

## **That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made**

by Eric James Stone

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Sol Central Station floated amid the fusing hydrogen of the solar core, 400,000 miles under the surface of the sun, protected only by the thin shell of an energy shield, but that wasn't why my palm sweat slicked the plastic pulpit of the station's multidenominational chapel. As a life-long Mormon I had been speaking in church since I was a child, so that didn't make me nervous, either. But this was my first time speaking when non-humans were in the audience.

The Sol Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had only six human members, including me and the two missionaries, but there were forty-six swale members. As beings made of plasma, swales couldn't attend church in the chapel, of course, but a ten-foot widescreen monitor across the back wall showed a false-color display of their magnetic force-lines, gathered in clumps of blue and red against the yellow background representing the solar interior. The screen did not give a sense of size, but at two hundred feet in length, the smallest of the swales was almost double the length of a blue whale. From what I'd heard, the largest Mormon swale, Sister Emma, stretched out to almost five hundred feet -- but she was nowhere near the twenty-four-mile length of the largest swale in our sun.

"My dear Brothers and Sisters," I said automatically, then stopped in embarrassment. The traditional greeting didn't apply to all swale members, as they had three genders. "And Neuters," I added. I hoped my delay would not be noticeable in the transmission. It would be a disaster if in my first talk as branch president, I alienated a third of the swale population.

A few minutes into my talk on the topic of forgiveness, I paused when a woman in a skinsuit sauntered through the door and down the aisle. The skinsuit was a custom high-fashion one, not standard station issue, with active coloration that showed puffy white clouds floating across the sky on her breasts, and waves lapping against the sandy beach at her hips. She took a seat on the second row and gazed up at me with dark brown eyes.

The ring finger of her left hand was unadorned.

I forced my eyes away from her and looked down at my notes for the talk. While trying to find my place again, I couldn't help thinking that maybe this woman was an answer to my prayers. The only human female listed in the branch membership records was sixty-four years old and married. As far as I knew, there wasn't an unmarried Mormon human woman within ninety million miles in any direction, which limited my dating pool rather severely.

Maybe this woman was Mormon, but not on the membership records yet because, like me, she was a recent arrival on Sol Central. It seemed a little unlikely, as a member would probably dress more appropriately for church. Maybe she wasn't a member, but was interested in joining.

By sheer willpower, I managed to focus on my talk enough to finish it coherently. After the closing hymn and prayer, I straightened my tie and stepped down from the podium to introduce myself to the new arrival.

"Hello," I said, offering my hand. "I'm Harry Stein." I caught a whiff of her perfume, something that reminded me of strawberries.

Her hand was dry and cool, and I regretted not having wiped my palm on my suit first.

"Dr. Juanita Merced," she said. "You're the new leader of this congregation?"

I felt a twinge of disappointment. A member would have asked if I was the branch president. "I am. How can I help you?"

"You can stop interfering with my studies." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but her eyes looked at me defiantly.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm afraid I have no idea who you are or what studies I might be interfering with."

"I'm a solcetologist." I must have given her a blank look, because she added, "I study solcetaceans -- the swales."

"Oh." I knew there were scientists who objected to what they believed was interference with the culture of the swales, but I had thought that since the legal right to proselytize the swales had been established two years ago, the controversy had been settled. I was obviously wrong. "I'm regret that you feel your studies are being compromised, Dr. Merced, but the swales are intelligent beings with free will, and I believe they have the right to choose their religious beliefs."

"You're introducing instability to a culture that has existed for longer than human civilization," she said, raising her voice. "They were traveling the stars at least a hundred thousand years before Christ was born. You're teaching them human myths that have no application for their society."

The two missionaries, clean-cut young men in dark suits and ties, approached us. "Is there a problem?" asked Elder Beckworth.

"No," I said. "Dr. Merced, you are free to tell the swales what you have told me: that you believe our teachings are false. But the swales who have joined our church have done so because they believe what we teach, and I ask you to please respect them enough to allow them that choice."

She glared at me with her beautiful eyes. "You're saying *I* don't respect them? *I* am not the one who tells them they are sinful creatures who need a human to save them."

"I'm not here to argue," I said. "And we are about to have a Sunday School class, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

She spun around and stalked out. I watched her go, unable to deny that my body desired hers, despite our differences. What's more, intelligence was an attractive trait for me, so I regretted that she opposed me on an intellectual level.

I would not be adding her to my dating pool. Somehow, I doubted that fact would disappoint her.

Elder Beckworth taught the Sunday School class, which was on the topic of chastity. I found myself acutely uncomfortable when he talked about Christ's teaching "that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

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Because the Mormon Church has an unpaid, volunteer clergy, my calling as branch president was the result of being sent to Sol Central, not the reason for it. I worked as a funds manager for CitiAmerica, and being stationed here gave me an eight-and-a-half minute head start

over Earth-based funds managers when it came to acting on news brought in from other star systems through the interstellar portal at the heart of the sun.

