

Annihilator

A man in apparently in his mid-sixties is kneeling next to an array of complex machines, not unlike old server stacks on earth, he's wearing a heavy jacket and humming something under his breath producing reddish hued puffs of smoke into the air, illuminated only by the eerie glow while tapping commands into a laptop in a dark hallway.

Above him in the ceiling, series of lights keep pulsating in a steady, slow rhythm on large slabs of metal that all have just barely readable text embossed on them; *Commonwealth Cryo*, there are hundreds of them, spanning both ways to foreseeable eternity into the cold dark. He lets out a long sigh and with bravado, taps the last key press into the laptop, machines on his sides respond and dive into the alcoves, leaving the hallway pitch black, save for the nearly nonexistent pulsating light sources and the laptop.

The man rises with a moan and stretches for a while.

He fumbles to try to get something from his pocket while holding the laptop and then curses, closes it and fumbles some more in the dark before a flashlight lights up the hallway.

He then hangs the flashlight from his jacket and folds the laptop up twice before putting it into his pocket, he reaches for his ear, whistles a two-tone sound and tries to speak but only produces a coughing fit.

Muffled sounds from the radio set mixes up into the loud sound disturbing the silence.

Finally after a good while man gets his breath back and speaks up again.

"Yes, apologies, I forgot how long I was here breathing this dry air. All done here."

A calm and deep voice, slightly annoyed look on his face mirroring his dislike over having a coughing fit over the open radio.

Voice bleeding over the earplug is now clearer, it's still asexual and has a mechanical overtone.

Airbridge is stable and holding, hop over here so we can leave.

The man takes a few steps, turns and takes a look at where he was kneeling, going over it, making sure nothing is left behind, not that it would matter, automated systems would clean everything large enough to be a safety hazard before the colony ship would make an atmospheric break at its destination.

He nods to himself, seemingly happy at the situation and starts making his way to where he is going raising his arm and caressing the slabs above him while walking.

“Sleep well, just a bad dream, nothing here you should concern yourselves over, just a shadow passing by in the eternal night.”

He begins humming badly to himself trying to keep his throat clear, before he finds what he was looking for, a hatch that shows recent signs of use in the floor, with a little elbow grease, grunting and flashlight painting abstract art over the walls, the hatch opens and reveals a ladder reaching some ten metres below.

He hops in and fidgets with the hatch above him for awhile and gives a last quizzical look at the empty hallway before he is gone and the hatch closes with a finality of a tomb.

The lights keep blinking in the dark, undisturbed.

The man taps a few commands into the glowing holographic panel in front of him behind the ladder and audibly mutters about mishmash technology before the hatch below him opens up with a hiss of rushing air, the opening leads to a well lit, clinically clean white small room without any windows in stark contrast to the frost covered steel hallway.

He turns off the flashlight hanging from his jacket, neatly places it on one of the lockers built into the walls and replaces it with a dark vest before he gestures at the hatch that closes in response, this time without a hiss of air.

He picks out the earpiece and puts it on the vest pocket specifically designed for it while rifling thru the pockets of the heavy jacket in the locker and fetches the flashlight and the folded laptop that he pats against his arm a few times and then nods to himself and places those items to his vest as well.

He combs his hair back with his hand, yawns a long good while and then scratches ongoing stub with his eyes closed.

Another slight gesture towards the wall pops out a holographic interface and activates the intercom, another gesture brings out the word “bridge” to the display.

“All done here, Lieutenant, you can detach us.”

He says and grabs hold of one of the many guardrails cornering and covering the room like one would do in a bus about to start.

“That’s Senior Flight Lieutenant Anne Harkins to you. We’ve been here for weeks, we won’t get shot for breaking the protocol and being informal Mr. Harris Johanssen. I have a name, use it.”

Snarky response follows, and so does imminent weightlessness accompanied by a metallic clank under the floor.

Harris seems to be holding back vomit for a while and then shakes his head.

“I don’t get how you younger generations deal with this.”

He says as he tries to find his footing again on the floor.

“Easy, we were born to this. I kinda feel bad for you old people getting nauseous in anything but a stable G.”

Harris closes his eyes and grabs hold of the bar and buries his shoes under a second handlebar in preparation for what’s coming.

