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Derelict

By Albert Berg

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The moment he stepped out of the air lock into the dark hallway beyond, Warrick felt something. It was difficult to define. Foreboding would have been too strong a word, but it pointed in the right direction. If nothing else it was a faint kind of déjà vu, a subtle suggestion that he had been here before. He waited a moment for the feeling to pass then radioed back to the ship.

"So far as I can see it's empty," he announced, his voice sounding loud and plastic inside the helmet.

"You sure?" Jones's voice came through the radio.

Warrick looked at the dark corridor ahead of him, at the hanging cobwebs, and the dimmed lights from the

consoles. "Pretty sure," he said. "There's no one here."

"Well where are they?"

Warrick had no answer for that. To tell the truth, the whole business creeped him out. Seven days ago, martian orbital traffic control had registered a ship docking in orbit without the usual communication of intention. Usually such behavior indicated smuggling or some other kind of illegal operation, but in this case it hadn't seemed likely.

Superficial scans had rated the ship at an upper level E-class, and Warrick had never heard of smugglers using ships of that size. They were too large, too hard to hide.

A routine check with earth had unearthed slightly more information. The strangely silent ship was the Persephone, a combination freighter/passenger vessel on a routine run to Mars with a full load of passengers and mining equipment. At least that's what the report they had sent to Warrick's orbital customs enforcement outpost had said.

At first the customs authority had ignored the anomalous ship, but after it had been almost a week without a word of explanation or intent, they had sent Warrick and his crew to check it out.

"Henderson's almost suited up," Jones's voice came back. "We'll be over in a minute."

"Roger that. Hurry it up."

While he was waiting Warrick mulled over the situation. He was not a superstitious man by default, but he felt that something about this situation was very wrong. He had felt it even before boarding, and now that he was here...he shuddered a little, an involuntary manifestation of a growing sense of unease.

He wondered if there could be anyone alive out there in the darkness. It seemed unlikely at best. The derelict's air purification system was off line, and yet his helmet sensors clearly showed breathable levels of oxygen in the air around him. If this ship had been inhabited, he suspected most of the clean air would have been used up. Still, he couldn't help hoping that something, anything, even the smallest insect was alive on this mystery ship. It would make it better, easier somehow to face the darkness ahead if he could let himself believe such a thing was possible.

Then, without warning, a sudden wave of claustrophobia overtook him, forcing him to face the suddenly horrifying fact that he was essentially trapped within his safety suit. He grappled with the latch at the side of his neck almost frantically and popped it open. His helmet popped off with a hiss, and Warrick tasted the stale air gratefully. He knew it was a foolish move. So far they hadn't detected any signs of life on the derelict ship, and there was no telling what it was that could have killed all the crew and passengers. It could be some kind of exotic virus or toxin carried through the air. It could be anything.

But if there was some kind of infection where were all the bodies? A ship of this class was rated for nearly a thousand passengers. The accommodations were far from luxurious, but they would do for someone trying to escape the crowded spaces of earth.

So far he had explored an entire deck without seeing so much as a finger.

Not that he was disappointed. If there were dead bodies on this ship they would be well into the late stages of decomposition by now. He tried not to imagine rotting faces, and missing eyes, and failed miserably. He shivered again, though the temperature in the suit stayed, as always, a balmy seventy-eight degrees.

"Henderson? Jones? You guys on the way yet?"

For a second no one answered. The response crackled back, "Hold your horses Warrick. We're almost ready to come through."

"Well hurry it up," Warrick said. "This place is giving me the willies."

A few minutes later he heard the crack and hiss of the airlock, and the doors opened to let the other two through.

"What happened to this place?" Henderson said with a low whistle. "It's like a ghost town in here."

"Don't say ghost," Warrick said. "I'm creeped out enough already."

"What's the matter?" Jones asked. "You afraid?"

"Leave him alone," Henderson said. "This place is giving me the shivers too. Let's just get this over with as fast as we can."

"Won't be too quick," Jones said. "We're gonna have to go over her with a fine toothed comb. Ship of this size has plenty of nooks and crannies where something could hide."

Warrick didn't ask for an elaboration of exactly what kind of something Jones might be referring to. Instead he said, "Well then, we'd best get a move on."

Jones snapped his helmet off and breathed in deep. "Not bad," he said a moment later.

"No point in putting the thing on, if you're going to take it off five seconds after we get through the lock," Henderson grumbled.

"Ah, quit your whining," Jones said. "I can handle myself."

Henderson shrugged.

"So," Jones said. "What's the plan of attack?"

"It'll be faster if we split up," Henderson suggested.

"No," Warrick replied. "Call me whatever you want, but I'm not taking any chances here. Something about this ship isn't right, and both of you know that. We stay together."

Henderson shrugged, and said, "Whatever you say boss. Lead the way."

Warrick swallowed the lump in his throat. He reached up and turned his helmet light on "high".

The beam stabbed out in front of him, painting a circle of light on the floor of the corridor ahead.

"You know the layout of this class of ship?" Jones asked.

"No," Warrick answered. "She's a new model, fresh off the Toyota orbital assembly line. You Henderson?"

