

Swallowing Pride by Dalibor Perkovic

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About this story

"Swallowing Pride" is a mixture of mischief, getting into trouble, and the lack of ability that the pampered rich-and-famous have with coping with the realities of space travel (and the odd skirmish with pirates). It's what happens when you try and make your girlfriend jealous by picking up rich and abundantly female movie stars...

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SWALLOWING PRIDE

from the memoirs of Aleksei Corbeau

I have to admit it, I did it just to annoy Sylvie. I mean, it's not nice to say that a girl is a pain in the ass, but she's been bugging me in the way only women can since we landed at Mackenzie Depot at Miphifa yesterday. I had a lot on my mind even without her attention—hungry sighing and sniffing and looking the other way when I try to make conversation – call me a wimp, but when my girl is in a bad mood, I can't not try to make her feel good. And if I don't succeed, the next thing that happens is me feeling guilty, the best manipulation material since the first caveman came from the hunt emptyhanded and, as a punishment, was carrying stoneblocks all over the cave making redecoration for the rest of the week.

Anyway, after all my communication and mood enhancing attempts, including pointing out of the stuff that makes our lives nicer, her nose was still circling the higher orbit, leaving me with the old well known feeling that this is one of those days when she is deliberately making scenes just in order to show who really is the boss 'round 'ere.

That's why I think I can't be blamed for leaving the hotel room (that I, of course, paid extra credits) and went into the city to cool off and put my thoughts together. At first I walked the roofed park, then went to the panorama restaurant where I had a drink, only to end up in a commbox checking the ads and the marketplace. After all, while the best of all girlfriends is passing through another one of her phases (on a round trip, of course, do you think I haven't been through this before?), someone ought to plan the path for the Asp, that is still officially mine, to make its way to the southern sectors.

The the Imperial navy offers didn't interest me anymore. It was long gone, the adolescent passion that made me feel important while talking to stiff-faced military commanders, who made me play their paperboy, later a paparazzo, and then an assassin. Bigshots will be able to make their big plans without me, I decided years ago. Then, just for a change, I decided to look at the Federation side of the medal, only to realise that they are all the same authoritarian bastards and went off, thank you very much, my way. All that political bullshit made me leave my home after all, and it was sad that it had taken me years to figure it out.

But, some were still waging their small wars. Someone wanted a senator dead, the other didn't like his colleague the trader. Lately, I literally fell in love with people who pay unnatural amounts like 150 credits just in order to send a book to a friend. I accepted jobs like that without bartering. I'd even have lowered the price if I could. At the moment, we had all the money we needed anyway. So, even now I found such ad. Unfortunately, the friend that needed the book was in the opposite direction – Facece. Sorry, buddy, better luck next time.

And then it hapened. I noticed an ad: "Need transport on a fast ship to Arexack." I checked the map, yup, right in my direction. (OUR direction, I corrected myself and started to imagine Sylvie sitting on my neck, whipping me with an animal skin whip and making me wipe the dust under the console, and under the chair, and there's a little left there, and there, and there...)

I shook my head and pressed the button. The person who wanted a lift was... Whoops! Does the name Debbie Swallow mean anything to you? If I tell you that she's an actress and that there was a reason why her name was Swallow, you probably won't ask for details, right? I had two or three recordings in the memory of my AI in my own time, but as Sylvie came into my life this part of pleasure went out of my part of the universe.

Then I felt someone looking at me. I turned my head and met eye to eye with a small red devil sitting on my right shoulder.

He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to. I started to grin. We already had a passenger cabin on board, we kept it for those merry moments in deep space when we weren't using the benefits of our stardreamers. So, why not? My grin got wider. Oh, boy, am I going to give her something to be really pissed about...

"Miss Swallow, we happen to go your direction. When do you want to go?" I asked after we exchanged formalities. I felt like I was teleported into one of those films, first we say hello, then we make some excuse of a dialog, and then we get on to the business.

