

**COMFY AND TASTY**

A Short Story

By: Povey Balkanski

Translated in English by: Pavel Tsvetkov

Bulgarian editor: Vanya Stancheva

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"I want a biscuit too!"

You do know those give-away leaflets, don't you?

They are everywhere, and they are free! All you need to do is to go and get one. Great, isn't it? No one will even ask you what you need it for. They are just left there for you. You can take several, if you feel like it!

There is one problem, though. It might be true of all free stuff—I am not sure. Maybe a smarter guy than me would know: I am just a postman. I deliver packages door to door. Like in that other ad...

Anyway, all I know is that when I entered the restaurant I had no idea about what was to follow. As I said, there is a certain problem with those "free" leaflets—you never know who left them!

"I want a biscuit too!" It sounds funny to me now, but it didn't at the time.

Looking from the outside, the door wasn't anything special, save for the fact that it was made of wood. Who uses wood nowadays? Not to mention that it is also ugly! This should have raised the alarm, but I, following the old postman's routine not to pay much attention to details, pushed the door open and walked in. It was rather dark inside. I walked through some drapery and found myself in a medium-sized saloon with a few empty tables. A phlegmatic waiter in a dirty uniform walked up to me, and I slowly and clearly read the name of the recipient from the envelope. (I had grown tired of people asking me ten times!) The guy nodded and disappeared somewhere, leaving me to wait. I was used to waiting. People liked showing how much better they were than some dusty postman. Anyway, I stayed and waited and moved around and looked around and that is when I saw them. They were lying on a cupboard in the corner. Not many, but enough. I took a few nonchalant steps forward to check them out. They had a beautiful design with a red cover and light-blue edges. In the middle, there was a mouth-watering picture of a piece of fruit cake, and the world's stupidest catchphrase (at least, that is what I think) was written above it in large, inviting letters:

"I want a biscuit too!"

I looked cautiously around, slipped one into my bag and quickly walked away, but I immediately felt a sense of shame. Why was I hiding? The sign clearly said that the leaflets were provided free of charge. Well, it's just who I am. I always think that I should become more insistent and aggressive with individuals like the one currently pressing his ID card to my terminal and grunting disparagingly. I needed to change my attitude to life as a whole. Maybe I even needed to change my job, but as always I left such thoughts for the next day.

I walked out of the restaurant with my head held high.

Two days later, I was standing in front of the gigantic spaceport with a certain dose of fear, a great dose of doubt and an even greater dose of unflinching resolve to finally put my life in order. Now, when I think of it, I must have been the exact type of guy that leaflet was meant for. But at the end of the day there will always be someone to fall for it, right? In addition, there will always be people who are not happy with what they are but, despite that, never quite ready to make the step to... Uh... The final step to... Uh, well, just the step!

But I am no longer one of those people. In fact, I am no longer anything, but that I will tell you about a bit later. Now, let me return to that spaceport, which was really huge. I liked it a lot at the time and I still do, although I can

no longer visit it. And when I say huge, what I really mean is that it was gigantic! Like the space it leads to.

My spaceship was scheduled to take off at fifteen-hundred hours, so I was almost two hours early. I was so excited that I could not stand still. I walked back and forth and every now and then touched the ticket in my inner pocket. I had spent almost my life savings on it, but, despite feeling uneasy, I was proud of having done what other people would not do. I had vowed to restore my savings and even to multiply them once I returned! After all, this was the reason for my going there: to learn how to do just that. However, what I learned was very different... But I will be touching on that later. Everything in good time. As already mentioned, I had a very strange feeling of insecurity, so I walked around the enormous spaceport, looking at the people around me. I had walked some distance in the direction of the east wing when I noticed an Observation Terrace sign and followed its arrow.

There weren't many people on the terrace, and I enjoyed the magnificent view almost by myself. I had been on a spaceship as a child, but so much time had passed that I had almost no recollection of it. Not to mention that, through the years, space-travel technology had undergone amazing development. I could see in front of me three huge cables at a considerable distance from one another. The last one seemed to vanish into space. Like three infinitely high towers, or the magic bean plant from that ancient legend, they started at ground level and vanished into the boundless sky. It was something to behold. And I enjoyed the view. Even now, I like remembering it...

