

The Aralaquean story

Stardate 523600.55 Tales are asked, and told.

Brro turns to Pia.

"I've heard, Pia, that you outwitted a clan of Ice Pirates, using them to solve the dilemma facing the Aralqueans over the Telusean fire swamps, no doubt profiting from the situation. Would you favour us with this tale?"

Stardate 523600.57 A merchant trading vessel makes a shaky landing on Aralquea

Pia drains her pint of beer before replying. "Right!" she says, "The Aralaquean story? Right you are! But how about another beer to wet my throat?"

Clearing said throat portentously, she begins:

"It was a hot, dry day in Amniatch, port city of Aralakea. A pall of dust hung thickly over the town, and only those whose jobs required it ventured outside.

[But then, it's **always** like that in Amniatch].

Just before close of business, an aged clunker fell rattling from the sky, burning off the prominent yellow sticker from its navigation port, together with what remained of its paintwork) with the speed of its movement through the atmosphere. It landed with a boom in [well, mostly in] its designated parking space. The airlocks opened to reveal a quarrelling, teeth-barring collection of Fribble-tops and Shneres whose uniforms identified them as independent merchant-sailors of the Empire. They made their way across the tarmac and disappeared into the arrivals office. Moments later, the ship's airlock briefly opened a second time, as a smallish humanoid hurried out, looked around, and scooted through a gap beneath the fence.

[That was me.]

"Aralquea! Home of the Telusean Fire Swamps! It really was a prime sight-seeing destination for the hitch-hiking traveller, and I'd arrived at last!"

"Oh good," says Pia, pausing as a second Earth Beer arrives.

"Surely, dear lady, the Telusean fireswamps are on Telusea?" A credit holographically displays on the table near Simon's credstick. "Last time I had visited Aralquea, it was a planet entirely covered with water, the 'port cities' nothing more than the over populated wharf areas of the many artificially created floating islands."

Stardate 523602.5 On Aralakea and Telusia

Pia looks impressed. "You must be **so** old, Simon. What was it like, before they invented ansibles? How did school get to you? Sure, the **original** Aralakea was covered with water, but that was ages ago, before the Great Evacuation. When things went sour on that old planet, just before it blew up, the Aralqueans ran to Basterdia. The Basterds didn't want to be swamped with a flood of refugees, but they'd signed the Covvy Protocol, so they couldn't just shoot them. So the Basterds paid the Telusian desert pygmies to let the Aralakeans set themselves up there, and the Aralakeans -

outnumbering the Telusians - promptly renamed the planet when their old world blew up."

"That seems hardly likely, doesn't it? As the Aralaqueans are an aquatic species, and as you say, the Telusians are desert dwellers." "Their climates are diametrically apposed, and having a greater population they would have had to flood the entire planet." Another credit representation appears. "Perhaps you shouldn't be spending so much time listening to the data-hawkers of Basterdia, well known for the libellous accusations. so well known in fact, that it is a tourist attraction." Simon wags his finger at Pia, condescendingly.

Another hologram appears as Pia matches the technomage's credits.

"I haven't been to Basterdia yet, so who knows what the Basterd data-hawkers have to say about it? All I know is what the Aralaquens told me when I went to the new Aralaquea to see the fire swamps.

"After skipping the tedious formalities of immigrations, I headed for town, looking to skive a drink. I'd only been in Amniatch for a few minutes, but the weather was hot, and the cargo-bay of the ship had been even hotter, so I was pretty thirsty. Amniatch is a strange place to look at. There's not much to see on the surface, just a few Telusian dust-sauna huts, a dirt track to the space-port, and some little bubble-domes over the entrances to the real town, underground.

"One I figured out what was what, I went over to a green bubble-dome. A door opened in the side, releasing a burst of cool, moist air. But not much, because it was only an air-lock. Well, I figured that I could hold my breath long enough to get out again if it turned out not to be an oxy-atmosphere, so in I went.

"The air lock turned out also to be an elevator, which took me down to the street. The air was okay, but the walls were dripping wet and the ground was covered in slime. It squelched between my toes, but that was okay, because it least it was cool. The underground town was fairly bustling with Aralaqueans, who looked just like big blue frogs, only with necks. [Aralaqueans are not aquatic at all, Simon - they're amphibious!]"

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The Technomage deftly taps receipt to his credstick. "Your wisdom belies your years, child, as it does my wallet." Simon grins knowingly. Either with foreknowledge of how the previous exchange would go and knowingly deceptive... or being caught short and desperately trying to save face.