So it happens she's going on a vacation, the Imperial Populationist Movement is paying for a ten-day vacation at Arexack. Heh, the Imperial Population Movement and Debbie Swallow, what a combination! Religious and patriotic fanatics were very pragmatic when it comes to The Interest Of The Empire. And The Interest is: the more population – the more strength to the Empire. Androids and clones excluded, we need REAL people for REAL challenges. I guess industrial cannon fodder wasn't as good as the real blood, and a bioconstructor that just sold the Navy another cargo of live soon-to-be-corpse can't beat the feeling of a mother weeping for her son killed in some God-forsaken sector, trying to protect The Interest Of The Empire. I was wondering if Debbie was going to repay the IPM somehow or was it a regular sponsorship. Maybe some church officials will happen to be in the same hotel? But 'nuff said. I disconnected and started for the hotel, feeling anxious to tell my dear co-pilot that I've found a refund for the fuel. The girl was paying 600 credits, after all, which goes for 12 tonnes of fuel. Quite enough to look extremely sincere.

I kept grinning while I was approaching the apartment door, and then I forced the grin off my face. The real joy should be from within!

So I came in real cheerful and said I've found a passenger. We get 600CR for the ride, no trouble, no mercenaries on our tail, clean business. She said "Ok," and kept reading some woman magazine. Well, if she doesn't bother to ask, I'm sure not going to tell her. She'll find out, eventually. This is going to be an interesting voyage...

When she saw Debbie at the dock I felt her freeze. Debbie had a very cute face, but was overdeveloped elsewhere. Not my type of woman at all, but she was a kind of a well-built stereotype, and sold well, at least in the backward provinces of the Empire. Dense, curly hair, lips abundant with plastics, as were the other parts of her body. Rich, half-witted, limited vocabulary (so I've heard), a perfect target for other women to gossip. Unfortunately, there were to be no other women on board besides Sylvie, and I'm sure not going to take any sides. Remember, I'm sincere and most innocent!

I was wondering if Sylvie knew who Debbie really was, and how she will react when she finds out. Guess I didn't have to wait for long...

"You're Debbie Swallow, right?" she said and shook her hand. "Sasha didn't tell me who it is we're carrying, I recognised you from the movies."

Didn't quite leave me speechless, but it was close. So, she'd seen a few movies, and was well informed to even know the actress' name. Hmm, I'll have to inquire deeper into my co-pilot's past. And then I saw her face and all thoughts about having fun on the voyage faded away. My dear Sylvie was real amused. She wasn't jealous, as any decent girl would be when her boyfriend picks up a movie star to give her a ride. How could she not be jealous? She extracted her claws every time a good-looking woman passed near us in the street. Not that I'd be unfaithful in any way (I wouldn't like wearing cybernetic eyes for the rest of my life), but she was a female with ordinary female frustrations, as was I when some goodlooking man passed in the street. I mean, it was the most regular thing, you hiss and grit your teeth when your dearest shows that it's aware of the existence of any other members of the opposite sex besides yours and it was perfectly normal, at least for us provincials (I heard that men born in the industrialised metropolae used to refer to some of their female acquaintances as "friends", but didn't quite believe it, it was probably just an urban myth. I mean, who could be such a wimp? The thing you do with women is you meet her, you make a pass, you make a complete idiot of yourself and then you leave, feeling miserable! Shikata ga nai! There is no other way!).

But this time, she wasn't gritting, she was grinning. I haven't had time to contemplate my disappointment, because we had a scheduled launch from the station, so we boarded the Asp (I thought I scored when I helped Debbie into the cabin, Sylvie narrowed her eyes with that "wait till I break your arms in several places and then see whom you'll help into the cabin" looks on her face, but it was over as soon as we were in, and Debbie secured in her part of the boat) and got underway.

Hello control, thankyou control, goodbye control, and we were out. I set for the Arexack system, we looked for the beautiful pattern of time dilatation on the screen and then we were out.

"We alright?" I asked, looking at the starfield and checking the maps. Sylvie pressed the button and starport listing appeared on the screen. "Yeah, got it," she said without hesitation. She was getting technical and so was I. When you're in deep space, you leave all that personal stuff for later. First you make sure that there WILL be later. I loved her for being able to get efficient when necessary, you don't get many female co-pilots like that.

"Gordon and Lopez are stations, Ulrich is underground. The rest are blue skies. What shall it be?" she asked sharply. Meanwhile I was looking at the scanners. Radar is clean, no asteroids, no double arrival cloud, noone near, seems ok. "I say we take the blue skies," I replied, feeling the weight of a small red creature on my right shoulder. "We should keep our passenger satisfied." "Absolutely. Oh, by the way, will you manage the piloting? I mean, how's your concentration? Got enough blood in your upper brains? Because if not, I could take the seat..." she grinned and checked for Kawasakitown. The ship started turning and the orange sun came into sight, counting down AUs. I stretched in my seat and looked behind.