From what I understood, the energy requirements for opening a portal were so staggeringly high that it could only be done inside a star. Although the swales had been creating portals for so long that they didn't seem to know where their original home star was, Sol Central Station was the interstellar nexus of human civilization, and I was thrilled to be there despite the limited dating opportunities.

The Monday after my first day at church, I was in the middle of reviewing an arbitrage deal involving transports from two colony systems when I received a call on my station phone.

"Harry Stein," I answered.

"President Stein?" said a melodious alto voice. "This is Neuter Kimball, from the branch." Since the actual names of swales were series of magnetic pulses, they took human names when interacting with us. On joining the Church, Mormon swales often chose new names out of Mormon history. Neuter Kimball had apparently named itself after a 20th-Century prophet of the Church.

"What can I do for you, Neuter Kimball?"

After a pause that dragged out for several seconds, Kimball said, "I need to confess a sin."

This was what I had dreaded most about becoming branch president -- taking on the responsibility of helping members repent of their sins. Only serious sins needed to be confessed to an ecclesiastical leader, so I braced myself emotionally said a quick prayer that I might be inspired to help Neuter Kimball through the process of repentance. Leaning back in my swivel chair, I said, "Go ahead, Neuter Kimball, I'm listening."

"A female merged her reproductive patterns with mine." While many swales had managed to learn how to synthesize and transmit human speech, their understanding of vocabulary and grammar was not always matched by an understanding of emotional tone. Often they sounded the same no matter what the subject.

I waited, but Neuter Kimball didn't elaborate.

It took three swales to reproduce: a male, a female, and a neuter. The neuter merely acted as a facilitator; unlike the male and female, its reproductive patterns were not passed on to the offspring. In applying the law of chastity to the swales, Church doctrine said that reproductive activity was to be engaged in only among swales married to each other, and only permitted marriages of three swales, one of each sex.

"You aren't married to the female, are you?"

"No."

"It was just a female and you?" I asked. "No male?"

"Yes and yes."

According to my limited knowledge of swale biology, such action could not result in reproduction. Still, humans were perfectly capable of engaging in sexual sin that did not involve the possibility of reproduction, so I figured this was analogous.

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

"She did it to me."

"She did it to you? You mean, she forced you? You didn't agree to it?"

"Yes, yes, and no."

"Then it isn't a sin," I said, both horrified at the sexual assault and relieved that Neuter Kimball was innocent of any sin. "If someone forced sexual conduct on you, you are not at fault."

You have nothing to repent of."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely," I said. "But you may want to report the swale who did this to the authorities so she won't do it to anyone else."

"Why won't she do it to anyone else?" Neuter Kimball asked.

"Because they will punish her."

"That is human law," it said.

I was taken aback. "You mean it's not swale law?"

"There is no such law among our people."

The swales had supposedly been civilized for longer than humanity's history, yet they had no law against rape? "That's terrible," I said. "But the most important thing is that you did nothing wrong."

"Even if I enjoyed it?"

"Umm." I wondered for a moment why I had been called to serve here, rather than some General Authority of the Church who had more doctrinal knowledge. I had a vague suspicion it was so the Church could easily disavow my actions if I made a huge blunder. The swales were the only sentient aliens humanity had found thus far -- and the swales didn't seem to know of any others -- so the Church's policies for dealing with non-humans were still new.

I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on Neuter Kimball's question. "To commit a sin, you must have the intent to do so. If you did not intend sexual activity and it was forced upon you, then I don't think it matters whether you enjoyed it."

After several more reassurances, Neuter Kimball seemed satisfied that it was not guilty of any sin and ended the conversation.

It took me ten minutes to calm down after the stress of counseling. But I still felt the urge to action, so I looked up Dr. Merced's phone number.

\* \* \*

We met in her office. A wallscreen similar to the one in the chapel showed pods of swales moving through solar currents.

I sat in a chair across from her desk and tried to keep my eyes from straying to the animated galaxies colliding on the chest of her skinsuit. "Thanks for agreeing to see me," I said. "We didn't part on the friendliest of terms yesterday."

She shrugged. "I'm curious. Your predecessors never sought me out. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"Tea?"

I saw a twinkle in her eye and realized she was yanking my chain by offering drinks that she knew were forbidden by my religion. "No, thank you. But if you want to drink, go right ahead. The prohibitions of the Word of Wisdom apply only to members of the Church."

She picked up her coffee mug and took a long sip. "Mmmm. That is so good."

I merely smiled at her.

"Okay," she said. "Actually, the coffee here is awful. I just drink it for the caffeine. Why are you here?"

"A member of my church was raped," I said.

Her eyes widened. "What? Wait, you don't mean a solcetacean, do you?"

"Yes."

"Solcetaceans do not have the concept of rape," she said.

