

And what was I doing with a collar on?

I didn't even think to ask the woman why I was on a pet-bed.

Where was I?

If I had been shopping, I might now be in one of the shopping-mall back-rooms.

What was I doing in a shopping-mall back-room?

Maybe that's what they did to teenagers who fell-asleep in the shopping-mall after closing hours.

My collar tugged at my neck, as the woman pulled at the leash.

Huh?

I was still dazed.

What had happened?

It felt like I had been out drinking the night before, but without the hangover... and like I was still inebriated.

Did I get drunk at the shopping-mall?

Shit. That would get me into trouble.

The collar tugged again.

“Up,” the woman commanded, as if I were a pet.

I tried to stand up.

I didn't think to think why I obeyed her command without questioning. Only later would I deduce that I had a *“Friendly-pet™”* implant installed that would, *“Turn any pet friendly, guaranteed.”* I had seen one on-sale for \$299.00 at the mall, and jokingly threatened to use it on Squeaker.

My feet gave-way as I tried to stand up.

Why couldn't I stand-up properly?

Something was wrong.

Why were my hands completely black? Had I spilled ink all-over them?

Where could I have gotten black-ink from, at the shopping-mall?

I tried to stand-up again, but my limbs weren't working properly. My legs didn't lift-me properly.

“Wait,” I muttered in a hoarse voice, while I tried to understand why I couldn't stand-up.

I had only gotten plastered a few times before. I had never gotten plastered this badly though.

The mall-woman stepped-back for a moment, and watched-me struggle to get up.

“Let's help her up...” The woman looked towards the space between my legs. *“I think she's a her.”*

Was I naked also?!?

A man approached from the side, and picked-me up by my stomach.

I didn't like the feel of his hands.

With a bit of effort on his part, and some weird acrobatic-coordination on my part, I finally felt my feet put their weight on the ground.

And my hands were on the ground, also.

That was odd...

The collar tugged again.

What was a mall-woman – That's what we called the mall "*hall monitors*", who also undertook the role of weaponless security-guards... What was the mall-woman doing with a leash around my neck? A stern look would have been sufficient for me to obey her.

The collar tugged. "*Come on.*"

Now that I was on my hands and knees, I decided to act a bit-more dignified.

I tried stand-up on my two legs. Someone's hands put pressure on my back, to prevent me from standing-up.

"Just walk on your hands and knees," the hall-woman said impatiently.

That was an odd comment. Walk on my hands-and-knees out-into a crowded mall?

The collar tugged at me again.

"I'll follow," I thought.

I crawled on my hands and knees, led by the collar, and the woman.

I was uncoordinated on my hands-and-knees.

"Come on..." The woman paused while she looked-up my name on her clipboard. *"... Wendy... This way. You're holding up the group."*

I didn't want to hold up the group, so I made an extra effort to crawl out of the room.

Did all of my friends get drunk also? I couldn't imagine any of them joining in.

I was led crawling, towards a doorway. What was odd, was that I was on all fours, but I wasn't crawling on my hands and knees.

My hangover-crawl reminded me of how I used to walk as a toddler. When my legs weren't so long, I could walk on all fours. I used my hands as fore-feet, my butt propped-up high.

The woman led me out of the room. My eyes were below her skirt height. Her yellow-gold tail, somewhat spotted, slung-out the back-side of her grey-blue skirt. I hadn't noticed anyone's tail for awhile. Doing-so was rude.

Wait, I thought to myself.

Where was I?

I needed some answers.

I needed to think.

I sat down, stubbornly.

That was an odd sensation, I thought, as my butt touched the ground. Was I not wearing any underwear?

"Just a moment," I tried to say. I couldn't remember how to speak. Or, perhaps I couldn't remember that I could speak.

The woman looked-down at me, somewhat exasperated.

From behind, the man rushed up. His hands reached underneath my stomach, and pulled-me up, onto all fours, again.

The collar tugged at my neck again.

The man pushed-on my butt.

"This way," commanded the woman in a business-like tone.

"We'll explain later."

I followed her command without complaint.

While crawling behind the woman, I tried to puzzle-out what had happened...

I had been to the mall...

And I must have gotten drunk.

Hadn't I come to the same conclusion ten-minutes before?

I think that I did. But I didn't recall-clearly if I had concluded that.

The woman led me down a white-lit corridor.

My mother would be pissed-off at me. I had promised her never to get drunk again.

The woman directed me down another hallway, which jogged left... or perhaps it was right. I was feeling dyslexic.

I continued to follow. "*Crawling*" had gotten easier.

The corridor ended in a wall, with a doorway on the left side.

The white-coated woman led me out the doorway, and into a small room. In it stood a blue-clothed military-woman, and a teenage Golden-panther. They both looked down at me.

This was embarrassing.

Shit, my inebriation would be all-over school by the afternoon. Not-to mention everyone knowing that I had to crawl out of the shopping-mall on my hands and knees.

I hoped I wasn't actually naked.

The girl looked nonchalantly at me. She hardly noticed me.

I hoped that the girl-teenager wouldn't recognize me.

If I ignored her, and acted innocuously, she might not even notice me.

While the military-officer and the teenager-girl looked down at me, I stood VERY quietly.

"*Come,*" pet-commanded the woman who led me.

The woman led me to the right, out a second doorway.

I felt my tail rudely flick-and-arc high as I crawled-out of the room.

Shit! That was rude.

... I HOPED I wasn't naked when I did that!

Did I have underwear on? I hoped I did. I certainly didn't have my skirt on. All I needed were "*cat-butt*" stories of myself running-around school.

The new corridor travelled a few meters, and then made a right-angle turn.

My mind awoke further, stimulated by the "*adrenaline*" that surged through my body upon seeing the other teenager.

I really should try and stand-up. My hangover-induced leglessness should be wearing off.

"*Wait,*" I spoke, and then stopped. I had remembered how to speak.

I tried to stand-up.

It wasn't going to work. I couldn't get my balance.

"*I know,*" I thought. "*I'll use the wall.*"

I faced the wall, and climbed up it. My BLACK-FURRED! arms pushing against the wall, helped me balance.

I managed to stand all of the way up. My eyes were neck-level with the woman who led me.

My legs didn't work properly though. I could barely stand.

I was also out of breath from the effort.

"*Just a moment while I catch my breath.*" My voice didn't sound at-all right either. It was too-low and growling.

I cleared my throat.

The woman waited patiently.

I took another moment to steady myself.

I stared at my black-furred hands. Why were my fingers so short and stubby?

"I think I can walk now," I said.

With that, I turned and...

"No, wait!" exclaimed the woman.

I turned towards the woman, and my rear legs gave out.

My body collapsed to the ground.

My arms weren't fast-enough to catch me.

My jaw hit the ground with a thump.

"Too much to drink last night," I mumbled.

Crap, I was uncoordinated.

I tried to get up again.

"Just get-up on your hands and knees. You can crawl to your bed," said the woman kindly. *"It isn't far."*

I tasted some blood in my mouth, most-likely from a tooth-cut on my lip.

"Okay," I answered breathlessly, as I began crawling toddler-like again.

I thought about the woman's comment about my bed.

That didn't make any sense.

"Did you call a taxi for me?"

"No." The woman paused. She hadn't heard that one before, obviously. *"No, we have a temporary room for you to rest in."*

And then she added, *"Don't worry. You're not in any trouble."*

The woman led me down a few more corridors. I *"crawled"* behind her.

She then led me through another metal pressure-door.

What was I doing on a spaceship? The mall didn't have a new virtual-reality room, did it?

I was tugged-into the grey-painted spaceship-hallway. At the far-end were some steps leading-up to a second floor.

The mall's new virtual-reality room was awfully large.

I was led to the first door on my left.

Two bunks were in the room, both with cushions. One was lower and wider.

What if someone came into the dressing room while I was asleep?

Crawling on my hands and feet, my head was only as high as the lowest-bunk's mattress – which was kind-of a pet-bed.

"I'll help you up."

The woman pointed-me to the lower-bed.

Which was good, because the other-one was too-high for me to manage.

I *"crawled"* up and onto the bed... barely. I climbed-propped my arms and chest onto the bed.

I next got my upper-torso and stomach onto the bed.

I once-again looked at my hands. My fur was still a thick-black, instead of being a thin golden-fur.

Displacing the sheets, I scooted forward with my stumpy rear legs. I didn't think to wonder why my legs were so short.

I tried to lift my right rear-leg onto the bed. I couldn't lift it high-enough.

How about the other leg?

I tried my left leg and foot. That didn't work either.

The woman grabbed my rear legs, and helped me crawl the rest of the way onto my bed.

Once in bed, I turned my head towards the woman.

"I have to get home so my mother doesn't kill me," I said.

"Don't worry. You have time to rest."

Without saying anything else, the woman walked-out the door. As she was closing the door, she said, *“Press the red button to talk to someone, and be let out.”* She pointed to a mushroom-shaped red push-button near the door.

The door closed.

I heard it lock.

I thought that I was in a mall changing-room. I hoped no-one would accidently barge-in, and see me sleeping naked.

Maybe I should cover myself with the sheets I was lying on-top of?

I don't recall doing so.

I fell asleep.

Roommate

I bolted-awake when the door opened.

Where was I?

In walked an adult Golden-panther, wearing fancy shopping-clothes. As adults, we wear different clothes when going shopping, than at school, or at work. Shopping is an event, even-though little is purchased.

The woman deposited a duffel-bag on her sleeping-bench, opposite me.

“Hello,” she said... nervously.

She stooped-down to peer into my eyes, and to make sure I was alright.

I was still groggy, and mentally-impacted from my hangover.

... but I didn't have a hangover.

I knew that now.

I had NOT been-out drinking at the mall last night.

I HAD enlisted in the military!

Shit.

I sat up with the realization.

And then instantly flopped back down!

What the fuck? Why couldn't I sit-up properly?

A soft-spot in my bed must have given-way.

I took a look at my bed, to see if I had put my hands into some extra-squishy part, perhaps a hole in the spring supports.

The view from my eyes reminded me of a cartoon scene I had watched three months before, where a teenage Golden-Panther princess had woken-up as a Black-Leopard after being cursed.

My arms were awfully short and stumpy.

And they were black.

So were my legs.

And someone had removed all of my clothes. That hadn't happened to the girl in the cartoon. She had kept her shirt and skirt.

Why was I a Black-Leopard?

I looked-up at the military-woman, who I was bunking with.

"What happened?" I barely-managed to ask. My voice was throaty and difficult to understand.

My eyes must-obviously have shown worry.

My roommate's eyes reciprocated concern.

She didn't know how to answer the question, which was obvious to me, given her minute-long pause.

"Are you all-right?" she asked.

Am I all-right? That was a direct-question. I should answer it. At the time, I didn't think to think why I felt compelled to answer it though.

I looked-myself over once again.

I wasn't sure if I should answer the question with, "*I'm naked*" or "*I feel ill.*" Those-two options came to mind.

I paused at least fifteen seconds to make-sure I wanted to answer the question with one of those two options.

I didn't.

I tried to ask an intelligent question instead.

"Where's my body?"

Worry on my roommate's face.

"You were just transformed?"

Was my roommate worried that she would be transformed also?

"Yeah," I replied... automatically.

And then, an *"And you?"* slipped out of my mouth, unbidden. It was that damn *Friendly-Pet™* implant, but I didn't know it at the time.