"Not me. Intel downloaded the basic layout into my HUD though. This corridor runs under the belly of

the ship and come out into the cargo hold."

" Alright, then. Let's go slow. I do not want to get lost in this thing."

"We couldn't go any slower if we were dead."

"Yeah," Warrick replied. "Right. Let's get this over with."

The first step was the hardest. Something in him sensed this wasn't right. He knew it was childish, but he couldn't help wishing he could abandon this mission and return to the safety and comfort of his own bunk. But after the first step, the second was easier and the third almost took itself, and after that all thoughts of turning back floated away.

They encountered nothing of interest in that first corridor, nothing to give any clue why this ship was floating in the empty black of space without a soul on board.

Ahead his light played over an ascending staircase that he thought must lead up into the cargo hold. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up but even his light seemed insufficient to penetrate the darkness beyond. He expected Jones to make some remark about the pause, but surprisingly neither of the two men said anything. They feel it too, he thought. Something is really wrong here.

He shut the lid on his fears and climbed up the stairs one at a time, all the while expecting his lamp to play across something in the darkness ahead, and feeling all the more unnerved, when it revealed nothing at all. Even when he had almost reached the top of the stairs, Warrick still couldn't get past the feeling that he would stop at the top to find a complete void beyond. But when he reached the top, his light played across a vast gray metal floor that in the darkness seemed as if it might go on for miles.

"This is it," Henderson. "Cargo bay."

"Where's all the cargo?" Jones asked.

"Maybe they took it," Warrick said.

"They who?" Henderson asked.

Warrick didn't answer. He didn't know the answer. The cargo bay was the largest space in the ship, and for good reason. So why wasn't there anything here? Not a single crate, no long rows of shelving, not even a dust bunny on the slate gray floor.

"Where next?" he asked Henderson.

Henderson consulted the inside of his helmet for a moment, then pointed. "That way. I think."

"Be sure."

Another pause, then, "Yeah, I'm sure. There should be a passage that leads through crew quarters, and forward to the command deck."

"Wait a minute," Jones said. "We're just moving on? What about the cargo?"

"What cargo?" Warrick said. "Do you see any cargo here?"

"Exactly. Where did it all go? Why aren't we looking for it?"

"Looking where, exactly?" Warrick asked. "You can almost see all four corners of the room from here. It's empty."

"Calm down Jones," Henderson said. "I'm sure we'll get some answers. Just cool your jets okay?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Warrick accepted the non-apology without comment. He was losing patience with Jones already, but he knew why the man was being like this. It was the ship. It was getting to them, getting to all of them, worming its way into the nooks and crannies of their minds and nestling itself into the very folds of their brains.

He led the two men across the empty floor of the cargo hold, all the while thinking about what Henderson had said about answers. He supposed they might find some reason to all of this, some underlying framework that put everything they had seen so far in perspective, but part of him hoped they wouldn't. He had a feeling that this wasn't going to be like the detective novels he had read as a kid where everything was wrapped up with a neat conclusion and justice for all. This was an entirely different kind of mystery: the kind better left unsolved. At the end, he thought, there will be blood. But that wasn't right. Not quite.

They reached the place where the door to the crew's quarters should have been, and found themselves facing the blank wall of the bulkhead.

"You said you were sure," Warrick said.

"I was sure," Henderson said. "It should be right here."

"Tell that to the wall," Jones said. It was obvious he meant it as a joke, but not even he laughed. Instead they all stood there for a moment looking at the wall, as if their stares might unmask the missing door. Nothing happened.

"Must of got turned around or something," Henderson said. "Sorry boss."

"That's okay," Warrick said, though his mind was telling him that it was very much not okay. "Which way?"

Henderson paused for a moment, then pointed back the direction they had come. "It must be that way," he said. "I guess I got the diagrams turned around in my head."

"Happens to the best of us," Warrick said. "Come on."

From wall to wall the cargo hold was nearly a third of a mile wide, and it took them nearly five minutes to reach the opposite side. During that time Henderson tried not to think about the darkness. There was so much of it in here, so much space their beams could not illuminate. The dark was an unknown like a blank slate waiting for someone to come along with a piece of chalk. And what would they draw? Would it be a flower? A beautiful sunrise over a quaint house with a door and two windows? Warrick didn't think so.

When the opposite wall proved to be blank as well, he felt himself begin to panic.

"I'm sorry boss," Henderson said. "I was sure..."

"Alright," Warrick said. "Maybe the map's goofy. We know there has to be another door in here somewhere right? Let's just follow the wall until we find it okay?"

He expected Jones to make some snide remark, but both of the men just nodded.

They followed the wall of the cargo hold until they reached the first corner, and Jones said, "Something about this ain't right."

"Understatement of the year, Jonesey," Warrick said.

"No, I mean something else. It's the floor."

Warrick looked at the floor and saw nothing of any particular interest. "What about the floor?"

"It's clean. Too clean. You ever worked a cargo ship captain?"

Warrick shook his head. He had enlisted in the Corps at the ripe young age of nineteen.

