

Eating Their Sins and Ours

by Jay Lake

"Bitch," whispered Ricardo, jamming home the spring-feeder on the chamber of his ballspitter.

Most of *Abraxas*' systems -- power, gravity, helm -- had gone with the aliens' first salvo. At least we still had atmosphere. I had been reviewing manifests on the big wallscreen in the ready room when the attack began, the bridge vacant for the first critical seconds of combat. That should have been all right, damn it. The aliens had never been seen within the Solar System before -- troublesome as they were, they were considered a colonial problem. Traffic control doctrine called for civilian ships like *Abraxas* to maintain a low-level defense posture, in order to avoid messy accidents.

I held on to that thought, a bitter mantra against the blood-price our crew was paying. A blood-price I had earned them through my casual negligence.

"Traitor." He rotated the locking collar on the gas cylinder.

Ricardo had tethered himself near one corner of the ready room to tinker with his ballspitter. Hollow rubber bullets powered by compressed air -- one of the few usable weapons on a starship, where high-velocity kinetics and energy weapons both had fatal drawbacks. Plus, with practice you could shoot around corners.

"Murderess." He checked his sighting, aiming the ballspitter at my face.

Idiot was more like it, but Ricardo didn't seem to require a response. I just stared back, willing him to shoot me, to shatter my forehead at two hundred meters per second. The ballspitter would kill an unprotected human at short ranges -- messy, bruised death.

Too bad the aliens wore hardened vacuum armor. Rubber balls didn't do much to them. They didn't find blowing holes in a human ship's hull a meaningful impediment either. Me, I was armed with clenched fists and regret.

"You'll pay right along with the rest of us." Ricardo dropped his aim and went through his weapon check all over again.

Eventually our emergency sticklights failed. Banging noises occasionally carried through the bulkheads. A red grainbulb on the backup aircycler let me know I hadn't gone blind. Ricardo's breathing thundered in the quiet dark, his ballspitter clicking as he worked through the weapon check over and over and over.

When the ready room's hatch finally broke open, the noise was unbearable. In flooding pulses of colored light, I saw Ricardo push off from his corner, ballspitter spewing like a supercargo at the end of a three-day station leave. I tried to scramble out from behind the galley processor, tried to swarm the alien's armored bulk with my fists, but I couldn't move. I just couldn't make myself move.

One of the aliens telescoped an impossibly long arm through the spray of rubber bullets and snapped Ricardo's neck. I recovered from my paralysis to curl into a fetal crouch as the balls bounced around the ready room, working off their killing velocity in the spinning colored lights.

A telescoping arm grabbed my neck, hard fingers choking me. Nothing snapped, although as I was towed weightless out of the room, two ribs cracked under the impact of Ricardo's ammunition.

I never even whimpered.

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I lay naked on a deck, metal cold against my back. I was in the vehicle bay of *Abraxas*. It had been completely stripped of equipment, from the shuttles down to our suit racks. Gravity had been restored along with the lighting. Every exit was covered with pink foam. My chest hurt like hell, a whopping bruise on one breast from Ricardo's rubber balls to go along with the cracked ribs. I wondered if I was the only survivor of our crew. Was there some way for me to kill myself here?

One of armored aliens lurched across the bay toward me. I tried to ignore it as I gently explored my cracked ribs. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see it was almost three meters tall, bipedal, with two thick armored arms and two more utility arms -- the extensors. It didn't have a head, just prominent bumps on the shoulders.

It stood there, patient, quiet. A killer machine. The silence eventually got my attention, so I stopped ignoring the alien and looked toward it, focusing on the black panels on the bumps.

"Incurse domains racekind you," the alien said.

We didn't even know what the aliens called themselves. Humans hadn't intercepted enough telemetry to crack their language. The aliens had never invested time in talking to us. The few times humans had captured an alien, it promptly died within the slagged interior of its armor. No human prisoner had ever escaped or been returned.

A cheerful thought given my current circumstances.

"I don't know." I couldn't keep the whine out of my voice. "I don't understand 'incurse domains.' I don't even think 'incurse' is a word."

The alien clucked at me for a moment, a giant mechanical chicken. "Formate this incursion regular."

I propped myself up on my elbows. "'Formate this incursion regular.' That almost made sense." I started to laugh, falling back onto the deck. "Where did you learn English? You think 'incurse' is the regular verb form of 'incursion.'"

Laughter took me, uncontrollable, bringing shrieking pain to my ribs. I couldn't cry for *Abraxas* and her crew but I could laugh until I threw up. After a while the alien left me to my whooping misery.

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Later my alien brought me food. The supplies were obviously looted from *Abraxas*' galley stores. Four vacuum-sealed bags of cornmeal at five kilos each, a three-liter tube of brine-packed olives and a hundred-gram tube of cinnamon. The ridiculous menu confirmed

the aliens didn't normally keep human prisoners.

Maybe I wasn't slated to die. Starve perhaps, but not be executed. Hope springs eternal.

