

*I'm not a science fiction writer. Never will be. Science fiction requires an attention to detail that I'm just no good at. "Give me just enough information so that I can lie convincingly." That's what Stephen King says. I, for one, subscribe to that philosophy.*

*But permit me this one tale, as it came to me and did not wish to remain quiet. It is science fiction only in that it occurs far in the future, and in space. Mostly, it's just frights and things that go bump in the night. Only on a spaceship.*

*Enjoy.*

## **Silence**

Carl Jung once stated that a million zeros joined together do not, unfortunately, add up to one. There are moments when I've come to realize that, in the scheme of this massive universe, mankind's collective knowledge is little more than several billion zeros.

I'm going to tell you what happened. But, first thing's first. I'm the only one who survived (isn't that how these things go?) and I'm the ship's cook. So, if you're expecting a lot of technical talk and scientific jargon, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm the wrong guy. I just know how to mix a pot of stew perfectly that'll feed an entire ship. Not quantum physics, mind you, but still no small feat.

Spent many a night alone on this ship. Holed up in my bunk with nothing but some old Dean Martin, some Coltrane and a lot of books. The kind with *pages*. Cost me most of my paycheck every month to get these things. Different

sellers scattered out all over the Earth. Maybe they needed a buck or two fast. Or maybe they too had finally given up on the arcane method of reading words on paper. Whatever the reason, they were selling and I was buying. What else was I going to do with my money? At 47 with no wife and kids, wasn't much else to be done with it. Tattered books lined my quarters. Fiction, science, psychology; you name it; I've probably got a tome or two on it.

I love history. You can find out so much about humanity by looking back at our history. And it ain't pretty, mind you. There were a lot of hopeful men when you looked back on our history. Men who felt certain that by now, mankind would have evolved beyond the greedy, selfish, warmongering beast that filled our history books. Hope is an amazing thing. Mind you, maybe I'm just a cynic; still, the power of hope is enough to blind even the most intelligent of our species. Suffice it to say, mankind had not, in fact, evolved beyond what we've always been. Most of our wars these days were fought by computers and technology (ah, technology, the New Religion). But people still died and money still lined the pockets of men with power.

Sometimes the thought of it made me so sick inside that I never wanted to set foot on Earth again. That didn't last very long, though. All I had to do was think of my small cabin, the lake, a good cigar and an evening of listening to nature make her music. All of my anger would just dissipate and I'd realize what I was mostly was homesick.

Earth. Don't see her much these days. Probably never will.

But I can't let this thing get to her. No matter what.

My ship is (maybe 'was' is the better choice of words here) the U.S.S. Sanders IX. Used to be a naval ship. Now she's owned privately by a large firm and contracted out on a five year basis. Her job is this: she patrols various parts of our solar system in search for fuel sources. It ain't a grand job, but it pays well and, as they say, somebody has to do it. (Don't even get me started on the whole fossil fuel, and alternate fuel shit. Went on for eons it seems. Not one

damn politician, bit of legislature or scientist managed to put a dent in things. When things ran out, well, they just ran out. That was how it was. Period.) Once in a while, The Sanders hits pay dirt. This is my second year in my second contract (I'm a good cook, what can I say?) and once or twice we hit the mother load. Science did help out here. Once we figured out a way to convert some of the minerals on neighboring planets into something usable that didn't blow up half a state at a time, we were golden. Yes, we did blow up half a state at a time. More than once. Those were moments when federal and state governments, along with the scientific community, ended up, let's say, with egg on their faces.

Our last run was anything but routine.

Seemed some of our sensors had been picking up on high energy levels from scattered debris in Saturn's rings. We had no idea if the Sanders could even get close enough to salvage, let alone take the damage if she were able to move in that close. Been through a lot of things on this ship, but I never experienced a tossing around like she took when we did scuttle up beside a million asteroids in orbit.

My name's Muldoon, by the way. Jonas Muldoon, ship's cook on the U.S.S. Sanders IX.

## 1

"Well, Jonas, whaddya think? Will we get out of this shit job in one piece?"

The Sanders was shaking like a cheap stripper on speed. Once or twice, as Robert Decker sat with me at the table, eating his rare steak (special ordered and hidden by yours truly. He'd done me a couple of favors over time, which earned him a quiet evening once a week in my kitchen to savor one of his New York Strip steaks), but mostly talking, I knew I heard us take some

serious flak to the hull. I wondered if the old bitch had it in her to keep it together.

“Who knows, Bobby. Do you care?”