From where I stood, the cables seemed very thin. The last one looked like a thread that was about to snap. I knew, however, that each of them was more than three metres in diameter and that they were made of the strongest material known to man. (Not unlike the substance that spiders use to spin their webs, but the exact name eludes me.) I also knew other things that I had been told about them over the years.

Generally I like spaceships, although there is some complicated stuff about them—artificial gravity, super-light speed and the like—that I cannot wrap my head around, even when people try to explain them to me. That said, I do like going here and there—and travelling as a whole. After all, I am a postman and that is what I do. Or, I used to be one...

Anyway, what can be seen with the naked eye—and what I observed from the terrace—is clear: the spaceship is attached to the cable and starts climbing up. As it puts distance between itself and the Earth, the spaceship picks up speed and, at around the three-hundred-kilometre mark above the planet, it flies off the cable, going as fast as thirty-thousand kilometres per hour! They say it is like tying a weight at the end of a cable, then spinning the weight around and suddenly letting it go. That cannot be an exact analogy, as the weight does not slide to the end of the cable, so this is again something that I do not understand. The spaceship that was climbing up the nearest cable was rather big. It must have had a lot of passengers inside.

I stayed there for some time, but then I felt hungry and walked off, looking for the buffet. I had just found one where the queue was not too long when I heard a pleasant, female voice: 'All passengers for the flight to Guiana Mag-Soria should proceed to Gate 76 for boarding, thank you!'

I forgot about the food and hurried to the gate.

The space trip was just great. As I already said, I love travelling. Luggage inspections, scanning, the whole disinfection process before they let you

board the ship. It was so exciting! It even boosted my feeling of independence and appreciation of the gravity of the situation, so, when I finally set foot on the spaceship's thick carpet, I was in a state of near-euphoria.

I sat down in the comfortable armchair and looked impatiently at the other passengers whose phlegmatic approach to their seats was driving me crazy. When at length the cabin filled up and the spaceship hatches isolated us from the outside world, the interesting part began: the spaceship jerked into motion and slid up the cable. An enthusiastic 'W-o-o-w!' filled the air when the bow was raised so that the enormous supporting cranes could lift the spaceship to the launch pad. It was a bit unpleasant, but unavoidable. Artificial gravitation works only in space.

It was not that uncomfortable though, as the armchairs were well designed, and, even when lying down with one's feet up, one felt OK. After a succession of strange, muffled sounds, coming from outside, the spaceship shuddered, and we seemed to start the climb. It was difficult to know for sure, as we were moving very slowly, but I was lucky enough to be sitting by the window, and I could observe (with my neck craned in an unnatural position) our slow ascent above the surface. I watched the vehicles crawl slowly along the endless road corridors around the spaceport and looked at the silhouettes of enormous buildings against the foggy horizon. It did indeed look like an ant colony, as modern social psychologists like to point out. It was time for me to advance in the social hierarchy and finally assume a higher position than that of a lowly worker ant!

'We will see about that,' I thought. 'But let's not put the cart before the horse!'

The leaflet said that all you had to do was get there. It was supposed to be easy from that point on. Anyone could do the job. But not everyone had the balls to actually go there.

We had already climbed rather high, and all we could see below us were clouds. We had picked up speed, and I turned my head forwards to avoid injuring my neck as a result of the acceleration. The more the spaceship accelerated, the deeper I sank into the armchair and the better it hugged and enveloped me. It was made of some half-liquid, half-solid substance and was rather comfortable. Soon, we left the atmosphere, and the cabin darkened. Soft artificial lighting was switched on. Shortly thereafter, an orbital station crossed the window at lightning speed. We had flown off the end of the cable. An agreeable, man's voice came through the speakers: 'Dear passengers! This is the senior pilot, Moross Sec 5, speaking. Welcome aboard the ACP-0305 Mar. We have just left the Earth's orbit and are heading to our final destination: the Large Magellanic Cloud galaxy, the Guiana Mag subsystem, the planet Guiana Mag-Soria. The trip will take three central galactic day/night cycles. You will be immersed in a tranquil sleep to make your stay on board more pleasant. If anyone feels uncomfortable, please, talk to the chief stewardess right now. Thank you for choosing Space Sail Limited and have a nice flight!'

