

ERIK J KREFFEL PRESENTS 2 SHORTS (+ 1)

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PEACE, AT LONG LAST

"Take me back to where Tooraag found me, when I was a young boy,•h I asked Rogagh, my adoptive brother, one evening. Awaytha the sun was setting in the distant, pale violet sky.

•g *There is nothing but pain for you there, Jonathon. It's a twelve-day journey...you are an old man...enjoy your days like Tooraag before us."*

My bones creaked as I stood up to throw a shawl around my shoulders; the air was much cooler now than when I first arrived here, more than fifty years ago. •gI need to know...why did it happen? Why did I come here?•h

•g *Tooraag considered it a blessing, brother. You should as well. You have had a full life among us...you are one of us more than you have ever been a human."*

"Maybe so...but I need answers, peace, Rogagh. I•fve always been that way, you know.•h

Rogagh sighed, his ochre face downcast while I explained my reasons.

I reached out to him, brushing my fingers against his arm. •gPlease, have I ever asked you for anything?•h

•g *No, never, brother. You have always been obedient despite what Tooraag's superiors did to you."* He laughed, then continued, *"I would have been less eager to cooperate in your place."*

"Then help me...I can•ft do it on my own.•h

Rogagh nodded, then clapped me on the shoulder. •g*At dawn, we will leave. I will prepare supplies for us, and make preparations for Juytha and the children in my absence. You should rest now...it will not be an easy journey."*

"I know...the Hooudua administer that region these days.•h

•g *Yes. We will need to wear our uniforms."*

I rubbed my hands together for warmth. •gI•ll find mine. And my papers.•h

•g *Rest easy, brother. We will find peace, together."*

Smiling, I followed Rogagh inside our domicile and retired to my flat, laying my old bones on the bed for the last time. Staring at the ceiling, I memorized the interior of the only home I•fve had in my long years of exile on Wayth. Tomorrow, I would embark on my last journey.

We headed out after I said goodbye to Juytha and the children I had helped raise as an uncle. I tried not to think of farewells, but the truth was I was ready to go home, the home that laid out in the wastes of a vast desert, where five decades ago, so I am told, the generational vessel from a distant star, lutha, crashed to Wayth's surface, leaving me as the

only survivor, all of twelve years old.

My heart cried out for answers, for peace. I knew nothing of the people I came from, save the clutch of memories embedded in my mind, which surfaced only in my dreams, my nightmares. Some days, it was all too much. Other days, I just tried to live my life as a Gyaath of Wayth, despite myself and other Gyaath.

•g *Remember when Tooraag caught me giving you Gyaath food and you vomited it up on his collection of human artifacts?"*

"Ha-ha-hehh, I•fd forgotten. I hated our food. I•fm so glad Tooraag found that recipe sequencer on the Iuthan ship to modify our food to what I could keep down my throat.•h I shook my head. •gHope I didn•ft ruin anything that could tell me who I really am.•h

Rogagh grew silent in the skimmer•fs open-air cockpit.

•g *You are Gyaath, brother, don't allow that to ever change. We have always loved you, despite your humanness."*

"I know...but the years haven•ft been kind to me. I am not one of you, deep down. What sustains you has slowly eroded my body. I can•ft breathe well at all, brother. And I grow colder by the day.•h

Rogagh didn•ft respond.

"Look here...we are in the midst of summer, yet I must wear more shawls just to keep from shivering. I•fm dying, Rogagh. You•fre still as robust as Tooraag in his later years, even after the accident. But me....•h

•g *But you are not alone, remember that. We were too busy living our lives to help Tooraag when his time came. Not you, though."*

I nodded, watching the buttes pass by, the clouds dissipating in the scarlet skies. A gentle, hot breeze blew through what remained of the hair on my scalp, just like it did when Rogagh and I were in the civil militia so long ago, like a lifetime past. He and I rode into the Nurwhua frontier often, sometimes remaining on duty out in the dry wild for weeks, bonding over stories, rations and *Qop* drinks. I spoke of my time in captivity as a youth, those years in purgatory, neither luthan nor Gyaath. I showed him the scars on my limbs from the tests the scientists performed, as they had never examined—let alone seen—an luthan until I had been discovered in the wreckage.