“Well, hell yeah I care,” Decker said, mouth full of steak. “I don’t want to get blown to hell for trying to help run the lights in Crested Butte.”

I laughed. “Crested Butte? The hell did that come from?”

“I don’t know. Sounded funny.”

“Yeah. It did at that.”

No sooner had I said it than something hit the ship hard enough that the lights came and went for a few seconds.

“Damn,” Decker said, “there went the forward aft phase inducers.”

“You just made that shit up, didn’t you?”

Decker smiled a toothy grin. “Yeah,” he said, “I did. Good catch.”

“Tough to bullshit a bullshitter.”

“I hope there’s a heaven.”

“Getting religious, Robert, my friend?”

“Nah. I just figure God to be a meat-eater. And I’ll miss these steaks if this ship crumples and I find out there’s no after life.”

Decker was pragmatic, if he was nothing else.

This time, the ship was struck so hard that the lights dimmed and gravity stepped out for a cigarette. Decker’s steak lifted from the plate about three inches, gravity came back and the steak smacked on the plate hard enough to send steak sauce splattering everywhere. Including my face.

“Holy shit,” Decker said.

“That one breached the hull. I’d bet on it.” That was me. I may have been a cook, but I knew a tiny bit about how much this sort of old ship could take.

We ran from the kitchen up to the elevator to the bridge.

## 2

The bridge was a mad house. Smoke everywhere. The consoles zinging and zapping as electronics misfired. Captain Duneel was shouting orders at the top of his lungs.

“I need a damage report! Now! What the hell is going on with my ship?”

No sooner had he said it than The Sanders lurched to the left. Those who weren't prepared went rolling across the floor like so much other junk that had been shaken loose.

“What the hell was that?”

“Sir,” one of the men said, “there's a hull breach on deck five.”

“Get down there now, Decker. See what's going on,” Duneel shouted.

“Yes sir.”

“I'm coming with you,” I told him.

We ran back to the elevator.

## 3

There was a hole in an exterior bulkhead on Deck 5 that Godzilla would have been able to look through with no problem. A couple of the crew had managed to get shields up around the hole, so everything wasn't sucked out from depressurizing further.

“What happened?” Decker yelled.

“We don't know. Nothing is in here. No asteroid, no rock. Not a goddamn thing!”

“So something hit us and then, what, stepped back out for a breather?”

“No sir. Well, hell, I don't know, sir. All I know is there's a hole there big enough to drive a lander through but nothing is in here.”

Decker looked at me. Cocked an eyebrow upward.

I shrugged. The hell did I know?

One of the shields the crew had set up shut off. Nothing hit it. Nothing at all seemed to happen except that it just shut down. Like someone turned it off.

“JONAS! GRAB ONTO SOMETHING!”

I was standing by the door. I grabbed something. I held on. When the first shield went down the second wasn't long after. There were flashes of what looked something like a cloud with lightning running through it and then, the shield was gone. Everything began being pulled toward the hole. Including the crew near it. Decker shouted. No one could hear him, including me and I was two feet from him. I grabbed his belt and held on. I would have shouted to him to move but I knew he wouldn't hear a word I'd said. Oxygen was sucked from my lungs faster than I could pull it in. I was suffocating. I knew he was, too, and still I could see him yelling as the crew began to be sucked out, too.

With my last bit of oxygen, I strained and pulled Decker with me out the door. A manual pump was the only way to shut this door. I'm sure you've seen enough movies in your time where ships like this have the nice automatic hydraulic doors at every door way. Not so here. The Sanders was out for a long time, and we had to conserve energy. So hydraulic doors weren't an option. We had to either shut them the old fashioned way or pump enough pressure manually to close them, an inch or so at a time. Guess which method this door used?

“HELP ME!” I shouted, looking right at Decker, hoping he could read my lips. He did. We both started pumping like crazy and the door began inching shut. I didn't know how much longer I would be able to pump, as I began feeling as though I would pass out from the lack of oxygen. Decker was as white as a sheet.

Finally the door shut. Decker pulled out a portable welder from one of the large pockets in his vest and began to weld the door shut.

I took in one of the longest and most appreciated breaths in my life.

Decker pulled a comm piece from another pocket and stuffed it in his right ear. “Captain! Deck 5 breach contained. But we'll need to get some guys

down here to weld extra braces on it. Lost Lewis, Richards and Hamilton. Yes sir. Couldn't seal the hole fast enough. Yes sir. Right away sir."

He looked at me.