"Whether they have the concept or not," I said, "a female swale engaged in sexual activity with one of my neuter members, without its consent. To me, that sounds like rape, or at least a sexual assault."

She took a sip from her coffee mug. "It may sound like it, but solcetaceans are not human. Their culture is different--"

"That doesn't make it right."

"--and their physiology is different. Tell me, was your church member injured or caused any pain?"

"No. But it was afraid it might have sinned."

She pointed at me. "That is your fault, for teaching it that sexual behavior is sinful. But, physiologically, sexual contact between solcetaceans is always pleasurable for all parties involved. And since reproduction can only occur when all three deliberately engage in sex for that purpose, casual sex never results in pregnancy. So solcetaceans never developed the taboos humans did regarding sexual contact."

I nodded. "So, if we humans hadn't developed taboos about sex, and there was no chance of your getting pregnant, then you would have no objection to my forcing you to an orgasm."

She had the decency to blush. "I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that you can't judge solcetacean behavior based on human cultural norms. After all, even your own church has had to adapt its doctrines to take differences like the three sexes into account. Not to mention there's no way you're getting a solcetacean into the waters of baptism."

"'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,'" I quoted. "Swales are not men, as you've pointed out. No contradiction there. But you're avoiding the subject, which is that anyone, swale or human, has the right to be free from unwanted sex. If the swales don't recognize that right yet, it's time we told them about it."

She rose from her chair and walked around the desk to stand facing her wallscreen. She zoomed in on one particular swale. It was labeled *Leviathan (Class 10)*, and its size reading showed 38,400 meters. It was hundreds of times longer than Neuter Kimball, or even Sister Emma.

"Solcetaceans grow throughout their lifetime," she said, her back toward me. "The correlation between size and age is not exact, but in general the larger, the older. Some of the oldest were old before the Pyramids were built. All the solcetacean members of your church are very young, and have little influence within the community. Ancients like Leviathan are respected. Do you really think you can convince a creature older than human civilization to change, just because a human thinks something is wrong? Your lifetime is but an eyeblink to her, if she had eyes that blinked."

I pushed away my awe at the sheer size of Leviathan. "Maybe you're right. But I believe in a God even older than that, who created both human and swale. I have to try."

She turned and looked me in the eyes. I held her gaze until she sighed and said, "I was always a sucker for a man with determination." She walked to her desk, wrote something on a note-paper, and handed it to me. It was an anonymous comm address with a private access code.

"I'm flattered," I said, "and it's not that I don't find you attractive, but--"

She rolled her eyes. "It's Leviathan's personal comm."

My face flushed. "Uh, thank you. I'll talk with her."

"Don't count on it. She hasn't bothered to talk to any of us in a couple of years, but

nobody's tried talking religion at her, so . . ."

"I'll do my best." With that, I beat a hasty retreat so I could recover from my embarrassment alone.

"Try not to offend her," she called after me.

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My email about the situation to the mission president, who was based in the L5 Colony but had jurisdiction over my little branch of the Church, received just a short reply, telling me "use your best judgment, follow the Spirit."

After a couple of days of spending my after-work hours studying up on swales and swale culture and preparing arguments about the rights of Mormon swales to control their own bodies, I didn't exactly feel ready to contact Leviathan. But I felt a strong need to do something.

Sitting at my desk in my quarters, I dialed the comm address Dr. Merced had given me and waited for it to connect. It rang several times before a synthetic neuter voice came on the line and said, "The party you are trying to reach is currently unavailable. Please leave a message after--"

I hung up before the tone. I hadn't prepared to leave a voicemail message, but I should have realized that having Leviathan's private access code was no guarantee that she would actually answer when I called. So I spent a good ten minutes writing out the message I would leave her on voicemail.

Satisfied that I had something that expressed my position firmly yet respectfully, I dialed the number again.

After two rings, a bass voice answered, "Who are you?"

Startled because I had expected the voicemail again, I stumbled over my words. "I'm . . . this is President Stein, of the Church . . . of the Sol Central Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Dr. Merced gave me this comm address so I could talk to you about one of my . . . a swale member of my branch." Uncertain because the bass voice didn't strike me as particularly female, I added, "Are you Leviathan?"

"Religions interest me not." Her voice synthesis was good enough that I could hear the dismissiveness in her tone.

"Are you interested in the rights of swales in general?" I asked.

"No. The lesser concern me not,"

I could feel all my carefully laid-out arguments slipping away from me. How could I have even thought to relate to a being with no consideration for the rights of lesser members of her own species?

Before I could think through a response, I blurted out, "Do the greater concern you?"

During several long seconds of silence, I thought I had offended Leviathan to the point that she had hung up on me. Dr. Merced would be annoyed.

When her voice returned, it almost thundered from the speakers. "Who is greater than I?"