"Well I had a summer job loading these things one year. Hotter'n you could imagine, but the money was alright. Anyway, they put some pretty hefty stuff in these holds, and they pack it in all the way to the ceiling. The report says this ships been doing this run for ten years, but there's no way. The floor on any real freighter would be scuffed up and used looking. Not like this."

Warrick looked again, and this time he saw what was missing. Jones was right. The gray floor was clean and smooth, unused.

"So you're saying this isn't really a cargo ship?" Warrick asked.

"I don't know. I'm just saying something ain't right here."

"Henderson, could our information be wrong?"

"Hard to see how sir," Henderson answered. The ship left earth with a full load according to all the intel we've got. Then it parked in orbit, and...well nothing. No radio transmissions, or communications of any kind. Unless..."

"Unless what? Spit it out," Warrick ordered.

"Unless they're not telling us everything."

"You think that's likely?"

Henderson shrugged, though the motion was muted somewhat by the confines of his suit. "I've heard of things like that before. Nothing official of course, it wouldn't be acknowledged officially, but there are plenty of rumors. Men sent on mission with bad information, somebody high up trying to cover their dirty laundry without worrying who else they bury in the process."

"What, you mean like this is some military experiment gone bad?" Jones asked. He threw his head back and laughed. "Now there's one for the books."

Warrick mulled the idea over in his head. It made sense. He knew the brass liked their secrets to stay secret, and he knew that they considered grunts like him to be expendable. He wasn't sure how he felt about that just now. On the one hand he hated the idea of being kept in the dark by his superiors, but on the other hand the idea that there was a logical explanation to all of this gave him some form of comfort, something to anchor his mind to.

"Okay, so we're flying blind," he said.

"Meaning what exactly?" Jones asked.

"Meaning nothing we think we know is real. Disregard any information that you don't know first-hand. Maybe some of what they gave us is real, but maybe it isn't. We stand a lot better chance if we don't lean on it too hard."

Both men indicated that understood, and the trio continued their walk down along the hull of the cargo bay. About midway down the wall Henderson pointed at something on the floor.

"There," he said. "What were you saying about marks on the floor?"

Warrick followed Henderson's finger and saw something carved into the steel of the Hull. Three long marks, furrows in the otherwise perfect surface. He tried not to think of claws.

Jones went over to the marks and traced them out with his finger. "It's not possible," he said. "This is heavy duty alloy. You could use a jackhammer on this stuff and not scratch it."

"Then what was all that you were saying about marks on the floor?" Warrick asked.

"Scuff marks," Jones said. "Residue from pallets and..." he waved a hand vaguely, "things."

Things, Warrick thought. Oh yes.

But aloud he said, "We're not learning anything here. Let's keep moving."

They reached the second corner without encountering any more anomalies or irregularities of any kind.

Along the way Warrick kept turning things over and over in his mind trying to make some kind of sense out of their situation. He was looking at a cargo hold that, according to Jones, had never seen a single shipment of cargo. It almost seemed as if he had stepped into a ship that was just out of the construction yards before her first voyage. But of course that wasn't possible. Mars didn't have the construction capacity for this size ship yet, and no one what going to fly a freighter all the way from earth with no cargo. So what exactly was he looking at?

But he was no closer to an answer when they came upon the impossible door.

"No," Henderson said.

"Yeah. I'm thinking the same thing," Jones said. "Weren't we just at this wall?"

Warrick looked at the door for a long time before answering. There was nothing strange about it. It was a standard bulkhead door, of a type he had seen many times before. The only problem was, it hadn't been here before.

"We must have missed it," Henderson said. "That's all it could be."

"Yes," Warrick said, but inside he knew there was no way they had missed the door the first time, not a chance in the world. But the thing that unnerved him most was that he knew Henderson knew it too.

"Yeah. Of course," Jones said sarcastically.

"Let's just get it open," Warrick said.

"Are you sure we want to?" Jones asked. "All kidding aside captain, there's no way we missed this door earlier. It's not that dark in here."

"You want to go back?"

Jones shook his head. "Not saying that. It's just...weird."

Warrick thought that weird was possibly the mildest way the sudden appearance of the door could be described. "What about you Henderson. You think we should turn back?"

Henderson shook his head. "I'll admit something strange is going on here, but to be honest, the more I see the more want to know what exactly is going on here."

Jones said, "You know what they say: Curiosity killed the cat."

"Satisfaction brought it back," Henderson replied.

"All right then," Warrick said. "Let's get this thing open."

If the ship had been powered up the door would have opened with the push of a button, but as it was, the mechanism had to be operated by hand. Jones found the crank handle in a compartment next to the door and folded it down. At first when he tried to turn it, the door resisted his efforts, but then something inside the mechanism gave, and the handle turned a little. The gears inside gave off a groaning sound so human that it made Warrick start in his suit.

The door swung open and reveal the gaping maw of a corridor beyond.

"Smells funny in there," Jones said.

Warrick nodded, almost without realizing he was doing so. There was a certain smell, a kind of musty quality to the air, that invaded his nostrils the moment the door was opened. It wasn't a necessarily nasty smell. In fact it reminded him faintly of cinnamon. But no. Not Cinnamon. Not quite.

