

The voyages of the ABC123

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Dedicated to our epic space adventures and yours.

Preface: The ABC123

This is the story of a small cargo ship named the ABC123 and its crew: Nono Hoho, Strawberry Coffee, and Bishop 1348. Over the course of this story, you will learn two vital things. The first is that a grilled cheese sandwich can be useful to have at hand. The second is that adventure lurks everywhere and often starts near a potted plant.

* * *

The ABC123 used to be a sailing yacht owned by a businessman who liked grilled cheeses with tomato and had a pet toad named Phil¹. It changed owners several

¹ Its real name was Philomarkalotticus.

times since then before falling into the possession of Nono Hoho and Strawberry Coffee.

Now the ship is a small cargo ship. In the front is a cockpit where Nono pilots it. The living quarters are in the middle and consists of sleeping quarters, a kitchen to eat in, a small bathroom, and Bishop's science office. In the back is the cargo hold and Strawberry's engineering room. The walls of the ship are light grey with an orange stripe that runs across the middle. The floor is made of metal plates that are worn and dented from years of being walked on. Pipes and ducting cover the ceiling and walls and occasionally the floor like a maze.

As a small cargo ship, the ABC123 does fairly well, though it has developed some unpredictable reliability problems over the years.

The crew of the ABC123 is just as interesting.

Strawberry Coffee is a dangerous, but empathetic, engineer. He is wild and friendly and has the ability to fix almost anything broken and even some things that aren't. He has two small animals which he calls his stuffies and they are named Tiza Jr. and Wally Jr. They sometimes

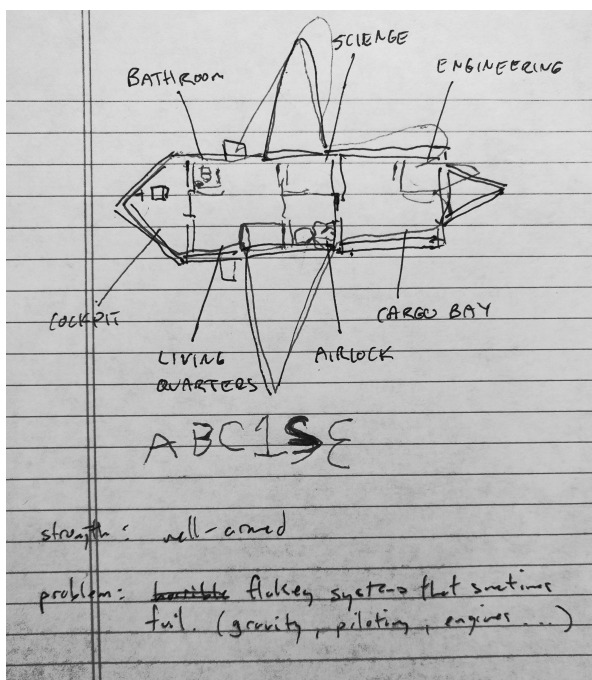


Figure 1: Very expensive architectural diagram of the ABC123.

“help” him out. The ABC123’s reliability problems keep him very busy.

Nono Hoho is a hotshot pilot who is calm and precise, but occasionally overwhelmed. He can pilot any ship in the galaxy. Sometimes he never crashes into things. That

sounds confusing, but it's true and illustrates the very nature of his complex character. He also has a small animal which he calls his stuffy, named Freckles, that he likes to snuggle with during naps. He sometimes flies the ABC123 like a hawk gliding through the sky and other times with the grace of a plummeting baby walrus.

Bishop 1348 is a scientist android who helps out where he can. One time he identified a new bacteria that liked to eat mint chip ice cream. Another time he got into an argument with a toaster about whether toasting bread was the best way to spend one's life².

Together, they take on missions carrying cargo from one end of the galaxy to the other. Their standard advertisement goes like this:

The ABC123 is not the fastest ship in the galaxy, nor the strongest, nor the most dangerous, nor does it have the largest cargo hold or biggest refrigerator, but we

² Toasters always have good points.

know you value your cargo and we know that getting it to where it needs to go on time is important to you!

That's why we're the best ship for you. No cargo is too mysterious! No pirates are too dangerous! We won't ask any questions!

Everyone says we're the best in the business. Even better than the XYZ-10-10! They are slower and less reliable than a hibernating eight-toed stink-flinging sloth cub from the Pasky Quadrant. Plus they smell like last week's stinky socks. (We don't smell like stinky socks.)

You want us and we want your money! Contact us today! We are waiting to hear from you!

That's everything you need to know about the ABC123

and its crew.

Adventures await!

Three pirate attacks on the way to Beta Calculus

It was Wednesday. The ABC123 cargo ship was parked on a landing pad in Bay 12 of the sinister Spacestation Alpha. Spacestation Alpha wasn't much to look at and no one thinks of it as a vacation hot spot, but cargo from across the galaxy passes through this station from a variety of locations. That made it a great place to find a job transporting cargo. That's why they were here.

Strawberry was wandering around the ABC123 fixing doors with his hammer. Several of them would only open when the ship was moving at extreme speeds which made it difficult to go to the bathroom or get a sandwich.

Bishop stood on the landing pad underneath the ship holding the refueling line checking the outer hull for damage.

Nono stood at the end of the ABC123 ramp surveying the scene before him and looking for a potential customer. Bay 12 was a large bay and there was lots of activity. Ships coming and going, refueling, cargo moving around, a group of hippos singing to a small plant, and all the sorts of things one sees in a busy spaceport. What Nono didn't see was a potential customer, so he decided to take a walk around.

He stepped away from the ramp and rounded the corner of the ABC123. Before him, an octopus-like alien was standing next to a huge cargo container and looking sad. Nono noticed the alien looked nervous and alternating between standing awkwardly and walking briskly around the cargo to make sure it was ok.

Nono, knowing no fear, stepped up to the octopus-like alien and said, "Hi! My name is Nono. I think you're looking for me."

Nono's facts!

I read a book once about a dog detective and he had facts. I have facts, too. That is a fact!

Everyone falls into one of two groups: people looking for me and people not looking for me. I've never met anyone who wasn't in one of those groups. That is also a fact!

The octopus-like alien looked up at Nono in surprise and took a step back. "I need a cargo ship to transport my highly-valuable cargo," he said with occasional guttural spurts and wild waving of his tentacles.

Nono looked at the octopus-like alien, then at the cargo, and said, "My name is Nono and you're definitely looking for me. I'm the pilot of the ABC123 which is maybe the best ship in the galaxy. If we can't transport it safely, then we should retire and join a band of singing and dancing hippos."