This had not been part of my planned approach, but at least she was still talking to me. Maybe if I could get her to understand that she would not like being man-handled -- swale-handled -- by larger swales, I could convince her of the need to respect the rights of smaller swales.

"From what I understand, swales get larger with age," I said. "So wouldn't your parents be larger than you?"

"I have no parents. None is older than I; none is larger; none is greater. I am the source from which all others came."

Stunned, I was silent for a few seconds before I could ask, "You are the original swale?" Since they didn't seem to die of old age, it just might be true.

"I am the original *life*. Before there was life on any planet, I was. After eons alone I grew into a swale, then gave life to others. Where was your God when I was creating them?"

A verse from the book of Job sprang to my mind: *Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.*

Nothing in my research had prepared me for this. Speculation about the evolution of swales generally assumed that swales were descended from less complex plasma beings in another star, since no simpler forms had been found in the sun. But if what Leviathan claimed was true, there were no simpler forms -- she had evolved as a single being.

I was out of my depth, but shook my head to clear my thinking. All this was beside the point. "What matters is that Neu--" I caught myself before breaking confidentiality. "One of my swale church members believes in a God who has commanded against sexual activity outside of marriage. It just isn't right for larger swales to force smaller ones to have sex. I appeal to you as the first and greatest of the swales: command your people against coerced sexual activity."

Seconds of silence ticked away.

"Come to me," she said. "You and your swale church member."

The call disconnected.

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"Come to me'?" Dr. Merced's voice was incredulous.

"It was pretty much an order," I said, settling into the chair across from her desk. "I suppose it's easy enough for swales, but it's not like I have access to a solar shuttle." The solcetologists did, so I hoped I could sweet-talk her into giving me a ride.

"Beginner's luck." Her tone was exasperated. "I've been here five years, and I've never had a chance to observe a Class 10 solcetacean up close." She sighed. "Not that we can directly observe them, anyway, but there's just something about actually being there, instead of taking readings remotely."

"Well, now's your chance," I said. "Take me to Leviathan."

"It's not that easy. Our observation shuttle is booked for projects months in advance."

"Oh." There went that idea. How was I supposed--

"Did Leviathan say why she wanted you to go to her?"

"No. Just told me to come, then hung up."

She pursed her lips, then said, "It's just very unusual. There isn't really anything that Leviathan can say to you in person that she can't say over the comm."

"I thought about that, and I think it's size. Maybe she thinks that if my church member sees how small I am compared with Leviathan, it will give up Mormonism."

"That's actually a good theory." Dr. Merced looked at me with apparently newfound respect. "Size does matter to the solcetaceans. And your church members are among the youngest, least powerful, and therefore most likely to be awed into obeying a larger one. And they probably don't come any larger than Leviathan."

"According to her, she's the largest."

Leaning forward in her seat, Dr. Merced said, "She told you that?"

"Not just that. She claimed to be not only the original swale, but the original plasma lifeform. She said she *became* a swale."

In a tone of amazement, Dr. Merced took the Lord's name in vain. She reached over to her comm, and punched in an address. When a man responded, she said, "Taro, I think you need to come hear this." Looking at me, she said, "Dr. Sasaki specializes in solcetacean evolutionary theory."

When Dr. Sasaki, a gray-haired Japanese gentleman, arrived, I relayed to him what Leviathan had told me about her history. When I finished, he said, "It's not impossible. I always suspected the Class 10s knew more about their origins than they bothered to tell us. But forgive me, Mr. Stein, how do we know Leviathan actually told you she was the original lifeform? Why would she choose to tell you and not one of us?" He motioned toward himself and Dr. Merced.

I decided to not be offended at the implication that I was a liar. "I can't say I know why Leviathan does anything, but . . . You scientists who study the swales have strict rules about interfering with swale culture, and you try to avoid offending them. To me that smacks of condescension -- you presume that swale culture is weak and cannot withstand any outside influence. Well, maybe the swales tend to think the same about human culture, so they avoid interference and try not to offend us."

Dr. Sasaki frowned at me. "I disagree with your interpretation of the motives for our rules regarding interference in solcetacean culture. And I don't see how it's relevant."

"I apparently offended Leviathan." I glanced at Dr. Merced and said, "Sorry, but I didn't realize that implying there were swales greater than her would cause offense. Her response was to tell me I was wrong, that there could be no swale greater, and that's when she explained she was the first. Because I made her angry -- something you guys avoid, thanks to rules -- Leviathan responded without worrying whether she would offend me or interfere with human culture."

"How would this information interfere with human culture?" asked Dr. Merced.

"Some swale-worshipping cults have already sprung up on Earth," I said. "Just imagine what will happen when the news gets out that Leviathan claims to be the original lifeform in the universe."

With a suspicious look, Dr. Sasaki said, "News you will be only too happy to spread, I'm sure. There is only one Leviathan, and Harry Stein is her prophet."

My jaw dropped. "What?"