He didn't like it.

"Shouldn't you put your helmets back on?" Henderson asked.

"You got a reading on that air?" Warrick asked. "Is it clean?"

"Clean enough," Henderson replied. "I'm not picking up any major pathogens or poisons in the atmosphere. It should be safe, but..."

"But what? Spit it out?"

"Nothing sir," Henderson replied. "I guess I'm just on edge."

Aren't we all? Warrick thought. Aren't we all?

Jones led the way into the dark corridor. Their suit lights, illuminated a small area in front of them, but the region beyond was as black as pitch. It was easy to start to think what might be hiding beyond the light, just at

the edge of the shadows. Too easy to think of things with fangs and tentacles in all the wrong places, slobbering in anticipation of their next meal.

It's just your imagination, Warrick told himself. That's all. You've been reading too many horror stories. Come on, you've been through worse than this. Pull it together.

The corridor was lined on each side with virtually identical doors. Looking down that long row of doors brought to Warrick's mind the infinitely receding images that appeared between parallel mirrors. As a child he had loved the effect, the magical sensation of looking down an endless hallway filled with unlimited copies of himself, but now it unsettled him. Somehow in this place the idea of being copied over and over again into eternity seemed utterly horrifying.

They checked behind all the doors. These were the passengers sleeping quarters with rows and rows of eerily identical bunks, neatly made. All of them were empty.

"Where did they all go?" Henderson wondered aloud, after the fifth such eerily creepy room had been explored with no evidence of any kind of inhabitants.

"Maybe they were never here to begin with," Jones said. "Wooh, spooky."

"Shut up," Warrick snapped. He didn't mean to snap, but the empty rooms were starting to get to him too. "What is wrong with this ship?" he wondered aloud.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the ship," Henderson said. "It's all in working order. There just aren't any people on it."

"You know what I mean," Warrick said. "This is so wrong. All of it."

"Like the Mary Celeste."

"Jones, the last thing I need right now is a ghost story, okay?"

"I'm just saying it. You must have thought of it by now."

To be fair, Warrick hadn't thought of the fabled ship, until the words were out of Jones's mouth, but once he had thought of it, there was no unthinking it.

He hadn't thought of the Mary Celeste in years. He remembered reading about the ship as a child. His father had had some book of stories called, *Stranger than Fiction* or some such nonsense, and it was filled with stories of sea monsters, and psychic astronauts, all of them supposedly true. And then there was the tale of the Mary Celeste, a ship that had sailed out one day with a full crew, only to be discovered days later completely deserted. There were half eaten meals on the tables, and a captain's log entry for earlier in the day, that had been only half completed. It was the thought of that half completed breakfast that had always chilled him most for some reason. He could almost see himself walking into that cabin and seeing those eggs on a china plate yolks spilling out like blood, letting off steam into the empty air. He had thought about it before going to bed the night after he read the story, trying to puzzle out what could have taken the man who had intended to sit down and eat those eggs, and erased him from the pages of reality.

"Not the same," Henderson said, breaking Warrick out of his thoughts. "It's not like the Mary Celeste. In some way's it's the antithesis of that story."

"How so?" Jones asked.

"The food, the logs, everything on that ship pointed toward the probability that it had been recently inhabited. On this ship, there's no evidence of habitation at all. The problem lies, not in wondering what happened to the original crew, but rather in the fact that there appears to have been no original crew to begin with."

"That doesn't make any sense," Warrick said. "Ships don't fly themselves."

"Autopilot," Henderson argued. "The first ship sent to colonize Mars were unmanned craft filled with supplies and inflatable habitats. It's not inconceivable-"

"It is," Warrick interrupted. "No one would send a ship like this through space without a crew. These things cost...well more money than you or I are ever likely to see. They're not going to risk some computer glitch turning their investment into a big metal pancake. What you're talking about happened years ago, even before the pulse drive was more than a sketch on some mathematicians lunch napkin. It couldn't happen today."

"I could," Henderson said. "You know it could."

"Okay, theoretically yes. But why? Why send a ship into space with no crew. The cost of paying them would be minimal compared to the investment in the voyage itself. What purpose would it serve?"

"What if there is no purpose?" Jones asked.

Warrick glared at him. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," he said. "Anyway we know there must have been a crew. We saw the boarding roster."

"You told us to forget about what we had been told, and focus on what we could learn," Henderson said calmly. "That's all I'm trying to do."

Warrick bit his tongue and nodded. "You're right. That is what I said. It still think it doesn't make sense, but lets take your theory. Why? Why would someone send a ship to Mars with no crew? It's not like it would save them much money, and it's taking a big risk. Even today, some computer systems fail on the orbital approach. Pilots have to be there to counter those kinds of failures. It's insurance pure and simple."

"I'm not arguing any particular point sir," Henderson said. "I just think we should try to think outside the box."

"Well keep trying," Warrick said. "In the mean time, lets keep moving. There's still a lot of ground to cover. Maybe we'll find some clue that will explain all this."

"Yeah," Jones said. "We'll be like the Hardy Boys. In Space!"