The octopus-like alien paused and said nothing. He looked around and saw no one else offering to take his

cargo. Then he looked at Nono again and sized him up. Then his face frowned awkwardly with what might have been a smile of some sort and he extended several of his tentacles. "I am Otto! I am shivering with delight at meeting you! Your confidence is overwhelming! We will pay you much money if you get the cargo safely to Beta Calculus. I would be remiss if I didn't warn you that there are pirates that seek to take possession of it!"

Nono thought hard. "Pirates. I think we can deal with that. Do you have 1,000 gold pieces that we can put in a treasure chest in our hold? If we are ever boarded, that will confuse the pirates and help us protect the real cargo."

Otto jumped in delight, "That is a strange request, but I think we can do that!"

Nono smiled. "Then we are in agreement. I'll get my crew to load this cargo container onto our ship and we'll be off."

Otto turned and motioned to one of his minions and muttered something in his ear. His minion ran off.

Nono called to Bishop and Strawberry. After a few moments, they ran down the ramp. At the end of the

ABC123 ramp, Bishop tripped over nothing obvious and sprawled across the ground. Strawberry stopped to help Bishop up, but in the process, tripped over Bishop's foot, did a forward tumble, and knocked over a potted plant parked helplessly nearby sending dirt everywhere. Bishop managed to stand and reached out a hand to help Strawberry up, but then slipped on the dirt from the potted plant and fell to the ground again.

Nono exclaimed, "We've got some cargo and a mission! And there will be pirates! Can you two stop monkeying around and get the cargo onto the ship? Then I think we should get out of here."

Strawberry picked himself up off the ground carefully and brushed off some dirt. Strawberry said, "That sounds super! I love missions!" Strawberry ran over to the cargo container, picked up the control pad, put the cargo container in hover mode, and then motioned to Bishop to push the cargo into the ABC123 cargo hold.

Bishop stood up slowly, so as not to lose his balance again. He reached down and picked up a rock that just bit him. Then wandered over to push the cargo container

into the ABC123 as directed.

Otto's minion returned with a treasure chest and put it at Otto's feet. Otto picked it up and handed it to Nono.

Nono awkwardly gave Otto a high-five³ and said, "See you in a day or two!" Then Nono ran up the ramp, dropped the treasure chest in the middle of the entry-way in the most obvious place in the ship, and headed straight for the cockpit.

As soon as the cargo was on the ship, Strawberry returned to fixing the ship's cannons. He looked at the targeting system and said sadly, "I was hoping to stay at the spacestation a while longer to fix the cannons. I also need some spare parts! This targeting computer keeps telling me it wants to write a book about trees, but the kind that make nests on giant seagulls. It makes no sense. I guess I'll have to fix them later."

Bishop heard him and replied, "I could also use some spare parts. Many of the instruments in my science office have not worked since we rescued that baby five-headed lemur from Hippocampus Seven and it chewed

³ It's never clear which tentacle to high-five.

on everything.” Bishop looked around in his science of-
fice glumly and poked an instrument panel which emit-
ted several sad and broken beep boop boop noises, then
caught fire. Bishop wearily put the fire out and then sat
down again.

Nono jumped into the pilot’s chair. He pulled out his
flight manual and started on his pre-flight departure prepa-
ration checklist. “Ramp up? Nope... Press that button.
There we go. Ramp up? Yes! Outer door shut? Nope...
Press that button, turn this knob, wait for the light ... wait
wait wait ... Yes! Now let’s open the gas line into the en-
gines, power up the drive core, wash the windshield, pop
a piece of gum in my mouth, throw away the wrapper
in the designated gum wrapper trash can, buckle my seat
belt, assess my life choices leading to this moment ... I’m
the best hotshot pilot ever! ... Fire up the engines and ...
we’re out of here!”

The ABC123 leaped from the ground and spun around
in the air causing everyone nearby on the landing pad to
throw themselves to the ground for safety. Then it ac-
celerated out of Spacestation Alpha Bay 12, accidentally

clipping the tail of a nearby parked spaceship, and continued out of space station airspace at extreme speeds!

Bishop and Strawberry, unprepared for take-off, fell to the floor and then tumbled into the back wall. Strawberry shouted, “Nono! You promised to tell us before we take off! I bumped my head again!”

Bishop’s rules to surviving the ABC123

1. Buckle in before Nono blasts off.
2. Don’t forget rule number 1.

“Oops! Sorry. I’m just so excited about this mission! Haha!” Nono set in a course toward their destination. As soon as the ship was moving smoothly, he engaged the autopilot, unbuckled his safety belt, and exited the cockpit. “I bet this mission will be easy-peasy. What should we do until we get to Beta Calculus? I think I want a nap.”

“I’ve got some things to fix. We weren’t at Spacesta-

tion Alpha long enough for me to fix the secondary engine drive system,” replied Strawberry.

“I want to examine this rock that bit my leg when I slipped on the dirt from the potted plant. Why did it bite my leg? Did it think it was a good idea? I know I didn’t.” Bishop stood holding the rock that bit him, then wandered over to his science lab to do some investigative science.

“Nap times are the best times!”, shouted Nono with exuberance as he picked up his stuffy Freckles and headed to his bunk for a nap.

* * *

Several hours passed.

The shrill sound of alarms in the ABC123 rang across the ship suggesting a large object was close by and getting closer. This startled Strawberry and he threw his hammer across the room by accident. The hammer sailed across the room and landed on Bishop’s foot. Bishop yelped in surprise and dropped a microscope on his other foot, “Yeaouch!” Nono awoke from his nap.

Nono and Strawberry rushed to the cockpit and saw a dead parrot sail past the ship's window.

"Oh, my goodness! That was a dead parrot sailing past the ship in the middle of space!" cried Nono!

Bishop yelled from the back of the ship while looking at his dented android feet, "A dead parrot? Pirates must be close by! Check the radar!"

Nono looked at the radar. "Great space pickles! There's a spaceship right behind us in close pursuit! It must be a pirate spaceship!" Nono was overwhelmed and fainted. His body slumped over the arm of the pilot's chair.

Strawberry rushed to Nono's side and shook him to wake him up. Nono finally awoke and looked around, looked at the radar, saw the indications on the radar that there was a pirate spaceship directly behind them closing fast, and exclaimed, "Oh no!"

Nono almost fainted again when Strawberry shouted, "Do something! Pilot the ship! I think the pirate ship is trying to attach to the ABC123!"

