

Space is quieter than the grave. Empty, dark, huge, and silent. Sometimes, lying in bed or just staring out into the spotted dark when no one else is around, you get a sense of it. It's more than the certainty that the vacuum is fatal--everyone knows that. It's that absolutely nothing can live out there. No matter how simple or complex the organism, nothing can survive in the cold and the dark. It doesn't just kill, it removes the ability to exist. Space smothers everything in the quiet.

Jeff was really pissed at Eddie.

He sat at the huge composite fiber table in the room they used as a kitchen, typing all of this morbid crap into the text editor on his pocket interface, waiting for his lunch. It was impossible to get anything to eat that tasted like anything out in space, away from the bigger ports and the orbiting resorts, but that was such a foregone conclusion that there wasn't any use in complaining about it. It could at least be hot, though, goddamnit. But, because Eddie was the son of a Wavefinder, terrified of the technology that kept them afloat in the vacuum, Jeff had to sit and wait nearly 20 minutes for his food. This was because the voltage was so low on the infrared oven that he built, piggybacked off of the plastic welder, that's how long it took to heat up a bowl of artificial-soy broth. It caused all of this static in his headset if he stood close, too.

"So sorry about the interference. I forgot my tinfoil hat upstairs."

He sat and he waited, and tried to decide what he would do with his gloomy prose. Maybe he would crack his way onto the homesite of the Association of Space Safety (that was a nickname--he could never remember the real acronym) and leave it there for all to find. He imagined a mother and father, with their little chubby children, all gathered around their homescreen, reading up about their pending vacation to the kid-friendly, merchandise-ridden resort locked in synchronous orbit over the storm on Saturn--the one that they had been saving and scrimping for the last 3 years to take--and finding Jeff's little message, which the kids would read and then never never want to leave their precious little plastic-wrapped Earth, where they belonged.

He really needed to eat. He was getting surly. He would be eating right now if it wasn't for Eddie and his paranoia.

"Because I'm hungry."

He could also post his death letter to the universe right on the welcome interface for the United Motor Corporation, where it would be seen by anyone looking to buy anything from a tiny two-seater to one of those gigamillion-dollar cruise liners, as well as the salesmen, the accounting department, the receptionists at all of UMC's various factories and corporate hubs, down to the lunch lady at the Neptune research outpost. It could be a sort of "Screw you, we stole your shit," message.

Course, then Eddie would be the one who was pissed.

“I do not eat like a teenager. I’m just hungry.”

No one else was in the ship. They were on a cargo ship a thousand miles away, stealing some UMC shit. All Jeff ever wanted when they were there was for them to leave, and now that no one was in the ship, he was bored.

Sometimes they all sat there in the kitchen to eat, but just as often they kept to themselves, especially Jeff. They were the closest thing he had to family, but he would sometimes go for days at a time without seeing another soul. He was always separate--isolated. And he never went on jobs with the rest of them. All of his equipment was in the ship, firstly. And second, Eddie treated him like a child compared to the rest of them, even Jaq who was 19--four years younger than Jeff. His excuse for never letting Jeff go with them on jobs was because Jeff was too important, but he didn’t really buy it. He knew that the real reason was because he’d almost gotten snatched that one time on Titan, and Eddie hadn’t ever forgotten it.

He was also terrified to leave the ship.

Jeff’s mind started to wander. He was staring at his legs, stretched out on the table’s attached bench. He was wearing cargo shorts because he liked the pockets, and his naturally brown legs were starved of sunlight. He ran his hand through his black hair, all the combing he ever did, and thought about the nature of data and whether what they were doing really constituted as stealing. Technically, the files they were taking from the ship were only patterned digital noise, subject, in a very precise way, to interpretation. They had to be translated by a computer in order to be understood by humans. Could something so intangible be stolen?

“Of course I’m monitoring the security sub-station. If there were any security alarms, it would have gone off on the interface. No one knows that you’re there and they won’t ever know.”

The oven had shut off sometime during his reverie. He needed to install an alarm or a bell or something on it. He jumped up and walked across the drab green-painted floor to the opposite wall where the oven hung like an ugly painting. He was sure it had to be leaking some radiation since every time he got near the thing the roof of his mouth itched.

He had almost forgotten the four people attached to the headset in his ear before it started to go a little haywire and filled his ear with static in a building crescendo. They protested, but since he hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before, he really didn’t care what they thought. He was going to enjoy his time alone.

Jeff took a spoonful of the broth, still in the oven, and blew on it gingerly. He took a short slurp and nearly dropped the spoon as his lips, tongue, and the roof of his mouth all burned. It was hot, like nuclear hot. He found a towel and wrapped the seaming bowl of broth in it so that he could carry it back to the table.

The ship was called The Pope of Fools. It was an old warship that had been violently modified time and time again until it was so many colors on the outside that you could almost have mistaken it for a Waver's flower-riden, rainbow-bedecked meditation station; as if any of them had ever seen a flower or a rainbow.

