

United Earth

by Molly N. Moss

The *Entropy* pinwheeled out of Twist Space only two light-hours farther from its destination than intended. All the crew members assigned to power the Twist Drive collapsed, exhausted, cursing both Chubby Checker and Lawrence Lightfoot. The latter was the astrophysicist who invented FTL. Lightfoot noticed that human space exploration began when the "twist" dance became popular in the late 1950s/early 1960s. Being a peculiar fellow, he wondered if there could be a causal connection. There was: the twist induced spontaneous frantic physiological efforts to escape the madness. Enough people doing the twist even opened portals to other dimensions, but none where humans were actually sane.

As a direct result of how the Twist Drive functioned, spaceship crew members endured near-constant pain from their ankles to their necks. They also enjoyed the tautest buttocks of all humankind.

Thirty-two hours after emerging from Twist Space, their maneuver drive brought them into a mostly stable orbit around Lambda Hydri B. On the bridge, Captain Cruz reluctantly turned away from the full-length mirror where he practiced manly poses. He radioed Doc Hacker

to report to the teleporter room and then, adopting a shrewd expression, he asked, “Two volunteers?”

“I'd love to come, Captain.” Fukishi slid an admiring gaze over Cruz's physique.

Cruz reciprocated the appraisal. “New eye shadow?”

Fukishi fluttered his eyelids. “It's called True Fantasy.”

“We'll see about that.” There being no other volunteers, Cruz beckoned Fukishi to follow him.

They'd almost reached the teleporter room when a voice of doom thundered, “CRUZ!”

He managed not to wet himself. Shaky, he turned to see Shruwa -- she was bearing down on him like a rampaging colossion from Omicron2 Eridani. Once again Cruz cursed himself for a fool. During a drunken celebration after defeating a Dimmon ship trespassing in United Earth Space territory, he'd made the mistake of kissing Shruwa. Cruz kissed everyone, but ever since then Shruwa seemed to claim him as her own.

“You weren't thinking of going planetside without your Chief Science Officer, were you?”

“Course not,” Cruz squeaked. Protocol required a science officer on planetary visits. Shruwa was a fine science officer when she wasn't PMSing — which was 30 days per month, especially in February.

Into the teleporter room strode Shruwa, Fukishi shaking his head as the science officer's skirt revealed unshaved legs, with Cruz slinking along behind them. Doc Hacker was standing over Cockup, the chief engineer. Or his feet, rather, which protruded from under the teleporter unit.

“Wasn't the teleporter maintenance supposed to be done six months ago?” Hacker's fingers twitched on his medical kit, as if he considered taking a laser scalpel to Cockup's feet.

“Ere now, a fella does 'is best, dun't 'e?” Cockup pushed himself free of the unit and scowled at the doctor. “Oother stuff kep' breakin' down, din't it?” He picked a Phillips screwdriver out of his toolbox and waved the group away. “Get on, I'll 'ave this done in a jiff.”

So they positioned themselves on teleporter pads. Cruz could see Cockup wrestling with the screwdriver. Then Cockup turned the tool wrong way around, *hammering* the screw in with the handle. Cruz gasped his horror. Grinning, the engineer scrambled to his feet and reached for the controls, while simultaneously the captain tried to protest. “Wait, Co —!”

“Appy trails!” Cockup turned the dial to “send,” and the planet-bound four were disassembled into component atoms.

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“We're alive.” Shruwa gazed at her hands as if unable to believe it, even with visual confirmation.

“No thanks to our mad mechanic,” growled Hacker.

They'd been reconstituted next to a fence surrounding a prefab base, where the husband-and-wife team of archaeologists were due for their annual medical exams. From the gate in the fence emerged Green and Wolfe, the archaeological team. Cruz promptly swept the wife into a crushing kiss of greeting, then did the same to the husband.

“Stop that! I'm not gay.” Dr. Green wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Neither am I.” Cruz shrugged. “But I have a weekly kiss quota to meet.” He struck his most virile-looking pose, to an appreciative coo from Fukishi, a warning growl from Shruwa,

and a snort from Hacker. Dr. Wolfe stood dazed, lips parted and breathing shallow.

A tap on his shoulder startled Cruz, and he turned to discover he had an identical twin. “I’m taking command,” announced the AntiCruz, and punched him.

While Cruz slumped to the ground and Fukishi shrieked alarm, Hacker opened his medical kit. “Now, who wants their check-up first?”

Dr. Green faced Hacker, slack-jawed with astonishment. “Your captain has an evil twin pummeling him, and you want to start our medical check-ups?”

Hacker shrugged. “Sure. This sort of thing happens all the time. Probably another teleporter malfunction. I think I’ll start with your blood tests.” And so saying, he stabbed his biosampler’s prong into Green’s upper arm.

Mingled with Green’s scream was a wordless battle cry. Fukishi, a black belt in flamingo karate, launched himself into the air. With dreamy ballet-like grace, he landed on one foot and speared his stiletto heel through the arch of AntiCruz’s boot. AntiCruz hopped away sobbing, and an enthralled Wolfe followed him.

“Now just you wait! I haven’t got a blood sample from you yet,” Hacker called out. He started to jog in pursuit of Wolfe.

But Green, running for his life, caught sight of a developing horror and skidded to a sudden halt. Hacker collided with him and they tumbled to the ground. “Umpamurf!” came a muffled but urgent shout from Green, pinned beneath Hacker.

“Huh?” Cruz, sitting up in Fukishi’s bracing arms, fingered his broken bleeding nose and yelped in pain.

“Omnimorph!” Green thrust his head and shoulders out from under Hacker, sending the

doctor sprawling. Then, pointing with wild gesticulations, he cried out, “Do something, quick!”

“An invasion of shape shifting cannibals wiped out this planet's sentient species,” Shruwa explained, consulting her pocket computer. “I deduce that Dr. Green is trying to tell us he sees one of them in our vicinity.”

“You'd see it too, if only you'd look! My wife, she's been acting strange the past two days! An omnimorph must still have been here, it must have gotten her...”

They all looked around them. Sure enough, Wolfe had just finished devouring AntiCruz's head. In an instant she shifted from the form of a human woman back into the true form of an omnimorph, a shimmering prismatic giant slug. From some unnamable part of its anatomy it extracted a pulse pistol, which it promptly aimed at the humans.

“Clever, but not quick enough,” said the omnimorph. “Now, who's next to die? I don't mind having my next meal cooked.”

“Hurry! Amaze the alien!” Shruwa looked up from her pocket computer and beckoned to her shipmates.

“Do what?” Green eyed the science officer with open suspicion.

“Bewilder it! They feed on beings they consider dull-witted. We must show out our wits!” Again Shruwa gestured to her colleagues to join her.

Cruz shrugged, and he and Fukishi and Hacker linked arms with Shruwa. They sang, swaying and kicking up their heels:

United Earth, what does, what must unite us?

Not DNA, nor common courtesy!

Hold close your friends, but your enemies closer:

That is always our shared insanity!

With an ululating wail that echoed weirdly in the half-excavated ruins, the omnimorph fled. It moved surprisingly fast for a slug. All the humans shook hands, and Cruz gave out kisses until he bumped his broken nose on Shruwa's cheekbone and howled in agony.

Hacker clamped a hand on Green's shoulder. "I think next should be the prostate exam."

Bio: Molly N. Moss wrote her first short story when she was six, tried writing for publication at fourteen, and gave up at twenty when the editor of a horror zine asked her to show respect for the English language by ceasing to write fiction in it. Since 2012 is the year of the Mayan death curse, Molly decided she couldn't make matters any worse by trying again.