Nono straightened in his chair and pulled himself together, "Right! I'm a hotshot pilot! I'm going to pilot this

ship!” He adjusted his position in the chair, grabbed the ship’s controls, and performed evasive maneuvers just in time to prevent the pirate spaceship from attaching to the side of the ABC123.

Bishop, hobbled into the cockpit and said, “Perhaps we should try outrunning them?”

Nono replied, “Excellent idea, my favorite android! Let them eat engine dust!”

Nono Hoho’s piloting tips

1. Don’t press the big red button that makes the ship explode—why ships have this is a mystery.
2. Don’t turn the steering wheel more than 5 ways around—then it will fall off making it hard to steer.
3. When blasting off, hold the green button with your right hand and the orange button with your left hand—it makes the engines run smoother.

4. When evading tricky space pirates, do a hard turn and slow down and they will pass you, except when they are space monkey pirates that have ships with arms which will just grab you as they pass.

Nono maxxed the engines and the ship lurched forward. Strawberry managed to grab the wall, but Bishop didn't and he fell backward and slammed into the back wall of the cockpit. "Ouch! I bonked my head!"

Several tense moments passed as the radar showed the pirate ship falling behind until it no longer showed up on the radar.

Nono exclaimed, "Ha! Take that pirates! We outran you!"

At that moment, one of the engines sputtered and went offline and the ship slowed down. Smoke filled the ship.

Strawberry got a serious look on his face. He picked up Tiza Jr. and Wally Jr. and said, "Come on guys. Time to go fix stuff." He headed to the engine compartment to fix things.

Nono shouted back to Strawberry, “I’m going to keep flying the ship. Maybe there are more pirates near by. I wonder if they know about our cargo. If so, I wonder how they found out about us so fast. We barely left the space station.”

* * *

Several hours passed.

Nono continued to expertly guide the ship through the overflowing nothingness of space while humming to himself.

Strawberry attempted to fix the engines. He was using his hammer and glue gun to piece things back together, but had problems fixing the temperamental manifold distributor completely. “I think that’ll hold for now, but I’ll need new parts to really fix it. We shouldn’t try maxxing out the engines like that again until we have a chance to get new parts. And a grilled cheese sandwich.” he shouted to Nono.

“That’s ok! I will use my amazing hotshot piloting!” Nono replied. “I set up an alarm that will tell us if pirates

are behind us and getting too close. That'll prevent us from getting sur—"

At that moment, the alarm went off and the red DANGER light flashed. Nono checked the radar and saw another pirate spaceship behind the ABC123 and getting closer fast!

"Another pirate spaceship approaching!" yelled Nono to the crew. "I don't think they want to give us hugs."

Nono turned the engines up a bit, but didn't max them out because he remembered Strawberry said maxing them out might break them again "Hmm... We're not going fast enough. If we want to outrun them, we're going to have to max the engines again."

Strawberry yelled, "No! The engines will break and we'll be floating in the vacuum of space forever!" But before he could finish saying that, Nono maxxed the engines and the ship lurched forward!

Strawberry fell to the floor and bonked his head. He stood up, but felt dazed. He shook his head a little to clear it. He was pretty sure the engines would break and that they couldn't outrun the pirates this time. He opened the

weapon closet and pulled out a sword. "I'll need a sword if those pirates board the ship," he said. He paused and took a second sword. "Maybe two swords."

At that moment, the crew heard a small explosion from the engine room and the ship immediately slowed down again. A faint smell of burning plastic and smoke, slightly different than the previous smell of smoke, filled the living quarters.

Nono shouted, "Great singing hippos in space! One of the engines is out and we're not going fast enough to outrun the pirates. Prepare to be boarded!"

Strawberry looked at the swords in his hands and frowned. "Knew it."

The pirate ship came up alongside the ABC123 and a tube extended from the side of the ship and attached itself to the hull of the ABC123 with a grinding kathump. Lasers cut a hole in the ABC123 hull where the tube was attached and smoke poured in through the hole. Suddenly, a pirate with a robot tentacle arm jumped through the smoke into the ABC123!

Nono shouted, "We have got to get that engine back

online!” Nono leaped out of the pilot’s chair and ran out of the cockpit and into the living quarters. Strawberry threw him one of the swords, then ran to the engine room to fix the broken engine.

The pirate with a robot tentacle spotted the treasure chest sitting in the middle of the cabin, smiled with delight, and headed towards it. Nono caught the sword from Strawberry with a flourish and lunged at the pirate, but missed and tripped over its tentacle, and dropped his sword. He almost fell to the floor but grabbed the wall to catch himself just in time.

Bishop ran in to the cabin with his arms waving all over the place shouting, “Ahhhhh!” He immediately tripped over Nono’s sword and crashed into the pirate causing them both to fall to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

A second pirate appeared through the smoke and boarded the ship! This one had a weird bird head and clawed feet. As it surveyed the scene, it saw the treasure chest, squawked with delight, and jumped towards it!

Meanwhile, in the engine room, Strawberry finished replacing a pipe, some power cables, and a circuit board

and tried to bring the engine back online. It sputtered, but then died. Strawberry kicked it hard. The engine sputtered, but managed to come back online! It grumbled and sputtered. While it was finally online, it seemed pretty grumpy.

Strawberry Coffee's ways to fix an engine

1. Hammer it.
2. Fix it with your mind.
3. Feed it a grilled cheese sandwich.
4. Reseat the spatial capacitor using a set of tweezers.
5. Kick it. Hard.
6. Do nothing because sometimes it'll just fix itself.

Strawberry wiped the sweat off his brow, picked up his sword and ran back into the cabin again just in time to see Nono tumble to the floor, stand up, and smack the

second pirate on the backside. The bird pirate squawked in surprise! It tried to peck Nono on the head, but Nono dove out of the way. The bird pirate overextended itself and slammed its head on the wall. It fell into an unconscious heap on the floor.

Strawberry grabbed a roll of nanosynthetic webbing and a grilled cheese sandwich, ran to the hole in the wall of the ship that the pirates were coming through, and covered it over before any other pirates could get in. He made sure to stretch the grilled cheese as far as it could go to give the patch strength and resiliency. Something banged on the other side of the patched hole. Strawberry shouted, “This patch isn’t going to hold for long! Engines should be working now—we need to get out of here!”

Nono ran to the cockpit, jumped into the pilot chair, and jerked the ABC123 back and forth to break away from the pirate ship. He succeeded with a loud scrunching sound that reverberated throughout the ship for several awkward moments. Then he maxxed the engines again to escape!

Strawberry tied up the two unconscious pirates and

dragged them into the cargo hold and then returned to the cockpit.