"Gotta leave you now. Get away from this door, Jonas"

I only needed to be told once.

## 4

I stood at the port hole (about the size of a normal window in a house on Earth) and looked out at space. Marveling at nothing.

Decker and some crew had managed to brace the door on Deck 5 and, so far as it stood right now, the breach was contained. Duneel was still shouting orders on the bridge the last time I stepped up there. I figured I was getting in the way and came to my quarters. I wanted to relax and just read. But my adrenaline was still pumping.

I wondered what the hell could have breached the hull. There were no other ships in the vicinity, so we hadn't been fired on. It only made sense that we'd been hit with an asteroid from Saturn's rings. But Decker had sent a man out to examine the hull and it showed no signs of being hit. There was no residual strata from a rock. No signs that we'd been hit at all, actually. It just seemed the gaping hole had appeared on its own. I'd heard of hull breaches like that before. When the ship was just too old or a ground-crew mechanic hadn't checked things properly before sending the ship out. But The Sanders wasn't that old. And I knew Decker well. He was too damned paranoid not to have stood over their shoulders and annoyed the ground-crew as they went over every inch of this ship.

Too many classic movies and too much classic fiction. Because I wondered if there was something else on board this ship with us now. Something I did not want to meet.

Some times life imitates art, doesn't it?

I stared out at Saturn. Beautiful in her own way, the rings from a distance looking like smart dressing on a shapely woman. But it wasn't like that at all. Or maybe it was. A shapely woman can rip a man apart, can't she? Same principle, maybe.

The thing I never got over about space was the utter loneliness of it. Especially as we'd been able to get out further and further into our own solar system and we'd realized that, here, in this solar system at least, we were actually quite alone. A lot of gas, toxins and poisons were the only things we'd found on our brother and sister planets and moons. Not one damned sign of life. Lots of hoaxes over the centuries. No life. Nothing. Dead.

What do you do when you find out your neighbors have all left home and aren't coming back? You're all on your own, now. Get used to it. And hell, all I did was cook. I can't even imagine the sadness from the science community over the years, as they realized that, if they wanted to find friends in space, it was going to take a hell of a lot longer and a whole lot more money.

There was a knock on my door.

I looked through the eyehole and saw Decker standing there. He still looked pale.

"Jonas. I'm glad to see you. I was a bit worried you'd hang out by that door. Wasn't sure how long it would hold."

I laughed. "I'm not suicidal, Bobby. I got the hell away as soon as you left."

"Good," Decker said. He rubbed his temples vigorously. "Tired."

"Get everything ship shape?"

"Yeah. Duneel ran us all until we could barely stand, but by God, we got everything repaired and I think we'll rest up for a few days and then get back to trying to extract some energy from this god-forsaken planet."

"Think that's a good idea, Bobby? I mean, one more hit like that and I don't think The Sanders will ever be going home again."

“Yeah, I know. But Duneel is a slave driver. He thinks we can find more creative ways to get at that energy, at least. Ways that won’t involve putting the ship right in harm’s way.”

“And you believe him?” I asked.

“Hell no. The man’s going to try and kill us all for a few dollars. But what can I do? He’s the captain?”

“Can’t you, I don’t know, usurp command or something? Cite some clause in the ship’s code or something? Him being unfit?”

Decker actually burst out laughing at what I’d said. “Nah, Jonas, doesn’t work like that on these contract ships. Only thing I can do is to submit a report to the company stating my concerns, and hope that within three to six months I get a response. By then, well, I don’t think I have to go on, do I?”

“Nope.”

I noticed Decker was favoring his right hand. It was actually closed into a fist. When he rubbed his right temple again with it, he didn’t not unclench it.

“What’s wrong with your hand, Bobby?”

“Huh? Oh. Well, I think I must have hurt it while we were pumping the door on Deck 5 closed. I’m not sure. But bloody hell, it hurts. Feels like I suddenly got a hell of a case of arthritis or carpal-tunnel.”

“Seen Doc Abelson yet?”

“No. Been putting it off. You know how much I hate going to the infirmary.”

“Yeah, I remember.” I never laughed at Decker, but I always found it amusing that Decker could stand there and do something like weld a door shut to a room with a hull breach, knowing at any moment the door could collapse and he’d be sucked into oblivion, and yet he was frightened or a polite man in a white coat.

“Well go anyway,” I said.

“Ok, mother. I’ll go.”

“Beer?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

That was the last time I saw Bobby Decker sane.

