

Union

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I hate being a Marine.

No that isn't true. I have seen things. Done things. And gotten more tail from more species and genders than I would have imagined before boot. I love the armor. I love the machinery. I love my guys. And I love jumping into the shit and making the kind of "boom" that makes my spine go numb from the sound alone. I love being a Marine.

I hate being a Marine today.

But I cant run to any of that. The beat is wrong. So "I hate being a Marine" is pounding in my head as I run up-deck. See, I'm being chased. Not super fast, but not all that slow neither. There is something behind me.

Not someone. Something. And not the normal sort of something. Not a seeker. Not a bunch of guys on a flat-bed. Not even the skitter-skitter-skitter of high velocity beads dancing against the walls and decking. Its something else.

I'm pretty sure that the only reason I am running is that I managed to avoid getting a proper look. There were five of us a second ago. Walking along K-deck from Waste Water to Port-Side Power Management, checking compartments and punching in the stations of our rounds like cheap rent-a-cops. But now there's only three of us.

I hope there's three of us anyway. Billy is in front of me. That's pissing me off. He's my best bud. We do everything together. And he's always telling that same stupid joke, "Don't gotta out-run the bear" is all fine and funny. But he's outrunning me and now it's not so funny.

One of the other guys is behind me. Not sure which one. Least I hope it's one of the other guys. I ain't gonna turn and look, that's fer damn sure. I'm pretty sure it's one of the guys. I told you I didn't get a good look. Don't want one neither. But what I did see, well I'm pret-darn sure that it wouldn't make that thump-thump-thump-thump of good old fashioned boots on deck plate.

I think there'd be slithering. Or slurping. Or some sick sliding sound I don't got words for. That's what it'd sound like right behind me. I know 'cause something strange like that is coming from just a bit further back.

Plus I don't think there'd be that much sewerage coming out of that thing neither. In what I didn't see, I clearly didn't see a mouth. And the guy behind me's got quite a mouth on him from what I hear.

So maybe right now, maybe, I don't gotta out-run the bear either.

Cam and Teri. They froze. The bear got-em. That's 'cause they got a good look I expect. But gettin-um didn't slow that thing much at all. They got off a bunch of shots too. Least I'm gonna hope that was gunfire. That muted sloppy snapping sound coming out wet and hollow from back there. Best if it was gunfire.

Now I heard about these things. I even seen blurry-ass pictures. Pictures ain't the same thing 'tall. Don't do it justice.

Whoa, Billy made the bulkhead. He better not close it. Least not yet. I need maybe five more steps. If he pushes the button now it'll close before I get all the way through. Yep. Three more steps, and damn straight I'm going through even if I don't make it all the way. I could stand to lose a foot, or a

leg or two. Anything below the junk. I like my junk. But hell, a guy can live without his junk if he's gotta.

Yes. Push the button Billy. I can make it from here. Common. Push. The. Button.

Why haven't you pushed the button Billy? You didn't keep running didja? Common man. Push the button. I'm nearly there. You better be there at that button Billy or I am gonna kick your ass when I find you.

Good. Blinking light, and warning strips down. Button pressed. In two steps I'll be there. Good boy Billy. But you waited a little too long. Oh yea, there's a guy behind me.

Shit. That sounded wrong. Someone stumbled. I hope it wasn't me.

Left boot good. Right boot good. Still running. Wasn't me.

Shit. Ern. Cam and Teri ate it, Billy out front. Me here. That leaves Ern.

Yea, I got time. Door's way up there. I got a good two seconds. Maybe even three. A short three seconds. Yea. That's like forever. I got time to do what's got to be done. Left boot's coming up again. I plant it there on the deck just past the door seal like that's where it belongs and I reach back.

Gawd I hope its Ern. I still ain't gonna look. No way.

Yes! Sleeve, with an arm in it and everything. Score! One hand a sleeve, the other a collar, I seize, hold, and throw.

Dumbass is still falling. He stumbles over the bulkhead threshold and trips over the second threshold to go splaying across the deck beyond.

Second threshold?

Shit! Double doors. Section twenty blast containment. I forgot! Now I remember!

But it's too late. I was gonna do it. I was gonna dive through and lose a body part if I had too. But I don't. I pull up short. Who's the dumbass now?