Warrick glowered at him and continued down the corridor, but before they had gone more than a hundred feet their lights played over a solid gray wall up ahead. A dead end.

"Shouldn't this keep going?" Warrick asked Henderson when they reached the wall.

"That's what the schematic says."

"Yeah, because that's been so reliable up till now," Jones said.

"Is it your mission in life to be an annoyance?" Warrick snapped. "If you don't have anything constructive to say then keep your mouth shut!"

Jones took a step back, and seemed to have been genuinely surprised by the outburst. "Didn't mean anything

by it," he muttered.

"According to my records, this hallway should extend through the engine room into the control area," Henderson said. He paused as if waiting for some kind of response, then said, "I'm not sure what's wrong."

Warrick looked at the metal barrier in their way willing it to give up its secrets with no effect. "Alright," he said. "I've seen enough. We're getting out of here."

"What about the mission?" Henderson asked.

Warrick shook his head. "Forget the mission," he said. "We were told to find out what happened here, but none of the intelligence we were given makes any sense. I smell a rat in this pie somewhere, and I'm not jumping through any more hoops without all the information." And, he added to himself, this place is really starting to scare me.

On the way back down the corridor Warrick looked at the long rows of identical doors and shuddered. There was something alien in all that uniformity, something unnatural. He found himself wishing he could see a tree or a rock or anything without crisply defined angles. He yearned for chaos.

This is getting ridiculous.

He had thought that it would only take a few minutes to retrace their steps. On the way in, they had stopped to look in nearly every one of the doors hoping to find some clue to unravel this maze of a mystery. Surely the trip back should be shorter.

It wasn't.

With each passing step Warrick fought the terror growing within himself. He thought about asking Henderson to check the schematics again, but he stopped himself. He kept silence, because this time he did not want to be the one to point out the awful absurdity of their situation. He knew what he was thinking. But to put such thoughts into words...unthinkable. So he clung to a single shining thought, in much the same manner that a drowning man might clutch at a single straw floating above him in the murky depths. There has to be some reasonable explanation.

A few minutes later they came to another dead end.

They stood looking at the grey featureless wall of metal, and this time none of them dared to speak.

It's a trick, Warrick thought. It has to be.

The thought gave him new inspiration. "It's some kind of test," he murmured.

Jones's gaze snapped away from the wall toward Warrick. "Test? What kind of test?"

"Psychological," Warrick said. "I think."

Henderson nodded. "It might make sense."

"With all due respect to the both of you, that's insane."

"Yes," Warrick mused. "Insane. That's exactly the idea."

"They're trying to push us to some kind of breaking point," Henderson said. "They try taking away the normal bounds of reality, and see how we handle it, as individuals and as a team."

"Rats in a maze," Warrick added. "That's what we are."

Jones shook his head. "Uh uh. I'm not buying it."

"Why not? It's the only idea that makes sense."

"Because it doesn't make sense. Sure, if we were planet-side, then maybe I'd buy into it. But we're in orbit. We've been on customs duty for three months. You can't fake that." He paused then when on. There's too much. Don't you see? If they were going to do an experiment like this it wouldn't be in orbit. The cost alone...well it's too much. Don't get me wrong. I'm as cynical as the next man, and about twice as ugly, but I don't see how any of this fits." Warrick knew that for once at least, Jones had a point, but he didn't want to admit it. He couldn't admit it. Because such an admission would force other, less conventional lines of thought. He tried not to think of half eaten eggs with steam still rising off of them in the dining room of a weirdly deserted ship.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," he said again, though this time it was more to himself than anyone else.

"We need a plan," Henderson said. "Whatever this is, we need to know what we're doing next."

Warrick banged against the wall in front of them with his knuckles. He guessed the barrier was at least an inch thick and possibly much more than that. "Well we're not getting through here," he said. "Which leaves us with only one other option. We go back."

"You know I hate to be the negative one in the group," Jones said, "but if you're right. If we're really in some kind of weird test, shouldn't we like, you know, not do the most predictable possible thing we can think of?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Warrick asked. "You want to try to break through that wall with your fists? Be my guest."

"I'm not saying that," Jones said. "I just don't like feeling like I'm being pushed around. That's how this feels."

"If you want to stick around here, then fine," Warrick said. "I'm going back. The faster we run this maze the sooner we find the cheese at the center."

He started back down the hallway, not bothering to look behind him, but he heard Jones mutter, "Yeah, but what if it's not cheese we find?"

They passed down the long hallway for the third time, but now Jones walked as if he had a purpose. At least now he had a handle on this thing. The straw he was clutching as had grown into a full-size life preserver, and he felt a little better. We're going to be fine, he told himself. We're going to get out of here.

He desperately wanted to get out of there.

He was so enveloped, so immersed in niggling away at the hanging threads at the edges of his psych test theory that he nearly didn't see it. He could have walked right on by. He almost did anyway. But he did see it. He did stop.

"That door," he said, pointing. "It's open."

"Must have forgotten to close it," Henderson said.

"Yeah," Warrick said. "Maybe."