The Pope was a class of vessel called a Hunchback. It was a cargo transport, built to haul tanks and other hopelessly large equipment into orbit for aerial drops, or to dock in space ports and orbital stations for delivery. It had a large section missing out of its belly, which also served a modular purpose of sorts. A living quarters, for example, could be installed into the abdomen of the beast and its guts filled with troops or other personnel. It was never meant to reenter atmosphere or even really to land. Sometimes, in a way that always made him feel self-conscious and a little strange, Jeff felt sorry for the Pope. It hadn't come to rest in almost the entire time he had been alive.

Eddie purchased The Pope and the living quarters insert sometime after the war, Jeff was never sure of the timeline. He assumed that Eddie got it cheap, since the hunchbacks fell out of favor even before the cease-fire, and by the time Jeff came on board, the poor thing barely floated on its own power. But that was why Jeff was there: he could fix things.

"Wheels, check the security communications again. Something isn't right." Eddie always called him Wheels. Jeff didn't hate it, but it wasn't exactly flattering.

He put down his spoon and pulled out his pocket interface. He could communicate directly with the entire ship with the device, no larger than the palms of both of his hands, and since Jeff had directly linked the Pope to UMC Cargo Ship AL-17, he could communicate with it, too.

"This is just another example of your crushing paranoia."

"Just shut up and check the security feed. We're almost done with the transfer. "

Jeff typed with his thumbs, mistyping and correcting in an almost constant string. He tapped on a square and it grew to fill the screen. He scrolled through the long list of meaningless check-ins and checkpoints and check-offs and double checks. He reached the end of the feed.

"The only thing that's here is an entry about four minutes ago called 'routine patrol'."

Jaq piped up in her impatient, throaty drawl, "So?"

"Well, every other patrol is just labeled 'patrol.' They made a particular point of calling this one 'routine.'"

Eddie said, "Do they say anything about how many grunts they sent out on this 'routine' patrol?"

Jeff looked at the line, but he couldn't believe it. He stammered, "Not grunts; troopers. A whole

squad.”

“What? You’ve got to be reading that wrong.” Sarah’s voice always had a shrill, accusatory tone, especially when she spoke to Jeff.

“It’s right here. I’m not reading it wrong.”

Eddie took control. “They must have figured out that we’re here. They sent the squad out without raising an alarm so that we wouldn’t be tipped off to them coming. Jeff, get back to your post. We’re going to need a way out.”

He got up from the table and he ran, cursing the whole way. How could he have been so careless? This was not going to be good, and while he was safe in the ship, the rest of them were hanging out on the edge of getting caught with no way back.

Maneuvering through the ship required a certain agility since it was such a patchwork of parts. There was seldom anything so mundane as a door, hatch, or bulkhead to pass through. Walkways were mazes of ladders, torch-cut holes that required even the smallest of them to both duck and step over, crawl spaces, and ill-fit partitions. It made the trip from the kitchen to the secondary control center, The Tower, tough at best--too slow at a time like now.

Jeff shot through an old safety hatch into the loading bay, almost diving onto the metal floor. He ran across the massive room to the next exit down the wall from where he came in to a large opening with no door. Inside was a closet of a room with some discarded coats and boots, as well as a few discarded parts from Jeff’s salvaged and cannibalized components. There was also a ladder.

He grabbed it and began to climb. He barely had to think about where the rungs were since he made this climb at least a couple of times a day, and he never faltered, even when he broke the surface of the ceiling of the little room and kept on climbing into the total darkness of the structure they called the Tower. Jeff had hung some salvaged lights here, but there were still stretches of several feet that were lost in darkness.

He addressed no one in particular, and his voice echoed between the beams and walls that surrounded the ladder, “How long on the transfer?”

Bishop’s slow, booming voice almost overwhelmed the speaker in Jeff’s ear as he answered, “30 seconds.”

Sarah said, “We’re going to get caught if we wait that long. We need to get out of here now.”

Jeff stopped. He hated to say it, but it was true: “If you guys bail out without all of the data, I can’t guarantee that we can finish the job.”

“Goddamnit, Eddie, the kid is going to get us locked up. What the hell are we even stealing?”

Eddie broke in, “No. Don’t answer that, Wheels. If we’re going to get caught, then the less we know the better. If we don’t know the whole story, then....”

Jaq interrupted, exasperated, “Then we won’t tell the whole story. Yeah, yeah.”

Jeff reached the end of the ladder. He opened the hatch above his head with a practiced flip of the latch and a measured push on the heavy thing, enough to keep it out of the way as he climbed up inside.

The secondary cockpit, called the Tower, was unique to the hunchbacks. It loomed far above the rest of the ship like the long erect tail of a hugely fat animal. It’s primary purpose was to operate the ship during cargo and module loading and unloading. You could fly the ship from there, though it was a bitch--the balance was all off. When Jeff came on board and got the Pope running right again, Eddie let him have the Tower for his own. Jeff quickly filled it with things that weren’t meant to be there. He slept in the crisscross of beams about halfway between the actual cockpit and the rest of the ship, where he had hung most of the lights, but sometimes he would fall asleep in his chair, looking at nothing but the panoply of posters, drawings, reference pages, and anti-corporate political cartoons that he had plastered on the massive wraparound window as much as he could, trying to block out the emptiness beyond.

