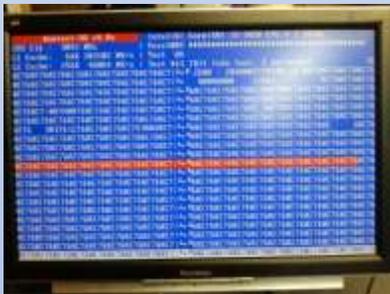


The emptiness of the ship was creepy to the point of disturbing. Any reader of H. P. Lovecraft would have felt right at home in these corridors.

# Lost Journey



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Even in a weightless environment, I can always tell when people are coming. Every motor on the ship creates static electricity, giving the air an ozone/machinery kind of mix. So once the bulkhead doors start operating, you can smell people as they approach. It's hard to think back now on the investigation since we learned what happened. Still, it's difficult to recall all the precise events, all the feelings. It's incredibly hard to put everything in the proper perspective.

Jim opened the final door into the crew's quarters, a grave look stamped on his face. "Jason, the probe is in place. It's in visual range of the *Phoenix*."

"Well then, Let's go have a look, shall we?" I followed him through the door. It wasn't really walking, I just pressed my feet against the wall and gave myself a good push. So, I guess it's more accurate to say, I floated along behind him down the passageway. It was hard not to notice the import of the occasion. No one had seen *Phoenix* for the last three years. She had been Earth's first attempt at faster than light speed. The *Phoenix* was to travel to Alpha Centauri and return. If something went wrong, she would return on automatic and place herself in orbit around the moon until someone could figure out what went wrong.

AS per the disaster schedule, she appeared in the sky headed straight for the moon. There was no communication, the ship was silent. Everyone, of course, assumed the worst. She seemed on course and on target for her lunar orbital injection and then she stopped. On the far side of the orbit of Mars. This slowed everything up. No one had considered building a rescue ship which had to go as far out as Mars ... or beyond. The *Knight's Pawn* was built with some trepidation. An exploration of a ghost ship was not on the top of everyone's to-do list. People were genuinely afraid of what was out there. Even the name, *Knight's Pawn*, was chosen because it was considered to be one of the weaker opening moves in chess.

We were still a good distance away from the *Phoenix*. Earth wanted us to send a probe out to investigate. No one wanted to bring back anything dangerous. The probe would be our first up-close look at the ship. But it was only step one. Like a deep-sea submersible, the *Niepce* was designed to go inside the ship. The idea was we'd be able to get inside and get a look at what happened.

The image on the monitor stunned everyone. The ship was quiet and unmoving. All we'd been able to get from the Webb 2 telescope was a flashy, blurred image. Everyone had assumed the *Phoenix* was tumbling out of control. But there she was, calm as if space was a gentle fish pond on a sunny day. There were no signs of damage, no impacts or residue of any kind. It looked as pristine as when she was first launched. Only this time there was no fanfare.

We did four orbits of the *Phoenix* and then had *Niepce* head for the main airlock. NASA wanted us to cut the feed, so the people at home wouldn't catch a glimpse of dead corpses. But we disobeyed orders and allowed the transmitters to work. We gave NASA some bull story about our controls not working.

"Shut it down," Horst demanded.

"Not a chance," Jim muttered. "Everybody's going to see what we see. This is news."

"You're a morbid freak," Janice spat. "Worse than the low life paparazzi."

At sea, buried under tons of crushing water, there was usually little to be found in the way of remains. But in the cold vacuum of space, everyone knew things were going to be quite different. Some of the crew even had to leave the room as *Niepce* approached the airlock window.

“Jim, move the drone to the right.” The image shifted on the screen. “There. Stop there. At the control panel. Extend the arm.”

Jim adjusted the control, and everyone could see the claw arm of the drone appear in the camera lens.

“See the big red button in the center? It’s the door release.” The button was lit, so the ship still had power.

Everyone was on edge. “I know what a door release looks like,” Jim snapped back.

The drone pressed the button until the light went out. Everything was normal, so far. Now the drone seemed to fly back away from the door. Jim had to fight with the controls to get the *Niepce* to stay still. “What the hell was happened?”

“Atmosphere,” I explained. “The drone was pushed back by gasses escaping from the airlock.”