## 5

I slept fitfully that night. Bad dreams crept into my head like a burglar and tortured me most of the night. I woke up drenched in sweat. I got up, changed clothes and got back into bed only to have another horrible dream and have to repeat the process. At 3a.m. I gave up trying and crawled into the bathtub into a tub of hot water to try and relax.

Just as I got situated in the tub, my comm piece began to beep. I got out of the tub, wrapped a towel around my waist and fished for it in the pocket of my pants. Found it, put it in my ear.

“Jonas, I wake you?” Schmidte from engineering.

“Nope, matter of fact.”

“Hey, you seen Decker?”

“No. Why?”

“He was suppose to report to Deck 3 an hour ago. No one’s seen him.

Thought you might know where he was.”

“Sorry, Mike. Not a clue.”

“Thanks, Jonas.”

“Yep.”

The comm piece went dead. Not like Decker at all to miss a duty report. Bath time was over. I decided to go to Decker’s room and see if maybe he was just exhausted and hadn’t woken up.

## 6

On the fifth time I knocked on Decker's door, I knew something was wrong. I tapped the comm piece in my ear. "I need someone to get down here and unlock Robert Decker's door, pronto."

About five minutes later, a guard showed up, pressed a couple of buttons on a small handheld device and a click announced that Decker's door was now unlocked.

"Should I stay with you? Go in and check things out?"

"No. Thank you. Decker is probably just exhausted."

"All right. Call if you need me."

"Thanks."

Decker was exhausted. And a good bit more. I found him curled up in the corner of his quarters, holding an arc saw and mumbling something to himself.

"Bobby? Bobby what's going on, man?"

He stared at the arc saw and didn't look at me.

"Bobby. Hey, come on, Bobby, it's me, Jonas."

He said something outloud to the air. Something about the pain. I walked over and tried to gently take the arc saw from him. This got his attention.

"Get back, Jonas. Don't touch me. Don't touch me for your own good."

"What's the matter, Bobby? Did you go see Abe yet? You didn't, did you?"

"No. Just came back in here and went to bed. My hand woke me up. The pain is unbearable."

"Do you have anything to take?"

"Yes. And I took three times as much as I'm supposed to. If my liver holds up, I won't die at least. But this hand. It's got to go."

"Whoa, hey, Abe can help."

"No he can't, Jonas. There's something wrong. Something far more wrong than just busting my hand on that pump. I think..."

"What?" I was getting nervous as he talked. He kept moving the arc saw closer to his right hand.

“I think something got in my hand, Jonas. Something infected me. I don’t know. But I’m going to cut my hand off. It’s the only way. It’s the only way, don’t you see? I can’t be free of it until I cut this hand off. I mean, hell, Jonas, it even tells you to cut your hand off in the Bible, remember? You remember that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I remember, Bobby. But that was a hell of a long time ago. And I don’t think Jesus was talking about an infection, do you?” I reached out for the saw and Bobby actually punched me in the face with that right hand. He let out an agonizing howl as his fist connected with the side of my face.

“You idiot! No you’re probably infected, too! Stay the hell away from me, Jonas! I mean it! I’m not fucking kidding!”

I tapped the comm piece in my ear.

“Yes sir?”

“Get in here, now,” I said.

But, as you can guess, it was too late. Decker let out a yell of victory and within less than one second, the arc saw had done its work. The hand lie on the ground. No blood from the hand or Decker’s arm. The arc saw cauterized the flesh as soon as it touched its surface.

“Shit, Bobby, why that hell!”

“I told you why,” Decker said. Sweat poured down his face and the sweat from his chest soaked his shirt through. He looked like a madman. One who had killed the evil beast the townspeople sought.

“Get to Abe,” Decker said. “Have him run tests on you. You need to know if you have whatever I had.”

“We’ll see him together, Bobby. I’m taking you to the infirmary right now. No arguments.”

“No. I’m not going.”

“Oh, but you are, I said.”

The door swung open.

“Now,” I said.

A tiny bead struck Decker on the throat next to the jugular. It burst and the fluid seeped into his skin in seconds. He was out cold before he could begin an argument. Hell of a marksman, that guard. Remind me not to piss him off.

7

Doctor Abraham Abelson stood looking down at Decker. One full eyebrow lifted.

“Anything?” I asked.

“Well, you check out fine. Not infections that I see. Nothing at all abnormal.”

That’s a relief, I thought but did not say.

“What about Bobby?”

“No infections, either. Just very depleted levels of serotonin and dopamine. What doesn’t make sense here is extremely high levels of adrenaline.”