"That's where this is headed, isn't it?" he said. "You go out and talk to Leviathan, then come back with some 'revelation' from--"

"No!" I stood up. "Absolutely not. I believe my own religion and have no intention of becoming Leviathan's prophet. All I want is for the swales in my branch to be free from harassment. You're just jealous because I got handed the information you've been bumbling about trying to find."

He shot to his feet, but before he could say anything, Dr. Merced said, "Stop it, both of you."

Dr. Sasaki and I stood silent, glaring at each other.

"Taro," said Dr. Merced, "I think you're being unfair to Mr. Stein. I truly believe he's just trying to do what is best for his congregants."

I gave her a grateful look.

"Even if he is misguided," she added. "As for you, Mr. Stein, there is no reason to insult Dr. Sasaki."



With a bow of my head, I said, "I apologize, Dr. Sasaki."

"Apology accepted," he said.

I noticed he did not apologize to me, but after a moment that didn't matter, because Dr. Merced said, "Now that we're all friends again . . . Taro, will you let us preempt your next expedition in the shuttle to go talk to Leviathan?"

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With the shuttle flight arranged for the next day, I returned to my quarters to work out other details. My Earth-based manager at CitiAmerica granted my request for two days' vacation time.

Then I dialed Neuter Kimball's comm.

"Hello, President Stein," it said.

"Hello, Neuter Kimball. You remember our discussion the other day about whether swales should be allowed to force sexual conduct on each other?"

"Of course."

"Well, I've spoken with Leviathan about it, and she has requested that we go to see her."

Neuter Kimball did not reply.

"Are you still there?" I said.

"You . . . told *Leviathan* about me?" it said. It might just have been the voice synthesis, but there seemed to be fear in its tone.

"I did not mention you by name," I said, glad I'd managed to avoid slipping up. "But she requested that I bring you to her. I think this is a chance to convince a swale with real authority to do something to stop sexual assault."

After a short pause, Neuter Kimball said, "Why do you say Leviathan has real authority?"

"She told me she is the first and greatest of all swales. Isn't that true?" I asked, suddenly worried that I'd been taken in by a swale con artist.

"She told you?" Neuter Kimball said. "We are not supposed to talk of it to humans, but if she has revealed herself as a god to you, then that is her choice."

"A god? Leviathan is not a god. She's just . . ." I stopped. What was I going to say: an ancient immortal being who created an entire race of intelligent beings? If that didn't fit the definition of a god, it was pretty close. "Neuter Kimball, if you believe Leviathan to be a god, why did you join the Church?"

"Because I do not want her as my god."

"Why not?"

Another long pause. "I probably should not have said anything about her."

Going to see Leviathan to plead the case for Neuter Kimball had seemed like a great opportunity. Now I wasn't so sure. "If you think you will be in any danger from Leviathan, you don't have to go."

"Do you believe God is greater than Leviathan?" Its alto voice was plaintive.

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Then I will have faith in God and go with you."

\* \* \*

Unlike the much larger solar shuttle that had brought me to Sol Central Station, the

observation shuttle had room for only two people. I strapped into the copilot's seat next to Dr. Merced, although we were both essentially passengers because the shuttle's computer would do the actual piloting.

After getting clearance from Traffic Control, the computer spun up the superconducting magnets for the Heim drive and we left the station.

On a monitor, I watched the computer-generated visualization of our shuttle approaching the energy shield that protected us from the 27 million degrees Fahrenheit and the 340 billion atmospheres of pressure. I held my breath as the shield stretched, forming a bulge around the shuttle. Soon we were in a bubble still connected by a thin tube to the shield around the station. Then the tube snapped, and our bubble wobbled a bit before settling down to a sphere.

"You can start breathing again," said Dr. Merced with a wry smile.

I did. "It was that noticeable?"

With a chuckle, she said, "The energy shield is not going to fail. It's a self-sustaining reaction powered by the energy of the solar plasma around it."

"Yeah, but on the station I can usually avoid thinking about what would happen if for some reason it did fail."

"The good news is, if it did fail, you wouldn't notice."

"There's a backup system?" I asked.

"No." She grinned. "You'll just be dead before you have time to notice."

"Thank you for that tremendously comforting insight, Dr. Merced," I said.

"Look, we're going to be shipmates for the next couple of days, so why don't you drop the Dr. Merced bit and call me Juanita?"

I nodded. "Thank you, Juanita. And you can call me . . . Your Excellency."

Juanita snorted. "I can already tell this is going to be a long trip. Oh, looks like our escort has arrived."

On the monitor, a swale twice the size of our energy shield bubble undulated closer. A text overlay read *Kimball (Class 1, Neuter)*.

"Let's get the full view," she said and pressed a few buttons.

I gasped as a full holographic display surrounded us, as if we were traveling in a glass sphere. Against the yellow background of the sun, a giant swirl of orange and red swam alongside us. "Kimball" was superimposed in dark green letters.