"No," she nodded. *"I'm still me."*

What should I ask next? My mind was blank.

My roommate solved the problem by avoiding the subject with politeness. *"Do you want some food?"*

"Yes," replied the *Friendly-Pet™* implant using my mouth. As far as I was concerned, I had answered the question honestly and with forethought. I was hungry, after all.

"Just let me unpack for a second."

The woman began pulling clothing out of her bag, and stowed the clothing on some open shelving.

What had happened to my clothes?

I peered over the side of my bed, looking for my duffel-bag. I didn't own a duffel-bag! What was I thinking?

My school backpack wasn't here either.

Not that the books were going to clothe me.

After my roommate had unpacked her clothing, she turned around, and introduced herself, *"My name is Sally, by the way."*
"I'm Wendy."

"Let's go get some food."

Sally was already at the door.

Hanging on the red mushroom-button was a curled-up red leash.

She grabbed it, and clipped it on my collar.

"Why did you do that?" I asked incredulously.

Sally looked surprised at my surprise, or perhaps she was surprised at her behavior.

"I... That was rude... I... I have to have a leash on you for now, to make sure you don't run away."

I nearly snarled.

This was going to be weird.

It didn't occur to me to ask Sally why someone had turned my body from that of a Golden-Panther to an animal ~~Black-Leopard~~ Black-Panther. In the television-cartoon, the Golden-Panther woman had all her bones fluidly morph, and black fur-hairs sprout-out between her old golden fur-hairs. Is that what happened to me? I must have been unconscious when that happened.

The leash-insult fell-away from my mind.

Sally began tugging at the leash...

... rejuvenating the *"leash-insult"*.

My intuition told me that I should follow the leash's tug, and hop-down from the bed.

No way!

I was-not going to hop-down from my bed, no-matter what my intuition told me I should do. Instead, I rolled onto my stomach, and slid my rear-legs onto the ground. Once my weight was supported by them, I backed-up, and eventually slid my forelegs onto the ground. For half a minute before I got both my forelegs down, I held-up my weight with my jaw and thick neck.

Once on the ground, I twirled-around towards Sally.

I did-NOT think to ask why I had been turned into a Black-Panther.

I momentarily completely-forgot about food.

My missing duffel-bag suddenly became a priority.

I glanced-about the ground underneath my bed to see if my clothes-bag was around. I needed to put some clothes on.

It wasn't there.

I caught myself turning my head to look underneath Sally's bed.

Wait!

I was being mindless. I didn't bring a clothes-bag, did I. And I left my schoolbag behind, before I was transformed. I'd have to pay for those books.

"What are you looking for?"

"Some clothes," I answered, as I looked-up at Sally.

Sally glanced at her stack of clothes, thinking about loaning me something.

After a few-seconds of thought, she looked at me, and head-tilted in the negative, *"I don't have anything that will fit you."*

How would I get to the food-room if I were naked?

"Don't worry. No-one will notice," Sally answered. *"We're the only ones here at the moment."*

Had Sally read my mind? My school-principle seemed to be able to read minds.

Reluctantly, I answered, *“Okay. Let’s go.”*

Sally led me through the door, into the hallway. I slunk-out cautiously, afraid that someone might be waiting outside with a camera, ready to photograph me naked.

Yeah, but I was a cat.

And this wasn’t my body.

Sally tugged at my leash as she walked towards a staircase to the left. Our room was one of ten, on the lower-level of a staircase-cascade.



Sally closed the door behind us, and led me up some steep steps onto a mezzanine.

For some odd reason, perhaps because I was lower to the ground, I noticed that the stair-steps and floor were a crisscrossed low-skid metal-surface.

The lower dorm-room hallway was about three meters wide. The mezzanine hallway widened to five meters. The mezzanine walls angled-out, with ramps leading-up to arched-openings near the ceiling.

Sally didn't let me stop to look-around, like I wanted to...

I think that I wanted to look-around...

She led me through the twenty-meter mezzanine, and up another steep staircase.

Immediately to our left, was a plastic door with a lever door-handle.

Sally opened-the door and ushered me into a small cafeteria. When I ventured too-far in-front of Sally, my head was pulled-back by the leash that Sally held.

The cafeteria had four small fast-food picnic-tables. Each picnic-table had two arced benches, fixed to the ground.

No-one was in the room, but us.

Sally closed the door, and led me to a table.

"Get up," she commanded.

I obeyed without thinking... or at least I tried to obey. I found it difficult to scramble-up onto the bench. I could get my forefeet on the bench-seat, but I couldn't easily lift my rear legs-and-feet onto the seat.

I nearly managed once, but my rear foot slipped-off.

In the end, I walked-onto the bench perpendicularly. I straddled the bench with both my left-and-right fore-legs, and my

left-and-right rear-legs. With a bit of elbow-and-knee work, I managed to stand on the bench.

Sally watched nervously as I struggled to do even a simple maneuver. Once I had seated myself, Sally awkwardly tried to find someplace to tie my leash to.

Why? Why did she try to tie me up?

Sally found no-place to tie my leash to. She eventually gave-up, and dropped the end of my leash onto the table-top.

"I'll get you some food," spoke Sally. She walked to the end of the room, where there was a countertop, and a few buttons on the wall.

The *Friendly-Pet™* implant encouraged me to paw the leash-end as if it were a stunned mouse. My fore-paws didn't work as well as hands, but I could almost pick-up the leash using my claw-tips.

"Do you want chicken or cattle?" asked Sally.

"Red meat today," I answered.

I remembered a *"Thank you"* about a minute later.

Something beeped.

Sally turned-away from the countertop, carrying two hot microwave-dinners. She placed mine in front of me first, and then set hers down.

Sally sat-down beside me.

"Fuck..." said Sally. And then she whispered to herself, *"I'm nervous."* And she then spoke, *"I forgot the forks. I'll get them."*

A minute later, Sally returned with the forks.

She was about to hand me mine, when she realized that I couldn't hold it.

"I'll have to feed you." Dismay broadcast on Sally's face.

Sally positioned the rectangular microwave-dinner in front of me. Sally used the fork to pick-up some meat, and held it in front of my mouth.

I leaned my head forwards and bit, nearly pulling the plastic-steel fork out of Sally's hand.

The meat tasted like beef-burgundy.

"Thank you," I said.

Next came a fork-full of risotto, also included in the microwave-meal.

Sally alternated meat and risotto.

She miscalculated food-balance, and had to feed me four forks of risotto at the end, without any meat in-between.

Once I had eaten, Sally put down my fork, and began eating her own meal.

She ate in silence.

I stared at the far countertop, mind-numb.

The ship hummed.

Morning

A chime went-off in our room, and then a video of a chirpy Golden-Panther told us that it was sunrise, and time to wake-up. My eyes opened half-way through the video. I caught the second-half, as it played on the flat-panel display attached to the door-wall.

Sally was still sleeping in her bunk, opposite. She was mostly undressed. I must have fallen-asleep before she took off-her

clothes. I only recalled walking-backwards down the steep steps after dinner, and then climbing into my bunk, exhausted.

What were my duties for the day?

The thought of calling my mother-up didn't occur to me. It should have.

I wondered if anyone-else had arrived in the battleship.

Just then, someone knocked on our door.

It opened, and a woman's face peeked in.

"Hello, Sally, I'm Karen."

The woman ignored me. Sally must have been my superior officer.

How did I know that Sally was my superior officer?

Sally sat up, alert. Being undressed was especially-embarrassing for her.

"Since you're the first person here, I'll show-you around the ship myself. Tomorrow, you can help show the other newcomers around."

Sally looked-around for her top.

Karen saw this, and replied embarrassed, *"I'll close the door for a minute."*

She stepped back, and closed the door. We were left-alone in the room.

Fumbling for her clothes, Sally hurriedly dressed-herself in her military uniform.

I noticed the absence of my military uniform. I stood up on my bunk, and turned around to face the door though.

I lay-down on my stomach as Sally opened the door herself, and let Karen in.

"Sorry about that," spoke an embarrassed Karen. *"I didn't want to leave you sitting-around with nothing to do."*

"That's okay. The alarm just went off. I hadn't woken-up yet."

"Before you begin your duties, we need to get your friend situated." The woman looked at me.

Sally noticed. *"Karen, this is Wendy."*

"Hello Wendy."

"Hello Karen," I answered back.

"Please follow me," said Karen, as she walked into the hallway.

I jumped-down from the bed this morning. My stumble wasn't that bad.

Sally waited for me to walk-out first. She closed the door behind me.

"Karen," asked Sally, *"Do you have any clothes for Wendy?"*

"Shit, I forgot to mention that. We have some cat-clothes on order. They should be here tonight."

"Thank you," I answered.

Karen nodded to me.

"Follow me."

Sally and I followed Karen up the stairs to the mezzanine.

Karen bent-down to my level, and looked into my eyes.

"Wendy, all you have to do is climb-up ramp number-two... That one... and enter the small doorway up-top."

I sat, waiting for further information.

Karen looked at me as if I was a bit dumb.

"Go. Go-on up," urged Karen. *"We'll pull you out at mealtime."*

That was it? My first day of military-duty was to climb-up a ramp?

I expected calisthenics, running, weapons training, or something else. Oh well, everyone knew that our military wasn't exactly top-of-the-line, and all-stringent-like.

I crept up a switch-back ramp to get to mid-level. And then onto ramp number-two.

The arched doorway was just tall-enough for me to climb-through, being four-legged.

Inside was a motorcycle body, without the wheels. A holographic display covered all of the walls, which were curved into an ellipsoid. The room looked like a high-quality version of the only-functioning arcade-game at the shopping-mall.

Video-game

All of the lights were off in the pod.

Upon entering, the *“wallpaper”* holographic displays gradually illuminated, brightening to a grey.

Having played video-games before, it was obvious to me that I should climb-onto the motorcycle seat.

Oddly, no-one had yet told me what my military-role was.

Perhaps they forgot? I was the first person on-board, and things seemed a bit confused. Maybe I'd learn-about what I was going to do when everyone-else arrived.

Or perhaps I was being trained to be a fighter-pilot.

That would be cool!

Certainly better than being infantry.

Better than being a medic, or whatever job I would likely earn in town.

Still, it would have been nice if someone had told me what I would do for the next half-year to a year...

And why they put me in a four-legged body.

I didn't dwell on my future job, though.

I climbed all-of-the-way into the simulator room, and rested my chest and stomach on the motorcycle seat. My forelegs fit into gold-coated hand-holsters up-front. I found it trickier to slide my hind-legs into their rear holsters.

As soon as all my limbs were in-place, a video-game sign appeared on the screen in front of me:

Insert one quarter to play

The sign didn't stay-up for long.

It faded-away to a video of Golden-Cat woman who introduced me to the system. Only her head and upper-torso were visible.

"Welcome to the Devastation-9000, one of the premier battleships in our fleet."

"Before you begin, ensure that you are seated properly on the motorcycle-seat, and that your arms and feet are inserted into their haptic-pneumatic holsters".

The video instantly-flicked to a new segment.

"I see that you have already gotten-situated properly."

"You are a new user. I will call you [video interrupt] Chrome."

With that, a sign with the words, “*You are Chrome*” zoomed-in.

You are

***** CHROME *****

“Your first task is to make sure that the pneumatic systems are working. Bear in mind, this will feel a bit weird.”

“Move your right foreleg to the right.”