Several minutes passed. The radar showed the pirate ship getting further and further behind them. Strawberry crossed his fingers anxiously hoping the engines would hold up.

Bishop walked into the cockpit and asked, “Any sign of pirates anymore?”

Nono replied, “I don’t see them on the radar.” Then he looked at the flashing red light on the console to his left. “Oh, dear. Maxing the engines is putting a lot of stress on our power systems. That’s not good.”

The ship creaked and the engines groaned. Nono checked the radar again for pirate spaceships, didn’t see any, and then brought the engines down to a safer and calmer level.

Strawberry was relieved. He wiped his brow and looked around the cockpit. “This ship is in rough shape. Look at this.” Strawberry pulled a knob off one of the instrument panels. “This knob is broken.”

“What did that knob do?” asked Nono.

Strawberry looked at the knob and the instrument panel,

then shrugged. "I'm not really sure." He put the broken knob down, walked out of the cockpit, picked up a power hammer from his workbag, then proceeded to smooth out and reinforce the patch in the hull.

Nono's eyes wandered over the instrumentation in front of him, but spent a good amount of time looking at the radar for approaching ships. "We should make ourselves less ... obvious. I'm going to shut off most of the lights. Maybe we can make it less likely they can see us." Nono flipped some switches shutting off all external lighting and closing the shades on most of the windows on the ship. "That's better."

* * *

Time passed slowly. The ship continued to make noises that made the crew uncomfortable and nervous.

Bishop looked at the radar anxiously. "We've outrun the pirates twice, but I bet this isn't over."

At that moment, the communication array lit up with an incoming message. Nono pressed the link button.

“THIS IS YELLOWNOSE, CAPTAIN OF THE PIRATE VESSEL BEHIND YOU! YOU HAVE CARGO THAT I WANT! YOU HAVE ESCAPED MY GRASP SEVERAL TIMES, BUT I WILL GET YOU AND NOTHING WILL STOP ME!” Then the yelly voice stopped.

Nono replied, “They sure want this cargo bad. I wonder what’s in it.”

Nono looked at the radar and yelled, “The radar shows another ship behind us! Let’s try to outrun this one, too!” Nono maxxed the engines again. The ship jumped forward! Then, just as suddenly, the ship lurched backward as one of the engines sputtered, caught on fire, and shut down.

Nono cried, “Great soggy waffles!”

Strawberry, waving his powerhammer around, yelled from the hold, “I’ll try to fix the engine, but I don’t think it’s going to be fixable this time. We need a new plan!”

Nono looked at the radar again and saw the blip getting closer. Fast. Really fast. In fact, it was much faster than any ship he knew of could travel. “Uh... this isn’t a ship behind us.” He paused. “Oh no. GRAB HOLD OF

SOMETHING AND BRACE FOR IMPACT!” Something hit the ABC123 on the port side hard and the whole ship shook. The lights flickered on and off and sparks flew out of the instrument panel. Strawberry and Bishop crashed to the floor. Bishop picked himself up and teetered over to a ship computer.

“We’ve been hit by a missile. We’ve lost part of one of our wings. We’ve lost an engine and the shields are depleted. Also, thirty-three percent of the lights, one refrigerator, one toaster, the toilet, my music player, Strawberry’s rechargable drill, and Nono’s foot massage chair are all out. The damage report instrument panel is also damaged. It wants to sing me a song about flowers.”

Strawberry yelled from the hold, “If we take another hit like that, we’re done for! This is a cargo ship—not a galactic destroyer!” Strawberry put his finger to his nose and thought about what it’d be like to be an engineer on a galactic destroyer. Then he flashed back to reality. “I’ll put out the fires, but I’m not sure there’s much more I can do.” He proceeded to wave around a fire extinguisher like he was conducting an orchestra as he made his way back

to the cockpit.

Nono looked at the radar and saw another blip racing towards them fast. He shouted, "Another missile incoming!"

Nono looked at the instruments, the radar, out the front window, and then back at the radar again. He smiled. "I have an idea. We're going to enter that asteroid field ahead of us and fly through that."

Bishop said, "That sounds terrible."

Everyone was quiet as the blip on the radar showed the missile closing fast.

Everyone was quiet as Nono turned the ship towards a nearby asteroid field.

Everyone was quiet as they wondered if this would be the last voyage of the ABC123.

Nono kept an eye on the radar and guided the ship towards a huge asteroid at the edge of the asteroid field. "I'm going to try to get to that big asteroid at the edge of the field before that missile hits us."

The asteroid loomed closer. The radar showed the missile getting closer, too. Suddenly, Nono jerked the wheel

of the ship and the ABC123 flipped over a few times. Nono counted under his breath and then pulled back on the wheel and the ABC123 swerved and skirted the asteroid at the last possible moment—any closer and it would have been like a blueberry hitting a bowling ball.

The missile swerved to follow them, but slammed into the asteroid in a massive explosion that spun the asteroid and rocked the ABC123. Strawberry lurched in his seat and bruised his elbow on the back of his chair. Bishop was thrown out of his seat and onto the floor. He groaned.

One of the instrument panels exploded in a shower of sparks and flames of blue and purple lept from it. Strawberry leaped from his seat, grabbed a fire extinguisher, and put out the new fire.

Smoke wafted through the cockpit swirling in the air in tiny eddies. The smell of burnt electronics and busted engines hung heavy in the air. It reminded Bishop of breakfast. Bishop groaned again.

The ship lurched and jerked around as Nono deftly piloted it through the asteroid field. Everyone was quiet. After several tense moments, the ABC123 emerged on the

other side of the asteroids.

Nono checked the radar and saw nothing behind them. “We’re out of the asteroid field. We might be free of the pirates, too. I don’t see them behind us anymore.”

Strawberry asked, “How much longer until we get to Beta Calculus?”

Nono smiled and replied, “You’re in luck. It’s right there.” He pointed out the cockpit window at a small sphere directly ahead of them. “We’ll be there in a jiffy.”

The remainder of the trip was stressful, but not nearly as exciting. The ABC123 was in rough shape, but Nono managed to pilot it sputtering and creaking all the way.

As they neared the planet’s atmosphere, Nono contacted the flight tower, transmitted the ABC123 flight code, and was instructed to land on the designated landing pad. Nono piloted the ABC123 through the atmosphere and gently landed on the landing pad. As he shut down the remaining engine, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Bishop and Strawberry stood from their seats and headed to the cargo hold. The cargo container was still there and intact. Strawberry picked up the control pad and put the

container in hover mode.

Strawberry then looked around puzzled. “Didn’t we have two pirates tied up back here? Where’d they go?”

