

# Space Haulers

Nicholas Silva

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Windows were almost an entirely romantic notion on a deep space hauler. All there was to see was the inky black expanding evermore around you, the stars and nebulas glittering like gems at distances too vast to fathom. You couldn't see anything, really. Not until you were right up to it. Sensors were the eyes of a ship's crew.

But still, sitting alone –and space let you know just how alone you were– it was nice to have something beautiful to look at.

It was thus that Reid and Iris found themselves sitting on a too-hard metal bench, arms propped against the frames of one of the port-side portholes, staring out into the void. The ship hummed around them, but they were silent. They were three months into a five month long journey, and sometimes words simply failed to arise at that point.

Sometimes the silence was perfectly comforting, just knowing that there was someone else sharing in it.

Reid looked over at Iris, bathed in the soft bluish glow of the technical display sat across the room from them. The light danced as the readouts changed, ebbing and flowing, and it looked like they were in some underwater world. Which, he mused, rubbing his temple lightly, he supposed they kind of were.

Outside the dense, reassuring wall of the ship's hull, he gazed at the constellations. Crabs, dolphins, a martini glass. He laughed at the last one, and nudged Iris, who gave a small grin. They were a long way from home to see that one, in fact it was a sight that few saw in this new era of highly efficient warp travel. They were in a region of space almost devoid of planets, of civilization. A vast interstellar highway that was, for all intents and purposes, abandoned. Occasionally they'd glide past the derelict hulk of an old fuel depot, but they'd never seen another soul out here.

Their cargo, highly unstable crystals mined in one of humanity's secret colonies, became disastrously volatile at any speeds above a moderate faster-than-lightspeed. Warp was out of the question. Instead, they were transported in long-haul freighters like theirs, relics of a bygone era of burgeoning space travel. Their travels across these wastelands would take a modern ship days at most, hours more typically. But for them it was months. Five months, two people, and a ship that was just itching to explode.

Not the best working conditions, but they made it work. They even had fun, when they could relax for a minute. It was times like this that Reid lived for. He had always dreamed of the stars, longing to see them. He was raised on retro films about space adventurers, and the pioneers, setting out to map the stars. This simple way of travel made him feel like he was one of those explorers, and that around every lightyear was some great new discovery, hidden in antiquity.

Suddenly Iris startled, her eyes wide, snapping Reid back into the moment. He craned his neck, looking every which way he could see for anything amiss, but he couldn't see what had spooked her. The screen hadn't buzzed out a warning, the ship sounded fine, and space was still... space.

"What's up?" He asked, his voice crackling from disuse, his throat dry from the stale air.

"Oh, nothing," she shrugged, scrunching up her eyebrows and blinking a couple of times. "I must have dozed off, I just thought I saw something."

"Hmm, it happens I guess," he replied, even though he didn't know her to sleep with her eyes open, and they had been open.

"I'm going to go get some water, do you want anything?" She asked, stretching herself, and sliding off the bench.

"I'll be along soon," stretching himself, and smiling up at her. "We should probably run some diagnostics before long anyways."

She chuckled, hanging onto the door frame for a moment, "Well don't take too long, I don't want to have to do it all." She disappeared down the hall, heading up a deck towards the living quarters.

From where they were now –after all, even a "space crawl" of lightspeed was still incredibly fast– it looked like the crab, drooping slightly, was taking a sip of the martini. He smiled, and followed along after Iris.

He found her in the small kitchenette, propped up against the food processor –a big, boxy menace that had two award-winning meals of bland slop and cardboard– reading from a small, leatherbound notebook, a half-drunk cup of water abandoned on the counter across the room. He had seen her with the notebook before. It was one of the few things that she kept private, and he didn't pry. Some sort of journal, he presumed, and left it at that.

He raised an eyebrow in her direction, but she was in another world, and so he pulled a plastic cup from the ultrasonic dishwasher and filled it. The water, as always, had a slightly metallic tinge, but he was long since used to it. In fact, when on their month of planet-side leave

between hauls, he found himself struggling to get down any other kind. He could be presented, he always thought, with the finest water from the springs of the healing worlds, and he would still balk at it in favor of the spittle the tin can he called home produced.

Space did weird things to a person.

Eventually she closed the journal, and slipped it into a pocket of her cargo pants.

"Do you ever think you see something out there?" She asked, her voice was on the surface as smooth and in-control as always, but he thought he heard it dipped in a tone of uncertainty he rarely heard. "You know, something... alive? Or at least something unusual?"

