Science fiction

Futures

Hoist by her own Picard

Resistance is futile. By Sylvia Spruck Wrigley

Syra flicked through her new messages, all cautions and reminders that she could do nothing about, before blanking out the display and walking to the communal room. "Computer, coffee," she said hopefully.

The drinks machine spat a green pillbox at her instead. Syra sighed and cracked it open. There were only three pills inside, so her levels must be looking better. She'd lost a month in a haze of tranquillizers and antidepressants; since then, she'd been trying to look enthusiastic and engaged when she thought the systems might be watching her.

"You cannot hide forever, Luke."

The systems were always watching her.

The screen flickered into life with another romance vid. Worried that lone occupants might experience depression or anxiety from social isolation, the systems had informed her that romance stories could mitigate the mental health of long-term loneliness. She was relieved to discover that someone had set up the systems with a limitless supply of space

adventures, ranging from original *Star Trek* to *Firefly* to *The Expanse*. She amused herself by pretending she was the captain of the fictional ships, giving instructions for their next mission, rather than a witless passenger who should never have been allowed out of her pod. She tried everything she could think of to get a response out of the systems. What was the worst that could happen?

"Open the pod bay doors, HAL."

The systems ignored her.

Syra had to wait another 17 Moon days before she could have a proper sleep, which she thought sounded a lot better than 502 Earth days or, as the system clock countdown showed, 12,048 hours. There were 307 other travellers who were all safely in their pods, except for Syra.

Her first hint that something had gone wrong was that she was awake. In a sudden out-of-character fit of responsibility, she had checked in with the systems to make sure everything was still going as planned. She got a list of issues that were apparently all minor,

but it turned out a minor security routine that had failed was listed as critical equipment. The systems required oversight as a result and apparently, out of all of the sleeping humans on the ship, Syra was deemed most fit to watch over things.

Her pod was transformed into a small office with a white desk, a display screen and a countdown timer. That's how she discovered she had 20,000 hours before someone else would be kicked out of their pod to take the next shift. Or now, 12,047 hours.

It was a long time to wait.

"Martini, shaken, not stirred."

The drinks machine spat out another pillbox.

Syra worried that she'd get in trouble when they arrived at their final destination to find that the supplies had been dwindling away, as if they had a mouse in the stores. She took the pills anyway. "Computer, activate the death ray."

A tinny voice responded. "No death ray installed."

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When she got tired of trying to get the ship to do something interesting, she connected her screen to the outer camera and watched the stars go by. Then she scratched a notch in the hard white polish of the desk, the only thing she'd found on the ship where she could leave a mark.

She left a lot of marks.

She had given up on coffee and taken to spouting nonsense at the ceiling when suddenly she got a new response. "Computer, reverse the polarity."

"Passphrase required."

Seriously? The developers of this must have been some hard-core geeks. What other popular phrases might the computer be programmed to respond to?

For a week, she amused herself by trying to guess the pass phrase. "May the Force be with you," she said.

Nothing happened.

"I am a leaf in the wind."

The systems ignored her.

And then, just as she'd begun to lose interest in the whole affair, she discovered it was a lot more obvious than she could have guessed.

"Make it so."

"Reversing course." The ship filled with the hissing of hydraulic gears and a tremor she felt to her very bones. Something had happened.

The tinny voice continued, the longest statement she'd ever heard it make. "We have reversed course back to Earth. Estimated time of arrival, 90,472 person-hours."

"What? NO! Computer, undo that command. Reverse the reverse polarity! Resume course."

Silence.

She stared at the ceiling, hands balled into tight fists. "Please? I'll do whatever you want, I'll watch every romance in the decks. You can't abandon me now. How do I reverse course?"

"Passphrase required."

"Make it so! Computer, make it so!"

Nothing.

She'd been babbling at it all night when she struck on a desperate question that the system understood. "Computer, why won't you make it so?"

"Passphrase expended. Current passphrase required."

Syra sat straight up but the voice went silent. Asking again for the current code phrase did nothing. "Computer, how do I reset the code phrase?"

"The fail-safe requires a level-three code or consensus by two or more crew."

Syra breathed. Two or more crew. She just had to get someone else out of their pod.

"Computer, wake up crew."

Silence.

"Computer, I need two or more crew members. I need the captain! Wake her up."

"The timer is set for Captain Altair to leave stasis."

Syra breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed into her chair. "When does her alarm go off?"

"Estimated time to captain on the bridge: 9,899 hours."

Syra closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she turned on the video screen and set everything in her profile to 'unwatched'. It was going to be a long time before she dared speak out loud again.

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley obsessively writes letters to her mother, her daughter, her accountant, as well as to unknown beings in outer space. Only her mother admits to reading them. Born in Germany, Sylvia spent her childhood in California and now lives in Estonia. Her fiction has been nominated for a Nebula and her short stories have been translated into more than a dozen languages. She has been writing full-time since 2016, including bespoke near-future science fiction for Thales and NATO. You can find out more about her at https://intrigue.co.uk.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley reveals the inspiration behind *Hoist by her own Picard*

I'm not usually one for allegories; I've always been jealous of authors who write stories that can change a reader's point of view. Writing is a type of processing for me, so I guess it works the other way around: my stories are often simply explorations of the random noise that's on my mind. It isn't until later that I realize "this is an allegorical look at the pandemic" and that I've accidentally admitted to the world that I've spent most of lockdown watching reruns of old science-fiction series.