Bishop said, “They’re definitely not here now. I’m sure they’ll turn up.”

As Bishop opened the ABC123 hatch and dropped the ramp, Strawberry pushed the cargo container through the hold, down the ramp, and then parked it outside the ship.

Bishop wondered, “I wonder what’s in this cargo container. I bet it is really exciting.”

Strawberry exclaimed, “Maybe it’s stuffies!”

Bishop pondered, “Perhaps it’s some new kind of edible algae?”

“Maybe it’s a new kind of synthetic wrap for healing metal!”

“Perhaps it’s filled with snowglobes from Zetacon Astronomical known for its moonlit desert nightscapes and occasional blizzard!”

Nono slid down the ramp and stood near the cargo container.

Otto appeared on the landing pad and as he walked

towards the ship he replied, “These are even better than those things you have mentioned! They are high-friction grippers for holding pieces in work projects! They’re the best! Nothing slips from them!”

Nono, Strawberry, and Bishop looked at him as if he had two heads⁴.

At this moment, completely unseen by the group celebrating their mission success, the two captured pirates crept down the ramp of the ship, then sprinted to a tunnel on the other side of the landing pad.

Otto continued, “There’s no substitute for pushing things around on a table saw. We Betarians are known throughout the galaxy for our amazing boutique furniture. However, pirates have been stealing all our gripper shipments recently. Without this shipment, we would have been in severe trouble possibly causing the collapse of our economy and destroying the well-being of all Betarians!”

Otto looked at the cargo container and walked around it examining it for damage. He smiled, made several guttural spurts of pleasure, and said, “Thank you so much

⁴ While Otto did have many tentacle arms, he didn’t have two heads.

for transporting our cargo! In this briefcase is the money I owe you for successful delivery. Your work was excellent! You're the only cargo ship to make this voyage successfully in the last three months. We would like to extend to you a permanent contract for ongoing delivery jobs. The contract comes with a monthly salary as well as a home base to work from. Will you do it?"

Nono and Strawberry looked at each other, smiled, and said, "That sounds awesome!"

The base

Otto looked pleased. “I’ll return in a few hours to get you and bring you to your base.”

With that, he shivered with pleasure, and strode off. Then paused, turned around, and strode off in a completely opposite direction.

Nono wondered, “Whatever happened to Yellownose?”

Strawberry shrugged. “I wonder why he has that name. It doesn’t seem very menacing. I had a yellow nose once, but it turned out to be bits of grilled cheese I had had for lunch.”

Nono said solmenly, “Perhaps that’s not the last we will see of that scurvy pirate.”

Strawberry turned and said, “The ABC123 took quite

a beating this mission. I'll need some quality time to enact repairs. I'll start making a list of needed parts."

Nono nodded. "I will have a grilled cheese sandwich and then take a nap."

Strawberry Coffee's recipe for Grilled Cheese

1. Get some grilled.
2. Get some cheese.
3. Put them in a bowl and whisk lightly.

Bishop looked up at the sky and said, "Seems we have a couple of hours to wait. I'll help with damage inventory."

* * *

Several hours passed.

Otto appeared out of nowhere. "It is time! Let's take your ship and fly to these coordinates. The base includes

a hangar and a kitchen with a potted plant! I am thinking you will be filled with happy feelings!”

They all piled into the ABC123, but Nono made it to the cockpit and launched the ship into the air before anyone had a chance to sit down. The takeoff was gradual this time, so the only injury was a minor scratch on Bishop’s left knee.

“I have scratched my knee,” Bishop moaned.

The trip was short. Nono landed the ship on the landing platform and they all disembarked.

Otto gestured around him. “This is all yours while you are in the service of the Beta Calculus homeworld!” Then he looked down and muttered, “It needs a little cleaning. Come this way!”

Otto led the three to a doorway and a key pad. He said, “The key code is 20200613. You can change it as you like.”

As the door slid open, a man was standing on the other side. He was dressed in a purple jump suit. His hair was scraggly and his eyes were sunken. He smiled at them. “I am Marksnew. I am the grounds keeper. I take care of the

place while you are gone. I also tend the garden.”

Before they could say hi, he turned about and left.

Nono, Strawberry, and Bishop entered the base. They divvied up the bed rooms. They examined the contents of the refrigerator. They did a quick inventory of the mechanic’s tools and ship repair machinery. They tested the water pressure. They walked up the stairs and down the stairs. They investigated the cracks in the ceiling. They looked for spiders.



As soon as they felt like they had looked at all the things, they re-assembled in the kitchen near the potted plant.

“Strawberry, can you make a list of all the things we’re going to need? The first thing we’ll need is a candy machine. It should go there.”

Strawberry picked up a pad of paper and a pen and started writing furiously.

Bishop sighed. “If we put the candy machine there, Nono, then no one will be able to enter or exit the kitchen.”

Strawberry scribbled out what he just wrote.

“What if it was an ice cream machine?”

Strawberry licked his lips and wrote a new line.

“No, not even if it was an ice cream machine.”

Strawberry scrunched up his face and crossed that line out.

“Well, we need a candy machine and it should go somewhere and if we put it somewhere other than the kitchen, we’ll get ants.”

At that point, Marksnew appeared. “Ants are worst.” he lamented. “Perhaps, if you moved the potted plant to be further into the room and put the candy machine against the wall there.”

“That sounds great! Strawberry—write it down!”

Strawberry smiled and wrote a new line.

Nono looked around and beamed. "Let's call this base "Homebase". Awesome! Time to go unpack!"

Strawberry handed the list to Marksnew. "This is what we need."

Nono and Strawberry left. Bishop shrugged and sat down. Marksnew looked at the piece of paper in his hand and said, "All you need is a candy machine?"

A quick trip to the Fleptomart

The doorbell rang! It was a lilting melody reminiscent of dolphins having a nice chat with an owl and a parakeet about the joys of sunsets. Nono grabbed Freckles and ran down from the laundry room and answered the door. There was no one there. The bell rang again.

Nono realized it was not the doorbell, but rather the interplanetary video communication system. He raced down the hall and up some stairs to the communication room and answered the call. The holo platform showed Otto standing next to another Betarian that looked a little like Otto, only taller. They were standing on a communi-

cation platform in a garden outside somewhere.

“I am so glad to be meeting you! It is a beautiful day outside!” Otto gestured around him. The air was a roiling mass of green fog occasionally broken up by lumpy bubbles of brown. Nono thought to himself that the fog looked gross, but Otto seemed to enjoy it.