"Thanks," I said as I tugged at the olive tube. I didn't have a cap-puller, but figured I could get it out eventually. Working on the olives distracted me from the chill of the flight deck.

"Do you think I could get water, and maybe some blankets?"

My alien did something I'd never heard of. It folded down in its powered armor like an anime toy until it was almost a cube on the deck. The shoulder bumps peeked at me from the top of the almost-cube.

"Instantiate response speaker righteous."

I lay the olive tube in my lap. "What?"

It clucked again. My alien almost sounded distressed. "Generate response racekind appropriate."

"I think you mean, 'You're welcome.'"

"Instantiate welcome you racekind."

"Okay..." Something about the phrase bothered me. "Racekind. You used that term before. That's you. The aliens. Whatever."

"Instantiate response speaker affirmative."

My alien was starting to make sense to me. Which was scary in its own right. "That would be 'yes,' right?"

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Two days later, measured by the light cycles on the flight deck, I'd gotten sick of olives and cornmeal. Still no water. The brine in which the olives were packed was hell to drink. At least I got some moisture out of the green flesh. I figured I had another day or so before I was incapacitated by thirst. It seemed only fitting that I die with the rest of the ship and crew.

My alien came to me with three others. We'd been making progress, me and my almost-cubical jailor. By now I could recognize my alien by the wear patterns on its powered armor. Talking away the hours together, I'd even gotten a little bit of the hang of its weird syntax -- verb-object-subject-modifier. My alien seemed to understand me, mostly.

Unfortunately, our communication was like one of those low-level write-only computer languages. Just because my alien understood me didn't mean I understood it. And now apparently it was time for somebody to prove something to somebody else.

"Instantiate greeting you racekind," said my alien. It didn't fold into a cube.

"Hi yourself." With a cold jolt in my spine, I remembered the sound of Ricardo's neck snapping.

"Implement action you requirement."

That was relatively clear. "You want me to do something."

There was a short pause. Perhaps they were talking by radio. Or telepathy. How the hell

would I know?

"Intake transgression you requirement," my alien said again.

"You want me to intake a transgression."

My alien practically rattled with excitement. "Instantiate response speaker affirmative."

"Right." Sarcasm wouldn't translate. Hell, words barely did. I shook my head. "What the hell do you think intaking a transgression actually means?"

"Atone you transgression requirement."

"Atonement? You want me to atone. For what?"

"Consume trespass you requirement."

"Trespass?" On what, I wanted to say, but the context was clear enough. "But we didn't invade your territory. We don't even know where your territory *is*." Well, I didn't. God only knew what the military got up to in the dark between the stars.

My alien rattled again, actually squeaking. "Mistaken you trespass comprehension."

I sighed. "Of course it was a mistake. No one meant to start a war with your racekind. We didn't know you existed until you started shooting up our ships."

There was long silence, as if the aliens were exchanging glances. I thought about what they were trying to communicate to me. Spiritual concepts such as transgression and atonement. It was like going to Fontevault Bible Church with my grandmother back in Caldwell County when I was a kid. Sermons full of blame and regret, fire and brimstone, fit to move a child's bowels to water with fear of the Lord. Even now I could hear Brother Ellison's black leather Bible slapping the soft pine lectern as women collapsed in the aisles, shrieking in tongues.

"Error you error error," my alien blurted.

"Error me error. Your English is getting worse." It wasn't properly meaningful even in the aliens' fractured syntax, but it did make sense. Obviously I'd misunderstood something important to my alien.

"Consume trespass you atonement," my alien said slowly, precisely.

Okay, so *trespass* wasn't the key here, at least not in the sense I understood it. My alien was shuffling concepts, trying to reach me in front of its audience. Try a different word. Atonement? It had said *requirement* before.

"Something you think I need to do," I said. "Something about my regrets." My mind flashed on Ricardo's final, doomed struggle in the ready room. "I've got regrets, all right, but I can't imagine you care."

"Error you error error." This time my alien almost sounded urgent. One of the other aliens stirred. Did that signal impatience in their body language, too? "Consume trespass you atonement."

Trespass. The key lay in that word. My alien didn't mean trespass in the sense of crossing borders. What else did that word mean? Trespass as in *forgive us our trespasses*? Sins

against God. If that were true, my alien would have fit right in at my grandmother's rural Texas church.

I had to chuckle at the thought. Not hardly.

My grandmother would have called *consume trespass* 'sin eating' -- one of those weird country customs I'd worked my way into space to get away from. I was frustrated, thirsty, tired. "Your trespass, my trespass, who cares? It's a whole damned war, not someone sneaking across fence lines. You want an apology, fine. I'm sorry!"

"Error you error error." Now my alien somehow sounded defeated. The other three aliens rattled their extensor arms. They were going to snap my neck, just like Ricardo's.

"I didn't do it," I shrieked. "I'm so sorry." I fought back a sob of panic. "I've paid, I'll pay again. Whatever you want." The hard, cold metal fingers clasped my neck. "I'll atone." The fingers stopped, the pressure on my throat relaxed.