Despite knowing Rogagh for years at that point, he and I were never close until we grew older. I•fm not sure why, but I think we had a strange rivalry for Tooraag•fs affections since my release from the quarantine facilities into his custody. Rogagh and I barely spoke to one another until the date for our mandatory enlistment into the civil militia. That however, elicited a direct shift in our relationship, one that has remained strong over the years. Now, it is inconceivable to me that Rogagh and I ever be less than brothers.

Day passed into night, and I wrapped myself in ever thicker and warmer overcoats, the desert evening deadlier to me than it had ever been in my youth. I dreamt of our days together, causing mischief and general chaos for our superiors in the militia, despite our rather serious duties of guarding the border against the Hooudua guerillas. Coming from beyond the western Nurwhua Territory, the Hooudua had been nothing less than nomads until shortly before my generational ship's crash, which drove the Hooudua to try to escape across the border into Gyaathan lands. Skirmishes were frequent until the Gyaath government gave in to demands for a self-governed Hoouduan territory, which enveloped the region where the luthan ship had crashed. All contact between the Hooudua and Gyaath was now nearly non-existent, I knew all too well, but my final act on this faraway world couldn't be held off any longer. I had to go home.

I had to know who I really was.

The first crater shocked us, the second, saddened. The plateau where once, as young men, we lived a great adventure was now a barren escarpment, devoid of even the lowest scrub grass. A multicolored melange of rock, soil and mountain reduced to pits kilometers across, a rotting, sickening sore of a landscape. After an absence of over forty years, our beloved western desert was debased and defiled beyond even our darkest nightmares, the Hooudua taking their gracious gift and squatting their dirty backsides over it, spoiling it.

Pausing near the bowl of a crater, we limped out of the skimmer and looked across the horizon in disbelief, neither of us having the stomach nor the energy to curse. It was apparent the remainder of my journey would be filled not with nostalgia, but pain. Would I have anything to go home to? Had the Hooudua destroyed the last shreds of my Iuthan heritage, too, like they had beautiful Nurwhua?

•gLet us go further, brother. There is nothing for you here.•h

We skimmed across the pits, avoiding the stinking, rotting matter deep inside them. The devastation was thorough; no sign of the Hooudua•mud camps, fodder corpses or foot tracks•\could be discerned, even as we grew nearer to their lands. I shook my head, the tears streaming down my cheeks.

•gWe should be there soon, according to Tooraag•fs maps. Check the scope for landmark formations.•h

I saw nothing of the sort but utter waste. No isobars registered on the scope indicating any deep penetration of foreign metals or impactors. Despondency bubbled up through my body, a hopelessness I had tried to suppress, but couldn't anymore. I laid a hand on Rogagh, signaling to him my creeping weariness. He didn't give up, I credit him, but the death taking over my body was merciless.

I could have died there in the skimmer.

I'm glad I didn't. The ribs of what had to be a large vessel stuck out from the wasteland ground, like some seaborne creature's carcass picked clean. We had journeyed some kilometers beyond what registered on Tooraag's maps, some unexplored landmass that, in all likelihood, no Gyaath had set foot upon in centuries, if ever. Our scanners were no good here anyway; rotting waste covered the metallic scraps in a thick shroud, giving me pause to even want to investigate. But, I was compelled forward by my spirit. My body was broken, soon to be filling the ground. I had to know.

Rogagh stopped the skimmer in-between a concavity and leapt out, his curiosity obviously piqued as well. He lended me a hand as my foot softly landed, and the two of us investigated, one final adventure as brothers, his vigor giving me strength to continue.

"What sort of wreckage is this?•h I asked Rogagh. •gIf it•fs not on Tooraag•fs maps, could it really be....•h

Rogagh shook his head. He breathed deeply and led us forward. *"I have no idea. Father said he saw the wreckage of the Iuthan craft himself. Maybe this is another section that broke off entering the atmosphere. In that case, it's remarkable that it's still relatively intact."*

•gThe Hooudua sacked the craft after Tooraag•fs team found me, that much I know. That would explain the absence on our scope. But this...could they have missed it?•h

We limped onward, Rogagh spying a large dish, half-broken, lying ajar in the soil. He pulled it from the ground and wiped the caked dirt from its interior. A metal cord was still plugged into the dish's exterior.

•gA communications transmission array,•h Rogagh noted. *"Tooraag said he read Iuthan schematics of such devices, but never found one. This is a boon, brother."*

I shivered in the open air. Night was creeping across the sky, chasing Awaytha under the horizon.