Captain Brro interjects; "The Aralaqueans are notorious for their mistrust of offworlders, especially since their dealings with the Basterds. You, what, evaded customs and immigration, avoided the twenty-four hour quarantine period, left their designated tourist areas and invaded what sounds like an Aralaquean breeding settlement - the males are semi-intelligent aquatic, living in Telusia's underground seas, the females are amphibious, living in small breeding settlements or larger towns and cities, depending on their fertility cycle, inclination and societal role. They are only blue during gestation.

"I'll wager you were... unwelcome. Aggressively so."

"Well, yes. Now that you mention it, I did notice that I was getting rather a lot of attention from the minute I set foot in the settlement. Stares and glares. But I was most of the way down the road and about to enter a building that seemed likely to be a bar before anyone actually stopped me. I was enjoying the sight of two of the local amphibians making a swaying, jovial exit and a third singing groggily from her position on the soft slime bench outside this establishment when the biggest, reddest, most aggressive looking Aralaquean that I've ever seen grabbed me by the shoulders, lifted me to her eye-level, and demanded to know who I thought I was and what I was doing there!

"Sir," said I, surprised. "Ma'am," I went on, "I'm... I'm a policy advisor for the Over-Head of the Special Humanitarian Issues Taskforce of the UP. **I'm here to investigate reports of gross mistreatment of the local populace by outside authorities. This seemed a good bet. Local populaces everywhere in the galaxy will tell you how they've been mistreated by outside authorities, and to upset a UP representative is sure to bring bad publicity for the cause. The big red Aralaquean (BRF, for short) put me down right away, but she still looked cranky. 'It's about time the issue was taken seriously,' she said, 'but that doesn't explain what a human is doing outside an ice dispensary in a breeding settlement in the middle of June.' She gave me a scary hairy eyeball and frogmarched me out of the settlement and across the surface to the next dome.**" United Planets

Pia finishes her second beer, pulls a plate of salted panda eggs across the table towards herself, and begins munching as she continues her tale.

"The next dome was more comfortable, with dry walkways for us outsiders, that the locals avoided. The people were more diverse, with the Aralaquean women in many shades of pink and grey (rather than the almost uniform blue like in the first dome) and a large number of tourists and businesspeople from around the galaxy. A few Telusians tried to sell souvenirs and postchips to the tourists, and looked so wet and miserable despite their wetsuits that I felt sorry for them and bought a few. I had to borrow a few credits from the BRF, but I'm sure she wouldn't have minded if she knew. She seemed to like me, what with that scary hairy eyeball and all. (I put that in my pocket for later).

"Anyway, after we got to the new dome, the BRF stopped pulling on my wrist quite so hard and turned a few shades pinker. She even looked kind of pretty, for a fr... Aralaquean.

"So then we got to the BRF's office. She sat down behind a big desk, and I sat down on the big chair in front of it. 'Didn't they explain to you at immigration that the breeding-settlements were off-limits?', she asked. 'We have enough trouble with contaminated Ice, without aliens startling the blue women. At this rate, we'll have no girls born at all this season.'

"`Well,' said I, `The immigrations official didn't seem to have much time for me. There was some kerfuffle over a stowaway on some merchant-ship when I got in. Can you tell me what this is about? Contaminated Ice?'



Stardate 523608.86 A Wager! (of sorts)

Ariel looks thoughtful.

'I know that there was much ummm... discussion in the Space Corp when the Basterds first allowed the Araqualean settlement of Telusia. After all, Telusia wasn't exactly the most *appropriate* destination and the Basterds were forced to construct the underground seas at great monetary expense (although I believe that the political return more than compensated). Even now the Araqualean people need to import water from other planets, some of whom also had an interest in Telusia at the time.' 'I'll wager that the contaminated ice was traced to shipments made from the Kaldacian government as part of a plan to gain control of the famed (and quite lucrative) Fire Swamps. They often complain at Full Council that the Aralaquean do not promote them to their tourist potential.'

Stardate 523609.72 Snagl Ice

Pia looks surprised at Ariel's insight. "Are you sure I haven't told you this one before?" she asks. "It was the Kaldacians, but we didn't know that then."