Oh for God's sake, was it really about my grandmother and that leather Bible of Brother Ellison's? That was beyond bizarre. But I was out of other guesses. "You want me to be a sin eater," I said, trying to calm my shuddering breath. "Take in the transgressions of...us? You? This entire war?"

My alien settled visibly, as if the tension had drained out of it. "Instantiate response speaker affirmative." The other three stopped, turned back to face me.

"All of our sins," I said. "Into me." God knew I had enough to atone for, but this was bigger and stranger than even I had imagined.

The four of them spoke the words together, four flat, mechanical voices echoing in the deserted flight bay. "Instantiate response speaker affirmative."

You never escape your childhood. No one ever did. Mine had followed me even here. The Lord's Prayer thundering in my head, I wondered how in space was I supposed to eat the sins of an entire war? All I could think to say was, "Could I *please* have some water?"

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They came back, the same four, my alien carrying three one-liter fluid bladders for ship's stores. One of the bladders was marked as water, the two weren't -- they were normally used for non-potable applications.

"Consume trespass you interrogative?" said my alien. It placed the two non-potable bladders on the deck between us, then used its extensor to set the water bladder to my left. Cracked and dry as it was, my mouth found some saliva. I imaged that water flowing like life itself down my parched, salty throat. Baptism all over again.

"What will happen?" I touched one of the bladders in front of me. "Will this end the war?" No more dead crews, no more broken ships.

"Truncate hostilities mutuality affirmative."

"End the war. Okay." I had to believe my alien. I couldn't see why it would bother to trick me, not when it held all the power between us. Now I got greedy. "What about me?"

"Consume trespass you completion. Consume trespass mutuality completion."

That was the first time my alien had ever used two sentences in a row in my hearing. That also wasn't much of an answer. Completion and mutuality seemed to be the key concepts. Away from the Bible, back to politics.

Aha.

"We do it together, you and I. All of it, to the end. Right?" I pointed at the bladders between us to make my meaning clear.

"Instantiate response speaker affirmative," said my alien. Yes.

"And the war is over? Everybody goes home, we make nice, have a treaty, send kids to each other's universities."

My alien didn't answer. It pushed one of the non-potable bladders toward me, then folded into its almost-cube shape, the bump peeking at me. An extensor arm grabbed the other non-potable bladder. My alien's armored cube hissed, then one of the panels folded back to extrude a small funnel. It popped open the valve on the bladder and paused.

I took the hint and popped mine. I sniffed the opening. It smelled like blood and machine oil mixed together.

What had they done with Ricardo and the rest of the crew? My stomach kicked as I threw up mangled olives and pasty chunks of cornmeal. Wiping my lips, I stared longingly at the liter of water they had given me. I had failed twice -- failed to raise the defenses, failed to fight when the aliens had finally come for me.

To hell with my alien. I would do this for Ricardo and the rest of the crew. My mouth already tasted horrible, the flavor of my guilty soul. The sin-eater, taking the wars of worlds within me.

Grandmother would have been proud.

"To peace," I said, tilting the bladder and pouring the ghastly mess into my mouth in a perverse Communion.

My alien drained its bladder as I choked mine down in salty, oily gulps. My stomach kept heaving, but I finished the entire liter.

Then I threw up again, oil and bile and blood. As I retched, my alien rocked in its cube, smoke issuing from the armored seams until the cube deformed slightly and the bump collapsed.

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When I could again focus sufficiently to pay attention, I found the other aliens had departed. Along with the armored shell of my alien, they had left hundreds of liter-bladders of water on the deck arranged in a spiral around me and the wreckage of my alien.

In my fever I lost count of my sleep cycles, long after my food ran out. Eventually a human crew came alien-hunting. I lay curled around one corner of the ruined armored cube, counting light sources in the ceiling. A tall woman walked up to me, her boots near my face. She bent down to touch my neck.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

I tried, I swear to God I tried to answer her. The war was over, we had a truce, we could make a treaty, my neglect hadn't killed *Abraxas* and her crew for nothing. I had taken the ultimate Communion. I had drunk the mixed wine of our blood and theirs. I had eaten the sins of two cultures. Words crowded my head, fighting to spill out. All I could say was, "Truncate hostilities mutuality affirmative."

She looked up at someone I couldn't see. "Medic!"

"Instantiate treaty mutuality affirmative," I told her. It was desperately important, but she wouldn't listen. She didn't understand. She didn't believe me.

At least she held my hand.

About the Author:

Jay Lake lives and works in Portland, Oregon, within sight of an 11,000 foot volcano. He is the author of over two hundred short stories, four collections, and a chapbook, along with novels from Tor Books, Night Shade Books and Fairwood Press. His current novel is *Trial of Flowers* (Night Shade Books). Jay is also the co-editor with Deborah Layne of the critically-acclaimed *Polyphony* anthology series from Wheatland Press.

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