There was a soft crack, and, after a short pause, the voice added: 'At the moment we are seventeenth in the queue for a super-light-speed push, so you can get out of your armchairs for a while. Please, adhere strictly to the flight attendants' instructions, thank you!'

There were sighs and murmuring, and some of us got up and moved around. I also got up and pressed my nose against the window. The view

outside was magical! I sighed excitedly. I had never seen so many stars! This alone was well worth every penny of my savings!

I spent quite some time just peeking outside. I had a feeling that I had turned into a small bubble, lost in deep space. I could feel rather than see the stars. It was as if I could touch them and converse with them. They were my brothers. The only... things around me to truly understand me. My only true friends. A countless company of silent adherents, radiating everlasting peace and quiet. The word "peace" formed in my head and then turned into a star and floated into space. I felt warm...

I just stood there for a long time, staring at the stars with my mouth open. I am not even sure for how long. Now, when I think about it, I can say that this was one of very few moments, if not the only moment, in my life when I have felt truly free. I like remembering it.

A soft bell-like sound brought me back to reality—and the voice of the stewardess: 'All passengers, please, go back to your seats! It will be our turn soon for the super-light-speed push. Thank you!'

I stepped back from the window and immediately realised that I badly needed to go to the bathroom. I hurried down the aisle.

The super-light-speed gravitator was an interesting device. I kept looking at it being displayed on the big screen across the aisle, while one of the officers, responsible for putting us to sleep, was adjusting my armchair and manipulating some tubes. Unfortunately, I could not see the gravitator through the window, as it was directly ahead of us. It must have been even more impressive when seen with the naked eye.

A gigantic metal ring with protrusions. Next to it were two small space stations and a bigger one—a bit further on. Several small servicing spaceships circled in on the outside, and on the inside... This is where it got interesting. The entire inside of the circle was covered in smooth, shiny blue surfaces, radiating streams of energy that converged in the centre, and I was horrified to realise that our spaceship was headed directly into that pulsating ball of energy.

'The principle of operation of the super-light-speed gravitator is quite simple,' the voice from the screen explained. 'We use gravity in a way that nature had not thought about. By creating a fictitious mass in both the sending and the receiving rings, gravitational thrust occurs on both sides of the space that we want to jump over. The receiving ring is located right in the middle of the actual distance we have to cover. When the required amount of pull is reached, the two forces are directed towards each other through super-spatial energy rays. When the two forces collide midway between the two rings, a gravitational tunnel is formed. At that point, the dynamic mass in which the spaceship resides shall be lowered into the statically anchored fictitious mass in the receiving ring. When the two masses pass each other, the same principle applies, but in the opposite direction, which leads to the slowing down of the spaceship until the connection is interrupted when we reach the end of the journey...'

I turned my head and looked at the stars for the last time. I would see them again only at the other end of the "tunnel". The officer had finished his job, and I was already in a reclining position, sunk in the jelly-like armchair and wrapped in a plasma-ion cocoon. I was ready for the trip.

'... Imagine that you have tied a weight to an elastic and stretched it. Just as with that ancient device called "a sling" that you may have seen at your

great-grandfather's house. Of course, such a journey requires a tremendous amount of energy, which comes from over thirty-four-thousand super-solar cells on our solar plantation, located near the centre of the galaxy. And now it's time for you to go on that long-awaited trip. Good luck!'

The voice paused, the screen went dark and the light in the cabin almost faded to black. There was only a slight background buzz, perhaps from the very complicated device ahead of us. I could no longer turn my head to the window, so I do not know what happened afterwards. I do not remember when exactly we went through the "tunnel" or when we arrived. I must have fallen asleep at some point, because when I came to it was bright around me and I could hear voices.