Doors slam down, fore and aft, and I'm in the dark space in between.

I guess I always knew a person could fit between these doors. Never thought I'd be me though. And dark. Never thought how dark. But not silent.

The loudest noise is me breathing up the air. That one's gonna kill me fast if I can't cut it back. Next loudest is the engines, real-space throbbing, N-space spooling up slowly, way too slowly. But behind that is every scrape 'n clink 'n thud throughout the ship, with more boots running and a million other noises. The engines are spooling, that's a good thing. When the ship jumps it will leave the monster behind. Don't know why, it just works that way. But it takes like half an hour for this tub to get from standby to jump. I don't know how long its been since the alert. No way it's been half an hour. No way I got however long is left.

I strain my ears, listening for hope, but instead, beneath all that comforting noise, I can hear the slithering metallic evil of that thing. I'm trying not to listen to it. It must just be my imagination. I think, I hope, that it isn't right there behind me, just a few inches of alloy behind me, but I know it is.

I can't turn around. I'd rather be facing towards it even with the doors holding me pinned. I try to turn anyway, slow and careful, but my shoulders and hips are wider than the gap. My belt scrapes across the weld and I freeze.

It's just so creepy to have it behind me. Sliding and slithering. A million tiny razor spines scraping sensitively across the bulkhead. extending and retracting, undulating bits that would put the word tentacle to shame for being so fixed and predictable.

It's there. I know it. I feel it in my soul. I feel the door growing warmer against my back and I want that to just be me. My heat leaching into the steel. But in my churning gut I know its more.

I can see it there, in my head. humping and mounding against the bulkhead. Searching. Probing. Feeling my heartbeat and rushing blood through the now scant layers separating us.

I am being quiet now. My breath slowed. I feel the hawk passing overhead, the lion in the brush, the predator in the deep. Every fear I have ever imagined or felt pales. My grizzly death is right behind me. I listen without choice.

The air is still fresh. This tiny compartment isn't sealed. There is no light, but air is coming in from somewhere. I hope it's from somewhere far away, but I know that's not how things work.

I wait. Someone somewhere please open this door. Just the one in front please.

God if you can hear me, please make Billy open the door. Or Ern, he owes me.

I don't think you can open just the one door. But I want it to be that you can and someone will.

But there is nothing. They probably think I am dead if they are even still there. Probably don't know that I am still here safe between the doors.

Something warm cradles my right foot and I piss myself. That's how I know that first warm wetness didn't come from me.

I expected slimy, I expected pain, but I just feel enveloping warmth. It's gathering around me. Some of it anyway. It can't all fit in this tiny space. When it got Cam and Teri it was fast and vicious. Why's it taking its time now?

God damn, it's inside my clothes.

It's scraping my skin coming up along my spine. No cutting or nothin but I can feel the sharpness in it. All needles and scalpels and razor blades almost cutting. Almost.

I'm frozen. Waiting. I don't know what's gonna set it off. What's gonna start the carving, the gutting. I want to scream but I can't. If I scream it will get me. I know that's dumb, since its got me now, but the corner of my brain that can still think just isn't in control of anything.

It starts now. I feel it pushing into me. Rape? No fucken way man. That just not fair... Damn, its not just there. Shit. Everywhere. Ass, yea, but mouth and nose and ears and... my junk. In my junk man! Damn! Now I am screaming. But just the once. A tiny squeak as the air seeps out and the thing rushes in.

Pain!

Finally the pain!

I never knew that pain could be a relief. The shame and the fear are gone. Just sensation. I would scream more but there is no more air in me. This pain fills me and keeps going. Ten thousand precision cuts all at once fill me to overflowing.

Now nothing. The pain is gone. Replaced by something too intense to call pain. Sliding and slithering along my nerves, crunching bone away from my spine. Laying me open but holding me together.

I wish I'd known. I wish someone had warned me. I want to go back and feel it again. Whatever that was, it was so sudden and so beyond anything. I don't know what they'd have said. But I feel like I missed out on something for not being ready when it happened.

And now I know I'm crazy. I have lost my shit entirely. This thing is cutting my flesh away. A million tiny sharpened chopsticks piercing and plucking and slicing before whisking the meat away. But sensation has me zoning out as nerve is whisked from meat and cradled by otherness.