Something in his gut told him to grab the molded plastic handle and pull the door closed, begged him not to-

But he already had. He brushed against the door ever so slightly and sent it swinging open. There was darkness beyond.

Warrick turned his light up to the highest setting and shined it through doorway hanging open (like a mouth, he thought and wished he hadn't) but still he could see nothing.

"How did we miss this the first time?" Henderson asked.

"We didn't," Warrick responded. "We couldn't have."

Jones stepped up to the doorway too, turning his own light to the highest setting, shining it into the interminable darkness. Still there was nothing but darkness stretching on and on, swallowing the high powered beams of light as if they were no more substantial than a candle flame.

"This is not normal," Jones said.

"What is it?" Henderson asked.

"It's...nothing," Warrick whispered almost in shock. "Void. The ultimate abyss."

"Wow, steady there," Jones said. "Somebody's got a poet's soul just dying to get out."

Soul, thought Warrick. Oh yes. He could feel himself flaying apart inside. In his soul.

"It's wrong," Warrick said. "There's no way this can be here."

"Maybe it isn't," Henderson suggested.

Warrick felt a chill that had nothing to do with temperature. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's some kind of trick," Henderson said. "Like an optical illusion."

Warrick's pounding heart calmed somewhat as he realized what Henderson was saying. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe it is. How can we test it?"

Henderson reached into his pack and pulled out a small black case which opened to reveal a computer screen and a small detachable camera on wheels. "It's for getting into tight places," Henderson explained. "I didn't think we'd need it but..." he shrugged.

"And you're gonna do what?" Jones asked. "Just toss it in there?"

"No." Without another word of explanation he ducked into one of the doors on the opposite side of the corridor. Warrick's breath caught in his mouth as the door swung open, but beyond this doorway everything seemed to be completely normal. He ducked his head in and saw Henderson standing on one of the beds reaching for a long bar that was set in some brackets mounted in the wall.

"What are you doing?" Warrick asked. "We're wasting time." He wasn't nearly ready to admit it aloud, but what he really wanted to do was get as far away from that door as possible.

"Just a second," Henderson said. "You'll see."

He took the bar meant for hanging clothes on, and with a roll of tape from his pack he lashed the camera to one end.

"Why do you have it pointing back toward you?" Warrick asked.

"If it is some kind of illusion then the odds are good we wouldn't be able to see anything more looking out with the camera than we would with the naked eye. But there's got to be something on the other side of that door, and our best chance of seeing it, barring going through ourselves of course, is to try to see what sort of structure surrounds the door itself."

Warrick thought of telling him to stop. He wanted to say it wasn't worth it. That part of his mind that had so desperately begged him not to open the door, was still screaming, pleading with him to leave that darkness far in his wake.

"Well let's not just sit around here talking about it," Jones said, interrupting Warrick's thoughts. "Let's see what we can see."

Curiosity killed the cat, Warrick thought. Stupid, stupid cat.

Henderson fiddled with the screen for a few moments, then said, "All right, I'm set. Here goes nothing." He pushed the camera out into the void.

Warrick crowded the screen, his heart filled with a kind of morbid fascination. The terror in his heart had grown until it was a thing of its own, living out an entire separate existence from the rest of his emotions. He did not know that he would see in that screen, but whatever it was he didn't think it was likely to calm his fears.

The image in the screen shook a little as Henderson tried to hold the bar steady. For a moment, they were only looking at themselves huddled around the tiny screen, but as the camera pushed on into the darkness they saw the truth, the whole truth, and nothing... Nothing at all.

It wasn't possible. Warrick had thought he was prepared for the worst, but this...

The doorway was still clearly visible in the screen, but beyond its borders...nothing. It simply hung there, against all possible reason, a single rectangle of light alone in a void of darkness.

Warrick whispered a single, "No!" and stepped back away from the screen, turning his eyes away, unable to look at the image before him.

Henderson on the other hand held his gaze fixed on the screen as if it were the only thing left in the world. He seemed to be trying to speak, at least Warrick saw his lips moving, but no sound emerged. He pushed the camera further out into the darkness, as if he thought that if he could find the right field of view that the horrible impossibility in front of him would resolve itself into something that made sense.

Then Warrick saw what he was about to do, and screamed, "Henderson, no!"

Perhaps his warning came too late. Perhaps Henderson's mind was so shut off that he could not hear. But

whatever the reason, he reached out with the pole, pushing his hand into void beyond the doorway.

Warrick heard him scream, though the sound seemed to be coming to his ears from a great distance. There was nothing in the dark, at least nothing that could be seen, but Henderson was struggling nevertheless, screaming in pain, trying to pull his hand back from the abyss. Warrick and Jones grabbed his shoulders and tried to help pull him back, but Warrick could feel something unseen, but no less real tugging at the hand that Henderson had extended into the darkness. There was a strength there that Warrick was sure could have snapped Henderson into the void with less time than it would take to blink, but the unseen force seemed to be toying with them, letting them continue their futile tug-of-war.

Still, Warrick wasn't ready to give up the battle. "Pull!" he screamed at Jones. "For the love of God, pull!"