“So he was maybe having a panic attack?”

“The adrenaline would make sense, yes. But the serotonin levels, no. The receptors almost seem to have been sealed shut, as though his brain just did not want to receive anymore serotonin.”

“Well, I’ve only read a little here and there, doc,” I said, “but that doesn’t seem possible. Wouldn’t something like that have shown up on a psychiatric examination?”

“A full one, yes,” Abe said. “And Decker had the complete workup not too long ago. Standard procedure after two consecutive five year contracts.”

“He’s been on this ship ten years?”

“Twelve,” Abe corrected. Of course, I hadn’t taken the current term into account. Bobby’d never told me he’d been on this crate that long.

“And I’m guessing nothing of the sort showed up on the evaluation?”

“Of course not, Jonas. I’d have never let the man back on this ship had such a thing been present.”

“I know. I’m grasping at straws.” Abe smiled, but his face showed weariness. He patted my shoulder.

“Go on. Get some sleep, as we doctors are fond of saying. I’m keeping a close eye on Robert. I know he’s your friend. He’s in the best care.”

I smiled back and took one last look at Bobby. His face, despite the sedative medication the guard had dosed him with, showed the look of a man experiencing one hell of a nightmare.

“What about Bobby’s hand?” I asked.

“It’s on ice. I know what you’re going to ask, and the answer is no. The arc saw did a number on his nerve and tissues. We can get him an artificial hand, but it will take months of therapy for the connections in the artificial hand to become synced with the impulses from his brain. He’ll have phantom pain long before he has the use of a new right hand.”

“All right, thanks, Abe,” I said.

Damn. Months. I knew Decker wasn’t poor by any means. I also knew that his hands were his livelihood, and even just months without them would hurt him.

## 8

I went back to Decker’s room and found it cordoned off for quarantine. I figured Captain Duneel already had Decker’s status from Abe by now, but he was playing it safe. Probably a smart move. I wondered if he’d quarantine me, seeing as to how I touch every bit of food this ship eats.

It was five thirty in the morning. I was so tired I could barely see straight, but it was time to get to the kitchen. Crew had to be fed, didn’t they?

Decker looked a lot better when I went back to see him that night after the last mess was served. He'd gotten a bit of his color back and he was actually smiling when I walked in.

"Doc says I'll be playing piano in six months, tops."

I laughed. "You don't play the piano, Bobby."

"I will with that new hand, Doc says he can arrange that."

"I'll be damned," I said.

"I'm sorry, Jonas. Sorry if I scared the shit out of you."

"Don't be. You're the one lost the hand. Abe says there's no sign of any kind of infection in either of us, though. So that's a relief."

"I need a favor, Jo."

He never calls me Jo unless some serious shit is about to go down. Nicknames are normally endearing. But when he called me Jo, let's just say I got the heeby-jeebies.

"What do you need, Bobby?"

"I need you to get my hand off this ship. I've already asked Abe and he won't do it. Says it's ridiculous. Says that if I'm not infected with something, then neither is my hand. I've asked him to run tests on it. He says with my crystal clear health report, Duneel won't sign off on the costs. Jo, you have to get that hand off this ship."

This did not make me feel better about the mental state of my friend. He was still talking insanity. Still going on about that right hand.

"And just how the hell am I supposed to do that, Bobby? I'm the ship's cook, for God's sake."

"Exactly. You are one of the few people on this ship authorized to jettison foodstuffs garbage! Put it in a plastic bag, grind it down—shit, I don't care what you do. *Just get it off this ship, Jo.* Do you understand me?"

"No, Bobby, actually, I don't. Abe's right. You're not infected, the hand isn't infected. I can't put my job on the line for this nonsense of yours. I

understand you're scared and in pain. Maybe a little loopy from all the meds. But come on, Bobby, this is silly."

Decker grabbed my shirt with his left hand, that hand now felt as though it was about three times as strong as it was when he had both of them. And he pulled me down to his face.

"You don't understand, shit, Jonas. I'm not asking. I'm *telling* you to get that fucking thing off this ship. Do you get me? I'm giving you a direct order to jettison that hand as soon as we're done with this conversation."

"And are we done, Bobby?"

He let go. "We're done. Do it. Because if you don't, I will find a way myself. And I don't care if I have to step all over the rules to do it."

I believed him. "I'm going to leave and let you rest, Bobby. I'll see what I can do about that hand."

"Don't see about shit, Jo. Do it. Please. For all of us."