I did so. The motion was fluid and frictionless. (*The combat-systems designer’s words. They’re forcing me to say this. 😊 – Mike*)

After pushing my right foreleg out a few centimeters, the limb-grip took control, and forcefully returned my foreleg to its original location.

I heard the door close behind me.



"Now, kick your right rear-leg out."

I did so.

And to my surprise, my left-leg was nearly-simultaneously forced out-and-wide by its pneumatic holster, following the exact-same motion.

"Got you. 😊"

Both of my rear legs were forcefully returned to their previous positions.

"And now for our first simulated flight."

"What you are feeling now is the pod decompressing, like you would feel if you were to actually launch into space."

"This feeling can be simulated. Or, you might actually be launching into space on your very-first test-run."

The grey surround-video faded into an image of a rectangular docking-bay. The wall in front of me was open to the stars, the arc of a nearby planet to my lower-left.

Cool!

I could see that the pod was resting on a dais landing-pad, and that it was gradually taking-off. I actually felt the motion.

This was MUCH better than the arcade.

The woman's image had disappeared, but her voice continued. It was echoed by a telepathic message, with the exact-same words.

"Your pod is now hovering free of its catch. To launch your pod, tense all four of your legs."

I tensed all of my legs as instructed. In future training sessions, I would be berated for acting without thinking, when I did this. I would be told that I first needed to check my pod's systems for damage, as well as to spend time pre-investigating the combat status.

Seconds after my legs tensed, the pod automatically whizzed-up from its parking-dais, and out of the centre of the docking-bay. I felt a field-transition as my pod passed through the spacecraft's force-shield.

I flew-out into the stars!

DEFINITELY better than infantry.

What did the spaceship that I launched-from look like? How big was it?

I decided to look-behind me (another telepathically-induced thought) to see what kind of ship I had left.

Oooh.

The docking-bay that I had left was perhaps twenty-meters wide, by ten-meters high. It was tiny compared to the spherical-exterior of the spacecraft.

And then I wondered what the planet looked like.

Below me was a blue-water planet, with green continents, and a hazy atmosphere. I could almost feel the planet's gravity.

I heard a *"tink"* sound just-off to my right.

A red *"target-box"* appeared where the sound came from. The target-box highlighted a space-station a thousand-kilometers above the planet. I didn't know how I knew that there was a space-station there. I just knew.

"Your job is to fly to the space station. You are carrying a payload of toilet paper. Look behind you." (Cat-humor is very weird.)

I craned my neck-around, and saw a large metallic-box floating immediately behind my pod. It even had dents on it.

"To begin flying in the direction of the space-station, look at it, concentrate on it, and lick your lips."

I had no-idea why licking my lips was selected as the *"get moving"* trigger, but I complied.

My space-pod began accelerating towards the space-station. I could perceive the launch-spacecraft receding into the distance.

"Don't go too-quickly or you will lose your load."

"To slow down, release your concentration, and un-tense your body."

I did so. I hadn't realized that my body had tensed-up.

"Enjoy the flight."

I flew towards the space-station for about ten minutes.

On a whim, I began experimenting with maneuvering. Sliding my body left and right caused my pod to veer in the same direction.

Unexpectedly, an alarm went-off!

Before the woman even spoke, I knew that a “zoomer” was spotted on approach, behind my right shoulder.

“A zoomer is approaching. They are high-atmosphere animals that will curiously investigate your spacecraft. They are harmless until you crash into them.”

An image of a bat-winged green-thing with a sucker-mouth appeared in my mind.

“The zoomer will catch-up to you soon. You cannot outrun it while you are towing your current payload.”

I tried to outrun the zoomer anyway, accelerating as quickly as I could.

I knew that the zoomer was catching up.

“Sorry, but you must release your container of toilet-paper, or the zoomer will catch up.”

“To release your cargo, pull your rear legs in towards the motorcycle-seat.”

I began to pull my rear legs in, but the woman’s voice (and the pneumatics) interrupted me.

“Not yet! You must first make a mental note of the location of your transit-container.” (Again, weird cat-humor.)

I thought about making a mental note.

“Bing.” A small text-sign appeared off to my right, with the words, *“Transit container”* on it. The sign slowly faded into the background.

I felt the container of toilet-paper float away.

I then more-strongly perceived the zoomer speeding-up on me.

“You must take evasive maneuvers. Lean to your right to rotate and dive.”

I did so.

Cool!

The planet swung underneath me as my pod rotated about its Z-axis. I even felt the momentum-motion of my pod, though when I eventually spun-around upside-down, I still felt like I was flying right-side up.

I perceived the transit-container quickly-receding into the distance, and the surprised zoomer hurrying to approach me.

All of the sudden, all of the lights turned on.

The cushion of my motorcycle seat deflated.

The gold grips that had tightly locked around my arms and legs relaxed. I hadn't even noticed them doing this.

The rear-door opened, and I felt the fresh air.

The pod telepathed to me, *"You are requested on deck."* It didn't speak this time.

Groggy, I stumbled-off the motorcycle-seat, backwards .

I thought about turning-around inside the pod, but decided it was too small. Instead, I backed-up, tail-first.

I felt my rear right-leg touch air...

And then I turned myself so I was walking-back parallel with the wall.

Though I nearly fell-off twice, I managed to back-myself down the ramp.

Dinner

Apparently, six hours had passed. It felt like only two hours. Sally and two officers were waiting *“on the ground”*.

One of the officers proudly held-out a bright-red plastic elastic-diaper. *“Here’s your stop-sign. You can put it on in the card room.”*
☺

I didn’t understand the *“stop-sign”* reference at first... not for a few days actually. Some planets have stop-signs with the same shape and color as our plastic diapers.

The three officers walked-up the stairs first, and I followed. One officer opened the door opposite the cafeteria-door. She set the red piece of plastic down, inside the room, and motioned me in.

“Just knock when you want to get out.”

I entered a room that was nearly same-size as the cafeteria, but with wooden tables and chairs. A sofa was on the far wall. The room also had a door for a toilet.

When the door closed, I investigated the piece of plastic... called a *“stop sign”*. I suspected that the officer had handed-me my clothes.

The *“underwear”* or *“diaper”* or *“stop-sign”* was quite practical. It had an elastic sphincter-hole for my tail, and enough material to cover-up my privates. Two Velcro straps tied the diaper to my upper-legs.

Certainly not fashionable, but it was better than nothing.

Determined to be independent, I didn’t knock on the door to be let out. I walked-up the wall next to the door using my forelegs. Leaning against the wall, I managed to stand-up on my hind-legs, and pull the door’s level-handle down. The door clicked open, and eventually swung wide-enough that I could squeeze through.

An officer was waiting outside for me. She didn't comment on my bright-red underwear.

I landed-myself back onto four legs, more gracefully than the last-time I had tried this trick.

The officer led me into the cafeteria, where a plate of food was already waiting on the table.

One of the officers proudly handed me a “*Tiger-claw*” fork so that I could pick-up my own food. It was a black palm-shaped disc, with a small metal grabbing-talon. The fork strapped onto my hand. When I squeezed buttons on the sides of the palm-shaped disc, the small talon would close around a small piece of meat, or a few grains of risotto. I could pick-up the food, and drop it onto my tongue, or into my upturned mouth if I was particularly dexterous.

Sally no-longer had to feed me, as if I were a child.

I appreciated the officers' friendliness.

Sally and the two officers discussed procedures, as well as how to fill-out different types of paperwork.

I didn't talk at all that night. At first, all my concentration went into learning how to maneuver food into my mouth.

And then I was simply tired, and decided to listen.

And then dinner was over. Someone took-away my rectangular plate, and I was led to my room.

Somehow, someone managed to clip the leash on me again. ☹️

I was so tired, I wasn't particularly bothered about the leash. The *Friendly-Pet™* implant might have had something to do with it, also.

More training

After we awoke the next morning, Sally directed me to pod number-four. I hadn't heard anyone radio Sally about my duties that morning. She must have gotten her instructions the night before.

Since no-one was around, all I had to do was climb-up, and play video-games all-day. Military service wasn't sounding all-that bad. Before I enlisted, I was afraid of being drafted into infantry.

Here I was, playing video-games all day. I expected my experience to be oppressive.

I had never cared for video-games before. They were an occasional entertainment at the shopping-mall... about ten-minutes worth of "fun". Yesterday's full day of game-play was actually engrossing. I found that I enjoyed playing mock-battle video-games, rather than running-around the bush on eight-kilometer jogs, followed by "buffalo-stalking"... When you are on the desert side of a planet, how ELSE do you train? We only used paintballs, and we weren't allowed to shoot any Technicolor buffalos.

Being four-legged didn't bother me, especially since it saved me from eight-kilometer jogs. The *Friendly-Pet™* installed in me may also have made a difference.

I hopped onto my motorcycle seat. I had no-problem getting my limbs into the holsters.

The game knew who I was, and zoomed-in a sign saying:

Welcome back,

***** CHROME *****

Almost all of the day's communications were telepathic-words, telepathic-sentences, and telepathic thumps. Audible speech was much-less common. After I learned the pod-controls, over the next few days, and after the computer's artificial-intelligence learned my habits, audible-speech was almost-always omitted.

The first mission of the day was to redo the toilet-paper mission that I had-not finished the day before... or at least that's what I was told.

My pod once-again launched from a rectangular hanger. The hanger was subtly different from the previous day's hanger, but I didn't pay any attention.

I squeezed my legs together to "kick off" my pod from its docking station.

A low-beeping alarm went-off immediately, followed by an announcer voice, "*System failure. You must first check the flight status of your pod. To listen to a tutorial, twitch your fore-feet.*"

Two minutes into the game, I was already engrossed ... another *Friendly-Pet™* feature.

I twitched my hands, and got the tutorial. Before taking-off, I had to look all-around me, to make sure all of my video-displays worked.

I did so.

“You are now cleared for take-off.”

My pod took-off immediately, and *“escorted itself”* out of the docking bay.

Like the toilet-paper simulation from the previous day, this simulation included a planet and a destination. Unlike the previous day’s simulation, space wasn’t empty. It was crowded. Other pods and friendly spacecraft zipped around. I could only see them as small white-dots (most-likely ultraviolet in real-life) flying in the distance. I had a telepathic link to the planet’s *“radar”*-system. I knew that other spaceplanes were flying-around, approximately how large each one was, and what each one was doing. To know where the spaceplanes were, I didn’t have to see any spaceplane images, nor did I have to read any text on the screen. (Search <http://www.youtube.com/> for *“space-shuttle UFO”* to see what the *“small white-dots”* look like.)

And, by the way, I knew that all the spaceplanes zipping-around were ours, running training missions.

Once I... as in me – My pod-and-I were now *“me”*... Once I got out of the docking bay, I received a request to wait for a cargo-trailer of metal cogs to arrive.

While the cargo-container was ejecting-itself from another docking-bay, I felt some space-turbulence. I knew that I had to steady my pod, and keep it in the same location, or the cargo-container wouldn’t properly *“attach”* to my pod. I counteracted the space-turbulence by leaning left-and-right, and forwards-and-backwards.

I knew how far my pod had drifted-away from its ideal pick-up coordinates.

I also knew that space-turbulence was caused by volumetric stretching-and-shrinking of space near large spacecraft, or by active defense-shields.