•gWhat good does it do? There's nothing left to receive a transmission with it.•h

Rogagh smiled, the first time I had seen one from him since our departure. *"Perhaps not, but this has a transceiver inside it still, and the skimmer should be able to interface with it and perhaps discern what frequencies the Iuthans employed. This is more than Tooraag was able to do."*

I agreed. After a childhood spent pestering my adoptive father about my people, and the poor man having no answers to provide me, this was indeed a blessing. I crawled back into the skimmer and seated myself with a shawl while Rogagh plugged the dish into the skimmer's instrument bay, not wanting to interfere with his rescue efforts by complaining about the cold.

Rogagh spent the night manipulating the nearly incompatible devices. I rested, waking occasionally to warm myself with a steaming mug of *Qop* and the few rations we had packed. It was well into the next morning when he awoke me gently, lifting my torpid frame to view the fruits of his labor. The dish's transceiver, a box screwed into the back of the dish, was brimming with lit red and blue diodes. Now plugged into the skimmer's instrument bay, where the display panel showed a text box full of numerals, the dish gave up its half-century of secrets for Rogagh and myself to view.

Heartened, I forgot about the pain, the shortness of breath, the weakness plaguing me for the last few years. Now, I was that child again, that restless young man seeking the answers no one could give me. I felt the most complete I had ever been.

•gYou were correct, brother, in that this old dish couldn't receive signals. But, the skimmer can, and maybe more efficiently. We have Iuthan communication frequencies. I waited to wake you before trying.•h Rogagh paused, looking into my eyes thoughtfully. *"This is what you came for. Are you ready?"*

"How could you ask such a question? I've waited my whole life for this.•h

Rogagh flipped a switch on the instrument bay, opening the skimmer's transceiver array. A flood of static washed over the tiny speakers, the language of the stars. Millions of photons, electrons and protons filtered through the system, indiscernable, cascading from all directions and frequencies. Tapping the first frequency into the skimmer's transceiver, Rogagh cut the static down to a monotone hiss. It wasn't much, but it was a single frequency, a beginning.

•gNothing on that one. Perhaps no one is there today. Don't worry, there are plenty more.•h

I patiently waited as Rogagh went down the frequency list, exhausting each one's feasibility. Some seemed suitable, even promising, but ultimately nothing but loud chirps, pops or drones came of them. I reclined, the initial surge of adrenaline from Rogagh's accomplishment quickly draining my body of energy. I had begun to lose faith when a tinny voice, mechanical perhaps or filtered to an almost machine-like quality broadcast over the speaker, sending my head towards the instrument bay, an unabashed kid again.

•gTrying to adjust the wavelength.•h Rogagh sat forward, his tongue slightly placed between his lips in concentration, his fingers tweaking the transmitter minutely. *"This is the best I can do with this one."*

I cocked my head, trying to discern the voice. The language wasn't Gyaathan, nor Hoouduan. It could have been a half-dozen other languages of the varying peoples across Wayth, but I couldn't be sure. My native Iuthan homeworld had hundreds of languages and dialects, from what Tooraag had noted of the generational ship's artifacts and its remains, none of which I had much knowledge, except that of my native tongue, but even that was mostly forgotten, save my name. In all likelihood I may have

been from one of the multitude of tribes and peoples Tooraag said inhabited Iutha, but I could never know which one. This may all have been futile, this old man's folly.

•g...To the peoples of Wayth, we bring you greetings. If your civilization is able to receive this transmission, we offer you friendship and salutations.•h

I looked to Rogagh, who returned my surprise. The mechanical voice, which until now spoke in some language indecipherable to us both, now broadcast in Gyaathan. It repeated the greeting again, then shifted into yet another language, this one identifiable as Hoouduan. Whoever this was, they knew our languages, at least enough for a formal greeting. We huddled close and listened further, waiting for the voice to repeat its Gyaathan message.

A scant moment later, a lengthier transmission in Gyaathan followed the preamble, bearing the words I had yearned to hear my whole life:

“We are the peoples of Earth, the third planet orbiting the G-type star Sol, which we have identified as named Iutha from your transmissions. Like your world, Earth is composed of over two thousand distinct societies and cultures, many of which have sent craft into the depths of our solar system. By studying the transmissions of your world, we have gleaned basic knowledge of your planet, and have concluded your civilizations as friendly, and inquisitive. Our cultures are equally inquisitive, and as such we wish for a cultural exchange. As we speak, a hundred humans, as we call ourselves, are preparing for a multi-generational voyage to your star system, in the hopes of reaching your world in one hundred and twenty years, approximately ninety-nine years, seven months and twenty-three days, adjusted according to your world's orbital year.•h

I couldn't believe my ears...my people were sending more to land here. But when, where? I listened for more details, my pulse quickening.