Maybe I should tell Abe to consider another full psych evaluation.

## 10

Back in my room, I pondered what Decker wanted. I could, perhaps, escape his direct order if I told Captain Duneel that I thought he was suffering dementia, and Doc Abelson should evaluate him psychologically. But did I want to basically rat out my best friend? No, I did not.

Still. Was I actually going to go through with what he wanted? Grind his severed hand into hamburger meat and jettison it like so much garbage?

I decided to sleep on it. The morning mess would clear my head and I'd maybe—just maybe—know how to approach this better.

Sleep would come not without a fight.

I dreamt of demons and black things. I remember dreaming that the eggs I cooked for the crew rose up and tried to kill me. They flipped themselves over,

and the yolks were eyes and they threw hot grease on me, burning my face, scalding my eyes blind. I laughed when I woke up. An uneasy sort of laugh. The weight of what I was going to do that night was heavy.

Yes, I was going to do what Decker wanted. Mostly because he was my friend and I'd never known him to ask me to do anything unless it was important to him. And even in a state of dementia, I could plainly see that this, for all the lack of sanity, was very important to him.

## 11

“Bobby, you’ve got your wish. I’m going to take the hand and grind it up and jettison it tonight.”

I thought Decker’s face might crack from the smile, it was so wide on his face.

“What changed your mind?”

“Nothing, Bobby. You’re still fucking insane. But I’m going to do it because you’re my friend, and that’s just the way it is. And if I get kicked off this ship and lose my contract, I will hunt you down.”

“You won’t. I’ll make certain. And you won’t be sorry. This is the right thing. Jonas, there’s something very wrong. Something I can’t explain because it makes no sense. But so long as...”

I held up my hand. “I’m sorry, Bobby, I can’t listen to anymore nonsense like that, ok? Just let me do this and let’s be done with it.”

Decker sighed. And damn, he looked tired. Pale again. Somehow thinner, too. “All right, Jonas. All right. Thank you.”

He lie back on his bed and fell asleep. Relief, it seemed, had taken him. What the hell was bothering him so much about his damn hand?

## 12

The hand was gone. God almighty. The little refrigeration unit Doc Abelson had been keeping it in was broken open. Not broken into, mind you, broken open. God help me, it looked like it had been broken out of. Not possible. Decker had no cybernetic parts. That hand was as flesh and blood as mine were, and one whack on that little alloy freezer and my own knuckles would have split open.

No, someone broke in. Had to be. But why, I had no idea. I needed to find Abe.

## 13

I found Abe.

It wasn't pretty. His face looked a lot like the little refrigeration unit. Mangled. Messed up really badly. His eyes, well, they were no longer in their sockets. His tongue was somewhere on the floor, but I didn't bother looking for it. I'm a cook, not a medic, so my intestinal tolerance for such gore was low.

I went back to Decker.

"Bobby, the...your hand. It's gone."

"What?" Decker's eyes were like saucers. Wide and frightened. "Shit. Damn it, I knew it!" He was getting up from his bed.

"No, Bobby. You can't get up. You're in no condition to be moving around." I was unaccustomed to the look he gave me.

"Jonas, you and I go way back. But need I remind you that you're a cook and I'm a ranking first officer? If I want to get up out of this bed to go find my own goddamned hand, then I'm going to do just that. Are we clear?"

"Yeah, Bobby," I said. "Crystal."

“Good,” he said. Then smiled a little. “Now, help me out here, would you? There’s a draft and I don’t like swinging in the breeze when there’s a murdering hand crawling around somewhere close by.”

## 14

Decker took me to a weapons room. He got himself a rather ominous looking automatic pistol and handed me a small cannon with a handle.

“I know you don’t shoot much, but this thing, well, you can’t miss. Aim for something—anything—and you’ll take out whatever’s within a three foot radius.”

“That’s comforting,” I said.

“Precisely why I’m going East, you’re going West. I know you think I’m insane, Jo, but whatever got a hold of me during that hull breach, well, it’s dangerous. I can’t explain it. Just trust me. You see it, as asinine as it sounds, you shoot the fuck out of my hand, ok?”

“Ok, Bobby. We’ll laugh about this later, remembering the time I shot your hand, ground it into patties and sent it hurtling through space.”

“God, I hope so, Jo. I really do.”

And with that, we were off. To find and shoot Decker’s hand. You can’t make shit like this up.

## 15

My comm piece beeped.

“Anything, Jonas?”

“Nothing. Negative. Whatever the hell I’m supposed to say.”