I found myself on Guiana Mag-Soria, the central planet and capital of the Magellanic Republic, which included the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. I stood under the giant dome of the central spaceport and watched with amazement the vast variety of races that swayed around me like an ocean. There were all sorts of humanoids, but Magellanians were the greatest in number. Quite a strange race. Born and bred in a colourful cloud of gas, they had variegated, reddish-green skin and tall, slender bodies. They had elongated faces with huge cheekbones, which gave them a somewhat robot-like expression. Their lips were thin and long, and they always smiled, but in a way that was more ominous than friendly. The eyes were their strangest feature—unlike ours, they could detect not only the visible light but also the infrared, and that of the ultraviolet spectrum, so for these weird creatures nothing remained hidden.

In fact, the spaceport was on one of the artificial satellites of Guiana Mag-Soria, being called Soss-Pop. It was a relatively small asteroid that had been hauled into orbit to serve the aforementioned purpose, and the spaceport occupied almost its entire surface. The central room that I was in had a transparent dome-shaped ceiling through which the heart of the Large Magellanic Cloud galaxy was visible. Information on arriving and departing spaceships, as well as a visual representation of their routes connecting the stars visible through the dome, was modelled in the air beneath it. It was indeed very impressive and solemn. I was already engaged in some serious stuff!

I took my eyes off the sight above my head and headed to the information desk. Now I had to find out the time and place of my next spaceship departure. This time it would be an internal galactic flight to a small planet whose name... I had forgotten. It was long and difficult. I took the four-fold brochure out of my pocket and once again stared at the piece of cake. I smiled. I knew I would often have to deal with sweets now. I flipped the page open and looked again at the short text that had brought such a great change to my life:

'Hey, hey! Hello to all lovers of adventure and the unknown. Are you ready for another leap into the infinite? Then listen up: the new branch of the Sweet Travels Factory has been opened. All are invited and welcome! We have room for everyone who is not afraid to take a risk and try something new in their life. Will you succeed? That all depends on you, but we will help you along, so you have nothing to fear. Laurels and fame are guaranteed. All you have to do is come over!

'This will be the hardest part, then comes the easy: invest a little money in buying Delicious Sweet Nuggets. (The most enterprising and brave of you can even get involved in the production!) You will then distribute this tempting

commodity among the native population of the newly discovered planet. (They are absolutely crazy about our products! You should have seen their frenzy during the trial tour!!!)

'In just a few months, the funds in your bank account will increase significantly, and after just one year you will be ready to retire. However, this still depends on your entrepreneurship: we are not offering free money ;)

'All the ins and outs will be explained to you on the spot. We have a great management team. All that is required of you is to be willing to risk in order to make money. Money is a sweet thing! Just like our favourite Sweet Nuggets. Yummy! Mmm, so good!

'Come to us! We are expecting you.

'CAUTION! This brochure is not distributed widely, as vacancies are limited. If you are holding one in your hands then you are extremely lucky! Hurry up so that you do not miss your chance.

'Do not hesitate!'

Then there was an exact address and a detailed description of how to get there, and the name of the planet was... The Ussuklavia Mugli-Neidvaria from the eighth star cluster of the orange side branch of the Large Magellanic Cloud. Hmm. A really strange and difficult name. Anyway, the important thing was the profit. Yes, the profit... This word now has a whole new dimension for me.

I looked up and then around. An enormous illuminated sign, Information Desk, floated in the air just above my head. I headed in the indicated direction.

The office was spacious and inviting. I walked over to one of the available officers—a dark-reddish Magellanic female, relatively attractive. (Actually, they all looked the same to me, but I guess they had their own beauty.)

'Hello and welcome to Guiana Mag-Soria! How can we help?' She smiled her unpleasant smile.

'Hi.' I smiled, but pleasantly. 'I need the schedule of flights to the planet...' I had forgotten the name again, so I lifted the brochure to my eyes. '... Ussuklavia Mugli-Neidvaria,' I finished.

I looked at the officer who was still looking at me and smiling her peculiar smile. I was also looking at her and smiling. This continued for a full minute. Finally, I could take it no more, and, raising the leaflet to my eyes, I repeated, 'The schedule of flights to Ussuklavia Mugli-Neidvaria.'

There was another painful pause, after which she finally spoke, 'I'm afraid I did not understand that, could you repeat, please?'