The room shifts directions in a fast succession without any rhyme or reason to Harris and he’s really trying to hold back vomit this time.

“3-point done, smooth sailing until we have to do this again. Still alive back there?”

He’s still grasping the handlebar hard enough to nearly stop his blood flow and takes a deep breath.

“Yes, still alive. Miraculously. Could I have gravity? Downwards, please.”

Anne hisses humorously, gravity slowly adjusts back “downwards” again and Harris finds his footing on the floor.

“Stern, coreward, hullbound, all the same to me. So, where next boss?”

Same snarky tone responds over the radio.

Harris swipes his brow and fingers the laptop in his pocket.

“Actually, could I come to visit? I’d like some company before we rocket on again.”

He says without noting the tone.

“Sure, come on bow, I’ll plug out.”

Harris waves at the intercom panel to close and the door automatically opens for him, revealing a claustrophobically tight walkway. Barely wide enough to allow passage by one person upright, mainly being designed for zero-g movement.

He stops at a pair of doors and taps his password for his door, Anne’s door being ajar and oozing with emptiness, pilots more or less live in their plugs, only leaving to eat and clean up. Small ship pilots even more so.

Plug systems integrate you with the whole ship, living quarters the size of a glorified bathtub for extended patrols feels exceedingly claustrophobic when you can just plug in and live in the vast wide nothing of gravitational equations and constant whisper of the universe in your ears.

Unbound Syndrome, harmless both mentally and physically as plugs are designed to deal with the physical aspects of being entombed for days at a time, but it has potential to be slightly addictive.

Harris rifles thru his meagre possessions and fetches a box of hardwood and smiles at it.

He backs out of his quarters and heads towards the bow with the box in tow.

Technically you are not allowed to enter the flight plug area unless you are tossed thru sixteen rotations on decontamination, but experience has taught that plugs self-calibrate to one specific person and count for the impurities and false genetic material floating around after few hundred hours of use, newer models even use that calibration data to allow for plugs to be not closed systems. Pilots still prefer the wet system for the “authentic” experience.

Harris politely knocks on the hatch that has warnings about opening it in 6 different languages, it opens without much warning or theatrics to an surprisingly spacious cockpit with two extra command seats around the plug system.

Harris once referenced it to be a centre console from a car and got blank stares from Anne in response.

Never generations are well educated but lacking in experience after all.

It's a bulge rising from the floor, built directly into the centerline of the ship and usually part of the main structural beam for safety and to allow pilots to run insanely high-g manoeuvres thanks to the liquid shielding inside the plug if the ship is otherwise unmanned.

The cockpit is relatively spacious, for such a small ship, somewhere along the design phase engineers thought you would need windows to fly and co-pilot seats are a relic of old style redundancy, as evidence of the rapid technological advancements, hulls became obsolete before the systems were installed. Windows are still there but are now replaced by six inches of hardened materials instead of vacuum rated glass and the whole room can be flash-flooded with ballistic epoxy should there ever be a need to, you could still imaginably, fly the ship manually if you wanted to, holographic displays could mimic windows if need be and gesture-code worked suitably as a control method, only a fool would, the human-machine Plug Interface System was unbeatable.

Harris seated himself on the right-sided co-pilot seat and patiently waited for his pilot to emerge from her cocoon while rifling thru the zero gravity hold-all bag bolted to the side of the seat and grinned as he found what he was looking for.

The plug makes a few metal clinks and opens up to its sides like an high-tech origami to reveal the pilot.

She is nested inside in her skintight plug suit in a memory foam cradle and blinks a couple of times at the white ceiling that she has jokingly scribbled on; *welcome back to reality, gravity sucks!* with a red marker, upside down.

She blinks at that for a while, coughs a couple of times and then inhales a big lungful of air and pops upright like electroshocked sending droplets of the oxygenated plug liquid to the ceiling from her short red hair.

"Oh, oxygen, been a while. Great stuff."

She meekly retorts and waves towards Harris with her right arm who places glasses on the waiting hand.

"You could get surgery and not be blind as a bat every time you come out of there, you know."

She blinks thru the smudgy glasses and tries to find a proper place for them all the while taking long deep breaths.

"Reality adjustment, you know, reality is smudgy, therefore I exist."