"Debbie, you alright?" I shouted.

"Have we launched yet?" came the answer from behind us. I could hear Sylvie clearing her throat and I didn't have to look at her to see her grin was becoming wider and wider.

"Yes we have, dear," I shouted back. "Don't leave that liquicouch, we're gonna start accelerating now." And as I was speaking out the "d" word, and it wasn't the "don't" one, I started to realise I was behaving like an idiot. Trying to make my girl jealous with a porno star? Get real, man, she'd be more jealous if I bought the inflating doll and brought it on-board! Well, good for me I'm able to laugh at myself. But still, could be an interesting trip. I laid my hand on the stardreamer and the spots marking the planets started moving.

I dreamed music. I dreamed Mozart, Bach and Tchaikovsky... I dreamed being a dolphin, floating peacefully through the algae, making lazy tail swings up... down... up... down... There may be sharks nearby, I knew, the coral reef is full of them... But the coral reef is big... and the number of sharks is limited, we may not meet them on this voyage... When we get home, the blue skies await, and there will be lots of... fish...

The large mark of Arexack 8 floated by on the left and disappeared from the screen, after a while the same happened with Arexack 6 on the right. I looked at the counter, 1,5 AU away, maybe we'll get away...

ZOOIING, ZOOIING, ZOOIING code red code red get up on your feet no don't you're in liqui should stay there if you don't want to turn into an omlet adrenaline is pumping the invisible needle slowly retracting one day it'll be a heart attack THE SHIP IS UNDER ATTACK small red letters at the corner and Sylvie is at the controls how come she's always faster than me... Oh God... I shake my head and it's clearer now. My heart is pounding as I lean over the console making a hard turn left, then right, than up, one eye on the scanner... ..nothing there... ..I release the engine button. We're clear, this time. I lean back, looking at Sylvie, but she's never sentimental at moments like this. "Three, at 250 km, red, green, orange. Coming this way," she barks. I return to controls and direct the ship 90 degrees away from the attackers. Sylvie is silent, always is when I'm at it. I'll try to make them split, different ships, different masses, different engines, different accelerations. They could be 20km apart when we make contact. If we're lucky. "Are we there yet?" a sudden shout comes from the back of the ship. Oh, the baby's awake! I completely forgot about miss Swallow. "No, we're half way," I respond trying to match direction with the incoming ships. Please, shut up, don't ...

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"Why did we exit the stardreamer?" asks the persistent, innocently interested voice. "I was just having the most beautiful dream, I was at the hair-dressers, and..." talk about nightmares, better.

"Having some problems, we'll be fine. Please, don't interrupt, ok?" I reply, looking at the blue glitch that appeared on the scanner. INCOMING MISSILE, says the screen. I open my mouth, but Sylvie is already pressing the button and the Asp is enclosed in a flashing ball of lightning. But the blue spot is still there. Shit! Sylvie activates ECM again, but again nothing. She aims at the missile, while I maintain direction and acceleration. Nearest ship is at 180 km, missile is at 150 and closing. I shake the stick a little, just for the show.

"Smart missile," she says. I shrug.

"Should've bought the ECM enhancer when had the chance," I reply.

"Remember why we didn't?" she asks. Oh my God! Now she's gonna start nagging!

We're about to start a fight with three ships, we already have one missile tracking us and who knows how many more is about to follow? And Sylvie is about to start nagging about some piece of equipment! It always becomes like this. I think I'm gonna start hating her. Even better, one day I'll just dump her into space.

"No," I reply.

"Neither do I," she says and I realise that I really, really love her, and that I don't want to have another co-pilot ever.

And the missile crosses the magic border at 100km while the boats are from 150 to 180 km away.

"We have eight shields, that can take two..." Sylvie starts...

INCOMING MISSILE
INCOMING MISSILE

We're again engulfed in a sphere of electric blue as Sylvie holds down the button, but the dark blue swarm keeps swarming in.

"Is everything alright?" asks the nagging voice from the passenger cabin, and as I start to reply...