'I need the flight schedule to Ussuklavia Mugli-Neidvaria!' I stated slowly and carefully for the third time.

'But, dear sir, there is no such planet in our galaxy! Perhaps somewhere else, but not here...' Confused and helpless, I was looking at her. 'Please, let me check once more in the information bank,' she said. She bent forwards and focused on her control panel. After a while, she looked up and said compassionately, 'I'm very sorry, but there is no such planet!'

At that moment, my enthusiasm collapsed, and I was ready to turn around and head back home. I was about to do just that when suddenly an idea came to me, and I grabbed at it desperately. I approached, and I showed her the brochure excitedly.

'Maybe I did not say it correctly, so you read it... Ussuklavia Mugli-Neidvaria,' I ended slowly and clearly.

She looked carefully at the creased paper. A long and careful look. Then, she leaned forwards to a hidden holophone and spoke in their Magellanic tongue. A strange, incomprehensible and impossible-to-learn sequence of vibrations articulated somewhere on the boundary between audible sound and ultrasound. What reached my ears could be described only as a series of weird squeaks. The conversation ended quickly, and she lifted her radiant, unfriendly face, 'Please, accept my sincere apologies: in our tongue, the name of this planet is pronounced differently. I will issue your ticket right away!'

'Oh, great!' I beamed and pulled out my wallet.

'There is no need to pay extra. This ticket is already included in the price of the previous one.'

'That's wonderful,' I thought.

She handed me the ticket and another piece of paper with some strange signs on it. I looked at it.

'As the address you are going to has slightly different semantics, and you may get lost, I have prepared this instruction for you. Show it to a police officer, and he will give you directions. You can also use it with the information terminals—you just have to insert it and choose an intergalactic language.'

I raised my eyebrows meaningfully, then took the papers, said 'Thank you' and left the desk with the feeling that, for the first time in my life, I had become "special" and had been treated accordingly.

This time, the spaceship was very small, and besides myself there were about a dozen individuals of different races in the narrow cabin. Was there another one like me—holding the lucky brochure? I looked at all of them, but there was no telling. They were strange. Well, anyway, I would know if we arrived at the same destination. I put those thoughts aside and relaxed in the comfortable armchair, which was fully automatic and did not need to be serviced by a man. The take-off was also different, as we were on an asteroid that had almost no gravity, and we were to use the so-called Gravitational Catapult. (Do not ask me what that means; I never understood anything from the explanations. I remember only that it looked... knotty.) The tranquil sleep swallowed me for the second and last time in my life.

The new spaceport looked like a garage compared to the previous one. There weren't many individuals, and the few stretching their legs around the waiting room looked suspicious. I opened the piece of paper that I had been given at Mag-Soria and looked at it. After about a minute, I was completely convinced that I was not going to learn anything from it myself, and I went looking for the information desk. I found it in a remote and dirty corner of the depressing waiting room. Naturally, it was closed. I am not sure why I thought that it was natural for it to be closed, but I just knew I should not expect help from anywhere. I had a strange sense of doom, but I was determined to go ahead with the plan at any cost: I was not giving up after getting that far. Although, frankly, I am one of those people who would normally quit just before the end. I say that from bitter experience. Like when I lost that lucrative business of putting fashionable prints on T-shirts and one of my most unpleasant classmates took it, but... whatever. I don't want to talk about it. The point is that this was perhaps my last chance to change my life and failure was not an option.

I went out and stood in front of the spaceport. I still did not know what to do, but I knew that I had to find the damn address. I walked around for a while, studying the dubious faces of passers-by, and finally decided that I would be smart about it and act like the mature person that I was. I figured I'd



find an officer of the law and show him the note. Yes! That's what I was going to do!

The flame of self-confidence was burning in my eyes when a garishly dressed Magellanic taxi driver approached me and, smiling his unpleasant smile, spoke to me.

'Hello sir, I see you are confused!' he said in an angelic voice, 'Do you want me to help you?'