My eyes. I feel them. Pain returns there because I can feel them being pushed from behind. It's in my skull. The darkness is full of spots and flares from the pressure of my eyes being pushed out of my skull from behind.

I know it now. It's in my brain. Oh god its going to eat my brain! A brain can't feel pain. How will I know when its eating? Will I even know parts of me are going. I feel my body going. What about my mind?

I want to grab at my memories but I can't. There's too much pressure. I just can't think. To much sensation. To much of everything. All of my life in one go. Its supposed to flash in front of me but all I have is now. A body that can't scream and lights flashing in the darkness as my eyes...

Oooohhh...

That's my favorite part...

I don't know what I was thinkin. It's all so obvious, and I've got like no time. Twenty two minutes and the ship will be gone. The people will be gone. I'll lose them all. Billy will be gone. And Ern. And that hot number down in engineering who always looks so coy when we see each other in the mess. If they get away I'll probably never find them again and their lives will be over in a flash. Lost.

Pushing through the venting is workable, but it takes a long time. Now that there's nothing valuable between the bulkheads I just tear them away.

I can smell Billy. Everybody always can, what with that cheap-ass cologne he thinks is so hot. He'll laugh when he realizes that's how I found him.

And Ern. There's a little bit of his blood and snot on the deck. Guess he fell all the way down after I tossed him through the doors. That tang of blood is even easier to follow.

I come across Dr. Mann in power distribution, tuning up the lateral sensor harmonics. I was two of his students, an assistant, and one of his peers for nearly thirty years once. He needs his machines to see me so he can feel safe. He's one of the reasons I came this way instead of heading up through command.

I slow down there. I let him take his scans. I just hope he remembers to key for record. I've been pushing that button for him for decades. I'll probably

have to do it again this one last time.

Billy is helping Ern up-deck, he must have brained himself when I threw him through the hatch. I'll have to be extra careful when I join him. He's kind'a a tool, but he's amazing with his hands and pretty astounding with his music. Funny stories too. I'll want that. It's worth saving.

Billy is using his brain now, I can tell. I know that look. Must have stopped panicking when he paused at the door. His timing was perfect on the button. If Ern hadn't stumbled we'd have been through perfect and been long gone by now. Stopping to punch down each bulkhead is a good move, and he's keeping Ern moving while they work their way to the tubes. Billy has a great tactical awareness and he's smart as a lick. He just doesn't know I've also got around him through the power runs.

The jump engines are starting to sing to me. It's wonderful. It reminds me of the between. I've been in this surging tide of gravity and time since it came to be, and that is a rush of its own. Mass, light, time and life. Each delicious in its own way. So much to see, so much to remember, so much more to become. But the between always beckons.

Doc finishes his scans, well finished enough for what time there is. I slip into his flesh at the edges first. Sure enough, he never remembers to key the record. I'm sure he's freaked out by the way his hands are carefully operating the links without his violation. He'll understand in a second. I push the data out on the wave. Sometimes these ships blow when they jump out on me and his scans are as artful as all his work. I admire him, I always have. That's why I follow him on these military projects even though I never could stand blood or violence. 'Course that was before I understood. His mind and his work both deserve my care.

I've been taking a lot of care with Billy and Ern. Keeping them from escaping through a transit has taken a long time. No way I got time to join them both before the jump now, but Billy's about to duck into a lifeboat. He'll laugh when he figures out I knew that'd be his move if I could get him here. Before he can hit the door switch that would shut me out just long enough, I surge an arm past him and splash some of myself against the jettison controls.

Three moments of the best damn part of life happen almost all at once. Doctor Mann comes to unity and his wisdom and understanding flood me with insight and wonder. There is an exquisite meaty separation as my arm is severed from my bulk when the lifeboat leaps away. And the jump pushes my bulk into the between where I let its mass dissolve in the joy of a nothingness I cannot sustain from here.

Of course nothing is lost here. Mass is nothing. Time is persistent. And I am as I always have been. As I will be till this reality ends and I rejoin my brethren in the between.