My cargo-trailer arrived behind me. I was instructed to travel very-slowly to another very-large spacecraft in the distance. A red-target mark was already displayed over the location of the too-far-away-to-see spacecraft.

To move my pod, I concentrated, leaned forward, and forgot to lick my lips. My pod began accelerating... VERY slowly.

Half an hour later, about one third-of the way through the journey, my pod shuttered to the left.

My cargo of cogs fell away.

Crap! I would have to swing-around and pick it up.

The space-turbulence must have knocked my cargo-trailer free. I had been fighting it for the previous half-an-hour.

It WASN'T space-turbulence.

Someone had shot me... my pod! An enemy. I knew this.

I also suddenly became aware that I (my body-and-mind) was mentally lethargic. The lethargy had secretly-and-silently occurred over the past ten minutes. I was almost-half asleep.

I couldn't wake myself up.

Self-releasing my own adrenaline didn't work.

Danger didn't work.

I was almost at the mental-point of thinking, *"Enemy? Should I care? This is only a simulation. I want to go back to bed."*

I must have sat motionless for at least half a minute while I tried to figure-out what to do.

Oh well.

This was a simulation.

Yawn.

I might as well dog-fight the enemy spaceplane.

It might be fun.

For some reason, I began to think that I should think about what kind of spacecraft the enemy was flying.

I thought about this.

The enemy, as my telepathy informed me, was a Hominid pyramid-shaped spear-tip fighter. It was flown by a trainee Hominid who was training for his real missions by killing me, an easy-to-hit slow-moving pod.

I was suddenly aware that many of the other *“friendlylies”* that I had felt earlier, were actually combatants. Why didn't the artificial-intelligence warn me of this before?

I had been sent-out to deliver spare-parts to the *“aircraft carrier”* during the middle of a dog-fight. The initial space-turbulence that I had experienced was from my home-ship's shields. Once I got away from my home-ship, the occasional-but-strong space-turbulence that I encountered was created by fighter spaceplanes zooming-by extradimensionally.

My pod, by the way, had-been programmatically-limited to a *“non-combatant”* three-dimensional plane in space. My pod was clearly marked, and signaling itself as a non-combatant. All of the combatants knew I that was a non-combatant. Consequently, my pod was trivial to hit, being both incredibly slow, and blinking with a non-combatant beacon.

The Hominid trainee was a bastard!

CHASE THE FUCKER DOWN!

My visuals of space instantaneously changed. I was no-longer limited to three-dimensional *“non-combatant”* space. My pod

went red inside, indicating that I was no-longer tagged as a non-combatant.

The Hominid spear-tip fighter was behind me. He had shot down two of us non-combatants on previous trainee missions, one about an hour ago, and one yesterday. He was twenty-three years old, and had an officer-brother on the Hominid command-ship.

I knew all of this without trying to know it. The information seeped in, while I maneuvered around to outflank him.

I had never maneuvered ANYWHERE, but I already knew how to perform the action.

Meanwhile, I noticed how “*space*” had changed. Previously, I was flying over a desert-planet, with a star-field above. Behind me was my cargo-ship. Far in-front was the aircraft-carrier.

Space had turned a deep orange-purple. Galaxies suddenly materialized into view... along with a second star that I hadn’t seen before... along with hundreds of spacecraft speeding around. Most were unmarked. Only a few were known friendlies or enemies.

My target was slow-as shit.

I did a loop around, and got behind his engines.

One of his engines was already damaged, producing excess volumes of space, as-well as particles that might damage my pod.

I fired at his other engine.

My pod’s tiny darts did nothing.

Meanwhile, I felt the fields in my pod going crazy. It was like being stuck in a medical magnetic-resonating imager (MRI), but worse. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MRI>)

“*Think before you act,*” was telepathed into my head. NOT, “*Use the force, Luke-Wendy,*” a famous line from the movie, *Star Wars*. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Force_\(Star_Wars\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Force_(Star_Wars)))

The pod’s artificial-intelligence thought for me, for now.

I knew that I had to zoom in-front of the idiot pilot, do a spin-around, and fire through his windshield.

Cool.

My pod took a sudden jolt.

I felt it tumble, and plunge towards the planet.

Everything went dark for fifteen minutes.

“You died. You just cost us \$82,000 for the pod, and \$7200 for a new body. Do not die again.”

The real-life oxygen was sucked-out of my pod... not bad for a game simulator.

I think that I actually fell unconscious.

I awoke in another pod... or at least that’s what I thought.

It was actually the same pod... I knew that... but the game pretended that I had died, and that my soul was placed into a new body without me knowing it. My new-body was already loaded into a new pod.

Having died only twenty seconds before, I was now once-again ready for space-combat.

I was only barely-awake, when my pod automatically ejected-out into the battle.

In game-terms, I died three-more times that day. In real-life, I was knocked unconscious every-time, and most-likely received atmosphere-delivered drugs to bedazzle my mind, so that I was increasingly mentally-incompetent.

When I was let-out of my pod for dinner, after what seemed like twelve-hours of training, I had no dexterity left to control my tiger-claw fork. Nor did I have any mental energy. I played with my food quite-a-lot that night, like a housecat would. I mindlessly pulled the bits of meat out of the microwave rectangle-dish with

my claws. I then scooted the gravy-covered meat to the edge of the table. And with my mouth directly against the table's edge, I scooted the meat into my mouth.

"She had a bit too-much training today," someone said.

More panthers

Jamie woke-us up the next morning, five-minutes before our morning alarm-video went off.

"We have a job for you two," Jamie whispered as she opened the door. *"Get dressed, and meet them outside."*

It took me just-about as long to scoot-into my red-diaper, as it took Sally to fully-clothe herself in her uniform. Despite being a Black-Panther, I found that putting-on my only article of clothing in front of Sally was embarrassing.

I was just stepping-off my bed when Sally opened the door. She was greeted by some voices.

I followed her out. Sally held the door open for me.

In the hallway, newly arrived was another Black-Panther, and another Golden-Panther *"rat"*, as the two-legged Golden-Panthers who roomed with us were called.

Jamie introduced Sally to Jen, the Golden-Panther recruit. She then introduced Jen to me.

"Jen, this is Wendy."

Jen looked down at me, and politely said, *"Hello, Wendy."*

She followed this up with, *"Wendy, this is Spam."* Wendy pointed to the other Black-Panther.

"Hello Spam," I spoke in a Panther-gruff voice.

Spam smelled of stress. Her implants emoted furious anger.

Spam looked me-over, and glared at me.

I got a telepath from her, *"They got you too. Huh."*

Telepathy? Sally, Jamie, and Jen continued in verbal conversation. Ignoring their conversation, I wondered if the Golden-Panthers had telepathic-communication like ours. They didn't seem to notice the conversation I was having with Spam.

Spam noticed that they didn't seem to notice. This pleased her.

They didn't seem to notice that this pleased her.

"Sally, you show Spam and Wendy around down here. They-are in room number-five," Jamie said. *"Jen, follow me, and I'll get you oriented. Sally can put your bag into your room."*

Jamie and the new recruit took-off.

"What are we going to do?" telepathed Spam.

Sally didn't notice to the telepath. She picked-up Jen's bag, as well as a second bag, and carried them to room-five.

Sally let us enter first. I walked in, followed by Spam.

"Which is your bag?" asked Sally to Spam.

Spam pointed to the red one with her forepaw, nearly falling over as she unbalanced herself. Sally threw Spam's bag on the Panther bunk, and the green-one on Jen's bunk.

My thoughts leaked, *"She got to keep her bag? Mine disappeared!"*

Spam answered, *"The clothes won't do us much good, will they?"* She was in surly mood.

"What do we do now?" asked Spam to me, telepathically.

Sally didn't realize that we were having the conversation. *"Do you have any questions?"* Sally asked verbally.

"No," verbally-grumbled Spam.

Sally was clearly uncomfortable. She paused a moment to think.

"Do you need to rest?" Sally verbally-asked.

"How should I answer?" Spam telepathically asked me. And then she thought to herself, which was transmitted to me, *"So much for my career as an architectural drafts-person."*

I then got the impression that spam DID-NOT need to rest. I don't think Spam consciously telepathed that information to me.

Spam thought about my response for a second, and then verbalized. *"No, I'm fine Sally. Just not very happy."*

"Yeah," Sally was flummoxed. Golden-Cats are normally extremely-polite to one-another, and Spam had been distinctly un-polite. *"Um, um."* Sally stuttered. *"Do you want to see the cafeteria?"*

"Sure," answered Spam. The word came-out elongated, like *"Shooooor"*, which sounded like the beginning of a threat.

"Your bright-blue underwear is on your bed," I telepathed.

"Sally," I TELEPATHED. *"Let's leave Spam alone for a minute."*

Sally didn't hear by telepath.

"Oops," I telepathed.

I spoke the same line, *"Sally, let's leave Spam alone for a minute. She needs to change her clothes."*

"Oh yeah, right."

Both Sally and I walked-out the door.

Ten minutes later, the door-handle jiggled. Sally opened-up the door. Spam nearly fell on top of her, blue-underwear on.

"I couldn't figure-out how to open the door," Spam telepathed.

Sally didn't hear this.

"You're all done I see. Follow-me up the stairs," spoke Sally.

Sally led.

Spam followed next. She had difficulty climbing.

Spam had also failed to put her tail through the tail-scrunchie in the underwear. The top of her underwear hung a-bit low.

Sally led us straight-past all of the pods, and up to the cafeteria.

All three of us were about to go in, when Sally's collar-radio went-off. *"Sally. Could you pick up Sarah at the service entry-way. Thank you."*

"Oops. Let's go back down," spoke Sally.

Sally moved faster this time. I followed immediately behind her. After two days of practice, I had no problem scooting head-first down the steep stairs. Spam, newly attached to four legs, nearly did a face-plant.

At the end of the spacecraft, near my room, was an officer Golden-Panther with a dejected-looking Black-Panther.

Sally got there first.

"Sally, this is Sarah," said the officer-woman.

"Hello Sarah," said Sally... now in-charge of three cats.

"This is Sarah's book-bag. She goes in room-three. Her roommate isn't here yet."

The officer-woman finished with a *"Please look after her,"* and then the woman disappeared out the door.

Sarah still had her leash attached.

She sat, unmoving, occasionally blinking mindlessly.

Both Spam and I telepathed, *"Hello,"* to Sarah when we arrived at the bottom.

Sarah didn't reply.

She might-perhaps have looked at us.

Sally opened room-three, and put Sarah's bag inside.

“Sarah, do you want to see your room?” asked Sally.

Sarah slowly-turned her head to look at Sally, but said nothing. Sarah stared again.

“Jen,” Sally radioed. *“Sarah is a bit out-of-it. What should I do?”*

Fifteen seconds later. *“This is Jen. Continue with the tour. She may perk-up.”*

Sally picked-up the end of Sarah’s leash. Both Spam and I leered at Sally because of this... but we didn’t do anything else.

Sally tugged Sarah up two flights of steps, and into the cafeteria.

We followed, now seasoned veterans.

“Does anyone want any food?” asked Sally to the three of us, mainly directed towards Spam and Sarah.

No-one answered. Cat blank-faces.

“Is anyone interested in a drink?” Sally was reaching. I rarely needed water as a Golden-Panther, and hadn’t yet needed any water as a Black-Panther.

Sally stepped forward.

She didn’t speak though.

Was that a “Yes”?

None of us could tell.