It was designed to seat two pilots and a technician for communications, sensors, and weapons. The weapons had all been removed or welded shut when the ship was decommissioned, but everything else worked. Jeff had removed the three seats and installed a single seat on a rail that allowed him to travel from terminal to terminal. One terminal in particular, the one that would have been the navigator/backup pilot’s, was heavily modified. There were square holes in the console where Jeff had removed gauges or buttons and routed the pertinent wires into a small computer. Another computer, hand built with a keyboard and monitor attached, floated on a fabricated arm, the screen of which had the UMC corporate logo floating around on it. There were also several discarded food wrappers and empty water bottles.

Jeff flopped down into his chair in front of the modified terminal and the floating-logo computer. “I’m in. What do you need?”

It was hard not to respect Eddie when he took on this commanding tone, “The transfer is still a few seconds away from done. Can you tell where the troopers are coming from?”

Jeff checked the security log on his interface, “It looks like they left the security substation and have been combing the ship fore to aft from there. Their last check-in was in the officer’s mess.”

“And where is that from here?”

“Hang on.” He turned to the computer with the UMC logo lazily floating. He touched the

keyboard and the logo went away, replaced with a login screen. He entered the stolen user name and password they had purchased a week before and he was into the ship's onboard systems. He touched an area of the screen and a map emerged.

"The mess is one floor below and aft of you. Following the same pattern they've been on, they would have come straight up from there and headed to the fore."

"Shit, that means they are between us and the skiff."

Just then, Jeff could hear a door somewhere slide open on half-rusted bearings. One UMC trooper, combat trained to be the toughest police force in the solar system, boomed through the hallway, "Stop right there! Step away from the wall, drop your weapons and put your hands above your head."

The panic began to rise in his stomach, cold and queasy. He touched another area on the screen and hit the enter key on the keyboard. He heard another loud slam of a door, this one shutting. A split second later, a huge impact rang the same door with a loud clang.

"What the hell was that?"

Sarah responded, "They were firing an air cannon at us, so thanks for shutting the door. But, the door on the other end of this corridor is also closed. We're trapped, so thanks for that, too."

"Wheels, we're going to need you to find us a way out of here."

Jeff closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. He moved both of his hands off of the keyboard and put them on his thighs. He let the breath fill him. When he was young, this had been a favorite game of his father's. The lean and kindly man would set his hand on the Family Health Monitor that was a part of every apartment in the colony, and he and Jeff would take turns doing this simple meditation and see how low they could get their heart rate to drop. When Jeff got older, teenage, his father showed him how he could use this exercise to calm his emotions. After his parents died, it became the only way he could stave off his crushing, constant anxiety.

"Come on, Wiz Kid, genius us a way out of here." Some of Sarah's words were drowned out by a pounding noise on the other side of the door.

"Almost there...."

"Everybody load up. We may have a fight on our hands." Even as Eddie said it, the panic rose in Jeff again.

Jaq said, "Good!" with an uncomfortably eager exclamation. "We can take these turtles."

“Almost there...”

Jeff didn't want them in a fight, especially Jaq. He didn't care about much in this universe, but if he had his way, he would care about her.

But sometimes, especially in their line of work, a fight was inevitable.

He opened his eyes. His hands found their rightful places on the keys of keyboards. He typed white commands onto a blank black screen which came to life when he finished a sequence and slapped the enter key with a flourish. What would have been pages upon pages of text scrolled by and by, too fast to be seen.

“I've got it, but you're not going to like it.”

“There's a surprise.”

“You're not helping, Sarah.” Jeff began to realize the gravity of the situation when Eddie snapped at Sarah. He usually let her run.

“I'm going to activate the fire alarms.”

“And drown us all? How does that get us any closer to getting back to the Pope?” Sarah obviously didn't like Eddie's tone and spoke before he could.

“How far is it to the door behind you?”

Bishop answered, “About 500 meters.” His slightly accented voice turned the last word into 'meet-ah.'

“The doors are linked, and I haven't been able to isolate them. Maybe if I had more time.... I'm going to open the doors and you guys are going to run all the way fore toward the nose. There is an adjoining corridor that leads to the lifeboats. I assume that Sarah is able to persuade the lifeboat to take you to the Esmerelda. If not, I can walk you through it.” The comment was a jab, and they all knew it.

“I'll be fine, Junior.”

There was a silent moment among them. The banging on the door persisted, but they were all lost in their own thoughts. This was going to be bad, no question.

“I can keep the doors open for a couple of minutes, I think, but they are getting wise to me squatting in their system. Once the alarm is tripped, the doors will re-close, and there won't be anything I can do about it.”

He could hear them breathing into their headsets, no one wanting to speak and break the magic spell that was their temporary safety.

“Alright, people, let’s get this done. Just another day at the park.” Eddie often drifted between friendly familiarity to stately command, but this was no time to be soft. He was the general of this little army. “Open the doors, Wheels.

He typed another set of commands into the keyboard attached to the black screen and started it rolling again. He held his hand over the touch-screen schematic of the ship in front of him.

“Opening the doors in three... two... one....”