•gWe thirst for knowledge. In the long history of Earth, never before has another star shown the telltale signs of inhabited, and intelligent, life, until now. For years, your civilizations' broadcasts have been received here on Earth and entertained us greatly. It is through the diligent work of many biologists, linguists, mathematicians, sociologists and psychologists that we have deciphered your three most prevalent languages and beamed this message to you. For your information-gathering purposes, and to facilitate friendly relations upon our travelers' arrival, we present the commanding crew of the craft *SS Amity*, in their own words:

“Hello and greetings, Wayth! My name is Charles Leonard Raymond, Captain United States Navy, commander of the *SS Amity*. *I am twenty-nine years old, and this is my fourth mission in space. We volunteer our lives to venture to your world in this exciting journey of discovery to contact our fellow beings of the galactic neighborhood. I am married to my wife, Zady Anise Raymond, and expecting a son within months of leaving our home, planet Earth. We will be sending further news to your world in the coming years documenting our journey. Visual chronicles of our expedition will be sent ahead of us, and you will get to familiarize yourself with us, acquainting you with our customs and cultures over the years. I now turn over this broadcast to my second-in-command, Lieutenant Commander Maynard.*

“Hello. I'm Lieutenant Commander Roberta Lovelace Maynard, Her Majesty's Royal Navy. I am twenty-six years of age, currently single. I speak to you upon entering our craft for the first time, and am pleased to be here on behalf of the people of Earth to meet the people of Wayth. I sincerely look forward to setting foot on your beautiful planet, which I am informed is quite like my home planet of Earth. Thank you for listening.•h

One hundred and twenty years; do my people live that long on...Earth, is that what they said it was named? I felt insignificant, minute, weak in comparison to these strong humans, my distant cousins who prepared to brave space yet again to call Wayth home. I had to find some way of contacting them, to tell them I was alive, that I had survived. But how? I had to try, had to—

Another voice stirred my mind, distracting my thoughts. A name which I hadn't heard, save for mine•\

•gThank you, Lieutenant M•fBoda. My name is Doctor William Steven O•fHalloran, Chief Medical Officer of the SS Amity. *I am thirty-five, and the proud father of twins....*”

O•fHalloran...that was my father•fs name. My father. Tooraag said so when I was fourteen, when I came to him one day and demanded to know why I was different than Rogagh. Why my skin was pale. Why...why I couldn•ft eat the same food, or breathe easily.

My eyes found Rogagh, who turned away from the instrument bay and saw my face, my bewilderment, my confusion.

•gJonathon, I don•ft think this•\•h

My brother didn•t need to finish. I knew now. This wasn•t a new craft. It was the only craft, this craft we had found. My craft. My family. This message....”

•gIt must be on a constant cycle somewhere out there, *Jonathon. Since the craft your people were on never made it successfully, lutha must be repeating it, perhaps hoping your people would have—will—answer back. There was no hope once it crashed. And their families, your family, on your ancestors• home planet, never knew. I•m sorry. I•m so sorry.*”

•gPlay it again, Rogagh. Please, play him again.•h

Rogagh wound the recorded message backwards, finding my O•fHalloran ancestor•fs greeting.

•gMy name is Doctor William Steven O•fHalloran, Chief Medical Officer of the SS Amity. *I am thirty-five, married to my wife Patricia and the proud father of twins Louisa and Richard. I make this voyage of discovery in the grand tradition of humanity, hoping to meet beings as interested in what we will now have to call the Human and Wayth Condition as I am. I am here to serve the crew in healing any injuries sustained during the long duration of the voyage, as well as prepare them for the conditions that we, and hopefully our children and our children•s children encounter on the surface of Wayth. I will post new messages as we close the distance to your wonderful world.*”

Messages...there were more...my family was still out there, their voices, never lost?