“I’ll get some tangerine-drink,” responded Sally. She was going to drag Sarah with her to the drink dispenser, but instead tossed her leash-end on the ground.

If Sarah had a bit-more sense, she would have run-off at that point.

Instead, Sarah merely sat, and stared transfixed at her leash’s end-loop.

Sally returned with a very-large cup of tangerine-drink. She held it low, in front of Sarah.

Sarah first tried to drink from the edge like a person. She quickly gave-up, and began lapping at the top of the drink.

With a bit of orange fluid in her, a familiar taste from high-school physical-education, Sarah began to wake up.

"Where's my mother?" she spoke quietly.

Sally nearly cried. Both Spam and I wedged-up against Sarah.

No-one answered Sarah.

Sarah lapped some more tangerine-drink.

Both of us got our first telepath from her, *"What the hell happened?"*

We had no answer.

We all sat, or stood, in the cafeteria for half-an-hour, doing nothing.

Sarah perked-up enough to stumble around the room.

While we all watched Sarah, Jen radioed to Sally in a saddened voice, *"Sally. Why don't you take Sarah, Spam, and Wendy to the pods. We need to see you on the bridge."*

Unbeknownst to me, Sally would meet with some of the command-crew ten minutes later. There, she was informed that several of our *Devastation-9000* ships had been destroyed in transit to our mission site. A relative of hers was on-board one of them.

Video-games with Spam and Sarah

Sally pointed me to pod number-two. I impolitely-and-thoughtlessly entered it before I saw what anyone-else did.

As I climbed into my seat, I heard Spam verbally complain about having to clamber-up to pod number-four.

Sarah had to be butt-pushed assisted into pod number-six, which was slightly lower. I didn't hear about this until a few days later, when Sarah was laughing-off her first-day's adventures.

"Shit. How the fuck do I get in this thing!" complained Spam over the radio as she tried to get her arms and legs into their holsters.

Sarah was much quieter. I knew she was there. I knew I had been appointed squad-leader for now. I knew Sarah had figured-out how to get into her pod.

I could read Sarah's mind!

She was a total wreck. She was totally confused. I won't reveal private information, but she was even younger than I was, and had done very-well in school.

Her mind-link to my mind calmed her down.

"Are you alright [Sarah]?" I thought.

"Yeah. No. Why am I playing video-games at the mall?"

I reinforced that thought. *"Don't worry. We'll just play some games."*

All three-of us ejected from different docking-bays out of an enormous spherical-spaceship.

I was the first out. I whirled my pod around to watch the other-two leave.

"Crap, these graphics are good. They even have scratches in the paintwork. [I'm lucky if I can get my computer to do a line rendering of a building.]" That was Spam.

Spam got her pod out easily, and began running the mission. I ignored the mission for now.

“Just wait Spam. Sarah’s not out yet.”

I was telepathically informed that Sarah had been given a neural-boost while she was in her motorbike-seat.

Sarah’s pod took fifteen minutes to launch. It actually hit the top of the docking-bay as she tried to fly it out.

I laughed. Sarah merely thought, *“Shit!”*

Spam didn’t notice this, because she was already hauling toilet-paper around.

Jewel arrives... More video-games

Half-way through our third mission, the lights went on, and our pod-doors opened.

I backed-up, and was on the ground first.

Spam nearly fell-off her ramp as she backed out.

Sarah, being smaller, somehow turned herself around inside her pod, and walked-down head-first... which was easier.

Sarah was VERY twitchy, and acted like she had drunk ~~six~~ ~~eight~~ sixteen cups of caffeinated soft-drink.

“Someone else can get pod-four next,” Spam telepathically-mumbled. I had no-idea what Spam meant.

Also on the mezzanine level was Jen, a Golden-Panther officer, and another Black-Panther.

“How was your ride?” asked Jen.

I answered. *“Good.”*

“That’s nice to here. Girls [non-pejorative], this is Jewel.”

We all looked at Jewel, and said telepathic *“Hello’s”*. Jen most-likely did-not hear our telepaths.

Jewel may not have either.

To Jen, the atmosphere appeared frigid. *“Right,”* she chirpily-said, *“It’s time for dinner. For those of you who don’t know, the toilet is opposite the cafeteria, just-off the card-room.”*

Jen continued with a *“Follow me,”* and led us into the cafeteria.

Several Golden-Panther officers were sitting in the cafeteria, waiting for us to arrive. Jen sat-down in a corner seat.

The four of us climbed onto the benches, or sat on the ground near the wall.

We all had meals placed in front of us, and were handed tiger-claws. I had enough skill with the techno-fork that I began eating right-away. The three other Panthers watched me eat, to see how it was done.

After one of the officers had eaten half her food, she stood-up in front of the cafeteria counter, and began speaking.

“The officers have already been briefed on these matters. I will brief you tonight. Spam, you will have to relay this information to all newcomers.”

“We will depart in a few days, as soon as all of our crew has boarded.”

“We will be assigned to Alliance space, where we will be helping them fend-off Hominid incursions.”

“The trip will take several weeks, at which point we will enter combat immediately. We might see combat on the way there. One of our ships was recently lost on the way.”

“Over the next few weeks, you will undertake training in the pod simulators.”

“Your roommates will assist you in the mornings and evenings. They will have different positions during the day, relevant to your safety. I cannot go into more detail about their roles.”

“Thank you, and welcome to our team.”

“After you finish eating, you can return to your pods for a few hours of play.”

Spam was squad-leader that night. A few days later, Wedge took the lead.

The command bridge

More Black-Panthers, and a few Golden-Panther *“rats”*, arrived the next day. Rather than training, we were given a tour of *“the bridge”*.

Beyond the cafeteria and card-room doors was an airlock door, which was typically kept closed. Black-Panthers were never allowed beyond the airlock door, except for this one occasion. Our Golden-Panther roommates passed through the airlock-door every day, though. They slept on our side of the airlock, but they worked on the other side.

On the *“other side”* of the airlock-door was a T-intersection, with a hallway travelling off to the left and right.

Off of the hallway, was a nicer cafeteria than ours, some toilets, laundry facilities, as well as an exercise room. The hallway

also attached to several command decks, offices, and more dorm rooms.

There was a medical-lounge, where medical procedures could be carried out... typical hospital stuff. Stored in a nearby “chiller”-room, were body-bags with replacement Black-Panther and Golden-Panther bodies. These were to be used if any of our current bodies died. There were a LOT of Black-Panther bodies, suspended in suction-wrap clear-plastic, and hanging from the ceiling.

The “upstairs” also had three command decks.

Each command deck was a rectangular room, six-meters by ten-meters.

During our tour, we (the Black-Panthers) were led into one of the command-decks. When I walked into room, I walked into outer-space.

The floor, ceiling, and walls were entirely wallpapered with video-displays of a star-field. All of the stars, galaxies, and nebulas that were visible to the ship, were drawn on the walls by computer-graphics, like a planetarium. Planets, space-stations, and spaceplanes were also illustrated. They were visually highlighted with green target-boxes, their names displayed next to them.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planetarium>

The wallpaper video-displays were three-dimensional volumes, about half-a-meter thick. Staff could reach into the displays and touch a star, or a planet, or a spacecraft. The object would be visually enlarged, and a text-box would appear adjacent to the object, with few paragraphs of information about the object.

Putting your hand into the volumetric-display felt like putting your hand into a thin Jell-O. The floor displays, also volumetric,

were protected from our feet by a glass-floor suspended above it, which we stood on. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jell-O>)

Three control-consoles were positioned in the room, one in front, and two to the sides. Each console had a few monitors, keyboards, and various buttons.

When someone would touch an object in the volumetric display, more-detailed information about the object would appear on the control-console monitors.

During operational flight, every control-console would have two operators. Six-to-ten “*spotters*” would wander-around the room, surveying the volumetric displays for interesting objects and anomalies.

Many spaceplanes could hide by “*wrapping space*” around themselves. The ship’s artificial-intelligence was always looking for spatial anomalies, most-of-which were naturally-formed.

The Golden-Panther spotters added an extra layer of observation to the ship’s artificial-intelligence. They would watch the anomalies that the artificial-intelligence found interesting, and highlight them.

If an anomaly were sufficiently interesting, a spotter would reach into the volumetric display, and poke the object. Information about the object would be forwarded to the control-consoles, where console-operators could view the data, and decide whether to send ping-signals to see how the anomaly behaved.

An interesting anomaly might have a probe sent to investigate it.

Or, one of us Black-Panthers might be directed to fly our pods to investigate the anomaly.

Any information gained from our pod, a probe, or the ping, would be automatically collected-and-analyzed by the ship’s

artificial-intelligence, as well as being displayed on the command-consoles.

The three command-decks all faced different *“directions”*, often rotated out-of ordinary three-dimensional space. The crew working in one command-deck might see a radically-different view of the surrounding space, compared to what staff in the other command-decks saw.

During operation, one-out-of-three of the command-decks was always running a simulation-game. The command-crew often simulated combat scenarios, sometimes the same combat-scenarios that we were running. They played games similar to the ones we played, but instead of one-person per pod, all of them were in the same room. Our pods could move quickly, haul trailers, and fire darts. From the bridge, the officers could fire plasma weapons, shells, darts, and missiles, as well as directing our pods.

We all assumed that our roommates worked (and played simulations) on the command-decks, though we were never told that explicitly. For secrecy reasons, we never discussed our work with them, and vice-versa.

After the two-hour tour, we were led back to the *“Panther-deck”* to relax.

Panther-pack

We spent several weeks training in the simulator. Most of our days were spent in our pods, ~~training~~ playing... Our training was so-fun and enjoyable that we thought of it as game-play.

As a Golden-Panther teenager, video-games had only been something to do once-a-week at the shopping-mall. Now, either because the video-games were more-realistic, or because I was a Black-Panther playing amidst friends, the video-games were authentically fun-and-engrossing. What was most-enjoyable about them was the chaotic chase.

And then, eating afterwards.

And then sleeping after that.

That was our day.

When I was a Golden-Panther, spending time with people was very-important to me. Knowing information about specific individuals was also important.

As a Black-Panther in a group, I interacted with, and cared-about the other Black-Panthers in the group. But I didn't know them as individuals, at all. My existence was as an individual. But, I only knew the other individuals as a group.

We communicated to the pack exclusively, and only very-rarely communicated one-on-one. Even if I had a thought that I wanted to transmit to only one person, I would broadcast the thought to everyone in the pack, out of laziness, comradery, and openness.

We interacted solely with other Black-Panthers, to the exclusion of our roommate Golden-Panthers. Only a few of our roommates ever felt comfortable-enough around-us to eat in the cafeteria when we did. And often, they were treated as servants, because they had hands. They were continually "*on call*" to dispense and warm-up our meals.

To our roommates, their cafeteria-experience was like walking into a zoo-cage full of wild animal-panthers. They knew that we were intelligent, and that we were NOT animals. They knew they should feel safe amongst us. But they always felt on-edge, and excluded, especially since we never verbally-spoke to other Black-Panthers in the pack.

Half-of-us going naked didn't help either.

Nor did our group-messiness during dinner. Risotto would always rudely be left scattered-about the carpet. Our Golden-Panther roommates would have to servant-like vacuum the floor afterwards.

Interspecies relations were NOT good.