I have a moment of extra surprise and odd disappointment. When I took the scans I realized that I was going to be absorbed. I was expecting to be extinguished, or perhaps become one of a chorus of lesser voices dominated by a malevolent overwhelming mind. But I am just me, only with more memories and vastly more comprehensive and well-informed opinions. In the same way

that I once might have wanted to eat lunch, continue working, and take a vacation all at once; I find myself possessed of countless goals and motivations, each undiminished. And the greatest wonder is that I have the capacity to pursue so many of these goals at once. I begin contemplating how to effectively communicate this back to the research fellowship. They must be told. Of course that can wait as I have to see to more immediate issues. If I don't see to my buds right now, they are going to disappear, an likely die in some damn mud-hole before I can join them.

'Course Billy's swearing up a storm. He'll laugh his ass off when he finally understands. I know I shouldn't swear, I was raised better than that more time's than not, but for Billy it's just the right words.

I can feel Billy eying the self-destruct. We'd joked about why you'd want such a damn-fool thing in a lifeboat before. Course I am all over the controls so he's not gettin at that. He doesn't understand yet. He figures that if he can take me out he's spending his life for a good cause, but I cannot be diminished and spending his life, especially for nothin, would be such a waste.

I don't got a lot of mass to work with here. I am summoning more from the between, but that's slow work, so I'm peeling up bits of the deck and such. Adding them to my bulk.

I'm making quite a show. Waving bits around on the console tryin' ta keep Billy's eyes on me while I make a slow gambit with a tendril to get at Ern, lying half conscious on the deck between us. Billy sees me working. I see him see that right back, and now we are playing tugger-war with Ern, who's bellowing like a damn-fool. Always was so dramatic. I slip him a paralytic.

The union is going to be a lot of careful work. Ern's got a brain bruise. I gotta get him in shape for the change. Wouldn't be fair to half-ass the job. Boy's retarded enough on his best day.

In the moment I'm thinking that, Billy acts. He's fast. I'm faster. But there ain't enough of me to go around.

The gun comes up. I harden myself up to knock the first shot aside to protect Ern and then lunge, but the gun keeps coming up, and with a hard retort Billy's gone.

The dumb-shit actually kacked himself. I bellow aloud and far into the ultraviolet as I surge forward to see what can be saved.

He's gone damn-it.

Most of his memories are there in the bottom of his skull, but his life is gone. I carefully envelop what I can, but this is not union. It's like slipping stills from a vid. Lost moments, stripped of their vital purpose. No organizing context. The vital continuity is just absent.

I'm crying. Marines aren't supposed to cry, but sometimes we do.

I work on both my buddies. Ern is easy to save. I repair his damage and slip inside his every synapse and fiber and then lift him from his flesh and...

Oooohhh...

I understand.

That's always my favorite part.

Two rush together and become one, suddenly understanding dawns. Both the wonder of the whole and the amazement of each least bit.

And then I am sad again at learning of Billy's loss. I loved him. That's why I always played my music for him. That's why I kept trying to shake him free of my dead weight while we fled. Trying to make sure he saved himself. Not that he'd ever abandon a bud. 'Course I didn't know then what I know now. Not all of me anyway.

Each bit of me that knew Billy tells different versions of different stories from different perspectives as I savor and preserve memories delicately lifted from his ruined skull. Funny stories. Sad stories. Happy moments. I am filled with regret.

It is all a memorial to what could have been.

I could have been Billy forever too, and now he is just snapshots and tall tales.

But it's a familiar loss in far too many ways. There is joy to be had in species and cultures and universes to come.

I piece his body together and use it to lay in a course and set the alerts. I clean up his mess and make things look right. I curl up some of my bulk in his empty skull to wait for rescue and dismiss the rest into the between.

There is more to had. Billy had family and friends, and they'll have descendants; a whole culture to join with and preserve into the infinite. A tiny bit of my bulk goes into cold sleep with Billy's remains, falsifying life signs for the machinery, waiting for whomever finds this lifeboat, dreaming of who Billy might have been.

Even while I sleep here I am elsewhere. Places where I am a god or a monster, places where I am watching life begin and others where intelligent people are fading to ruin, and one or two where I am actually understood.

That's how it's always been, I am who I always have been, but more-so with each moment.

I go in and catch up what would be lost. Rescue the obscure from final entropy. It is a joy. It is dangerous and intense and eternally amazing. I save the lost.

I love being a Marine.

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