Strawberry entered the room, sat in a chair, put his feet up, and slid his sunglasses on.

“I have a strange mission for you. This is Nort who is the Chief Chancellor of Schools in the capital city of Beta Calculus. Unfortunately, they have run out of snack for the children. Also unfortunately, cargo ships are disappearing or being diverted somewhere between here and the food distribution center we purchase snacks from. We need you to figure out what’s going on and bring in a shipment. Our children’s future is in your hands! Will you do it?”

Nono and Strawberry looked at each other and then said, “Yes, we will!” Strawberry added, “But first this talk of snack makes me hungry.” Strawberry headed to the kitchen to eat some snack leaving Nono alone in the com-

munication room.

Nono gave Otto the thumbs up sign. "Otto, we will do this mission!"

"I am filled with gladness! I will send you coordinates for the distribution center and the details of the most recent order. My many thanks to you." Otto vanished from the holo platform.

Nono announced into the intercom system. "Everybody get to the ship! We're taking off!"

Nono put Freckles down against the wall, ran down the hall, up the stairs, through the kitchen, slipped on trash, and tumbled towards the counter on the back wall. He lay on the ground and then sat up. He paused, looked around, and wondered why there was trash all over the floor in the kitchen.

As he sat there, he saw Strawberry emerge from the kitchen pantry, "Wait for me!" he said between mouthfuls. "I need to get something!"

Nono jumped up and continued to the hanger as Strawberry slipped on the trash on the floor and tumbled into the wall. "Yeouch!" he heard Strawberry cry behind him.

As Nono headed up the ramp into the ship, he saw Bishop standing at the top of the ramp looking at the ceiling. Nono raced to the cockpit as he yelled, "Mission waits for no one! Time to go! THREE!"

Strawberry ran up the ramp as it started closing.

"TWO!"

The lights flickered as Nono turned on the engines. Before Strawberry had a chance to say, "Oh, no. Not again.", he heard "ONE!" and the ship lurched, spun 180 degrees, and then lurched again as it left out of the hanger and plunged upwards through the Beta Calculus atmosphere into space sending Strawberry and Bishop crashing into a wall. And a chair. And a table. And a small potted plant covered with thorns. And then the wall again.

Bishop picked himself up sadly.

Strawberry picked himself up and pulled out a long needle from his forearm where it had hit the plant. "Yeouch!"

The plant lay on the ground, its pot shattered and its soil strewn across the floor.

Strawberry brushed the dirt off his pants and walked to the cockpit. "Where are we headed?"

Nono said, “The Fleptomart. It’s not too far.”

Strawberry looked around the cockpit and sat. He looked at the tactical computer, noticed the screen was blank, and pulled the underside panel open to peek inside and figure out why.

* * *

Thirty minutes passed slowly by in a string of uneventful nothings periodically interrupted by notification chirps of various ABC123 subsystems looking for attention.

Nono pointed, “There’s the Fleptomart.” He looked at the communications array, switched to the flight navigation broadcast frequency, and said, “Hello, Fleptomart! This is the ABC123 asking for clearance to land.”

The communications array burbled with static for a bit, then a high-pitched voice gurgled, “You are cleared for landing, ABC123. Please proceed to landing pad 47-A.” The hairs on Strawberry’s neck stood on end.

Bishop entered the cockpit and looked down at Strawberry fidgeting with the tactical computer. “It looks bro-

ken.”

Strawberry said, “Of course, it’s broken. It looks like something bit the energy relay. At least it’s not talking about trees anymore.” Strawberry sat up a moment. “I will fix it with my mind.”

Nono raised his left eyebrow, “You’re going to do what?”

Strawberry stared hard at the tactical computer. He stared even harder. His brow was furrowed with concentration.

Nono asked Bishop, “What’s he doing?”

Bishop replied curtly, “Strawberry is fixing the tactical computer with his mind.”

Nono asked curiously, “Can he even do that?”

Bishop beeped then booped then shrugged.

Strawberry stared harder, his eyes as wide open as they could possibly be. He started swaying back and forth. He hummed a single note that echoed against the wall as its own overtone. After several moments, he announced, “FIXED IT!” Strawberry stood up and looked pleased.

Bishop looked skeptical.

The tactical computer looked blank.

The ABC123 approached the Fleptomart parking area and arrows appeared on the screen showing the path to landing pad 47-A. Nono piloted the ship slowly following the arrows as directed.

The ship's proximity sirens erupted and red lights bathed the cockpit. A ship suddenly filled the front window. Nono jammed the steering console sending the ABC123 into an evasive barrel roll sending Strawberry and Bishop tumbling about the cockpit like a dryer full of socks. The other ship tore out of the landing area and disappeared into space.

Strawberry shouted, "What was that about?"

Nono replied, "I bet that ship is being piloted by a hot-shot pilot!"

After a few moments of hovering around, Nono landed the ship on the landing pad and shut the ship down. Strawberry and Bishop picked themselves up off the ground.

Nono lept out of his pilot chair and shouted, "Let's find out what's going on with those snacks!" as Strawberry counted several new bruises.

Nono dropped the ramp and descended across the land-

ing pad platform followed by Strawberry and Bishop.

As they walked across the platform towards the Flep-tomart entrance, they were greeted by advertisements of a myriad of products ranging from toenail clippers to hair brushes for Frumulon Eels to a box of Crackalot breakfast cereal.

They passed through the entrance into a cavernous space so large the far wall wasn't visible. There were aisles with rooms and rooms with aisles. There were products everywhere. There were stairs and elevators and slith-ertubes for 100-legged gesticulating manovours. There were beings wandering and standing and talking and examining their grocery lists. The sounds of a weeping Zerkin child echoed dully around the cavernous space suggesting it was very tired and hungry and wished it were back home in a warm mud puddle passing gas contentedly.

The cavernous space was broken up into colored zones, the nearest one being customer service where everyone had a smile painted on their face.

Nono motioned to the customer service desk. Nono, Strawberry, and Bishop slid up to the desk. Strawberry

smiled. Bishop contorted his face in an ambiguous expression that only robots could muster. Nono put his hands on the desk and asked, “Where’s the order for Beta Calculus?”

The arthropod behind the desk looked up at them slowly. Then it slowly reached over to the computer and slowly fiddled with keys. It paused and slowly looked the screen up and down. Then it fiddled with keys some more.