"Anyway, the BRF told me what was going on with this ice. On the old Aralaquea, there was a sort of green snail all over the planet that excreted hormonal chemicals into the water. Aralaqueans spend a lot of time in the water and used to absorb this stuff through their skin. Only, they didn't bring the snails with them to Telusia. That didn't seem to matter much most of the time, but after a few seasons, they started to notice that there weren't as many females being born, only the sub sentient males. Of course, that was because there weren't any snails in the underground seas. So along with their regular water shipments, the Aralaqueans had to start importing this chemical, which had to be handled pretty carefully because it didn't last if you didn't keep it dissolved and keep it cold. This "Snagl Ice", as they called it, cost a lot to bring in and they only had enough to give to pregnant and menstruating females, so they set up ice dispensaries in the breeding colonies, and that seemed to work pretty well for a few years.

"When I got to the planet, though, they were having problems. Somehow, most of the Snagl Ice that they were buying in had been contaminated with a toxin that made the blue fr... Aralaqueans giddy and impulsive. Aralaqueans who get any kind of shock or excitement during pregnancy are much more likely to have male children, so the balance was shifting the wrong way again. They still had more female kids than without the ice, but not enough to maintain their population in the long run. But their book-keeping was a mess and they didn't know what this contaminant was, or where it was coming from.

"Now, I didn't mind hearing about all this, but I had come to Aralaquea to see the fire swamps, not to sit in some slimy office, so I was starting to get bored. When the BRF went into cybertrance to call up some files for me, I slipped out of her office and headed for the surface. I found the road out to the fire-swamps and hitched a ride with some spacer types who had hired their own buggy. They seemed in a pretty good mood."

Pia pauses to make sure she still has the attention of her audience.

Bobo's normally smooth chrome forehead furrows thoughtfully. "I'm sure the Aralaqueans had a good reason for not just importing a breeding population of snails..."

A silvery credit icon is projected just over the table in front of Bobo. It glints as it rotates. "In any case, I'll wager you soon discovered that your happy spacers were destined for a discreet meeting with a group of the poor, discriminated-against, downtrodden, and fortunately mentally underestimated male Aralaqueans, along with some of their curiously Kaldacian-looking new friends."

"The green snails are obligate mixotrophs," says Pia, surprisingly. "They don't do so well in underground seas. And you really do need a sea full, since they each generate such small concentrations of the hormone."

Another two credit motes join Bobo's in holographic symmetry, rotating in the air.

"I had heard that the Terran Hypersnail - a vicious, cyber-enhanced genetic mutant was being smuggled into that region. Undisclosed sources, which may or may not have been the illegally hacked computer mainframes of the Terran government [blessed be the God Microsoft]." A smirk disappears quickly on Simons face.

"I would wager that, not only did you encounter the male Aralaqueans, as Bobo the Brown does suggest : But you also uncovered the insidious Terran plot to use those feeble foils as allies and scapegoats in their miscreant undertaking. The introduction of their Hypersnails, and enslavement of the entire planet!" The Technomages wild eyes stare intently at Pia as he finishes his statement.

Stardate 523610.67 A plot of several parts

Pia smiles and waves her card (a card bearing an identification image curiously unlike its owner) through the hologram to accept the technomage's proffered credits. "You're both right. Everyone had an angle on Aralaquea. There were seven happy spacers in the yellow buggy that picked me up. Two humans, black as night and shaven-headed: Zaire and Nadine. A golden servebot with its restraining bolt sawn off: T7leen. Three representatives of the Lanta hive, Mische. And a tentacled creature in a jar of water who didn't seem to have a name.

"'Nadine,' said I, 'it is good to see such cheer. Are you happy because you are on your way to see the famous Telusian Fire Swamps?' 'Yes,' said Nadine, winking at Zaire, 'That's why.' 'Oh,' said the first of Mische, quivering its belly. 'We thought it was because of all the money we are about to get.' Nadine coughed and fell silent.

"By and by the buggy came to a halt on the desert road. 'Pia,' said Zaire, who was driving, 'We will take you to the fire swamps, but first we have a little business of our own. Wait here and we will be back in a few minutes.'

"I shrugged and Nadine got out, taking the tentacled creature in its jar. Mische got out, preening their eyes and blinking at the sun. T7leen got out pulling a large trunk from the back seat. Zaire got out, and locked the buggy behind him. They all walked behind a large rock by the roadside, and disappeared. So I got out, closed the door quietly, and slipped behind the rock myself. There was nothing there.

"I stood for a moment, pondering, when the giggle of a Lanta came from beneath my feet. I examined the rock, found the touchpad, and took out my zoot-box to backtrace the thermal patterns of Nadine's fingers on the keys. After a moment, I re-entered the code myself, and a trap-door opened to a stone stairwell. I knew it was a stairwell, because I'd seen one once before, in some ancient Terran ruins.