There was a sound that Warrick would never have believed human if he hadn't heard it gurgling out of Henderson's mouth himself, and then all three men suddenly lurched backward into the hall. The door slammed shut with such force that the sound rang in Warrick's ears like a gunshot. But then the sounds that Henderson was making, the horrified screams of pain, seemed to overwhelm everything else.

He clutched frantically at the bloody stump of flesh and bone that protruded from the mangled sleeve of his suit, all that was left of his arm, holding it to himself like a wounded child. Warrick could only watch in numb horror, but Jones leaped into action ripping the first aid kit out of his pack and deftly applying a tourniquet to the bleeding stump. Once the worst of the gushing flow of blood had been staunched, he hurriedly wrapped the stump with bandages, using up both the rolls in his pack before he stopped. When he was done, he turned to Warrick with a glare and said, "You still think this is a psych test?"

Warrick shook his head as tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. In another time perhaps he would have thought to be ashamed to cry, but now he knew nothing but the fear. He wanted to be a child again, running to his mother with a bloody knee, wishing the pain away, secure in the knowledge that she would protect him. She would kiss away all the tears. She would make it all better.

But there was no mother aboard the derelict.

"Pull. It. Together." Jones said. "He's wounded. You're not. Quite crying like a baby and help me."

Warrick shook his head. "It won't matter," he said. "None of it matters. We're already dead."

"No," Jones said. "We're not. Not yet. But we've got to get moving."

Moving where? Jones thought. Wherever we go, the ship won't let us leave. It can't let us leave. But even with his doubt there was a fierce certainty in Jones's voice that was hard to ignore. Jones believed they could get out of this. He believed. And for now that was enough for Warrick.

He wiped the tears out of his eyes and focused on Henderson. The man was curled in a ball on the floor, still clutching his severed hand to his chest. "Henderson," Warrick said. "Can you hear me? Are you with us?"

Henderson didn't say anything, but Warrick thought he saw him nod his head.

"We need to get moving," he said. "Can you stand?"

No response.

"Come on," said Jones. "Give me a hand."

Warrick knew that Jones hadn't meant it that way, but he caught the more literal meaning of the phrase and began to laugh hysterically. Uncontrollably.

I am going mad, he thought in a tiny corner of his brain that somehow remained aloof from the lurking insanity that threatened to overwhelm him.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!" Jones screamed right in his ear. "Pull yourself together sir, or so help me I will shoot you where you stand!"

The outburst was enough to bring Jones back into some sense of reality once again. "Right," he said. "You're right. We have to get moving."

He helped Jones get Henderson up off the floor. The man was still in shock, but Warrick thought he saw some kind of coherence returning his eyes.

"You're gonna be okay," he said. "We're gonna get out of this hell hole, and you're gonna be okay. I promise you."

It was a stupid thing to say. He didn't know if any of them would make it out alive, and he certainly wasn't in the position to be making promises. Still, he felt a little better once the words were out of his mouth. Maybe Jones was right. Maybe there was hope. And there was a part of him that realized he was not making the promise to Henderson at all.

"Come on," Jones said, pointing down the corridor. "This way."

The three of them moved, awkwardly, slowly, but they moved, away from that cursed door, and the darkness beyond. How far they traveled down that corridor Warrick couldn't say. It could have been miles. It might have been only a few hundred feet. Time was all wrong now. He saw it wrong in his mind. It ran in fits and starts like a sputtering fountain clogged with some horrid black sludge, the blood of the gods. Where did that thought come from? Jones wondered, and it didn't matter.

They tottered along like a trio of old men whose lives had been stolen by age, their youth wasted in immaturity.

Finally they came to a door.

"This is it," Jones said. "I knew it. I knew it would be here."

But of course that was nonsense. Jones hadn't known anything of the kind. You're just as lost as I am, he thought. But at least Jones was still willing to fight, and his courage gave Warrick hope. They had both seen the same horrors, and yet Jones seemed to be unscathed by it all. We can make it through, Warrick told himself. It's not a lie. It felt like a lie.

Jones pulled the door open, and Warrick shrank back a little, half expecting to find another horrible darkness beyond, but instead he saw a long room with a multitude of pipes of various sizes and great vertical steel cylinders spaced apart equally. But there was something wrong. He didn't see it at first, because he had his light pointed at the floor, but as Jones swept his beam across the tangle of pipes and valves Warrick saw that they had been coated in something black and oozing. He could see it dripping down off of the ceiling, and hanging from the pipes, but more than that it seemed to move ever so subtly, as if it had a mind of its own.

"What is that stuff?" Jones asked.

"Blood of the gods," Warrick murmured.

Jones's eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"Never mind."

"We've got to go through there."

Warrick shined his light on the black stuff he now saw covered every inch of the engine room. He could feel his stomach turning, and he closed his eyes for a moment praying he wouldn't throw up. He didn't want to touch the stuff, not even through his boots, but Jones was right. They didn't have another way out.

"Right foot first," he muttered.