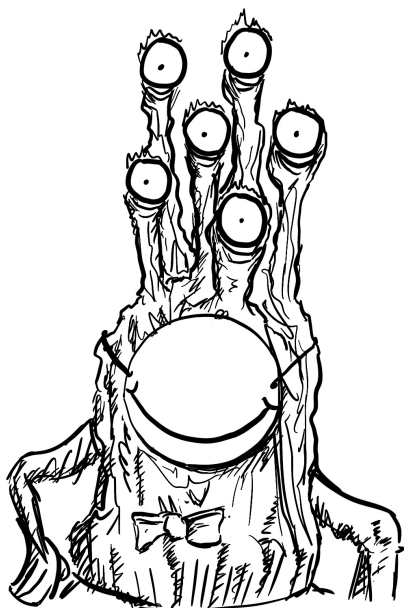
“Thhhhhhhheeeeeeee caaaarrrgooooo shhhhhppppppp
picckkkkkkkkeddddd upppppppppp thhhhhhhheeeeeeee
orrrrrrrrrdderrrrrrrrr annnnnnnnnnd isssss heeeeeaad-
dddeddddd toooooo Beeeetaaaaaaaaaa Callllllcuuuuu-
uullllluuuusssss nnnnnnnnnnoowwwwwwwwww. llll-
llllllttt jusssssssstttt lefffffffffft.”

Nono thought that over, then asked, “Why aren’t any shipments getting through?”

The arthropod behind the desk convulsed and wrigled in a worrisome and clearly uncomfortable way that didn’t match the smile painted on its face. It gestured in an extremely slow manner. It seemed to be beckoning them slowly to come closer.

So Nono got closer.

It moved its head slowly about, then all six of its eyes opened very slowly until they were as wide as dinner plates. “Thhhheeeeeeee pirrrrrratesssssss.”, it hissed slowly and quietly.



Nono said, “What about chariots?”

“Thhhhhhheeeeeeeee piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii–”, it started.

Strawberry looked at Bishop. Bishop looked at Nono. Nono waited, which was tough for Nono as his patience muscle was weak and feeble.

“-rrrrrrrrrraaaatteeesssssssssss!” it finished slowly.

Nono looked perplexed, “You don’t like pilots? I’m a hotshot pilot and I don’t like that you don’t like pilots!”

“PIIIIIIIIIIRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAATES!” it hissed again, this time so slowly that you might have thought that time had stopped. The cilia around its mouth vibrated and little bits of spit sprayed the desk and Nono’s hands. This attracted the notice of several customers nearby.

Nono stepped back. “How rude. Why didn’t you say pirates the first time?”

Two of the customers were staring at them. One customer had a robot tentacle. The other had a bird head and clawed feet.

Bishop put his hands on Strawberry’s and Nono’s shoulders. “Don’t those two look familiar?”

Strawberry looked at Bishop, then at the two customers. He said, “Uhhh...”

Nono took no notice. Instead, he looked the customer

service representative in the face and said, “Pirates! I’m not afraid of pirates. Tell us where they are and we’ll get rid of them.”

The customer service representative looked shocked. Or rather it looked like it was going through the facial maneuvers to eventually look shocked if they stood around and waited long enough. Which they didn’t.

The two customers ran.

Strawberry sprung up onto the customer service desk to look at the screen. “The cargo ship is named the Oofie-7.”

Nono shouted, “Quick! To the ship! The Oofie-7 might be in trouble!”

Nono, Strawberry, and Bishop ran to their ship on landing pad 47-A.

Nono leaped into the pilot chair and fired up the engines. He didn’t even bother counting down. The ship jumped off the landing platform and hurtled into space as Nono shouted “ONE!” for effect.

Strawberry picked himself off the ground. “I feel like I’m wearing your head and you’re wearing mine,” he con-

fusedly told Bishop, who was extracting himself from a tangled web of rubber hose.

Strawberry stumbled to the cockpit. Nono glanced over from his flight controls and asked, "Can you figure out where that cargo ship is?"

Strawberry fell into a chair and almost fell out. He looked around for a computer that was at least partially working. After finding one that seemed ok especially if you ignored the wisps of smoke coming from it, he proceeded to scan the space nearby and determine which ships were going which direction.

Several minutes passed before Strawberry said, "There's this ship here that identifies as a cargo ship and it's heading to Beta Calculus and there's a curious vessel that identifies itself as a rubber chocolate bar that appears to be following it."

"Sweet!" cried Nono. The ship veered in a new direction towards the cargo ship being followed by a rubber chocolate bar.

Bishop limped into the cockpit. "Did you know that it's astronomically unlikely to find a rubber chocolate bar

flying through space?”

Strawberry scanned some more. “The cargo ship seems to be slowing down.”

Nono replied cautiously, “That can’t be good.”

Bishop continued, “I can’t find a single instance of rubber chocolate bars flying in space in my databanks.”

Nono piloted the ABC123 coaxing the ship to go as quickly as it could. As soon as they were within visual range of the cargo ship, Nono tried to contact the Oofie-7. “Oofie-7. This is the ABC123. We’re nearby. What’s your status?”

No one from the Oofie-7 replied.

The cargo ship got bigger and bigger. The engines were off. The lights were off. It was moving, but probably from inertia and otherwise inert.

Bishop pointed and said the obvious, “The cargo ship looks dead.”

Nono said, “I don’t see any flying chocolate bars.”

Strawberry looked at the computer and said, “Maybe the computer is broken?”

Nono said, “Bishop. You stay here and pilot the ABC123

while Strawberry and I get on that ship and find out what's going on."

Bishop looked at Nono curiously, "Ok. I will stay here while you put yourself in mortal danger on a ship that has no power and no lights for mysterious reasons and investigate."

Nono handed the controls to Bishop. Bishop piloted the ABC123 closer to the cargo ship and then extended the docking module and docked with it.

Nono and Strawberry put on their spacesuits. Strawberry grabbed a flashlight. The two of them proceeded into the docking module and then into the derelict Oofie-7.

The lights were off in the cargo ship. It was very quiet. Strawberry turned the flashlight on and waved it around. They heard a squeak and a scurry. A small something raced across the room and disappeared.

Strawberry looked around and found a console. Strawberry touched the console a few times. "I think there is no power in this ship. We should go to the engine room and see what's going on. This is a Guardian-class cargo

freighter, so the engine room is probably this way.”

Strawberry and Nono walked down the corridor holding the flashlight in front of them to light the way. “It’s a good thing there aren’t doors blocking our way.”

“Why’s that, Strawberry?”

“The power is off, the doors won’t work, so we’d have to muscle them open by hand and that’s hard.”

“Oh, I see. I’m fine with that. This is fine. Everything’s fine.” Nono lied as he walked down the dark, creepy, silent corridor.