I stood there for a moment, wondering what to answer and whether to trust him at all, but in the end I just gave him the note and said, 'I'm looking for this address, but I don't know how to find it. I was given directions, but I don't know much Magellanic... And on top of that... Actually, I also have the address here...' I fished for the brochure in my pocket and handed it to the taxi driver, who had a cold and somehow greedy look at the small piece of paper. He glanced briefly at the colourful brochure and handed it back to me but kept the small piece of paper.

'Yes, I know where your address is!' he said in the warmest and most pleasing voice I had ever heard. 'I can drive you there if you want, and it will cost you just sixty-four unigalacs! By the way, the place is really remote and difficult to get to; you will not be able to find your own way. Our localisation system here is a bit confused. I doubt that even my colleagues would know it, but I just happen to be living nearby.'

His smile was as wide as the universe.

'Well, what do you say?'

I did not know what to say. I did not know what to think either. This seemed to be my lucky day, but that strange feeling was still smouldering inside me. I just said, 'Let's go then!'

The place we went to was really obscure. We drove for a long time up and down streets and overhead roads before we got to a dark and hulking building with blurred windows and a single entrance. The air had an unpleasant odour, and the light-purple sky of the planet had now grown darker and cloudier.

I stood in front of the rickety graffitied door, and the driver, still clutching my note, got out of the hydromobile and came to me.

'Here it is!' he said. 'I'll come along, so that I know for the next time,' he mumbled, waving my piece of paper in the air. He was obviously not planning to return it to me.

I pushed the door and walked in. We found ourselves in a dark and stinky corridor with a flickering light at its end. I headed that way, and the taxi driver came after me. I had the unpleasant feeling that I had no idea what was going on around me.

The light came from a spotlight, installed in a narrow and ugly porter's room in which a short and stout porter was watching TV, if one could ever call Magellanians stout. I was just about to open my mouth when my companion shot out some short and quick Magellanic chirping, while handing my note over to the porter. I was looking confused, wondering what to do to regain control of the situation, when the fat porter grinned at me in an unfriendly way: 'Welcome, man from Earth! We are so glad that you found the courage to come all the way here. We are in dire need of new candidates!'

He pulled his hard-to-move body out of the room and, clutching my shoulder, added, 'Now, I'll take you to our managers, who can't wait to meet you.'

I must have looked completely lost, when he chirped at the driver and the latter waved his hand goodbye.

The second floor, which we found ourselves on after a short ride in a cranky elevator, was no more welcoming than the first. Peeling plaster, a dirty floor and poor lighting. And not a single window to be seen anywhere. The porter hurriedly opened one of the graffitied doors, literally pushed me inside and, without saying a word, slammed the door shut. The lock engaged, and I was left alone, very surprised and not quite sure what had just happened. This was the first time when I quite sincerely suspected that the brochure might have been a bit deceptive. My doubts would turn into an iron conviction two minutes later.

I started to look around the room, only to find out that to my surprise I was not alone! An Ocrillian was sitting on a dirty couch in the corner and looking at me with boredom. He did not say anything; he was just sitting and looking at me, slowly moving his tentacles along his lips. I stared back at him. I found this race to be truly disgusting. They have thin, pink-greenish skin, fragile limbs and a freaky head with small horns and tentacles. Quite an unpleasant sight. Originating from somewhere in the Ocrillia cluster of galaxies, Ocrillians have the strange ability to give off an unpleasant sour odour when angry. They used to teach us at school that this was a protective mechanism of the Ocrillian race, intended to protect the female from the flow of sticky poisonous saliva that the male released just before the moment of extreme rage or fright. This, in turn, was supposed to protect him when hunting on his planet for small, shallow-water molluscs, in case he got attacked by birds of prey that were also after the molluscs in question. In short, these creatures were an insult to both the eye and the nose. I decided to be friendly and broke the silence, 'Hi! Are you here about the ad?' I waved the brochure in the air.

'Hmm!' snarled the Ocrillian as he was standing up. 'The ad!' He approached me and pulled the brochure out of my numb fingers. 'This, my boy, is the most deceptive piece of paper in the universe!' he said and tore it to pieces, which he then trampled upon the floor. I started to protest, but a bad sour odour came into my nostrils, and I quickly stepped back.