Actual combat

Our video alarm-clock would wake us up every morning. Fifteen minutes later, we would congregate on the mezzanine for the day's instructions, if there were any. We would then climb into our pods, and chase the day away.

This morning, a video-screen in the mezzanine turned on. The ship's military commander spoke:

"Good morning."

"As you all know, we have been travelling towards Alotian space on a mission to help our Cat-evolved comrades."

"We have been in Alotian space for the last four days."

"We are now in the combat zone."

“At ANY time, and I stress ANY time, we might suddenly enter combat, and your skills and prowess will be called-upon to defend us.”

“Thank you.”

With the briefing finished, we climbed into our pods. We COMPLETELY forgot that we were potentially in a war-situation.

Over the past several-weeks, we had played through fifty different game-scenarios. All of them were very different.

This morning’s game scenario was just as different from every other game scenario, as they all had been.

In the scenario, our tiny battleship was *“anchored”* about ten-kilometers from a wrecked battleship, even-smaller than ours. We didn’t know whose it was, or what it looked like. Scans had shown that there were no survivors – most likely.

A week before, we had done a cat-and-mouse hunt in a simulated derelict battle-ship. There had been no enemies, just lots-of-fun as we pinged one-another with our pods’ darts.

We learned to never-trust our initial mission-briefing, though. What happened in the real game-scenario was ALWAYS different than what our mission-briefing told us was going to happen. Unexpected surprises almost-always presented themselves.

“There’ll be survivors today,” telepathed someone.

“I want to explore the hallways,” added someone else.

Our pods were small-enough that we could fly through the hallways of derelict ships. Turning corners was a bitch though... so I was told. We’d have to stand our three-meter-long capsule-shaped pods on-end to make the ninety-degree turns. The entire world would rotate as we did so, with the floor-and-ceiling becoming temporary walls. The hallway we were turning into would become

a very-deep-and-scary pit. After making the turn, we would get lost. We accidentally backtracked half the time. It was a LOT of fun... so I was told. But I MISSED that scenario!

So far, I was aware that three of us were playing. Our Panther-pack was often randomly-split into two or three different simulations. Most scenarios only required a few people to play.

All three of us launched at once.

The capsules had momentum-simulators to simulate the feel of an actual launch. Sometimes, the momentum-simulators worked markedly better than other times. Today's launch was at the eighty-percent mark, as far as "cool". It actually felt like we were launching.

My pod ejected from the port side. As I flew-away from the ship, I saw two green-colored pods off to my left, exiting from the starboard side of the ship.

The two pods were directed to approach the battle-damaged wreck using a vine-weave formation, just in-case they were being hunted.

My mission, automatically known to me, was to have to look at a "blip" a few-kilometers away from the wreck. The blip's crosshairs were already displayed on my screen. The blip was closer to our ship than the wreck was.

"Fuck," I thought, "I wanted to wander the tunnels, not chase after yet-another blip."

No-one answered my complaint.

The game must have been simulating radio-silence.

While the other two slowly vine-weaved, I veered-off to the right, and headed straight for the blip. The sooner I investigated the blip, the sooner I'd be able to get back to the fun part of this scenario, checking-out the derelict-ship's tunnels.

At first, the blip was nothing more than yellow crosshairs on my display. There was no distance measure, intentionally, in case an enemy was reading my mind.

Half-way to the blip, and the blip crosshairs disappeared.

That had happened before. They would likely reestablish themselves in little-while.

I continued on a straight path, heading towards where the crosshairs had been. The computer was most-likely testing me to see if I could mentally lock onto a target.

I had completely forgotten about the opportunity to crawl through the tunnels.

The yellow crosshairs reappeared. A small green object was barely visible at the crosshair's center.

"Cool," I thought. I hadn't seen these graphics before.

I visually zoomed-in on the image, using maximum zoom.

Centered between the crosshairs was a green-ish field of tiles, surrounded by a fuzziness that faded the tiles into stars.

The visuals might have been a bug. The computer-graphics libraries were full of drawing-bugs. The green-tiles surrounded by fuzziness might just have been an incorrectly-rendered "sprite" (a computer-graphics term) that would turn-out to be yet-another message-pod. We were all sick of message pods. Half of the scenarios involved investigating a blip, only to discover yet-another message-pod! *"Now that you have found this message pod, go collect three trailers of underwear, and deliver them to the waiting battleship."*

As I got closer, the fuzzy-border around the tiles expanded. More-and-more blue-yellow green-tiles became visible. I could even see a white-ish grout in-between.

I noticed that the circular-border was not only fuzzy, but that it refracted light. Light from distant-stars very-noticeably refracted around the edge. I had only-ever seen minor amounts of refraction drawn, when a damaged engine was *“spitting out space”*. Today’s computer-drawn refraction was ten-times as great. As far as a computer-graphics special-effect, the more-noticeable refraction wasn’t all-that impressive, though.

Just in-case this scenario turned-out to be an interesting one, I began to weave a bit. (I hated to lose on interesting scenarios. I didn’t care if I lost when playing the boring ones.) Weaving back-and-forth was supposed to make our pods more-difficult to hit. It never seemed to make a difference though.

As I approached the hole in space, it suddenly enlarged, and the tiles suddenly shrunk. The visual changes were all from my point-of-view. Anyone watching the hole would have seen no change to it. My pod might have shrunk in size, though, as it approached the spatial anomaly.

Behind the hole was a battleship nearly as large as ours.

Cool special-effect!

Something bothered me.

The computer-graphics had just-gotten a little-bit too-good.

Could that hiding battleship be real?

I began to get nervous.

What had I done the last time I was all-alone, and had encountered a battleship?

It had been hiding behind an asteroid. The rest of the team didn’t notice it until I accidentally spotted the simulated ship, and yelled-out.

Think...

I twitched my right pinkie to send a very-short very-hard-to-detect emergency blip.

At this point in time, it slowly dawned on me that this battleship was real, and that I was actually remotely piloting a drone-pod towards a real battleship.

Two thoughts broke into my head:

One: If I got the drone-pod blown-up, I'd be charged real money, taken from my salary.

Two: If what I saw was actually a real battleship, it might actually really blow us up. Our pods were "*weather-tight*" and would survive an explosion. We would just drift for a few hours... no-one would bother shooting our pods down... and a friendly ship would pick us up. Everyone-else on-board wouldn't be so lucky. They would depressurize and die.

I didn't have long to dwell on the matter...

The hole suddenly enlarged so-much that it disappeared.

I (my remotely-controlled pod) was only fifty-meters away from an enemy battleship.

Fuck!

My pod was going to get destroyed.

Fuck!

That would cost me \$20,000, at least, of real money!

Telepathic alert: "*Get the hell out of there!*"

Instincts and artificial-intelligence kicked in!

I veered up, twirled around, and headed straight-back towards our ship...

... which I could see, about five kilometers away.

The artificial-intelligence began automatically weaving. I had forgotten to weave.

"Come on! Come on! Hurry up!"

I hated automatic weaving. It slowed me down to a crawl.

I had to get back to the ship before I was shot.

"Hurry up!" came a telepath.

The forefront of our ship began to glow white-hot.

Within two seconds, the glow was one-quarter the size of our ship.

And then the burst hurled from the side plasma-turret of our ship, white-light half as large as the ship. I hadn't seen the ship fire before.

The spherical burst narrowed as it came towards me.

Crap! I was going to be hit by it!

Luckily not.

The burst passed directly underneath me.

I didn't look-back to see where it went.

Fifteen seconds later, an artificial-intelligence telepathic-sentence came through, *"The enemy ship has been hit."*

I still didn't look back.

Forward!

Concentrate.

My pod's artificial-intelligence changed to *"running-scared-home"* mode.

Ten-seconds later, my visuals and information blacked-out.

Everything in the pod was quiet.

Absolutely fucking quiet.

I was panting.

My tail was erect in excitement.

I waited in silence.

Were we going to be blown-up?

How would I know?

We hadn't yet trained on that simulation.

Outside the ship, unbeknownst to me at the time:

As I began my *“run home”*, three other enemy-ships appeared from extradimensional-space. One ship appeared very-close to the wreck.

Our ship launched missiles.

Meanwhile, the enemy ships fired beams (or darts) in the vicinity of the derelict ship.

Two of the enemy ships, furthest-away from the wreck where my two comrades were training, were detonated by two ten-kiloton missiles.

Another missile hit the ship that I had scouted out, just in-case the plasma pulse hadn't damaged-it enough.

Two missile-bots flew out of our battleship, and wove their way towards the last enemy battleship near the wreck.

That battleship received two one-kiloton detonations.

A quarter of an hour after my pod docked, I received a telepathic thump that we were still alive. My pod would soon be turned-around so that I could exit it. I wouldn't be able to exit my pod for at least another quarter of an hour. End of transmission.

Utter silence.

I may perhaps-have felt my pod turning around.

I waited.

Half an hour later, a slightly-depressed telepathic message was whispered to me, informing me that I'd be in the dark for awhile longer.

Fifteen minutes later, my pod-lights came on, shocking my eyes with their brightness.

My pod's door opened behind-me.

My limb-grips released.

And I walked-out backwards.

Everyone was gathered down-below.

"Someone didn't come back," was telepathed to me as soon as I had backed-out of my pod.

Everyone was assembled *"on deck,"* including our roommates and the battle-captain.

"Wendy, good job," she said, as I reached the floor.

"We sunk four enemy vessels."

A telepathic cheer.

"One took a beam-hit, followed by a missile."

"Two went down by missiles."

"One had remote-controlled land-mines detonate its life-support."

"One of our people didn't come back. She was destroyed by a plasma-pulse directed at her by the enemy."

Pause.

"We don't have her soul."

A moment of prayer.

"We are currently in flight."

"Sssk ships are picking-up the pieces."

Rene didn't make it back. Spam's pod had been disabled, and had to be towed-back.

The next day, I was publicly berated for not approaching the blip cautiously enough. Spam also received a *"commendation"*. Spam and Rene had both seen a hole on the other side of the vessel. They also thought it was a bug in the computer software. They had seen such holes before while playing simulations, and had ignored them without ill-effect.

We ate after the briefing, but not in the cafeteria. Food was brought down to us on the mezzanine floor.

We ate in silence.

Oak and Carry were given blue-stims. I didn't know why.

After we finished eating, everyone, the Black-Panthers and the Golden "rats", returned to their rooms.

As I walked down the stairs, I thought to myself, "Fuck!"

My pod had actually been out in the battle...

Shit!

Now that the meal was over, I was fucking terrified.

Sally opened the door to our room. I entered. She followed, and closed the door behind us.

I hopped onto my bed.

Sally undressed to her underwear, and silently crept into her bed.

My bed felt very-cold, very-uninviting, and very-alone.

I wasn't going to sleep-alone tonight. Not with the fear-sense about me.

Every "ting" and rumble of the ship made me nervous.

I hopped out of my bed, and climbed into bed with Sally.

Another real combat

We were given the next day off.

All we did was laze-around near the exit door, just outside of our rooms... in a Panther-pack.

I was still mentally *“thick”* from the day before.

We lay-around for at least half a day. It was difficult to tell though, since there were no clocks. Our only cue was the morning alarm-video, and the dimming of the lights.

As it turns out, we didn't actually get the entire day off.

At midday, the lights brightened to wake us up from our torpor.

Our chasing-instincts began to itch.

We watched, as one of the officers quietly entered through the airlock-door, two stairways above. She walked past the cafeteria door, down one clanking set of metal steps, past our pod-caves, and down the next staircase, to our level.