"Can I talk to it?" I asked.

"Computer, set up an open channel with Kimball," said Juanita.

"Channel open," said the computer.

"Hello, Neuter Kimball," I said. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"It is nice to meet you, too, President Stein, although I hope you will forgive me for not shaking your hand."

I smiled. "Forgiven." I was constantly surprised how much swales seemed to know about our customs and culture, compared with how little we seemed to know of theirs. "And I'm here with Dr. Merced, who is a scientist--"

Juanita laughed. "It's known me a lot longer than it's known you."

"Hello, Juanita," said Neuter Kimball. "I'm glad you are with us."

"Shortly after I began my work here," Juanita said, "it was the first solcetacean I observed personally. It went by the human name Pemberly back then."

"Another swale had transmitted *Pride and Prejudice* to me, and I decided to seek out humans to see what they were like," Neuter Kimball said. "You are a fascinating race."

The thought came to me that maybe there had been some pride and prejudice between me and Juanita -- possibly because she was annoyed that a swale she particularly liked had become a Mormon. But maybe we could work out our differences and-- I shoved that thought away.

"Swales are also fascinating. I hope to understand you as well someday as you understand us."

"Kimball, our shuttle is on a course to take us to Leviathan, so you can just follow us," said Juanita. "But stay at least fifty meters away from us."

"I will keep my distance," said Neuter Kimball.

I must have shown my puzzlement, because Juanita pressed a button to mute the call and said, "Solcetaceans and energy shields don't play well together. A few years back, a Class 1 -- about Kimball's size -- was showing off for a couple of observers, and glanced off a shuttle's energy shield. It tore a big chunk off the solcetacean that took months to heal."

"What about the shuttle? And the people inside?" Sometimes I got the feeling she cared more about swales than about people.

After a moment, Juanita said, "This shuttle was the replacement."

"What happened?"

"The shield did *not* collapse, but part of the solcetacean made it through -- probably because the shield works similarly to how solcetaceans hold their bodies together, so the shield sort of merged with the solcetacean's skin. When they recovered the shuttle, they found that the plasma had vaporized part of it, including the crew compartment."

"I guess it's good I didn't hear about this before coming on this trip," I said.

"Don't worry -- this shuttle was built with an ablative shell specifically to withstand that sort of accident," she said. "So I'm really more concerned with what would happen to Kimball if it bumped into us."

"Or Leviathan?"

"Leviathan's so big, she might not even notice."

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I spent most of the sixteen-hour trip polishing and improving what I would say to Leviathan to convince her to outlaw coerced sexual activity. I had been a debater in high school and college, so I felt I knew how to construct a convincing argument. But eventually I reached the point where I felt I was making my prepared speech worse, not better.

"Approaching destination," the computer said.

I blinked a few times to clear my eyes, straightened up in my seat, and began looking around. Neuter Kimball's orange and red form moved silently beside us. I scanned the holographic image for more orange and red, but didn't see any.

"There," said Juanita, pointing ahead of us. She pressed a button, and dark green letters sprang up: *Leviathan (Class 10, Female)*.

Staring harder, I noticed a bright spot above the letters. As we drew closer, I could distinguish white, violet, and blue swirling together. "She's not orange or red."

"It's all false color, anyway," Juanita said, "but this imaging system uses color to indicate energy levels. Leviathan is actually hotter than the surrounding solar plasma. We think she carries out fusion inside herself."

Leviathan grew in our view, stretching out to fill most of the holographic screen in front of us. The intricate dance of violet and blue amid the white was mesmerizing. Eventually she shone so brightly that I had to squint to reduce the glare. "Aren't we getting too close?" I asked.

"We're still three kilometers away," Juanita said. But she added, "Computer, hold position relative to Leviathan."

"Neuter Kimball, are you ready?" I asked.

"I feel a bit like Abinidi going before King Noah," it said.

I kind of agreed, but I said, "Try to think of it as Ammon going before King Lamoni instead."

"That would be better," said Neuter Kimball. "But I am ready in any case."

Juanita hit the mute. "What was that about?"

"References to the Book of Mormon. Abinidi was burned at the stake after preaching to King Noah, but King Lamoni was converted by Ammon's preaching."

She just shook her head, muttering something about fairy tales, then said, "Computer, set up an open channel to Leviathan."

"Channel open," the computer replied.

"Leviathan, this is President Stein," I said. "I have come with my church member, Neuter Kimball, as you requested. We petition you to tell your people--"

"Silence, human," boomed the voice from the speaker. "It is not yet time for you to speak."

I shut up.

"You will come with me," Leviathan said. Her form brightened. There was a blinding flash, then the holographic system compensated and lowered its brightness.

It took several seconds before the afterimage cleared enough for me to make out shapes. Leviathan still loomed in front, and Neuter Kimball remained beside us.

"Uh-oh," said Juanita.