'They bring you here,' he went on, 'they fill your ears with superlatives about how precious and worthy you are to them, and then they lock you up in a tiny room and feed you canned food.'

My back touched the wall, but luckily the Ocrillian had started to cool off and returned to his couch.

'... All they do is promise!' he continued whining. 'Those fuckers from the Citadel, they also promise freely: insurance, free medicine... They are so full of it! All this has amounted to squat!' He rested his head on his hand and focused his eyes on eternity. I chose one of the dirty armchairs to sit in. I did not like how he had treated me one bit, but at least I had not been bathed in poisonous saliva. I had to be careful not to anger him again. I got up and started to collect the pieces of my brochure when he suddenly said, 'And where are you from? What do you do?'

From the conversation that followed, I did not learn anything important except that my interlocutor had been employed as an escalator-repair engineer on his native planet that was located on the lower magnetic branch of one of the Ocrillian Galaxies. I also learned that he had spent in that room nearly seventeen hours, and he was terribly bored and ready to return home. The only problem was that the door was locked! Besides, the door looked much stronger from the inside than it did from the outside. Well, that

information did not sit well with me either. How long would I have to stay there? And what would happen?

I looked at my watch. It was seven-thirty in the evening. My worries grew with every passing minute. Suddenly, there was a whistling sound and a short crack. It was only then that I noticed the transport tube in the corner. Two dinner trays had arrived in its opening.

My roommate jumped out of his armchair and ran to the food. His eyes lit up, and the tentacles on his lips were dancing happily. He reluctantly agreed that only one of the two trays was meant for him.

Then I spent the most uncomfortable night of my life. I found that sleeping in a room with an Ocrillian was not pleasant, as he was stinking even in his sleep. Besides, he was constantly making some splashing and croaking sounds. Torn by anguish and self-reproach, I did not close my eyes even for a minute.

The next morning everything became clear to me.

Some alarm went off and woke us up. I looked at my watch. It was seven-thirty. Obviously, I had fallen asleep at the end of the night because the ringing really startled me. I even thought that I had to go to work. I washed my face at the dirty sink and ate breakfast in the company of my ugly roommate. Shortly afterwards, four big and strong Magellanian with impulse-shock batons entered the room and politely asked us to follow them. They led us to a small, windowless room with a large table in the middle, two chairs on one of its long sides and a fat, thick Magellanian on the other. This guy was even fatter than the porter. He wasn't your typical Magellanian.

We sat on the chairs with some help from the guards, and the smirking, fat Magellanian spoke ingratiatingly: 'Welcome, gentlemen! I am very glad that you have agreed to dedicate your life to a career in the Global Sweetness Corporation. We are happy to welcome you to our neat and obedient ranks...'

'Oh, oh, hold your horses. We haven't agreed to anything yet! And we may never agree!' I got somewhat excited. 'Whether we do or don't depends on your proposal.'

'Mm-hm-ha-hm-huh,' the fat guy replied, and then explained to us politely, 'When you voluntarily enter this building, you automatically sign a contract to work in our company for a period of twenty-five central galactic years. Your entry through our door is recorded by a police-certified camera. Besides, we have a witness to testify to that effect for both of you—the taxi driver who brought you here! It is plain as day that you have no legitimate reason to protest, but be my guest. We have had several such cases. They are still serving their sentences in the mines of Mag-Ore's meteorite belt! You may still try, if you feel like it; we will in any case make a profit.' He had a smirk on his face, even worse than before. 'And I can assure you that working in Global Sweetness is much more enjoyable than mining. In fact, you will hardly have to work! All you have to do now in order to finalise your commitment is to sign this document here.' He handed us a sheet of paper. 'It concerns the size of your salary. You probably understand that, if you do not sign it, you will not be getting any salary. Mm-hm-ham-huh.'

I felt the overwhelming urge to wipe the smirk off his face. I was shaking all over.

'Of course, you can protest this document as much as you want. Knock yourselves out. Hm-hm-hah-ho...'

And protest we did. Not exactly the document in question, since we had not even read it, but the situation as a whole.

Our protest was quickly quenched with the help of the impulse-shock batons, and, after we had signed without further ado, they took us to the training chamber. It was actually quite simple.