We already knew what to expect.

“Unfortunately, we need you to do some more training.”

The officer must-have expected to be mauled by nine surly Panthers.

We didn't maul her.

This time... 😊

“The pods will be turned-on in half an hour.”

The officer turned-around to walk back up the stairs, but stopped, and looked back at us.

“Thank you.”

And, she then made a retreat up the steps.

We waited for her to get all of the way up to the cafeteria before acting.

I clambered up the steps, and immediately hopped into my pod. I might as well begin playing now, I thought. Other people took their time to visit the toilet.

My pod's door closed, and its screens activated.

I was very-specifically informed that my pod was NOT physically launched, and that I was either flying a real but-inexpensive probe, or I was flying a simulated one.

I won't go into the scenario details...

All I did was whiz my pod around, looking for anomalies.

My pod's sensors spotted some anomalies. They may have been real anomalies, or they may have been simulated and superimposed on reality, or the entire experience may have been simulated.

All of the anomalies disappeared when I got close to them.

Many disappeared as soon as I noticed them.

I didn't see any other pods flying around. No-one else seemed to be playing in the same scenario that I was playing in, which made the scenario especially boring.

After an hour, I was released. The pod lights went on. The door behind-me opened up.

And I walked out.

Below was a Golden-Panther officer. She instructed me to get some food from the cafeteria.

"That was a short day," I thought to myself...

Sally and other Golden *"rats"* were in the cafeteria eating. None of the Black-Panthers were there, except me.

One of the officers brought me some food, and I ate alone... in a room full of Golden-Panthers.

Just as I was finishing, Spam and Diamond entered.

I left with Sally to return to our room.

I'm not homosexual, but Black-Panthers like to sleep on-top of one-another when they're stressed-out.

I was stressed out.

I jumped onto Sally's bed for comfort. It felt much safer than my own cold-and-steely bunk.

Sleep.

Alert! Alert! Alert!

I didn't know that they had red flashing-lights in our dorm rooms.

"Beep-buzz! Beep-buzz! Beep-Buzz!"

Red-flashing light.

I learned what housecats felt like when the person they were sleeping on suddenly woke-up, and flung them off the bed. I was nearly as heavy as Sally, but we were operating in reduced gravity.

Her instant reaction to the alarm, rolled me to the edge of the bed.

Ten seconds later, I tumbled-off the bed.

"Beep-buzz! Beep-buzz! Beep-Buzz!"

Sally put her clothes on.

Red-flashing light.

"Beep-buzz! Beep-buzz! Beep-Buzz!"

"Come-on!"

I ran-naked into my next combat.

So did everyone else. Diamond may have had her red-underwear half-on as she ran into her pod.

A pack of nine Panthers ran-up and into their pods, knocking-over four of their Golden-Panther roommates.

We were loaded and launched before our roommates got past the cafeteria.

I was going to be launched into ACTUAL fucking combat!

Wait a minute...

I had no idea why I was so eager to enter combat. It must have been the *Friendly-Pet™* implant.

But I didn't get launched...

All I got was gunnery. ☹️

When my pod's visuals faded onto the wallpaper-display, my pod was NOT already flying into space.

Instead, twin gun-turrets graphically faded-into my pod's fore-screen.

I had never done gunnery before.

Oh well... so much for training.

Not having ever trained on the guns, I already knew how to operate them. I used my forearms to swivel left-and-right. I leaned forward to arc up-and-down. And my head-movements applied micro-adjustments. Whatever I would concentrate-on, would be automatically targeted, and zoomed-in on.

Two seconds after the gun-turrets and star-field faded into view, I began firing.

In front of me was a smaller enemy-vessel, about the size of a bus. The ship was fully "*uncloaked*", and was no-longer hiding behind a hole.

I took aim at the first vessel.

I zoomed-in by concentrating.

The ship had a window in front... odd. Most battle-ready spaceplanes didn't have windows. Windows were a liability.

Inside, I could see an Aussie (an older-race of Hominid) furiously typing-away at a terminal.

I knew that I was in fast-time... He was moving at half the rate I was.

I aimed straight for the window.

I aimed straight at his head.

I could see his eyebrows.

I fired.

The bolts took three seconds of my time to get there.

They flew through the window, and depressurized the cabin. I think I missed his head.

With the cabin depressurized, my next thought was to aim for the ship's engines. I knew exactly where they were.

I re-aimed the turrets to the right-and-below the punctured windows. I was still visually zoomed-in.

From my perspective, the guns were rotating extremely slowly. Panning the five-meters distance to the engine took fifteen seconds of my time.

The section of enemy spaceplane that I was looking at, "*felt*" hot.

I fired two volleys of two darts into the engines.

The darts moved in slow motion.

I didn't wait for them to hit.

Instead, I rapidly zoomed-out, slowly to me, and spotted another bus-sized ship coming out of hiding. Only half of it was visible behind its spatial-distortion weave.

Sometime about then, I received a telepathic notification that the bolts had hit the first ship.

All I saw of the second spaceplane was a blue-yellow green-fuselage, framed by a circular haze.

I had no clear target on the ship. Firing arbitrarily at it would merely puncture holes in the crew quarters, or something equally as ineffective.

My artificial-intelligence let me know that I'd be better-off firing. I had plenty of bolts left.

I aimed at the upper-right edge of the visible enemy-ship. Its engines might be there.

I fired.

The bolts flew extremely slowly.

I aimed a bit-further towards the centre of the visible circle...

... and fired two-more bolts. My first set of bolts were only one-third of the way to their destination.

Now requested by the artificial-intelligence to NOT waste bolts, I waited and watched. The spatial-weave was slowly dissipating, revealing the enemy ship. It looked to be larger than the first bus-sized craft.

I glanced-over at the first enemy-spaceplane. Despite having-been punctured by bolts, it fired bolts back at us. They were just leaving the ship's gun-turrets. They-also moved in slow motion.

I looked back at the bolts that I had fired at the second enemy-ship.

They were going wide. It didn't occur to me at the time, but the hide-away spatial-weave that the ship used was dissipating. The paths of the momentum-directed bolts were being bent by the spatial changes.

I began to take aim at the first ship that I had hit.

The first set of bolts that I had fired at the second-ship, were going to miss. They went wide, and to the right.

The other bolts veered left.

I wondered if I should target the hidden gun-turret on the first ship. I had seen where the bolts had fired from.

My pod's artificial-intelligence alerted-me to glance-back at my first set of bolts.

The bolts had completely bypassed the target...

... But they impacted something hiding behind.

I only saw a small burst of light, as an errant bolt hit some energy-gear on a completely-invisible third enemy-ship, behind the second enemy-ship.

I heard someone should "*Fuck!*" over my intercom, but eight-times as long as normal, and three-octaves lower.

The ship's artificial-intelligence automatically ignited a strobe-pulse, which lit-up all of the surrounding space.

A white silhouette of a fucking-huge cube-shaped battleship was illuminated.

It was easily ten-times as long, wide, and deep as ours ship. Which meant it was one-thousand-times the mass.

Two seconds after the ship's light-silhouette briefly appeared, "*We're outgunned,*" was telepathed to me.

We bolted.

Space turned inside out.

My target-crosshairs faded into points.

All the lights went-out in my pod.

I got a telepathic blip that I was to stay there for awhile.

Ten-minutes later, my pod-lights turned-on to a very-dim glow.

I telepathically learned that two Panthers were left marooned when we ran... But we had to run, because a ship that size would vaporize-us in a millisecond.

Forty minutes later, my pod doors opened.

I backed out, as usual.

My legs didn't work well.

It was difficult to breathe.

All of my muscles were sore.

I must have been given atmospheric stim-drugs while I was firing. Now that they had worn-off, I was suddenly very out-of-it.

I nearly fell-off my ramp as I backed out.

Sally was on the floor.

She hitched a collar to me.

I barely noticed, I was so dazed.

Sally led me up to the cafeteria.

Everyone-else was eating food in silence.

I was led into the cafeteria.

I had to be helped onto the bench.

Food was already waiting.

Sally hand-fed me.

I learned that the two marooned people died, but their souls were rescued. They would be deployed with another crew.

A serious battle had erupted after we fled. The Aussies had been stalking-us since our victory two days before.

Meanwhile, the Golden-Panther "vet" buzzed around-me, injecting me with stims. I hardly noticed her.

I wasn't very hungry.

I was hand-fed another bite.

I don't remember going to sleep.

Seriously.

I know that I ate.

And then I remember waking-up in the middle of the night for a few seconds.

And then I awoke in the morning.

As I found out later, my body relaxed. My head slumped-down onto the table. And then, my body fell-off the bench that I sat on.

I had died.

Everyone just-stared at my collapsed body for half a minute.

Someone eventually checked my breathing and heart-rate.

My heart had stopped beating.

The medical-officer, who had just sat down to eat, rushed upstairs, and returned with a hand ventilator and “*resurrection*” drugs.

The drugs were injected above my heart using a very-long needle.

I was ventilated for half an hour before I stabilized.

Three officers carried my limp body to my bunk.

A day of rest

I didn't get out of bed for half the day.

I was in a mental fog, kind-of a delirium.

Sally brought food into our room, and fed me.

And then I slept.

And woke-up and ate.

And slept again.

Hominid core-ships

I won't use the term "*Death-star*", because that name is already taken by the movie, "*Star Wars*". People who fight them call them "*Death moons*"... Not a very-impressive term.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_Star,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars)

I prefer "*Core-ship*".

Hominid core-ships look like they do in the movie, "*Star wars*", minus the energy-beam dimple.

They are spheres, ranging in size from eight-kilometers to four-hundred-kilometers across.

They are constructed of a solid sphere-core of fissile material, uranium or higher.

The entire surface of the sphere-core is covered with blue-grey-painted buildings of various heights.

A four-hundred-kilometer diameter core-ship can have a population of up to two-point-five billion people. ($\pi \times 400\text{-km} \times 400 \text{ km} \times 5000 \text{ people/km}^2$) Core-ships are used to transport the populations of entire planets.

They can also be used as aircraft-carriers, combined with troop-carriers, combined with ice-breakers. They can push their way into any solar-system, destroy a planet's defenses, and deploy an enormous invasion-force. Meanwhile, anyone attacking a core-ship will find them extremely difficult to destroy, requiring an assault force of approximately half the core-ship's population.

Hominid core-ship

We knew that our battleship had been called-in to help fight a core-ship. We were briefed by the Golden-Panther combat-commander about what we should expect. Unfortunately, our simulator didn't have any core-ship training-sessions. The computer-programmers had never actually fought a core-ship.

After the briefing and dinner, we were given time to sleep, helped by stims.

Two hours before we reached the core-ship, we were woken-up.

An hour before the core-ship battle, we were loaded into our pods.

We sat in the dark.

Thirty minutes of anticipation.

And then...

... Whoosh!

All of the sudden, my pod's visuals came on, and I was flying through the trenches of a core-ship.

I knew that there were three core-ships in the area, all hovering around an Alotian planet. The Alotians were neutral. They didn't want the core-ships around, and they REALLY didn't want a core-ship battle above their planets.

I knew that I was flying through the trenches of the largest core-ship, four-hundred-kilometers in diameter.

I knew that my mission was to run-around the trenches and map them, directed by my pod's artificial-intelligence.