They stepped into the room, and the moment Warrick felt his boot sink into the black ooze he felt the urge to vomit overwhelm him once more. There was something about the texture of the strange material, something about the way it squished and oozed beneath his feet that reinforced his earlier notion that it was a thing alive. He kept expecting a tendril of the stuff to detach itself from the floor and wrap itself around his neck, and then it would pry its way past his teeth and into his mouth, and it would taste like rotting cabbage against his tongue. All this he saw with such alarming certainty in his mind. Almost as if it had already happened.

But in spite of the worst imaginings of his mind, they reached the far end of the room completely unscathed.

"See now?" Jones said, as they stepped through the door at the far end. "That wasn't so bad."

"Look again," Warrick said, his heart dying within him. "We're back where we started."

It wasn't possible. But that didn't even seem to matter now. All that mattered was what was. They had made it through the horror of the ooze covered engine room only to emerge once again at their point of entry. Warrick looked out at that long white hallway lined with doors on either side, and felt like screaming.

"Maybe it just looks the same," Jones said. "Maybe this is a different hallway."

"No, no, no, no, NO! It's the same. It's all the same. Always the same!"

"Captain? We have to keep going."

"I can't KEEP GOING! We are going to DIE!"

"I promise you won't die," Jones said. There was something in his voice, something that registered in Warrick's mind on some deep primal level. Something wrong. But the rest of him went on trying to shore up the eroding walls of reality.

"How can you promise?" Warrick screamed. "You can't promise! It's all a lie!"

He was overcome by a sudden urge to run, and there was nothing left in him to fight it. He let go of Henderson's shoulder and sprinted down the hall, completely uncaring about anything or anyone else. He would live. Oh, yes. He would live. Those who tried to slow him down were nothing to him. He would LIVE!

He ran what seemed like hours. He ran until his sides ached, and his breath came in sharp barking gasps. He ran until he could hear his heartbeat in his ears like a drum. He ran until he could run no longer, and still, somehow, he ran. The doors flashed by on either side of him until they were nothing more than a blur, but no

matter how he ran, he could not find that blessed ending, that glorious open hatch he was certain would lead to his freedom. Then, finally when it seemed his heart would explode in his chest he sank to the ground exhausted.

"Where are you going?"

Warrick jumped, and turned his head to see Jones standing there looking at him with a strangely familiar smile on his face. Not more than ten feet behind him the door to the engine room loomed open like a great empty eye.

"No," Warrick whispered. "No. It's not real."

"Isn't it?" Jones asked. "How sure are you?"

"It can't be real."

Jones stepped forward, and leaned in close to Warrick's face. Warrick caught something on his breath, a whiff of cinnamon. But no. Not quite cinnamon at all. "You can prove it you know," the Jones-thing said. "If none of this is real then prove it. Take out your gun and shoot yourself in the head. If you're only dreaming, if all of this is only a nightmare...well, I suppose you'll wake up."

"Where is he?" Warrick demanded. "Where's Henderson? What have you done with Henderson?"

Jones laughed, a high barking animal sound that was echoed and amplified by the hard unforgiving walls around them. "He's not here, Warrick."

"What do you mean? Where is he? What have you done to him? What is this place?"

"This place is special Warrick. Can't you feel it? Can't you feel the power here?"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!" Warrick screamed. "WHERE IS HENDERSON?"

"I told you. He's not here. He's never been here. But you...you've been here so many times."

Warrick screamed again and clutched at the gun in his holster, bringing the firearm to bear on Jones's head, and squeezing the trigger. The bullet tore off the top left portion of his skull and ripped out his left eye. Something came out of the wound, but it wasn't blood. It was thick and black and it seemed to move with a will of its own. The Jones-thing looked down at Warrick with his one good eye and grinned. "This never gets old," he said. "Never."

"Who...who are you?"

The Jones-thing spread his arms. "But captain, don't you recognize me?"

Warrick shook his head. "You're not him," he said. "You...you're something else."

"Very astute," the Jones-thing said.

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

For a moment, the Jones-thing looked almost puzzled. "Because it pleases me," he finally said. "It's...so nice."

Warrick looked on in shock. But there was something else, something beyond the fear, something that had been dawning on him from the moment he stepped onto this cursed ship.

"What's the matter?" the Jones-thing asked. "No righteous indignation?"

"I've been here before," Warrick said. "This has all happened before."

"Now," the Jones-thing said. "Now your finally starting to get the big picture."

The rush of memories flooded into Warrick's mind, assaulting him with a million different terrors, a myriad of unspeakable horrors that ripped at his brain like crows tearing away at chunks of his sanity.

"This is it," the Jones-thing purred. "This is always my favorite part."

"No," Warrick said. "It's not. Not any more."

With his mind dying inside itself he took the gun in his hand, pointed it at the bottom of his chin and pulled the trigger.

He heard an echo of insane laughter as the world went white, then vanished completely.

Then...

The moment he stepped out of the air lock into the dark hallway beyond, Warrick felt something. It was difficult to define. Foreboding would have been too strong a word, but that was a step in the right direction. If nothing else it was a subtle kind of deja vu, a suggestion that he had been here before. But of course he hadn't. He couldn't have been. He waited a moment for the feeling to pass then radioed back to the ship.