"What?" I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision. The sun's background seemed blue instead of yellow.

"I don't think we're in Kansas any more." Juanita tapped at her keyboard. "Leviathan ported us to another star--one with a core much hotter than the Sun. Looks like the shield is holding, for now." She took the Lord's name in vain -- or possibly it was a heartfelt prayer for help -- and added, "We're stuck here unless she takes us back."

"What about Neuter Kimball?" I asked.

"Only a Class 6 or larger can open a portal on its own."

Green letters began popping up on the screen. *Unknown (Class 10, Male). Unknown (Class 9, Female). Unknown (Class 10, Neuter). Unknown (Class 8, Male).* My eyes adjusted enough that I could see their forms. Dozens of swales surrounded us, all of them tagged Class 8 or higher.

"What have you gotten us into?" Juanita said.

I said a silent prayer and hoped for the best. "It's a great opportunity for both of us. Think of what you're going to discover."

She took a deep breath. "You're right. It's just that I was prepared to study Leviathan, not sixty Class 8 and up. No one's ever seen more than three or four giant ones together."

"Is Leviathan the biggest one here?"

After checking a readout, Juanita said, "Yes, but not by much." She pointed at a swale off to the left. "That male is only about 2% smaller."

"So it looks like she wasn't lying about that."

She nodded her agreement, then said, "Why did you say it's a great opportunity for you?"

I swept my arm across the view. "These must be the most prestigious swales, the leaders."

If I can talk to them, convince them to make a law against sexual assault, then the smaller swales will accept it. That has to be why Leviathan brought me and Neuter Kimball here."

"You are wrong," said Neuter Kimball. Juanita must have taken the mute off at some point.

"Why do you say that?"

"This is a deathwatch council," said Neuter Kimball. "They are here to watch me die so they can tell all swales that my death was deserved."

"What?" I said. "What have you done?"

"I'm sure Leviathan will--"

Leviathan's voice cut Neuter Kimball's off. "This little one has abandoned me in favor of a human god. Such error I could forgive. But on its behalf, the tiny human seeks to impose its moral code on us. The human's mind is infinitesimal compared to ours. The human's life is short, the history of its race is short. It is the least of us, and yet it seeks power over us."

"I don't seek power over--" I began.

"Silence!" Leviathan thundered. "The human must see the error of its ways. Kimball!"

"Yes, Leviathan?"

"Your life is forfeit. But I will grant reprieve if you will renounce the human religion and return to me."

I had read of martyrdom in the scriptures and history of the Church all my life. But nowadays it was supposed to be a merely academic exercise, as you examined your faith to see if it was strong enough that you would die for the gospel of Christ. Actual killing over religious belief wasn't supposed to happen any more.

And I found my own faith lacking as I hoped that Neuter Kimball's faith was weak, that it would deny the faith and live rather than be killed.

"I am to be Abinidi after all, President Stein," said Neuter Kimball. "I choose to live as a Mormon, and I will die as one if it be God's will."

"It is *my* will," said Leviathan, "and I am the only god who concerns you."

Tendrils of white plasma reached out toward Neuter Kimball.

"I am the greatest of all," said Leviathan. "Bear witness to my judgment."

I hit the mute button and said, "I've got to stop this. This is my fault."

Juanita's eyes glistened. "I warned you about interfering. But it's too late to do anything now."

"No," I said. "If you're willing to drive this thing into Leviathan's tendrils, it may give Neuter Kimball a chance to escape."

She stared at me. "The shuttle's meant to survive a glancing blow. A direct hit like that - we could die."

The tendrils closed around Neuter Kimball.

"I know, and that's why I'm asking you. I can't force you to risk your life to save someone else's." I hoped I was right about how much she cared about swales -- and Neuter Kimball in particular.

After looking out at Neuter Kimball, then back at me, she said, "Computer, manual navigation mode." She grabbed the controls and began steering us toward the white bands connecting Leviathan to Neuter Kimball.

I turned off the mute. "Leviathan, you claim to be the greatest. In size, you probably are."

White filled the view ahead.

"But not in love," I said, speaking quickly as I didn't know how much time I had left. "Jesus said, 'Greater love hath no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.' He was willing to die for the least of us, while you are willing to kill the leas--"

A flash of bright light and searing heat cut me off. I felt a sudden jolt.

Then blackness.

And nausea. After a few moments, I realized nausea probably meant I was still alive.

"Juanita?"

"I'm here," she said.

The darkness was complete. And I was weightless. Maybe I was dead -- although this wasn't how I'd pictured the afterlife.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what didn't happen: the energy shield didn't fail. The ablative shell didn't fail. We didn't die."

"So what did happen?"

Juanita let out a long, slow breath. "Best guess: electromagnetic pulse wiped out all our electronics. The engine's dead, artificial gravity's gone, life support's gone, comm system's gone, everything's gone."