Everyone gave me an odd look. NASA assumed, after all this time, the atmosphere in the airlock would have leaked away, but it was obviously still intact. Jim directed the drone over the open door. The lights were on and it was clear the inner door was closed. No dead bodies so far. If something had gone wrong, they didn’t have time to make it to the airlocks ... or at least not this one.

Jim worked the drone inside and turned it around. Using the claw, Jim hit the control to close the outer door. It closed with a silent hiss. Jim had some trouble turning *Niepce* around again. He hit the side walls about two or three times. Fortunately, he didn’t accidentally press any buttons. The inner door opened, and the drone was again slammed by the sudden rush of air into the compartment. Apparently, all the ship’s atmosphere was still intact.

The air still had 20% oxygen present, so the crew hadn’t simply run out of breathable air in the three years it had taken us to get up here. The gas sensors, however, registered almost no carbon dioxide. The scrubbers had removed everything. This was our first clue there was no one still breathing on the ship. A loud sigh went through the cabin when the data rolled across the screen. No one wanted to be the burial party of the first FTL crew in history, but it looks like we’ve been volunteered.

Jim steered the drone down towards the control room. He stopped at Commander Roswell’s station. The computer was still on. The room seemed to brighten. All we would have to do was access the video feed and we’d have our answer. The *Phoenix* was programmed to record everything. Jim tried to plug into the terminal while I looked at the monitor screen through the camera. What I saw made me worry. It wasn’t static, but it was random text characters. Different fonts, different colors, some letters in italic others in bold. But none of it made any sense. No words, no images. It was like the entire system had been encrypted.

Horst put his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “Don’t download anything.”

“What?” Jim protested, “You think we’re going to get attacked by an alien computer virus? Don’t be paranoid.”

“Can’t risk it.” Horst insisted. “We’ll need our own computers if we are ever going to get home.”

Jim continued to try to make a wired connection between the Computer’s USB port and the drone’s connection tool.

“Don’t,” Horst demanded. “I’m giving you an order.”

Jim threw up his hands in disgust. We parked a stationary cam pointed at the screen and the went off to continue our search.

The rest of the ship was as deserted as the airlock. No bodies, no signs of disorder or struggle. No cryptic messages scrawled on the floor in the crew’s blood. Nothing. The emptiness of the ship was creepy to the point of disturbing. Any reader of H. P. Lovecraft would have felt right at home in these corridors. The one thing which became obvious was all the computer monitors were completely the same. I don’t just mean they had the same encrypted look, I mean it was *exactly the same*. Every letter, every color, every space. Backup systems which were meant to be used in an emergency and not even networked together looked precisely the same. It was as if they were all playing the same symphony. Repeatedly. Each instrument playing exactly the same note at precisely the same time.

I made the hair on the back of my neck stick up.

“We’ll need to go over there,” I informed Horst.

“Not a chance,” he replied. “There no remains. Nothing to recover and we still don’t have a clue what happened. I’m not taking any risks until I know what’s going on.”

“My point exactly,” I explained. “We’re got going to be able to get any data with the drone. I agree it’s too dangerous to download anything. Which means we have to go over. At least one of us.”

“Rejected,” Horst insisted.

“I’ll wear my spacesuit the entire time.”

“Not a chance,” Horst argued.

“You can leave me there, but I’m going on board,” I said.

Horst’s face turned red. “You get on board when you’re the last person on Earth still living.” He insisted.

Arguing with Horst was pointless. Once he made up his mind, even evident couldn’t penetrate the thing he called a mind. It’s why NASA picked him. A man determined to follow the protocol to the point of immobility.

“Can I at least pilot the drone for a bit?”

Jim indicated he was fine with letting me run the show while Horst scratched his head.

“Fine, but absolutely no downloading. No matter what the reason. Are we clear?”

“Agreed, no downloading.”

“Ruth, watch him. Make sure he doesn’t decide to ignore my orders.”

I went through every personal effect on the ship. Everything from Jackson's copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, to Roswell's golf ball. The one which had once been owned by Alan Shepard. They were all right where they were supposed to be. All the spacesuits were in place and empty, their tanks full. The only way they could have left was by landing on an Earth-like world and walking off into the sunset. Even if they had left the ship, what was up with the computers. What was the meaning of the garbage flowing across the screens and why was it in sync with machines which weren't even connected?