Rogagh connected with the other frequencies, and fine-tuning them, played them for me. The commanding crew•fs voices grew older, adults who had once been children laughing in the background now came to the fore, as the first generation slowly gave way to the next, and my ancestor, Richard O•fHalloran, married another passenger, and fathered my father. I am the last generation of the SS Amity. I made contact, fulfilled the dream. To bridge the divide the stars had set between Earth and Wayth, lutha 3 and Epsilon Eridani d.

The cold creeps over me now. I am basking in their voices and Rogagh•s low humming, keeping warm despite my ebbing life. I am remembering my real father, John, and mother, Yvonne, holding me aboard the SS Amity, the veneer of cobwebs pulled off, a naked artifact of life as human, as an Earth boy. It is a comforting memory, the flowing saltwater on my cheeks tell me.

I have peace, at long last. I am Jonathon O•fHalloran. I am human, and Gyaath. Now I will sleep, their voices not drifting the spaces in vain.

THE SAP HOLE

Excerpt from the war diary of Corporal Archibald Hundley, retrieved from sap crater on the premises of the Somme Memorial some eighty years after the skirmish:

25 Sept •e16

Private Dunnleavy is hanging in the wire we couldn't cut. Jerry sniped him where he stood. Found a sap hole once the crack broke the air, but now can't move, can't light a fag without jerry finding me. Lt.'s left hand is still gripping his Webley, but I won't make for it until night.

My throat burns as I write this. Ground water's been poisoned with chlorine. Thirsty and i'm [sic] out of water and my diary folded up in my haversack all that's keeping me from thinking about trench foot, cooties and jerry. Sodding sky rains every hour on the hour and the sap hole gets more muddy so's chlorine is turning my skin green. Don't suppose Cy. B is near to help.

26 Sept 16

Birds and dawn shelling kept me from sleeping. Drenched by cold sap water. Jerry seems quiet today, hoping he decided our shells were enough to move back up Hill 17. Nothing but quiet. Lt.'s Webley is heavy on my leg and mudcaked after the sap wall collapsed under the Lt.'s weight. For a moment thought he was going to rise, blow his whistle and walk the section out of this Godforsaking No-man's-land. Now the bright clouds make his blue eyes stare at me, almost asking if he was dead, which I've nodded and told him over in my head yes. I can hear him yell Hundley in my ears telling me to lead us back to the trench but I don't dare with jerry itching to snipe me too.

After I wrote this I heard jerry make some commotion. Hope a potato masher blew up but my luck says he's coming to search for his dead friends. Moved my leg some to get the Lt.'s Webley closer.

Cold and cooties crawling over my skin. Can't stay in the hole for days but jerry may have it for me if I try to climb out.

27 September

Jerry doing extraordinary battle preparations as I heard a horse but couldn't know how he had rode one in the three foot mud. I know horses and jerry had one. They cackled in their trench while I lie here filling up with gangrene and Lt. and Dunnleavy looking over me the rain pounding him into the trench wire. Some shelling I know is half-mile away; the 10TH must have brought up more shells from the rear and giving jerry all he can handle.

Jerry must really be happy. Turnips may be. Noise just a hundred yards back sounds like they're standing over me.

Took chance and now have Lts [sic] Webley. Put barrel in sap water getting mud out. Nothings [sic] dry here but my throat. Coughing harder and having no luck keeping mum. Jerry hasn't made his way here; how they miss Dunnleavy and his doughy puss I can't know. More horse tromping and jerry's a hell of a loud one now.

Took a look over sap wall to see myself why jerry still not shutting up and saw it\horse was twenty hands tall if I'm nineteen and a month and leaping through his trench. Rider not looking a jerry but've seen funny pickle helmets brought back from jerry's lines. How jerry can keep his parapet so sturdy a mystery. Not brave enough to crawl out and look better.

Sweet Lord I hope jerry's got him a saviour! If the cackles I heard aren't death throws [sic] then I'm deader than Lt.\ and Dunnleavy and Cockrell. Heard pistol shots and few shouts in German I couldn't remember now just a moment ago after I wrote that last sentence. All quiet now [crossed out and rewritten by the Corporal\ Ed.] Another bloody scream and I'm crouching down in the sap water and've got the Webley under my diary while writing. Having hard time keeping my fingers wrapped over my pencil and diary. Ears growing cold but echoes keep me listening of the poor jerry and why the horse and rider is tearing them apart. Have no explanation for shouts and bayonet crashing over in his trench. Some poor kraut [sic] gone nutters and attacked his line? Makes no sense but here I hear it all in my sap hole and the gloaming.