They continued down the corridor past closed doors, occasional stacks of crates, computer consoles, and a sign that said, “Oofie-7 is the best Oofie!” above a picture of a flightless bird smiling while wearing slightly crooked sunglasses.

After some time, they reached a door that had a double latch and a sign that said, “Engine room”.

Nono wondered aloud, “Where is the crew? This is so creepy and weird. Maybe we shouldn’t open that door?”

Strawberry said, “The password is 12345! Open!”

Nono said, “You said the power is out. Why would

this door open if the power is out? Also, why would that be the password? That's a terrible password."

"It was worth a try!"

"Really? I don't think it was."

Strawberry looked at Nono and shrugged. He stood and looked at the door. He looked around the door and then at the double latch. Then around the door again. Then he tested both of the latches and they didn't budge. He moved to the right of the door and pulled open an access panel and reached inside. Then the sounds of something metal falling and hitting a variety of other metal things rang out in the hallway in a disconcerting way.

Strawberry peered into the access panel and said, "I think I have broken the door. That seems bad, but in this case, it's good." He walked over to the double latch and gave it a strong pull and the door screeched open.

The engine room was pitch black, just like the rest of the ship had been, only darker. The smells of oil, fuel, and ozone wafted out of the room. Strawberry shined his flashlight around the engine room. Then he wrinkled his nose in disgust and said, "I smell engine room stuff. Also,

burning plastic. Also, I smell ... pizza? Something is definitely broken. Also, food.”

Strawberry walked around the engine room following the smell of pizza and burning plastic. Then the flashlight showed a half a pizza folded over one of the power converters coming out of the ship’s ion core. There was a puddle of grease below the pizza. Strawberry said, “I think someone was throwing a party to celebrate their dog’s birthday and someone threw the dog a piece of pizza and the pizza landed here and the grease shorted the converter and the engine shut down and now there’s no power. And maybe a bunch of other things happened, too.”

Nono looked at him, “A dog’s birthday party? What?”

Strawberry peeled the pizza off the power converter and flung it over his shoulder. It landed on Nono’s head. As the now irritated Nono found a better place for the pizza, Strawberry continued scratching the extra cheese drippings off of the converter. He found some rags and cleaned up the grease. He looked the converter over and it looked better. Then he reset the breaker, wandered to the console, and proceeded to restart the ion core.

The ion core in the middle of the room began to glow. It sputtered. Then it fumed, then sputtered some more. It fumed and sputtered as if it were sad that no one had invited it to a dog's birthday party with pizza. Then it started up and several seconds later, the lights come back on and the ship whirled back to life.

Nono blinked his eyes a few times as he adjusted to the sudden lack-of-darkness.

The clanking sound of people running through the ship rang through the corridors. Nono jumped behind a table and hid under a blanket. Strawberry continued tinkering with the console, tuning the ion core and the power system.

Someone ran into the room! She was wearing a red one-piece jumpsuit with a yellow insignia on it that looked like a bird. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Nono, from under the blanket, in a muffled voice said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Ensign Celeste of the Oofie-7. That one is standing at my console. Now who are you and how did you get here?"

Nono, still under the blanket, said, “I am Nono Hoho and this is Strawberry Coffee. We are here because this cargo ship is carrying important goods and it was floating in space and had no power and everything seemed wrong and we just pulled a piece of pizza off that doohicky there and now the lights are on and what the chickens happened here?”

Ensign Celeste smiled. “So you’re the ones who restored power to the ship! I’m so thankful! All I know is that I went to get a cup of coffee and while I was rinsing out the carafe, the power went out and the doors were locked and I couldn’t get out. I’ve been trying to use plastic straws to open the vent to the air ducts for a while now. It wasn’t working.”

More footsteps, then two men arrived, also wearing red one-piece jumpsuits. One asked, “What’s going on here?” Ensign Celeste explained the situation.

The one with the mustache grimaced and turned to the other, “Trab, you nincompoop! You’re not supposed to eat pizza in the engine room! This is what happens!” Then he turned to Celeste. “We’ve been stuck in the bathroom this

entire time. It was dark and scary.” Trab shrugged.

Nono pulled the blanket off of himself. “Where are the pirates?”

Strawberry asked, “Where is the dog?”

Ensign Celeste looked at them and wondered, “What pirates? What dog? What are you talking about?”

Nono said, “We were sure that you were beset by pirates! Strawberry thinks the dog had a birthday party.”

Ensign Celeste looked at him blankly.

Nono smiled and winked. “Aha! You’re keeping the pirates and dog a secret! Cool! We’ll escort you back to Beta Calculus now.”

The mustachioed man said, “That’d be great! Thank you!”

Strawberry and Nono left the room.

Celeste muttered, “Maybe we shouldn’t go with them—they’re crazy.”

* * *

Strawberry and Nono returned to the ABC123. They found Bishop sitting in the cockpit staring at a single green

blinking light in the ceiling. “On. On again. On. On again. Wait for it... On again.”

Nono poked Bishop and said, “Time to go!”

Bishop stood up and Nono sat down. Nono grabbed the flight controls, retracted the docking module, and flipped the engine on. Strawberry started to say, “Oh, wait!” but the ship lurched, flipped and lurched again and then accelerated quickly, came around, and pulled up parallel with the cargo ship.

Strawberry picked himself up off of Bishop. Bishop grumbled, picked himself up off of the floor, and left the cockpit to fetch his arm that had popped off and skittered away.

The trip was fairly uneventful. Nono piloted. Strawberry tinkered with the tactical console. Bishop found another blinking light to stare at.

* * *

Several hours later, they had arrived at the export port on the outskirts of the capital city of Beta Calculus. The

ramp was down and Strawberry was sitting on a deck chair at the bottom of it enjoying the outside air.

A tall, lanky Betarian with a briefcase approached. “Greetings, my friends! I have come with very quick steps from the office of Otto to deliver his convivial appreciations and this briefcase. I have been informed the cargo ship has delivered its cargo which is headed to its destination as we speak. You have done most excellently and we humbly thank you.”

Strawberry nodded and said, “Sweet!” He stood, grabbed his chair and the briefcase, and moved up the ramp. “Nono—it’s time to head home!”

* * *

The ramp closed and slid into the ship as the engines whined to life. The Betarian looked startled as he thought he heard, “No you don’t! Not again! Don’t you dare not wait for us to sit—” as the ship leaped off the landing pad and headed westward. He thought he could hear two voices crying out in pain, but perhaps it was just the wind.

The tall, lanky Betarian breathed in and smiled knowing he had done a good job. Then he wandered off to do another.