"Well I mean Crabcakes looked like it was drinking from the martini today. Guess I never looked at just that right moment," he shrugged, not knowing what she was getting at. They had been doing this for years. "I mean there was that one haul last standard when we were told pirates might have discovered our route, but we never saw even a hint of them."

"Yeah, they figure they got lost in the Karmidian Nebula before they could even get into this stretch," she said, her voice quieting. He could tell her mind was definitely working away on something deeper, and asked as much. She shrugged.

"Like I said earlier, I was probably just nodding off," she sighed, then winced. "But I really thought I saw something. Something... well it looked like something was swimming out there, following us."

Reid pursed his lips, and took a deep breath.

"Now you don't have to go on deciding whether I've got space delirium or not, I don't," she looked at him knowingly. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, no," Reid said, waving his cup as if to bat away the thought. "You know you can say anything. They say loose lips sink ships, but in hauling I firmly believe that keeping your lips closed when they need to say something is far more dangerous. Maybe you were dozing off, maybe you saw something. I don't know. But now we have something to look for, eigh?"

"Make it a game, maybe? Are you tired of 'what frequency are the crystals humming at and are they going to blow up?'" She smirked. Then sighed again, her aura returning to normal. "You know that the old spacers used to say they saw monsters out in the void. Big serpents and tentacled fiends. I mean *you* know that, you love those goofy old movies. But they really did say that, too."

"Space is a mystery," he smiled.

"I always wanted to find out if those legends were true," she said softly. "I know it's silly, and maybe a bit rash since those stories were usually 'hey, remember Johr, yeah his ship got eaten by the Great Maw' or something, but like you said it's a mystery."

"You sure do love mysteries. Practically keep some authors in business single-handed."

"Honestly the bigger mystery there is how you don't? I love staring out the window but it does get to me after a while," she looked at her watch and flicked an eyebrow up. "Which again is probably all this is. But hey, keep an eye out skipper, and don't stop for any hitch-hikers. I'm going to go check on the engine, you go do your navigation stuff."

"Aye aye, Captain," he gave a little salute with his cup, and they parted to either end of the ship.

Iris knew it was a cliché, but she always loved to think of the engine as purring. It was as if they had a pet, if she framed it like that. A third member of the crew that was always there, keeping them going.

It was for this reason that she was additionally distressed to hear, upon opening the engineering bay doors, that the engine wasn't purring, not quite. It was a tiny difference, imperceptible to anyone else, and one which even she hadn't been able to feel from the vibrations in the walls, but it was there. There was a slight whine to it, its song strained ever so slightly.

It was extremely unusual, at least this deep in space. It was the sort of whine that would usually only start up if they were nearing a planet, or a star. Some large source of a gravity well that the ship would have to fight against to stay on course, straining the engines in the process.

She opened up a hatch in the floor, and extracted her toolbox, and from that a sensor that she plugged into a small port on the engine's frame. She tapped the built-in diagnostic screen, and it showed nominal readings, but as she drew the nodes of another sensor along the exposed pipes and wires around her, she detected that there was, indeed, a miniscule increase in energy usage, and a slight decrease in output.

She reached for her radio, pausing for a minute to decide if it was worth reporting, then called for Reid, at the exact moment that he started to call for her. There was a shriek of static, then his voice said, "You first."

"I'm reading some odd energy throughput down here," she reported, checking the gauge again. It seemed to go back to normal for a moment, then returned. "Nothing to major. What're you calling in?"

"Hmm. Well you might want to get up here if you can," he replied. He sounded worried, even over the crackling modulation of the radio. "You'll want to see this."

She looked at the gauge once more, and it was holding steady in its irregularity. She paired the display to her watch so that she could monitor it more closely than the ship's readouts would allow. "On my way."

Reid was thrumming his fingers on the control panel, sitting precariously on the edge of the pilot's seat when Iris climbed up into the forward cabin that he insisted they called a bridge. It was a glorious title for the cramped space, but it sounded nice, made them feel like they were in command of some great ship.

"What's up?" She asked, shimmying around the engineering station, coming to stand behind him. Looking over his shoulder, she could see a corporate directive open on the main screen.

"They're changing our course," he grumbled, then tilted his head to look at her and groaned, "Three years we've been on the same course and it works just fine every time, but now they're changing our course mid-flight."