Harris breathes out thru his nose at that.

"Here, take this too."

He's holding out a self-cleaning glass that apparently has lost it's ability to self-clean.

It's still serviceable, apparently it was being used to store dust.

Anne holds it out a second with a disbelief on her face thanks to the reality disjoint of trying to figure out the delta V to reach it before she connects what it is and then cleans it out with some the plug-liquid and a paper towel Harris is holding out.

"So, uh. A glass. They should use this as a plug adjustment test. Trippy stuff. What am I supposed to drink from it?"

Harris rises the wooden box to view and slides a part of it away, revealing a bottle of red liquid.

"Here, you might enjoy this."

Harris says and passes her the wooden lid.

She puts down the glass to hang precariously from the edge of the plug and toys around with the piece of wood before her eyes light up.

"Hey, this is real wood!"

She runs her fingers up and down the wood surface, clearly enjoying the sensation.

"I thought wood manufacturing was hideously banned or something, how did you get this?"

Harris smirks under his breath while struggling to open the bottle with a omni-tool.

"It's an genuine article, actual Earth grown wood. Made on the same year this was bottled."

He's holding up the now opened bottle and shows her the etiquette. That she studies with interest.

"Sierra Grande Merlot. So, is that good stuff or what?"

Harris laughs at that.

"To be honest, I have no idea, I was never much of a drinker. I just bought it before we left and it came with the box. Seemed like the thing to do. Something to remind me from home that I'd never lose."

She keeps running her fingers over the piece of wood in deep thought.

"What changed so much you'd want to get rid of it?"

He shakes his head and gestures her to pick up the glass.

"I don't want to get rid of it, it's more of a farewell to something, I'll still have the bottle after I drink it."

She gives him the piece of wood and holds out her glass in expectation.

"Here's hoping it's actually good and hasn't turned into vinegar."

Harris says and pours himself a glass and carefully sniffs it.

"Seems fine to me. Apparently you are supposed to taste it rather than to go bottoms up. Slight sips."

She warily sniffs her glass of wine and seems to determine the same before sipping some. Her face goes thru a wide range of emotions from disgust to disbelief.

"Oh, wow, this ain't bad after all. This has alcohol in it?"

Harris nods and seems to have come to the same conclusion, that the wine is indeed, not bad.

"A little. Not enough to make us decently drunk even if we two were to finish the whole bottle."

They both sit there quietly, enjoying the wine for a while before she breaks the silence.

"So, you didn't still answer me. Why now?"

Harris slings around the remains of his wine in the glass before answering.

"Guess I can't just try to get you drunk to make you forget, huh. I'm a historian. Was. Still am. It's complicated."

He finishes his glass in one go and pours himself some more and offers her a refill which she happily accepts.

"And that's what I was doing in there."

He gestures the viewport holograms to open and swings the view to point from the direction they came from.

Something massive is sucking up the starscape and replacing the stars with guidance lights and a dash of light.

Another gesture and the picture zooms in close enough to make the dash of light a readable plaque. *HMS Stephen Hawking.*

"Rewriting it."

She runs her finger across the tip of the glass.

"Isn't that, like, bad?"

There's an odd expression on Harris's face for a few seconds.

"Yes. In this case? I don't know."

She finishes her glass in one go and gestures for more.

"You are going to run that by me once more old man."

He fills her glass and leans back and takes a deep breath.

"You ever remember your parents, family or anyone from back on earth ever having a hushed debate that always stopped when you showed up and you were at one point absolutely sure they were keeping something from you?"

She looks at him sideways with a smirk.

"This is the point where you reveal to me that my parents are actually aliens and there never was no earth, right?"

He shakes his head.

"No, I mean seriously."

She stares at *Hawking* in the distance and answers carefully.

"Sure, I mean, people from Earth always kinda had a secret. Personally I slated it for the what you had to go thru, it was really, really bad when you left, wasn't it? Shared agony or how do the shrinks put it. I figured i don't *want* to know that stuff on a personal level and leave it well enough alone. But I don't know how that figures into you rewriting history. Everybody lost then, it'd be a lesson, not a hideous secret to keep."

Harris nods.

"There's that. It was bad. And no, it isn't that I'm hiding."

He stares into his glass for a while.