That's it.

That's all that I was supposed to do.

It would be a boring scenario if it weren't for the fact that I thought it to be very real.

Of course, we could have been lied to... more like deceived.

What I saw in front of me wasn't necessarily real. Despite what our combat-commander said, a core-ship simulation could have been uploaded into our ship's computer. I might be playing in a computer-simulated combat against a core-ship.

There was also a chance that I was remotely-piloting a pod through the core-ship's building-canyons.

And then there was the chance that I was in the pod.

All of this information took two minutes to relay.

Meanwhile, my artificial-intelligence did most of the flying work.

My brain eventually kicked-in.

I was flying down the center of vacuum-atmosphere city-street, with buildings up to ten stories high on either side.

A "T"-intersection was coming-up. A dead-end was directly in-front of me. Small alleyways branched to the left and the right.

"Did I want to travel left or right?" queried the pod's artificial-intelligence.

"Left."

Zip-zoom.

My pod instantaneously zipped-turned left at a one-hundred-degree angle; the T-intersection was more of a crooked-T. The turn was so rapid that I didn't perceive it happen. Nor did I feel the turn's angular-momentum.

I was telepathically informed that a few wall-guns shot at my pod.

They missed.

From the previous day's briefing, I knew that if the wall-guns hit my pod, they would most-likely do nothing. The darts they fired couldn't be very powerful, or any darts that missed would

penetrate the walls of the opposite building, depressurizing whatever buildings were across the street.

My job as a pilot was to choose “left” or “right” when my pod came to an intersection. Less-importantly, I was to maneuver my pod within the confines of the street-canyon, which was about ten-meters wide.

If I forgot to maneuver, or made a maneuvering mistake, my pod’s artificial-intelligence would take control. If I wasn’t fast-enough at deciding left or right, or if I chose the wrong direction, my pod’s artificial-intelligence would make the decision for me.

My pod’s artificial-intelligence was tasked with mapping-out the buildings, as well as the locations of gun turrets, energy sources, Hominid populations, and spaceplane hangers.

Another “T”-intersection approached at one-hundred kilometers-per-hour. A dead-end was once-again looming.

Right or left?

“Right”.

Crap!

I crashed.

My pod failed to turn right, and I went straight into a building. I got a momentary glimpse of some very-startled red-headed Hominid-women... before they depressurized.

And then the really scary scene happened...

The pod that crashed was an unmanned aerial-vehicle.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unmanned_aerial_vehicle)

My visuals instantaneously changed.

I found myself on-approach to the core-ship, perhaps one-hundred kilometers away.

“You totaled your only remote-pod. This is for real.” One of the Golden-Panther officers spoke that.

"I have been piloting you in. You-are in-control now."

"I have been piloting you in" didn't boost my confidence.

Golden-Panthers were notoriously-bad pod-pilots. On a per-second basis, my life was more in-danger with her piloting my pod, than if I were flying-around the core-ship trenches.

Anyway, I was still alive. By that point, two of my group had already been hit and depressurized. Their bodies had died. Their souls were being flown back by soul-catchers. They'd be in new bodies shortly.

I needed to orient myself.

Spacecraft were everywhere.

They were unlabeled. I didn't know if they were friendly or not. Nor did they know if I was friendly or not... Their only clue was that I was heading in, towards the core-ship, so I must be part of the assault-team.

A few very-large darts flew past me, originating from the core-ship. They most-likely targeted one of the larger ships, not me.

No-one was chasing me. Pods were just a nuisance to the enormous battle.

My journey-in took fifteen minutes.

When I got within a kilometer of the four-hundred-kilometer core-ship, my artificial-intelligence warned me to expect darts fired in my direction. I wasn't alerted if any darts were fired at my pod though, perhaps as a precaution in-case anyone was reading my mind.

The artificial-intelligence automatically vectored me into a building-canyon. I felt no momentum-forces as I moved, although I felt an awful-lot of fields. I was being severely irradiated by my pod's anti-momentum and fast-time fields. Most-likely, my body would die within days.

I swooped into a very-wide building-canyon, perhaps one-hundred meters across. To either side were city-blocks of tall buildings, as well as flat runway-like regions.

I was soon flying below building-height in the canyon, automatically piloted by my pod's artificial-intelligence.

As I zoomed-along, at what appeared to be fifty kilometers-per-hour, I noticed Hominid military and transport vessels parked on "runway" surfaces adjacent to the canyon.

My artificial-intelligence informed me that I would be turning right into an unmapped alleyway.

Based on the speed of the buildings flying past, my pod appeared (to me) to-have slowed to twenty kilometers-per-hour. My pod was travelling at fifty kilometers-per-hour, but I was in a fast-time field, so it only looked-like twenty kilometers-per-hour to me.

When the turn came, my pod appeared (to me) to slow-down to five kilometers-per-hour. The blue-grey iron-walls of the core-ship buildings changed-color to purple.

My pod turned right, into a ten-meter wide canyon.

My speed perceptually increased to twenty-kilometers per hour.

During the turn, radiation-fields were INCREDIBLY intense. The pod most-likely didn't slow down. Instead, it entered fast-time for a few seconds. One minute of real-time, lasted ten-minutes for me and the pod.

I sped through the building-canyon.

I knew that I had to follow the canyon-turns in a stair-step pattern: First left, then make a right, then make another left, and then a right.

The first "T"-intersection was coming up.

My artificial-intelligence asked me which way I wanted to go.
“Left.”

Time slowed-down on the outside. From my perspective, my pod once-again slowed to five kilometers-per-hour, so it could successfully turn into the ten-meter alleyway.

My pod’s artificial-intelligence ignored my “left” prompt, and gracefully turned my pod right. I could actually feel the momentum-forces this time. If my arms and legs weren’t strapped-in, I would have fallen-off the motorcycle-seat.

Just as I turned right, two darts flew in front of my pod, sourcing from the alley I had just left.

Fuck! I was being chased!

Time sped-up, and I was heading down a long alley.

I didn’t do much of anything, except panic.

My artificial-intelligence informed me that the alley ended in a left-turn. I was going to bank left.

I tried looking behind me to see if anything was chasing.

Maybe.

I couldn’t tell.

I might have seen the extradimensional blur of a Hominid pyramid-shaped spear-tip ship. It would have been four-meters across...

... But I only barely saw a motion-blurred outline of a shadow behind me.

I returned my gaze forward.

The alleyway turn was only twenty-meters away.

Time slowed in the outside world again.

This time, my pod had to bank-hard to make the corner. The star-field sky was no-longer above me. It was to my right, the ground to my left, and a building above.

I REALLY felt the momentum-forces this time. They pulled me hard into my seat.

Time sped-up outside.

My pod travelled thirty-meters more, to the end of the alleyway.

It was just righting-itself.

I reached the end of the alleyway.

The buildings to my left-and-right disappeared.

The canyon opened-out.

My pod began flying-over a large “*tarmac*” section of the core-ship. Military spaceplanes were parked all-over its surface.

While I flew through the channels between the buildings, the Hominids would have only fired small darts at my pod. That way, any darts that missed me would NOT go into the buildings, and depressurize the Hominids working inside their offices.

Now that I was over open-ground, the Hominids could fire deadlier darts.

I don't know if I was hit by a dart from a wall-mounted turret, or by the phantom spear-tip that was chasing me.

I died.

My soul was almost-certainly rescued by the soul-catcher built into my seat.

But my soul never made it back to my battleship.

Kaboom!

My battleship was destroyed sometime after I took control of my pod.

The battle involved three core-ships parked over the Alotian planet. The core-ship I was assigned to was the largest, at four-hundred-kilometers diameter. Two smaller core-ships, about one-hundred kilometers, were on the other side of the planet.

Core-ships cannot be blown-up with missiles.

They can be slowed, by destroying the momentum-plates installed in the roofs of their buildings, and underneath their landing-pad "*tarmacs*".

Core-ships can be disabled by nuking their entire surface.

Or, the core of a smaller core-ship can be hurled into the center of the larger core-ship, from an extradimensional angle. The impact turns the cores into a HUGE-ENORMOUS-GIGANTIC nuclear-bomb.

The detonation is not as devastating as you might expect from a four-hundred-kilometer diameter sphere of plutonium going thermonuclear.

Back to the story...

The core-ship that I was mapping was extradimensionally impacted by a smaller core.

One-eighth of the planet's surface was lethally irradiated.

One-tenth of that area immediately bursts into flames.

A billion Alotians might have died.

As well as two-point-five billion Hominids on the core-ship.

As well as most non-Hominoid military-personnel within four-thousand kilometers of the detonated core-ship... perhaps a half-a-billion people.

After the largest core-ship went thermonuclear, one of the smaller one-hundred kilometer core-ships was flung into the planet. The impact would have created a large earthquake, perhaps a tsunami, and left ninety-kilometers of the core-ship exposed on the planet's surface as a giant monolith.

The third core-ship was allowed to escape.

At the time of my battleship's destruction, sixty-percent of my Black-Panther pack had been killed in the core-ship attack. Many of their souls were unrecoverable.

Meanwhile, on the ship...

The job of a Black-Panther's Golden-Panther roommate is to keep their roommate alive. While we trained in our pods, our roommates sat in front of flat-screen monitors, and piloted the virtual enemy-ships that attacked us. Or, they secretly acted as our co-pilots, helping us to avoid enemies, stimulating us up, etcetera. Once in-awhile, they played-piloted their own virtual pods from their flat-panel terminals, without the aid of the pod-simulator's realism.

Enough Black-Panthers had died in the core-ship assault, that the Golden-Panthers whose roommates had died, were being called one-by-one to the medical lounge.

There, the Golden-Panther roommates were put to sleep, and their souls were transferred into Black-Panther bodies.

*"If your roommate dies, you become a Black-Panther. Got it?
DON'T – LET – YOUR – ROOMMATE – DIE!"*

What really happened on my home-planet

Sally was Janet's older sister. I was selected by her to be her "co-pilot" because of my good grades, and her sister's recommendation about my character. In particular, Sally chose me because her sister commented "that I was-not a prat".

Sally didn't know I would be turned into a Black-Panther until after her decision was finalized. She didn't like impacting my life that way, but she also knew that I would want to escape from the limited-existence of the outpost-town, where I grew up.

Sally didn't ever expect the two of us to be in combat...

Our military was a tiny, low-tech "war-games" military. All we ever did, was participate in war-games. We didn't have any enemies. And we didn't want any.

When Sally wrote-down my name half a year before I was drafted, the military-post was a cushy one. After half-a-year to a year of duty, I'd get a brand-new Golden-Panther body. I'd be able to return to my home-town if I wished, or travel elsewhere.

A month before I was drafted, Sally learned that the military-post was less-cushy. It involved limited combat alongside other Cat-evolved militaries.

What felt like three weeks of space-travel to Sally and I, was nearly half a year. Our section of the battleship was in slow-time, to conserve food and resources.

By the time we reached our assigned space, war had erupted.

I didn't tell my mother that I was going to visit the draft-office that day. When I didn't show-up at night, she called the police.

A search began the next day.

It wasn't until a few days later, that a letter arrived from the military, informing my mother that I had been enlisted

immediately. My distraught mother didn't bother to check her mailbox for another two days.

Some of my high-school friends are in battleships now. I wish them well.

For more stories

You can download more of my short stories for free from:

<http://www.disclosuree.com/Stories.pdf>