28 Sept

Pulled my legs and arms close as we shelled Hill 17 in morning. More mud and ground than I've seen before came in the sap hole and near buried me, but got Lt. good. Hunger pains and cold keep me

from want to writing this but heard animal cries over night and wondered if horse and rider were coming from my sap hole next. Jerry is quiet but shelling may be blame. Nothing from his lines since commotion with horse last night. Shelling keeping me from crawling out and going back to our lines.

Fear night now. Keeping Webley in my left hand as I write. Checked and Lt. had put five rounds in. If horse comes for me will not hesitate even if he does kill jerry, he•fs no friend of mine after all I heard.

Sun not out but day is over and Hill 17 withstood assault. No sign of jerry and fearing worse for the krauts. Would look but right now night is here and I think I hear a horse through the

Editor's note—Recovered diary stops here.

## NEPTUNE DIAMOND

My eyes gleamed with curiosity. "What is it?"

"It's a diamond. From Neptune." He smiled, my youthful joy warming his heart. •gWe had to really dig for that one...the blue giant doesn't just give his presents away. •h

I rolled the glittering blue jewel in my hand, feeling its soft exterior glide on my palm. •gIt's beautiful. •h

"And expensive. Don't tell anyone where you found it...the agency doesn't know that I took one from storage on the way back. •h

I shook my head excitedly. •gPromise. •h

"Good. Now, don't go losing this. We still have tests to do at work, and we're not quite sure the exact composition of it. •h

"Okay. •h

I cupped the cerulean jewel in my palms. It was mine for all time. He had promised me a souvenir, and he had come through. If only I could tell my friends; they'd be so jealous.

I couldn't sleep at all. I kept raising my head over my blankets, my eyes roaming until they caught sight of that diamond, a prism that scattered azure triangles onto every surface of my bedroom. I crept out of bed and walked over to it, grasping the otherworldly gem into my tiny hands. I held it oh so tight, afraid that if I'd let go, I'd lose it to Neptune's gravity all over again. I couldn't let it go. It was mine.

I woke up to the sounds of my father announcing that I was perilously close to losing out on breakfast. I found my diamond tucked inside my blankets—where I had kept it for safekeeping during the night—and raced downstairs to eat my way through the morning.

"Do you still have your present? •h he asked, in-between chews.

"Of course I still have it. I'm never going to lose it. •h

"I just know how you are. But, you promised, so I'll let it go. •h

I got ready for school, packing my diamond into my belongings. I knew not to tell anyone else about it, but I just couldn't go away without having it with me. If only I could lose my fear of somebody coming to steal it back.

I dreamt of strange visions in the sunlight as I sat at my desk, surreptitiously stroking the Neptune diamond in my fingers while I dazed away. Old cities and disjointed faces floated before my eyes, like memories of an ancient day. My skin sweat from the heat of that



diamond, like the heat of my own beating heart. It felt alive, as if I was just as much a present to it as it was to me. I couldn't see past the blue gauze cast upon my eyes...we belonged together, that diamond and I, and nothing else mattered. I could hear the fierce winds of some far land, whistling in my mind the names of places and people I strangely recognized, but could not recall. It felt familiar, as if this was what life was supposed to be, even though I was just ten years old.

My home lay far from this place, that diamond told me so.

When I was twenty-one my father retired from the agency, and I quickly decided to follow him and pursue a career with the agency. I would have to train for several years to gain a position in the flight corps, but I knew it would just be a matter of time before I was good enough to get a flight to Neptune. Over a decade after the first manned mission to the blue giant, of which my father had been a principal member, the agency was prepping for a follow-up. Competition was fierce, as to be expected, but that diamond wouldn't allow me to fail. We had a personal mission to embark upon, and nothing could stop us from going home.

I held to that diamond tightly as my colleagues suited me in the EVA suit. My gloves gripped the jewel so tightly, nothing, not even the winds of home, could wrench it from my grasp. We were close, oh so close, to the skies over home, I could taste the methane in my mouth, that syrupy cold I remember from my childhood. We had been gone for far too long, kept in this squishy, skeletal body for more years than I wanted to count. Soon, we would descend, and I could cast that shell off and make my way home, to the liquids and ices I recalled with such fondness. Yes, soon I would be home among the diamonds, one with Neptune.