INCOMING MISSILE
INCOMING MISSILE

"Shut up!" I shout as the first missile flies a few km behind the ship and starts turning around. Two more are approaching and the enemy is at 50 km, still in a tight formation, led by two

INCOMING MISSILE
INCOMING MISSILE

Preceded by four more missiles. The light blue flames are dancing all around Asp Explorer, but missile smoke tracks are closing in.

"Maybe we should tell them whom we have on board," whispers Sylvie checking at the attackers. 45km, 40km, two missiles are hurling past the ship and *click*, the engine is offline. I look at the scanner, one blue spot at 4 o'clock above, one above and one below, four more are ganging up from the left. I turn directly downwards not even thinking to release the engine.

"Tell me what's happening, please!" we hear a shout from the rear cabin and I see Sylvie, as in a slow-motion, enraged, screaming "SHADDAFUCKUP OR I'LL RIP YOUR SILICONS OUT!"

I turn back to the screen and seven missiles and three ships now at 10km, which is a lot prettier sight. I hear some kind of frightened whisper from the back, recognise only the word "expensive" but the sound is lost in

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the screaming of the shields when one missile hits the target and we're at 53% shields. I glance at the scanner and try to find a path that will avoid the remaining six plus three ships. The next moment, another missile explodes far to the left, the white return for a moment made me frightened, is there an Imperial Explorer that we haven't noticed before? but then I come to my senses. And then the star spangled sky blossoms in red and orange, as three coloured laser beams dance from top to the bottom of the screen. I make a tight turn right and then up and then right again, and there is one attacker in sight. Sylvie aims but it disappears in the top right corner of the screen. Eagle MkIII, say the red letters, and I turn again, she aims at a new one, Viper I, I try to cut it with a laser but he's gone before the beam comes anywhere near. Then I hear whoosh and our only missile is away and the red dot starts to leave the melee that has just become too crowded.

I turn left and there's a Gyr charging from two km with its gun ablazing and suddenly the shield is down to 15 percent and then WHAM, the shields scream and the siren blasts and the metal twitches and the airlocks hiss and the computer says top thruster damaged and the screen says "hull 76%" and the actress screams in the back and I abruptly turn down and there is a Gyr with his back turned on us, trying to rotate, I put the engine out for a second, press the laser button and flames flicker from the Gyr's hull and suddenly the sight is full of smoke but I'm still firing, poking with the laser for the target through the smoke cloud, feeling a pack of missiles behind my back turning in space, noticing that their target has stopped accelerating and converging to finish the 12 percent shields and 76 percent hull and there is a huge blast, the world shatters and I've gone deaf and I feel acceleration as the escape capsule throws me out as the rubbish and metal alloys and rubbish and radioactives hurl past me on the way down but no, I'm still in my cabin, pressing the engine starter like I'm gonna push it down through the console, turning left and up scooping metal alloys avoiding rubbish, I catch a glimpse of two white spots, is it the Viper? no, it's another missile far away, the other white spot is the Gyr, I turn right and down again as the Eagle MkIII hurls by and I see another missile in the distance and turn right again and down again and there are two more white spots, one gives birth to a red spot, Viper has survived, the other is probably another missile gone...

"Two missiles left," says Sylvie as I rotate the ship, the Viper passes across the screen, wounded, smoking, and 10km away and another blue spot turns white at a safe distance. I take a glance at the shields, they're 26 percent and rising, I take a shot at the Eagle, but missile is right behind it, closing in, so I have to turn. The red laser mows across the screen and shield is down to 11 percent as I find the route between two ships and remaining missile, then turn towards the red spot. Viper is 2 clicks away, burning and firing. I turn fast right then slowly back, peeking at the target over the screen edge, he's coming through NOW I turn firing a full blast at Viper's flank and the explosion blinds the screen and again there are two spots on the radar and a few seconds later there's only one green return in the mess of dark blue.

I say "Check for the missiles," and Sylvie's fingers are flying across the console, numbers rushing all over the screen and then she says "We're clear", and I take a deep breath as I turn the aim at the green Eagle that's charging and puking red. I dodge to the right twice and then slowly return to the left, and then turn sharp and there he is. I fire, but nothing, too small, too fast, too far. I turn at 90 degrees, hold the engine and then turn again, he's coming, but not so straight. Click, click, I send short bursts of photons and the spacecraft blossoms into white and orange, filling the screen with "metal alloys" signs and then, as if the whole universe has returned to its normal mode of existence, the engine returns on-line with a noiseless *click*...