"Down the stairs I went, listening ahead so I didn't surprise the spacers (or let them surprise me). Halfway down, there was an exit. I took it, to see where it led, and found myself in the box-seat of a grand opera house or theatre. Far below, on the stage stood my happy spacer friends and an equal number of Kalducian nationals, looking sinister in their traditional dragon-scale mail. Standing quietly to one side of the Kalducians was a figure, hooded and cowed, of indeterminate species. And before them, in a grand aquatic stadium, were perhaps a thousand singing male Aralaqueans."

Stardate 523611.76 Zara gives a quick lesson on why contract work is the way to go (see Stardate 523511.doc)

Stardate 523615.62 On offer is made

"Wow," says Pia, "I always wondered about the other end of that deal."

"Yours must have been the first Hypersnail shipment to arrive on New Aralaquea, although they had made a few appearances on the old planet. As you say, the male Aralaqueans - poor things - were thrilled. The Hypersnails have a major aphrodisiac effect on them, and by all reports, they had a wild old time when they arrived. Such a wild time, in fact, that they forgot to invite the females and almost starved themselves to death in a month-long orgy that lasted until the Hypersnails themselves expired. They thought it was worth it, but you can imagine the effect that kind of thing would have on the Aralaquean population if it happened all the time. The females could imagine it, too, and promptly placed a total ban on the import of Hypersnails. Fortunately, that first shipment had included only female Hypersnails so they could not reproduce on the planet. (A canny move on the part of the importer, perhaps?)

"I came to the underground amphitheatre knowing nothing of this, but it was on the public record, so I cybed it up as soon as I heard what was going on in the secret meeting on the road to the Fire Swamps. For the Aralaquean females, it seems, were not the only ones with imagination.

"The leader of the dragon-scaled Kalducians was addressing the Aralaquean males as I arrived. Her organisation - she announced - was preparing to smuggle in to Aralaquea a breeding population of Terran Hypersnails, sufficient to ensure that the males - for a small fee - could access the snails whenever they liked for only a small fee. It was not - she assured the males - illegal to own Hypersnails on Aralaquea. Indeed, due to a curious requirement of the Aralaquean constitution, it was not possible for the ruling parties to make that illegal. So if they could just get past the difficulties of importing the snails to begin with, all would be well. And that was where they sought the aid of their future clients. If the males could create a sufficient diversion to loosen security at the spaceport, the Kalducians would sign a deal with the famous Ice Pirates (she gestured towards my spacer friends) that would ensure a continuing supply of Hypersnails in perpetuity.

"The cowed figure behind her laughed with pleasure, and it was only from the glances exchanged among the Kalducians then that I saw how uncomfortable they were with his presence.

"The Kalducian leader continued: 'I will give you 20 standards to think about our offer', she said. 'And I will return with the paperwork.'

"The Kalducians are nothing if not sticklers for paperwork, even in ventures of dubious legality."

"Dealing and use of addictive substances. A regrettably common vice. I trust you chose to interfere with this grotesquery at the earliest opportunity.", Ambassador Svathlan's machine translates.

Brro pushes forward a credit chip. "Actually, Ambassador, I'll wager that she didn't. I'll wager, in fact, that thanks to Pia here, Terran Hypersnails are among Aralakea's chief exports."

Tentacles blurring through horrified forms, and a heat haze rising off a portion of the shell in some excessively shocked comments in Indra-Derryn, the Ambassador exhibits some horror. But is not inclined to wager over the Captain as the perfidy of sentients is too well known to it.

Stardate 523616.89 The Fabulous Fire Swamps

Pia squirms on her chair. "Well," she said, "They make good money from those Hypersnails now."

"Old Ned always said that curiosity killed the cat - whatever that was - but I love this sort of intrigue. As the meeting broke up, I scooted back up the way I had come and got back into the buggy before the Ice Pirates returned. It had taken a while, so I pretended that I had fallen asleep. I'm good at that."

Abruptly, Pia's head drops to the table, her eyes close, and she lets out a loud sound reminiscent of a malfunctioning chainsaw. Almost immediately, she bounces back up. "See?"

"The Pirates came back, chattering happily, although they seemed to run out of things to say when they remembered me. I noticed that they hadn't brought that trunk back with them, and as we set off again for the fireswamps, I checked out the view through the back window and managed to catch sight of the Kalducian party struggling with it back down the road to the dome town.