Magellanians had long been producing a sugary milk essence, which they use to prepare a concentrate for producing the dizzying vapours that they are so fond of. Production takes place only on the moons of Collomaria Muglian-Por, where there are vast fields of crystallised organic matter. Organic matter that lives! Not sure if you can imagine a living crystal.

In fact, the crystals themselves are not quite solid. They are somewhat damp and warm and do not look like stone. However, in order to obtain the essence in question, the unique conditions present on these moons are needed. Their atmosphere consists of thirty-four types of gas, their lakes contain heavy water, their three suns emit the exact amount of necessary radiation, you name it.

The problem lies in the fact that the production ability of the crystals on the six moons had been exhausted about sixteen central galactic years earlier, while the vapour consumption had gone up. It had doubled because other galactic systems had begun to buy the essence. What had the Magellanians done then, as the only manufacturers in the universe? Quite naturally, in order not to lose the market, and because natural crystals grow too slowly, they had decided to produce artificial ones, to plant them on a moon and just harvest them!

Great, isn't it? But after conducting some experiments, they had found out that the best essence was obtained from crystallised humanoid bodies! None of the other animals found in the universe could be used to achieve such results. Even though the newly obtained essence was much worse than the natural one, they made a compromise in the name of profit. All they had to do was to find some fresh bodies!

They could not use the bodies of other Magellanians for moral and religious reasons and therefore:

"I want a biscuit too!"

God, what stupidity! You understand that turning myself voluntarily into a milk crystal in plantation CTC78-W6 on the B3 moon was not something that could boost my self-esteem. I was glad that my ex-friends could not see me! We weren't friends, strictly speaking, but they would have made a lot of fun of me anyway.

To be honest, even to this day, I think that I kind of brought this on myself, but, nevertheless, I don't think that we were treated fairly. It was rather rude, actually. That day, they forced us into the baths with crystallising solution, where we remained for two months, getting weak energy impulses instead of food. (Crystals feed like trees by transforming solar radiation with the addition of a specific geomagnetic field that Collomaria moons have.) When we had transformed into silent and immobile pink-brownish statues, they put us in our allocated positions and that was that!

We were forgotten by everything and everyone.

Once every three days, the garden robot went by to collect the pale-rose dew that crystallised around the waist of each statue. The one produced by my deformed body! Every once in a while, there was a committee that inspected the condition of each crystal, but that was about all the fun we could get. A silent, meaningless existence.

The only friendly gesture to us was that they connected us through a thought bridge to the Global Web Information Network (GWIN), albeit with

limited rights, so that we could communicate with each other and with a part of the rest of the world, identifying ourselves as computer programs.

This is how I learned that the so-called salaries we had signed for were, in fact, lifetime retirement pensions to be used at the Gavullia's Shess-Pess sanatorium, where, until the end of our natural life (not expected to be too long), we would on a daily basis be subjected to de-crystallising procedures designed to protect our bodies from falling apart. Very exciting! Especially since I would remain partially immobile.

And... the brochure! Yes, the damn brochure! I learned that there was text on it, written in a simple, block-letter font in the infrared spectrum, visible only to the Magellanians. The message said that anyone who helped the extra-terrestrial holder of said note reach the address mentioned would receive a substantial reward. Short and clear. Anyone would help. There was an address and phone number on the bottom.

Well, that was that! And then what?

You proceed with your own meagre existence by serving someone else's needs. And that disgusting secretion! I feel constantly wet. It seems that I exist only so that I can produce the dew the next morning.

It is only now, almost ten years after starting "work", that I have been allowed to write this story to tell people what has actually been going on around here. It has been explained to me that the story would be published on some unknown planet, in some unknown galaxy where they do not even recruit.

Whatever. But:

Guys! If you see a brochure that says "I want a biscuit too!", DO NOT TOUCH IT! Start running in the opposite direction!

Hmm...

Or, perhaps I should have written "Take one, it's so cool!", so that I am not the only one to be taken advantage of?

As a matter of fact, I'm not the only one: there are others here.

Oh, I don't know. I am totally confused lately.

The End