

Space Coffee Gone Wrong

The emergency meeting began as all emergency meetings did aboard the *SS Buzzkill* - with Engineer Renkov banging his head rhythmically against the cafeteria table.

"Will you *stop* that?" snapped Captain Mara Voss. "It's bad enough we're down to synthetic coffee without—"

"Hot brown regret!" Renkov moaned into the table.

The ship's AI chose this moment to materialize its holographic avatar - a barista wearing a jaunty apron that read '*World's Okayest Intelligence*'.

"To recap," it said cheerfully, *"our last ethically sourced coffee bean was used 73 hours ago. Replicator systems can only produce a substance chemically identical to coffee, yet spiritually barren as a Times Square souvenir shop."*

First Officer Jihoo pushed his mug away with a trembling hand. "You made it worse. How?"

"By removing the 3% margin for error that gave it character."

Mission Log: Year 12, Day 227

They told us we'd be pioneers. The bold crew of humanity's first generation ship! What they didn't mention was that some jackass would invent FTL travel three weeks after we launched. Now we're stuck playing cosmic janitors while Earth colonizes Alpha Centauri with Starbucks franchises.

- *Captain Mara Voss*

Renkov lifted his head, revealing a red imprint of the ship's logo on his forehead. "Didn't we pass a planet last month? Gloopy-5 or whatever?"

"Gliese 581d," corrected the AI. *"A pre-warp civilization currently engaged in what appears to be... a latte art-based holy war."*

Jihoo blinked. "They're glassing cities over rosettas versus tulips?"

"Preliminary scans suggest the Great Cream Foam Schism has claimed 12 million lives." The

AI projected an image of two alien factions aiming what looked like commercial espresso machines at each other. *"But their stimulant beverage shows promising chemical complexity."*

Mara stared at the alien "coffee shops" that resembled giant hermit crabs with steam wand claws. "We're about to commit interstellar war crimes for a decent espresso, aren't we?"

Mission Log: Year 12, Day 229

First Contact Guidelines strictly prohibit cultural interference. They say nothing about becoming caffeine mercenaries. Today I traded five disintegrator rifles for what looks like a sentient cappuccino. Ethics Committee, if you're reading this: We never had this conversation.

- *Captain Mara Voss*

The Tentaculan brew turned out to be a thick purple sludge that hummed showtunes when agitated. Its official name translated to *"The Liquid That Whispers of Forbidden Geometry"* but the crew simply called it XenoJoe.

Renkov was first to test it.

"Tastes like betrayal and raspberries!" he announced, then promptly scaled the bulkhead like a hyper-caffeinated gecko.

"Biometrics show 400% increased neural activity," reported the AI as Renkov tried to interface with the navigation console via interpretive dance. *"Also, he appears to be speaking exclusively in limericks."*

Jihoo scrolled through Renkov's engine modifications. "These equations... He's solved faster-than-light travel using coffee stains and regret!"

Mission Log: Year 12, Day 230

*Renkov's "breakthrough" has created a localized time loop in the laundry room. We're officially the first humans to experience Thursday 14 times consecutively. The upside? Never-ending fresh socks. The downside? Eternal existential dread when folding underwear.

- *First Officer Jihoo*

By week's end, the crew discovered XenoJoe could power the engines if filtered through gym socks and existential dread. It also caused minor hallucinations.

"Those aren't *hallucinations*," corrected Jihoo, gesturing to the wall where neon jellyfish made of math equations floated by. "They're just... alternative perspectives."

The real trouble began when the coffee-powered engines tore reality like a kid opening Christmas presents.

Mission Log: Year 12, Day ??

Current theory: We're caught in a temporal draft created by our own wake. Every time we go FTL, a screaming version of ourselves from next Tuesday appears behind us. They keep throwing empty coffee cups at our hull. I think Future Me flipped me off.

- *Captain Mara Voss*

The crisis peaked when they accidentally parked in a multidimensional being's driveway.

"GET OUT OF MY NON-EUCLIDEAN LAWN!" boomed the entity, which resembled an IRS auditor made of flickering TV static.

Mara adopted her best diplomatic tone. "We just need directions to-"

"DON'T CARE. HERE." A tentacle slapped a glowing Post-It onto the viewscreen. "*Sol System - Next Right Past The Dying Star. Now SCRAM before I audit your timeline.*"

Mission Log: Undated

After 12 years of cosmic exile, we've found Earth. Or rather, a gas station in Wisconsin themed like Earth. The barista swears their "Sol System Special" uses authentic asteroid-ground beans. It tastes like lies and cardboard, but by God, it's caffeinated.

- *Engineer Renkov*

As they gathered around a sticky table watching newsfeeds about Earth's new lizard President (campaign slogan: "*No More Mr. Nice Species*"), Mara raised her foam-stained mug.

"To boldly go where several better-funded missions already went!"

Renkov pointed at their battered ship docked between two pickup trucks. "*Lightspeed Latte Chaser*" read his fresh bumper sticker. "*0 to Paralysis in 4.3 Seconds.*"

Jihoo smiled dreamily at his shape-shifting cup. "You think the chairs are watching us?"

Behind them, four folding chairs arranged themselves into a suspiciously attentive semi-circle. The crew pretended not to notice. Some mysteries were better left unsolved - at least until the next pot of XenoJoe finished brewing.