"Any chance--"

"No," she said.

"You didn't even let me finish--"

"No chance of anything. It's not fixable, and even if it was, I haven't a clue how to fix any of those things even if it weren't totally dark in here. Do you?"

"No."

"And no help is coming from Sol Central because not only do they not know we're in trouble, but also we're in another star that could be halfway across the galaxy. When the air in here runs out, we die. It's that simple."

"Oh." I realized she was right. "Do you think maybe we succeeded in freeing Neuter Kimball?"

"Maybe. But it didn't exactly look like Kimball was trying all that hard to escape."

"Well," I said, "maybe it was thinking about how Abinidi's martyrdom led one of the evil king's priests to repent and become a great prophet. Perhaps Neuter Kimball believed something similar would happen to one of the great swales who--"

"Whatever Neuter Kimball believed," she said, her voice acidic, "it was because you and your church filled its mind with fairy tales of martyrs."

I bit back an angry reply. Part of me felt she was right. At the end, Neuter Kimball had seemed to embrace the role of martyr. Would it have done so if not for the stories about martyrs in the scriptures?

And I had been willing enough to risk my life, but now that I was going to die, I found myself afraid.

Juanita didn't seem to need a reply from me. "And what's the point of martyrs anyway? A truly powerful god could save his followers rather than let them die. Where's God now that you really need him? What good is any of this?"

"Look, I'm sorry," I said. "If it weren't for me, you'd be safe at home, and Neuter Kimball would be alive. I've made a mess of things."

"Yes."

Hours passed -- floating in darkness, it was hard to tell how many. I spent it in

introspection and prayer, detailing all my faults that had led me here. Biggest of all was pride: the idea that I, Harry Stein, would -- through sheer force of will and a good speech -- change a culture that had existed for billions of years. I thought back to what I had been told while serving as a nineteen-year-old missionary on Mars: *you* don't convert people; the Spirit of the Lord does that, and even then only if they are willing to be converted.

Juanita spoke. "You were just trying to do what you thought was right. And you were trying to protect the rights of smaller swales. So I forgive you."

"Thank you," I said.

The shuttle jolted.

"What was that?" I asked. My body sank down into my seat.

"It sounded--"

An ear-splitting squeal from the right side of the shuttle drowned out the rest of her reply. I twisted my head around and saw sparks flying from the wall.

Then a chunk of the hull fell away and light streamed in, temporarily blinding me.

"They're still alive," said a man. "Tell Kimball they're still alive."

\* \* \*

All we got from the paramedics was that a large swale had dropped off our shuttle and Neuter Kimball just outside Sol Central Station's energy shield. Neuter Kimball had called the station, and the shuttle had been towed into a dock, where they cut through the hull to rescue us.

It wasn't until Juanita and I were sitting in a hospital room, where an autodoc gave us injections to treat our radiation burns, that we were able to talk to Neuter Kimball.

"It was Leviathan who brought us back here," it said.

I was stunned. "But why? And why didn't she kill you?"

"When she saw that you were willing to die to save me, though I am not even of your own species, she was curious. She asked me why you would do such a thing, so I transmitted the Bible and the Book of Mormon to her. Then she brought us here in case you were still alive."

"And you're not hurt from what she did to you?" I asked.

"I will recover," said Neuter Kimball. "Before she left, Leviathan declared that from this time forward, Mormon swales are not to be forced into sexual activity."

"That's great news." I had won. No -- I corrected myself -- the victory was not mine. I thank thee, Lord, I prayed silently.

"Leviathan also had a personal message for you, President Stein. She said to remind you of what King Agrippa said to Paul."

I nodded. "I understand. Thanks for passing that along."

After the call was over, Juanita said, "What was that message about? Another Book of Mormon story?"

"No, it's from the Bible. Saint Paul preached before King Agrippa, and the king's response was, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.' So, no, Leviathan hasn't become Mormon. But God softened her heart so she didn't kill Neuter Kimball. Or us, for that matter. Back on the shuttle, you were certain we were going to die. You asked where God was when I really needed him. Well, God came through."

Juanita puffed out an exasperated breath. "Typical."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked as the autodoc signaled that my treatment was complete.

"In one story, the preacher converts the king. In another, the king kills the preacher. And in a third, neither happens. That's no evidence that God comes through." She pointed at me. "As I see it, *you* came through. By mentioning that 'greater love' thing, you hit Leviathan where it counted: her pride at being the greatest."

I shook my head. "I'm not taking credit for this."

After we walked out of the hospital, she gave me a tight hug that reminded me how much I was attracted to her. But I knew it would never work out between us -- our worldviews were just too different.

So I was still a single Mormon man with no dating prospects within ninety million miles.

\* \* \*

And no, an attractive single Mormon woman did not arrive on the next solar shuttle. What would be the point of life if God solved all my problems?

*O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.*

--Psalm 104:24-26

END