“Me either. Keep looking.”

“Hey Bobby?”

“Yeah?”

“If I see it, should I yell out, ‘put your hand where I can see it?’”

“I’m glad your steaks are better than your jokes.”

Everyone’s a critic.

It was around the other side of a bulkhead that my world changed forever.

## 16

To this day I try and deny what I saw there. It couldn’t have been real. But even my own rather substantial talent for denial can’t cover up the fact that it *was* real. It was real and right there in front of me. And I screamed. Honest to God, I let out a wail that would have shamed an eleven year old girl.

Jutting out just beyond the bulkhead was Decker’s hand. Although, I’d been losing my ability to call it Decker’s hand. And when I saw what I saw, I realized it was never again going to be his or anyone else’s hand.

I walked slowly around that corner.

The hand had grown a complete arm.

The arm had grown a partial torso.

“Holy God,” I said.

Then I screamed.

I remembered I had that portable cannon in my hand. How did Decker say to shoot this thing? Did it have a safety? Was I supposed to load it or something? Damn it, why hadn’t I listened to him?

As I argued with myself, the hand (and everything attached to it now) moved. It began to crawl forward. *Toward* me.

I remembered how to shoot the gun in a hurry. I aim and fired and the recoil knocked me flat on my ass. Decker was right about one thing: it blew everything within a three foot radius of that hand-thing into dust.

But not the hand thing.

It was still there. Just bleeding a lot. And moving. Fast.

At least it was moving in the other direction now.

My comm piece beeped again. It took me three beeps before I could remember where that damn noise was coming from.

“JONAS! Jonas, are you all right? Do you copy, Jonas? I repeat, are you all right?”

“Um. Roger. Uh, yes, I’m ok, Bobby.”

“Did you see something, Jonas?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, what? What did you see?”

“Your hand. Only it belongs to a different arm and part of a torso now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it grew itself an arm and part of a torso, Bobby, that’s what I mean. I can’t believe it and I saw it. It came after me. I shot it with this freaking cannon you gave me and now I have a sore ass and that thing is still moving.”

“Where is it now?”

I realized when he asked me that I had lost track of it. I didn’t know where it was. It was gone.

“I don’t know.”

“Repeat that.”

“I said I don’t know where it is, Bobby.”

“Stay there. I’m coming to find you.”

“Follow the sound of my mind running away.”

## 17

“You ok, Jonas?”

“No.”

“I mean, physically. Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Ok. Come on, we have to find it.”

“What is it, Bobby? What the hell is that thing? What got a hold of you when you were welding that door shut?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. How long now have we been looking for life in our solar system? Centuries? This was not what I’d hoped we’d find. Something out of a cheap science fiction story.”

“No kidding. I’m just. I can’t believe what I saw. That can’t be real, can it?”

“Well, you shot at it. You tell me.”

I didn’t say a word to that.

We looked from stem to stern on The Sanders. Nothing. We couldn’t find a trace of that thing. After four straight hours of searching, Decker needed rest. He was as white as a sheet and sweating like a fat man in a sauna. I told him, as a friend, he could kiss my ass as an officer, but that he was going to rest or I would knock him out with the butt of this cannon if it came down to it. He relented surprisingly easy.

I took him back to the infirmary.

“Duneel is going to wonder why Abe hasn’t given him a report.”

“I’ll call Duneel myself, tell him Abe is resting for a while,” Decker said.

“That will hold him off for a bit. But sooner or later, Abe’s going to stink and someone’s bound to get wind. No pun intended.”

“That’s why you’re going to stick him in the large freezer.”

“Me? Why the hell do I get stuck with these things?”

“You wanted me to rest, Jonas.”

Touché.

“Are we going to tell Duneel about this, this thing he’s got running, uh, crawling around his ship?” I asked.

“Not yet. There’s nothing to tell him that he won’t commit us both for. And when he looks for Abe to evaluate us, he’s bound to find out Abe is no more, isn’t he?”

“I suppose so. Rest for a while. I’ll deal with Abe. Then, in a few hours, we go looking for that thing again.” I was not looking forward to what I had to do. I was looking forward to being along while Decker slept even less.

After putting Doc Abelson in the freezer, I came back to my room.