"I erased a victory. Probably the most important and meaningful victory history ever had."

"So who lost then? Was it us?"

Anne retorts in whiplash and elicits a chuckle from Harris.

"Oh, we didn't lose. No human did. Hmmm, how old are you?"

Anne rolls her eyes.

"Old enough to drink, Mr. Late Alarm. Twenty three, if you must know."

Harris does some arithmetic and has to use his fingers to count for the cryosleep.

"So, you'd have been, what... Sounds about right. I think you remember. Let's start with this, what happened when you were seven?"

She lifts her hair from her ear and tries to figure out what Harris is getting at.

“Wait... no. It has something to do with de Rais changing her name. What the hell was it...”

She takes a long pause thinking about it.

“Nope, can’t remember. But how is that relevant?”

Harris pours them both a bit more wine.

“Ever met her, face to face?”

Anne nods and takes a sip.

“She’s, you know... Impressive, loud, inspiring. We didn’t talk, per se. But we met, at graduation day, Yeah.”

Harris toys with his wine.

“Connect the dots Anne. And really think about how de Rais fits in.”

She leans in and stares at the *Hawking* slowly turning in the distance.

“Historian doesn’t mind changing history on all of the colony ships so they won’t have written history about it, and everyone old enough to know what it is, is happy being quiet about it, she changes her name, that somehow translates to being important, and there was the victory on Earth everyone knows about. Okay, she won, but uuuh...”

She snaps her fingers.

“Godslayer. That was her title.”

She snaps her head to Harris in disbelief.

“Wait, you are telling me she actually killed a god? Does not compute. Isn’t that like, impossible?”

Harris looks Anne directly in the eyes with a level stare.

“I know she did. I was there and I *felt* it.”

Harris puts conviction in those words, a hard fanaticism oozing into his eyes. And Anne can’t help but be taken back.

“That’s kinda... Our resident hottie slash tyrant is an actual Godslayer. I thought she was just good at shouting people to work together.”

They don’t talk about anything for a good long while, they just drink the wine in silence and watch *Hawking* slip to the darkness until Anne breaks the ice.

“So why did you tell me?” It must have been her who put you up to this... gallivanting journey to erase history.”

Harris leans forward and looks at the shadow of *Hawking* through his glass.

“Couple of reasons, call it the dutiful historian part of me, can’t just leave well enough alone. I need there to be someone who knows after I’m gone. I can’t see this fade into myth, not her.” He takes a deep breath.

“But mainly, I told you because you are wasting your talents here. I told you this as a waking call. Running wet-plug in some ass-end patrol chauffeuring a deadbeat historian for your own benefit because it suits you. Miss, you needed a swift kick to the behind, Shadow of Infinity, our organisation, isn’t a place for wasting talent. We are more than just another way to be alive and human, kid, we have a purpose. We didn’t escape Earth, we left it to pave way to those who come after us. Remember your Oath.”

Anne is taken back, and is obviously annoyed by the old man butting into her life so rudely, but does not interrupt.

“Despite my dislike for this zero-g horsing, I know a good pilot when I see one, been on rides with plenty of good and bad in G’s and out of it. We need you there, in the helm of some big ship, where you matter. Not scootering around menials, we have drones for that. And I know what drives you here, seen it plenty of times.”

Harris taps on the side of the Plug with his fingers.

“You think this is a liberty only small ship pilots get? Void Hugging. You want to hug void, Unbound? Request to be assigned to the Flagship. How many hours you got logged? I’ll wager no-one comes close to even half the hours you got. You’ll hug void no-one has hugged before.” Harries waves his arm in defeat while Anne is still clawing for a comeback.

“And it’s my only way at getting back at her for making me do this. She called me her Annihilator, the person who killed the Godslayer. Pen is mightier than sword indeed.”

Harris looks away ashamed, and rubs his neck.

“So, she’ll get a ace pilot who knows her dirty little secret, I get to keep my legacy, at least a while longer and you get to go on doing what you love, where it matters. And the universe at large is none the wiser for it. Everyone benefits. Does that answer your question on why I needed to drink a bottle of stuff that happens to be the only one in existence?”

Anne thinks about it for a good while and gulps the last of her wine.

“Okay, yeah, it does. And I guess I did kinda need that swift kick.”