My God, when was the last time I took a breath? I sighed as the tasteful, nice-smelling air filled my lungs. I turned to Sylvie, she turned to me, and we just sat there looking at each other. This one was close. Nothing can be worse than a bunch of missiles while your ECM is having a bad day... But we're not going to argue. Nevermore.

I don't know for how long we've been silent, but the menace from the back decided it was time to acknowledge her presence.

"Hello, is there anyone alive there?" said the tiny frightened voice. Sylvie smiled and nodded towards the

back.

"You should be polite," she said "and explain what was happening."

"Me? I'm not the one who said..."

"Shut up! You got her on board!" she said and turned to the console. So much for not arguing nevermore. But as I got up from my couch and started for the cabin, I saw Sylvie's face widen into a small but happy grin.

"Er, Debbie, we had some problems but it's all over now," i said. And the small red devil was here again.

"You can come to the control room and I... We'll show you..."

As if she only waited for an invitation. She catapulted herself out of her cabin, rushed past me and stuck her face into the big screen that showed the beautiful starry sky stained with lots of metal floating around.

I returned to my seat and strapped myself back while Sylvie was checking the damage report, pretending not to notice the guest.

"What are all those metal alloys floating around?" asked Debbie.

"We just got attacked by three pirates, and these are leftovers," I explained as I'd explain to a kid. She kept looking at the screen and then pointed her finger at a speck that floated among the wreckage.

"What's that? It says 'gem stones'! Could it be..."

"Yup," I answered. "It's probably the cargo they looted from some poor fellow who wasn't that lucky. And there..."

I stopped. A few km away was something marked as "fertiliser" and the little red devil started whispering in my ear.

"... there is some, hm, fertiliser." I shut up, waiting for her to ask the obvious question. And she did.

"So, they were carrying fertiliser?"

"Maybe, but not necessarily. The scanner is of limited capability as far as chemical analysis is concerned. It's got a data entry for stock market supplies only, and if it detects something that isn't listed, it will mark it as the most similar thing it can find in its memory, so, this could be regular fertiliser as well as... some organic leftovers..."

In a corner of my eye I saw Sylvie turn, but then she turned back to her job of checking the damage report.

"What kind of organic leftovers?" asked Debbie, but her tone was saying "I know what you are saying but I want you to say something else..."

"Probably carbonised pirate corpses," I said without hesitation and continued in one breath: "You know, lotsa stuff turns to fertiliser. I once transported slaves from Facece to Vequess and forgot to buy cargo bay life support and when I landed and wanted to sell, I found out I had 30 tons of fertiliser, and at first I thought 'boy, I bought the wrong stuff' and then..."

"I have to go to the toilet!" said Debbie, who turned pretty pale in face, and ran for her cabin. She returned a few seconds later and asked "Excuse me, where IS the toilet?"

I pointed my thumb to the small console-like object behind my couch. She looked at it and approached it with curiosity.

"Is that a door...?" she started, but again, she already knew the answer and wanted me to say something else. Anything else.

"No, you push that button there and the hole will open. Then you sit on it and do whatever you... want... But we don't use it that often because stardreamers have this bio-plug..."

"Can I go to the stardreamer then, please?" she asked.

"No, it works for the crew as a whole. Just hold on for another ten minutes and we'll engage it again. I just want to pick up these metal alloys, you can stay here and watch. Those are remains of three ships destroyed in combat, there will probably be a lot of blood and spills and other organic material all over it..."

My last words were unheard by the object because it escaped to its cabin and closed the door, for the first time since we left Miphifa.

"Disgusting," murmured Sylvie, but still, the grin on her face was telling a story of its own. She checked the damage report a while ago alright, but she was probably just enjoying all this too much to stop the conversation.

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What else is there to say? We didn't pick up metal alloys, who needs them? We continued the trip and got attacked by seven more craft that fired a total of two missiles. They never got past our shields. And all that time the doors to the passenger cabin were tightly shut.

When we got to Arexack, we had to force Debbie out of the cabin, and when she finally got out, she was shivering, but standing tall. I felt sort of sorry for her, but then remembered how much money she makes, and then I felt sort of sorry for myself. But what is money when you are free among the stars with your love by your side?

We got paid off, sold what we scavenged, repaired the ship and then we were free again.