

High Jinks

by Mark Flanagan

“Gorgonzolla!”

The remnant croaked, his eyes wild as he thrust an open hand in Jaffron's direction. A burst of energy tilted Jaffron's pod on its axis and sent it hurtling backwards. The force might have felt like a blast of wind, only there was no wind in space.

Jaffron kept his hands pressed to the podshield, his arms outstretched, preventing his face from being mashed against the glass as he hurtled backwards. He glided through nothingness for what seemed like hours and indeed, with only the merest frictive particles to slow his trajectory, was miles, finally slowing and eventually halting just within the game's border. Jaffron pulled his palms from the glass with a wet thwop! and shook the numbness from his arms. Then, he engaged the pod's thrusters and made his way back to the center. It was his turn.

Nice word, he thought, but Jaffron had heard better. Gorgonzolla, indeed. It was a cheese, right? They had been at it for days - the training. It had started small - bean, spittle, pants - diminutive words which while amusing, lacked the jocular juice needed to push the pods very far from center. 500 clicks tops, and that was for *dollop*. Each word in the lexicon, though technically equal to any other, derived its potency from its gelastic index - a calculation consisting of letter count, syllabic complexity, and its mirthpoint, as experienced by the word's wielder. Thus, Gorgonzolla was not to be underestimated at 11 letters, four syllables, and no small amount of mirth in its utterance.

And that was the real key, wasn't it? This was why Jaffron was out here in space with the old bugger to begin with. The games, developed over an age, had become the only safe means by which to

train the keepers - in space, and out from under the watchful eye of the Dominion, who kept jocularities at bay and had long ago stricken such verboten vocabulary from the language.

Spackle, diphthong, kerfuffle...

Words flooded Jaffron's mind as he neared the old man. Stealthy now, engine off, drifting on residual, hoping to catch the remnant napping.

Bloviolate, helmet, uvula...

The old man typically dozed between plays. He was ancient, a boy himself before the cleansing, before the Dominion had purged the language of any levity.

Under a hundred clicks, now. Jaffron could make out the old man's form, his bearded chin mashed against rough cloak, ropes of grey hair obliterating his face.

Gobsmack, caterwaul, pants...

A twelfth year, Jaffron knew the lexicon backwards and forwards, but he still hadn't beaten the remnant. Close now. With the right word he was certain to send the old man out past the radius.

Hogwash, snorkel, spittle...

Yes, very close. Was that perhaps a glint of spittle in the remnant's beard? Now was his chance; now was the time! Jaffron closed his eyelids, looked inward, focusing all of his attention on the word. And the word was Sku...

"Hippocampus!!!"

The old man's head snapped back and both arms shot straight at Jaffron's pod as he simultaneously released the word from his ever-expanding, tooth-deficient maw. It had been a trap, Jaffron realized too late as his forehead smacked into the podscreen, careening backwards in what was now an all too familiar motion. Too fast this time - he'd reach the radius for sure. And then it would be over. Again.

Skullduggery.