I couldn't get it out of my head. What I saw. That hand. How it had grown a completely new arm and part of a torso. I'd read some science fiction in my time. Some horror, too. I knew the power of the human imagination. And, until Decker saw it, too, I couldn't quite put the idea one hundred percent to bed that I had perhaps been imagining what I thought I'd seen. Stress can do weird things to a man. Maybe, being so close to that hull breach, I'd suffered some sort of oxygen deprivation and had some sort of mild brain damage. Or maybe I'd just been on this damn ship for way too long.

I decided I needed a break and pulled out an ancient copy of Jung's *The Undiscovered Self*. That book had cost me three hundred American dollars, and it was barely in one piece when I'd gotten it. Over time, I'd learned a little about book restoration while on The Sanders. And while it didn't look new by any means now, at least it was in one, firm piece.

At some point while reading, I fell asleep.

When I woke, my auto-timer for my lights had cut them off. In space, hell, it's always dark. The best way I'd found to deal with this fact was to set up a timer for my lights to simulate night and day.

I lifted the book from my chest, placed my bookmark in it and reached behind me to put it on the shelf. I knew where it was from memory by now.

That was when I saw.

A silhouette. Decker.

"Hey. Bobby? Are you ok?"

Nothing. Not a word.

"Bobby, is that you?" Why do we ask dumb questions like that when we're frightened?

“Hey man, answer me!”

Nothing.

The hell with this.

I turned on the light.

And Bobby stood in next to my bed. Only it wasn't Robert Decker. God in heaven, no. It resembled Bobby, but it wasn't Bobby in a million years. I knew what it was. I knew what it had grown itself from.

Holy shit.

It just looked at me. Stared at me from eyes I'd never seen before. I couldn't move.

Its right hand and arm and part of the torso were burnt to a crisp. The rest of it was physical perfection. A magnificent copy if ever I'd seen one. But I didn't care about that for long. I wanted it dead.

I had kept the gun Decker had given me. I had, in fact, put it on the shelf behind me when I took out Jung's book.

I reached back slowly and picked it up. I cocked it and pointed it at this god-forsaken thing that mimicked Decker.

The thing hissed like a huge, wild animal and tore through my room and went right through the door. Didn't open it. Didn't slow down. Went right through it.

I jumped up and began to chase it. It was headed for the infirmary. I put my comm piece in my ear. “Captain Duneel. I need Captain Duneel, ASAP.”

“One moment.”

“Duneel. Who is this?”

“Jonas, sir. Cook. We've got an emergency. There's something, I don't know quite how to explain it. Something *hostile* on board and headed for the infirmary. We need guards down here right away.”

“Explain further, Jonas.”

“Wish I could, sir. Please, get some guards to the infirmary as fast as possible.”

“All right. Are you armed?”

“Yes sir. Big fucking cannon that Decker gave me.”

“You know how to use it?”

“Point, pull trigger, blow shit up. Yessir.”

“Keep it close. Someone’s on the way.”

I ran like hell trying to beat that thing to the infirmary. In the end, I was just too damned late. Decker’s screams beat me to the infirmary.

## 20

I walked in and Decker was in pieces. Part of him was in that thing’s hand. Decker’s own hand once. Part of him was on the floor. Part of him was on the ceiling and what was left of him lie on the bed in front of that thing.

It turned to look at me and howled some kind of sound that was not a sound that should exist in this universe. The sheer force of the sound burst my left ear drum, and ringing was all I would ever hear from it again.

It ran toward me. I pointed the gun and fired. Both myself and that thing ended up on our asses. It shook its Decker-like head and stood back up, snarling at me like a demon.

A guard appeared behind me and yelled at me to stay down. I did. It opened fire on that thing, pelting it with enough rounds to knock down a bull elephant. But it just stood there, taking the bullets. It fell once, got back up and then ran toward us. It hit the guard hard enough in the chest to send him flying ten or so feet and ran past me. Blood trailed on the floor behind it.

## 21

### Epilogue

The rest of it was what you might expect. The creature went through the entire ship, systematically killing everyone on board. It left me alone. I don’t know why. I can only wonder if it was because I was the only thing that had

managed to harm it. Even wild animals remember being harmed by something in infancy and will treat whatever harmed them with a different respect. Hard to think of the growth of an arm and part of a torso as infancy. But hell, how much weirder is that than to think something had infected my best friend's hand and grown itself an entire, almost indestructible body.

I've set the autopilot on The Sanders for God knows where. Just away from Earth and my solar system. This log will be my last one for a while. I'm tired. Tired of talking about this mess. Tired of thinking about it. Think I might go read something.

If you're listening to this transmission, for the love of God, stay the hell away from this ship.

February 12, 2008

Dothan, Alabama