"If you every get the opportunity to see the Fire Swamps, take it. They really are spectacular. The smell, though, is something else. Nadine told me that the Kalducians were planning to do something about that, when they took over the tourist trade. It would have destroyed the local ecosystem and poisoned any Telusians coming anywhere near their sacred sites, but I can see how it would have made visitors more comfortable. They had the contracts all set up ready to do it, too - apparently, they were the only single green snail hormone supplier big enough to guarantee a regular clean supply to Aralaquea, but they wouldn't do it unless the Aralaqueans ceded control of the Fire Swamps. So that's what was behind the contaminated shipments - if they had just stopped supplying, the gap would have been filled in bits and pieces by hundreds of small traders, but if they created enough uncertainty over the quality of the substance (so long as no-one figured out where the contamination was coming from), they figured the Aralaqueans would have no choice. But it wouldn't have been much of a choice. At that time, the Telusian Fire Swamps were the only real income source on the planet, so if they gave that away, the Aralaqueans wouldn't have been able to survive in the long run, what with the cost of importing water all the time as well as the hormones. So it was a bit of a dilemma for them.

"I asked the spacers where they were staying. They looked at me strangely and said that they were staying in the alien resort, of course - that was the only place visitors were allowed to stay. Oh well. That made things easier. I hitched a lift back to the resort with the spacers, said my goodbyes, and headed for the bar to finally get that drink. The proclivities of Kalducians are well-known, so I took my time over that drink, and sure enough before too long, the group I had seen earlier came into the bar as well. From the pockets of the leader, the Kalducians donated to the cause (well, I'm *sure* they would have donated, if they had known about it) 30 credits, a hotel booking slip and a keycard. Things were looking up."

Ariel quietly snickers. 'Let me guess - the Kaldacians wanted to set up a odour hole like they tried with the Bog of Eternal Stench over on Uranda Seven. Very nice - and a total waste of time. Given the altered climate, Tellusia would have been an even bigger disaster than there!"

"But I'm not here to digress." A shimmering credit appears by her head and floats over the table towards Pia.

"Fire Swamps are supposed to be smelly (how else do you tell you're not on some glorified 'holoday'?) and I'll bet the real mastermind behind the deal knew all along that the Kalducian's plan would never work. You mentioned a cowed figure? Well I'll bet that was no less than Varth Dader, Terran terrorist and all round evil guy. I'll bet his **real** plan was to get rid of Aralaqueans, Tellusians and the Kalducians with one foul swoop. He never did like, well, anybody, really."

"Right again," says Pia. "You **have** heard this one before, haven't you?"

"Dader just has it in for every type of non-human there is. When the contract came into his poison factory from the Kalducians for a mild, undetectable neuro-toxin that could be dissolved in ice, he found out why and saw his opportunity to create havoc. He filled the order, but followed it through to Aralaquea, and after it had started to cause some damage, he pounced.

"When the little Terran came to the Kalducians, screaming bloody murder over the contamination and threatening to tell the Aralaquean authorities everything, they figured the shit was about to hit the fan. They offered him money, they offered him Norfolk Tears, they offered him women, but it seemed that nothing would sway him. Finally, just when they were really desperate, he offered what seemed an easy way out. All they had to do was set up a little deal to help out the poor, oppressed Aralaquean menfolk, and he'd let it go. They could even keep the profits, if everything went smoothly. Of course, Dader was doubtless planning to sell them out as soon as he got what he wanted, but the Kalducians tend to believe anything they see on paper, so long as it is in triplicate and signed by a lawyer. Where Dader got his law degree, I have no idea.

"I was appalled when I read the paperwork describing all this in the Kalducians' hotel suite. The booking slip I'd confiscated had the room number, the keycard let me in without so much as a pin (after a little creative re-wiring of the door), and what I found inside was a room stacked high with papers. The trunk that the Ice Pirates had given them was sitting open on the bed, and in it was a document (in triplicate, but yet to be signed) 200 hundred pages thick, outlining a deal according to which - in exchange for a very large sum of cash from the Kalducians - the Ice Pirates would bring in a full breeding stock of geneered Hypersnails, guaranteed suitable for the Aralaquean homeworld, to be replaced at no additional cost if found for any reason to be inadequate.

"Reading the summary, I had a brainwave. I cybed up those files that my friend the BRF had tried to get me to read earlier to check on something I thought I'd read before. I was right - the technical name for the green hormone snail that the Aralaqueans missed so much was the Tennam Hydrasnail. So close to "Terran Hypersnail" and yet so far. That kind of handy coincidence happens only once in a lifetime (or once in an anecdote, at any rate). But there it was. I fed the document into the post-chute, had it scanned, and slipped it into the disposal-chute. A little creative editing, then I dumped three copies to hardcover and put them back in the trunk with no-one the wiser. Then I went back to the bar for another drink, and returned the keycard to my now paralytic Kalducian friend.