She opens her mouth, about to add something but has to reword the question few times.

“But why would she? I mean if it is what she did, why hide it?”

Harris shrugs his shoulders while staring out of the window.

“Truthfully, I do not know what her ultimate reasoning behind it is. She gave me two reasons for it when I asked, and both rang a bit untrue to me. Firstly a old adage about victories, it isn’t final until no memory of your enemy remains. And the second one was that she didn’t want to be remembered as a Godslayer, it would distract us, Shadow of Infinity, from what we have to do in the future. Create some sort of cult of personality around her and muddy the waters with religious dogma. But she could have just let it be and let it fade into myth with time. Unless you were there, no one actually believes it at face value.”

He pauses just long enough to finish his drink.

“I’d call her shy about it, but that really does not fit her personality. Maybe she’ll tell you, if you ever get the opportunity to ask. And maybe those actually were the reasons and I’m being a suspicious fanatic about it.”

Harris lets out a long sigh and raises the bottle to offer wine to Anne who accepts and then pours himself the last few drops from the bottle.

“Regardless, it’s done. That was the last colony ship that made it out of the haywire orbital defence network. Last remaining record of the events that existed, is right here.”

He taps his vest pocket where the laptop is resting, pulls it out and with care, places it into the wooden box where it fits like it was made for, picks up the cover, slides it close and places it on the console in front of the chair.

“I’ll leave this to you, incase your curiosity gets the better of you. A bedtime story of darker times and greater acts of heroism.”

Anne glances at the box and back to Harris.

“What if I, or someone else tries to copy it?”

Harris smiles and shakes his head.

“You can’t, trust me. I spent a considerable amount of time and effort into ensuring that. If all else fails, the device will self-destruct harmlessly. I still can’t prevent you from showing it around, but I ask that you don’t.”

Anne nods solemnly.

“I won’t, I promise.”

Harris sign-codes a silent thank you and rises from his chair.

“Take us to port then Lieutenant. I’ll retreat to my quarters, I have bothered you enough for one journey.”

He starts walking out of the cockpit and stops in the doorway, one hand at the bulkhead, one foot out of the room, and looks back at Anne sitting in her Plug-cradle, staring into the holo display and the stars beyond.

“And Anne, really think about getting that reassignment, will you?”

Anne does not look back but nods, deep in thought.

Behind her the door closes and leaves her in the well lit room, alone with her thoughts.

Idly she reaches for one of the input-output cables and meshes the nanopaste tip of the cable against her neck, forming a partial control link with the ship.

Lights dim and holodisplays shut off, she can now see the starscape beyond the hull and the thick armour plating better than she ever could with her eyes.

Rest of the cables twitch and respond to her subconscious commands and slither towards her like charmed snakes, each finding their own connection point on her nervous system.

The cockpit fades from her view, still there but irrelevant. She can now hear the idling machines of *Stephen Hawking*, somewhere on background the destination G-type main-sequence star crackling, can almost taste the horrific gravitational pit of the black hole this whole cluster slowly rotates around and somewhere beyond that, far rimward, the warm feeling of home as the Plug system gives meaning to navigational coordinates.

Zen-like calm sets over her and she curls into an upright foetal position as she mentally counts the minimum safe distance from *Hawking* for main engine burn.

She can feel the gravitational shielding slip over the internal components that require it and the living quarters to nullify acceleration G's in preparation.

Somewhere below she can feel the numb of cryo engines kicking in overgear to protect the heat sensitive components of the ship.

Clock ticks to zero and fusion torch igniting plummets the tiny ship into a curve around the local space, she is holding back the scream of joy as she feels the acceleration on the skin of the ship and *Hawking* becomes a dot into the distance even to her expanded senses.

FTL device begins scooping up the inertia from the ship, dark matter from the surrounding space and traditional electrical power to fuel its unimaginably complex functions in a tingly sensation before it immerses the ship to its own contradictory quantum reality-bubble where speed of light becomes a breakable necessity for any object in motion and any object entering the field less than the speed of light becomes energy until it leaves it.

Caught in two realities, she can feel it everything condensing on her, the universe becomes a part of her as she is whisked to her destination.

She's hugging void.

Part of her is wondering if it would be any different with a bigger ship.

The End