I parked the drone in front of one of the keyboards. Technically, with the claw arm, it had one finger. Do you know how long it takes to type with only one finger? Now try doing your typing with a remote robot arm. I couldn't even do CTRL+ALT+DEL. I spent hours learning how to type with one robot finger. By the end, I was getting pretty good. About one word a minute.

Even with all of my efforts, I couldn't even get into the operating system. It's as if it wasn't there. It appeared as if the entire system had been rewritten. The one thing I did find out was the odd fact all the memory was filled up. Every byte of it. There was enough storage in the system for about fifty cameras to record every second for ten straight years. Trillions and trillions of terabytes. Every single part of it was in use.

I spent a week on it until I was ready to pull my hair out. Horst wasn't too happy either, he and the rest of the crew wanted to go home. It was a long trip and the sooner we started, the sooner we'd get back. NASA overruled him, so we stayed in position. They wanted to know what had happened and if there was any chance I could figure it out, they would let me stay up here until the last possible moment.

Horst got really annoyed when I stole his drawing tablet and rushed back into the observation section.

"What are you doing?" Ruth asked.

"Here," I said, handing her a pad of sticky notes. "Write down every letter you see. But just the red ones."

"What for?" Ruth asked.

"Just do it, OK?"

She shrugged her shoulders and started staring at the screen. "If you try to download stuff while I'm not looking, I'm going to scream."

"If I was going to download data, would I be hard copying it off the screen," I replied. "Just jot down all the red letters."

It took about two days, but I finally figured out what was going on. I took Ruth's notes, crossed out a bunch of letters and then handed her back the pen. "Thanks," I said.

"Thanks for what?" She asked. But it was too late. I was already heading back to the common area.

"OK," I told Horst, "We can go back now."

"So, you finally gave up, huh?"

"Nope," I said. "I found the crew."

There was stunned silence. Jim put down the bag of hot coffee he was squeezing into his mouth. “You found the bodies?”

“No, there are no remains. But I know where everyone is.”

Horst frowned. “Do you want to explain what you are talking about, or do you simply want to be annoyingly vague?”

“Here,” I said. Handing him back his tablet. “Read this.”

Horst stared at the tablet. “So what? It’s a sonnet. Emerson, I believe.”

I tried not to look too smug. As part of the backup crew, I’d trained with Henderson. I knew him pretty well, perhaps as well as his wife. “This was one of Henderson’s favorites. He used to repeat it all the time in the simulator when he got bored.”

“So?”

I passed him Ruth’s pad of sticky notes. It was engineering data. “I still don’t get it,” Horst complained. “What does this mean?”

“It’s Commander Roswell. You’re looking at engineering data from the Redstone rocket. He was an expert.”

Horst looked unhappy. “You’re losing me.”

“They’re in the computer,” I announced.

“What?” Now it was Ruth’s turn to be confused.

“We’re always believed matter can’t go faster than light because it would then have more than infinite mass. The whole idea of the drive was to briefly convert everything to energy, which doesn’t have any mass. They the ship and crew can go as fast as you like. In testing, it all worked out fine. I suspect for longer trips, matter which was once living energy can’t come back ... it’s changed. Every few seconds in your body a cell divides or an old one dies. So, after a few seconds, you’re not who you were anymore, your different. Technically you’re new.”

Horst gave me a dirty look. “The system only brings back what it was recorded, but you’re not you anymore. The end result was they stayed energy.”

“Just floating around the ship?” Jim asked.

“Basically.”

Horst snarled in derision.

“The automated systems kicked in and the ship came home as planned. Only the crew was still hanging around. They managed to find the one thing which was compatible with bursts of energy, the computer system. It must have happened when the ship was outside of the orbit of Mars.”

“Is this why it stopped way out here?” Ruth asked.

“Yep.”

“Why’s the data look like a mess?” Horst asked.

“Henderson is Times Roman. Commander Roswell thoughts are all the red letters. They are all speaking ... or thinking ... at the same time, so you can’t read it unless you pull only those letters out of the stream.

“So, what do we do now?” Jim asked.

“We go home.” I answered, “Unless you can figure out how to convert energy back into solid matter which no longer exists”

“God,” Ruth mumbled, “what a terrible fate.”

“They have solar panels and a good electronic system,” I remarked. “I could be worse. They could last several hundred years out here. They may still be around long after you and I are dead and gone. It’s a lot of time for people to figure something out.”