"Chalk up one more for the good guys. Of course, that wasn't the end of it. I called up the BRF and (after explaining why I had to leave her office unexpectedly before), managed to convince her to accompany me the next morning to witness the scheduled meeting at the opera house. We watched the Kalducian give her little speech, heard the Aralaquean males acclaim the idea, and saw the Aralaqueans, the Kalducians, and the Ice Pirates sign and counter-sign the contracts. Varth Dader stood witness in his capacity as an interstellar lawyer, and thus the pact was made. When everything was done - and could not be undone, I stood up from my crouching-spot and made my presence felt.

"`Ho ho!`, I shouted, getting into the spirit of things, `Such public spiritedness is good to see! Nadine, you have just agreed to stock this world with green hormonal Hydrasnails. Kalducians, I think you'll find that you have agreed to pay!` The Kalducian leader went a shade greener than her usual lime as

she hurriedly re-read the contract in her hands. 'It's true,' She announced to her horrified peers, 'and this is legally binding.' The Ice Pirate made as if to rip up her contract, but to the Kalducians, that was a crime beyond all others, so they moved at once to prevent it. 'But,' pleaded the Ice Pirates, 'We have already brought the Hypersnails, and they are waiting in the docks for a distraction even now. Must we bear the expense of a new shipment - and of a freshly geneered species, at that?' The Kalducians insisted that it was so, and that they would go to any length to see a contract that they had signed - however unhappily - enforced. The Aralaqueans swam about in a confused swarm below.

"Well, I was pretty pleased with that. I had thought it might take the BRF to get it enforced, but I hadn't counted on Kalducian honour. (You aliens can be so strange). The Terran looked cross, but I didn't see that there was much that he could do about it. But then the BRF jumped up and starting laying charges - the Kalducians for contaminated ice, the Ice Pirates for snail-smuggling (and a whole back-log of charges relating to interfering with legally commissioned Ice vessels) and the Terran for - well, she said she'd think of something that would stick.

"Just then, there was a boom and rumble. The earth shook and the water turned gold. The theatre seemed likely to collapse, so we ran for the surface. The sky was golden with shooting stars and mad fireflies. The BRF stopped dead in startlement, the Kalducians ran for cover, and the Pirates ran for their buggy. I didn't want to see them get off that easy, so I followed and leapt onto the roof-rack for the ride.

"I guess that was the distraction that the males had planned. We'd all underestimated their ingenuity and to this day, I don't know what they did. It sure worked as a distraction, though.

"The pirates drove straight for the docks, through the now unguarded entrance, and headed for their ship. They got in (I slipped in behind, unseen) and - in too much of a frantic hurry for the standard lift-off checks, started straight for the sky. There was a grumble and a roar as the ship was launched (there's only supposed to be a roar, not a grumble at all). There was a louder grumble and a scream of twisting metal before we'd even hit escape velocity, and gradually our climb slowed, then rapidly, we accelerated back towards the Earth. The Hypersnails had scoured the metal so badly that it had eaten through the body and compromised the systems. We came to ground amid the Fire Swamps, and while the travel deck was still intact and had been built to survive anything, the cargo deck exploded. Hypersnails were scattered across the desert and into the swamps for miles around. The safety systems kicked in and saved the rest of us from any serious harm, though I twisted my ankle quite badly. You can't trust those metallic ships.

"An Aralaquean police scouter picked us up almost straight away, and the Ice Pirates and Kalducians were pardoned, on the proviso that they kept up the deal. It was too good an opportunity for the Aralaqueans to pass up. The BRF had been able to prove nothing against Dader: the Kalducians documents had all mysteriously disappeared, so he got off scott free. The BRF thanked me for my role in thwarting the plot and promised a rich reward. Was I imagining a smug twinkle in her eye when she said that it would be sent to me care of the UP? Drat.

"Dader laughed as he left and said that if he couldn't enslave the Aralaqueans with lust, he'd think of some other way.

"The Hypersnails died in the fires, of course, but they are still picking out the caramelised bodies to this day. Baked Hypersnails, it has been found, are quite a delicacy, and they're making a killing on the export market."

"And that's it," says Pia, looking around. "Who's next?" — Back to [science fiction](#)
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