"That is definitely annoying," she tried to read what the message said, and eventually made out a name, recoiling. "That'll bring us awfully close to the Karmidian! Are they nuts?!"

"They might be."

"The *Karmidian*, the no-fly-zone, the nebula which no one seems to fly out of? They want to send us, a hauler full of *volatile* cargo, to go cuddle up to the kuffing *Karmidian Nebula*?!" She growled, rubbing her temples. "I don't like it, Ree."

"I don't like it either Iris but they aren't giving us any option," he deflated, and waved absently at the letter. "Apparently the Navy wants these crystals 'yesterday', and so two more months isn't going to cut it. They crunched the numbers, and determined that this new course will shave off at least three standard weeks off our trip."

"I wouldn't think the Navy would want to risk losing their crystals just to get them a bit early, not if they want them that bad."

"Apparently they really don't think it will be a big deal. We're only going *near* the nebula, and they say that a Navy drone just flew near this path a standard ago and was fine. They also reiterated that since we took a Navy contract, standard Safety Org requirements don't apply to us."

"Oh I know they don't care about us, but I just thought *maybe* they'd care about their super precious cargo."

"I guess they're just not worried about it."

"What do they know?" She slumped down into a narrow seat.

“Not much,” he agreed. “But we know what we know! We’ll make it work. Speaking of, what’s this about the engine?”

“It’s got a slight bit of strain on it,” Iris checked her watch. It showed the engine hadn’t changed since she left it. “It’s like it’s compensating for something, some force acting against us. If I were only going off of it, I would think we were nudging up against a gravity well.”

“Well that would be bad, there shouldn’t be one out here,” Reid shuffled through several screens for navigation, and the sensor feedback. “And our scans indicate that there isn’t. But something must be causing it.”

“It could just be a fluke. These things do happen,” she checked the watch again. “But so long as it doesn’t act up any more, we shouldn’t have to worry about it. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

They were silent for several long minutes, each staring at their screens.

“I really don’t like this.”

“I don’t either.”

“But we’ll get through it, together.”

The next week passed by slowly, and was racked with nerves. The hauler slowly followed its new path, and neared closer to the treacherous space they were to traverse. Reid spent most of his time on the bridge, watching for any hazards, and Iris existed in an anxious rush, jumping from room to room, system to system, making sure everything was in order.

The engine room became her most frequent haunt, and she would pass many long hours of so-called rest sitting within it, listening to the engine whine. It hadn’t gotten much worse, but it was now registering on the readouts too, not just her own instruments. It was enough to keep her worried.

One day, while she was sipping on a cup of tea –one of the few luxuries they had aboard– she took out her journal. It wasn’t a journal, really. The well-worn pages were not her own stories, they were those of her great aunt, Jaiden. She had been a spacer herself, decades before, and had been part of the last generation to use anything other than warp. As a consequence, she had been on ships not too dissimilar to the one Iris and Reid called home.

She had all sorts of stories, and would share them when Iris was younger. She would listen with great interest, and honestly those stories, much as movies had for Reid, inspired her to want to be part of that brave breed who chose to make space their home. When she was older, she took great care to write down Jaiden’s stories in these notebooks. Many of them were of great interest, or usefulness –ways to negotiate with pirates, where to get the best plum weed, or about her great exploits– and she had shared these fondly with Reid, but this notebook

was different. While Jaiden was a brilliant spacer, Iris had always been inclined to think that maybe she had done more than just plum weed, and some of her stories were far too fantastic for her to write them down with the rest. This journal was the compendium of all of Jaiden's superstitious talk. She hadn't wanted to share it with Reid, or anyone else, in case he thought she was crazy, believing in such nonsense. Of course, she always told herself, she didn't. She was just fascinated by the legend, but the mystery. She would tease them, talk about them, but never acknowledge that her dear Jaiden talked about them too. It seemed to do them both a disservice.

But now, after years in space, Iris was beginning to understand that there was more to the universe than one could ever imagine, and especially in this past week she was beginning to believe just a little in the legends her great aunt had obsessed over.

She thumbed through the journal until she found the entry she had been referencing almost every day since she saw... that thing.

*Long, flowing, like a serpent that decided to put on some sort of robe. I've seen them many times, oh yes. Many times. I call them wraiths, well, that's what a lot of people call them and I guess I didn't see fit to change it. Scares me silly when I see them, even though they never did me any harm. They just... followed my ship, from time to time. Especially near nebulas, actually.*

*Now, I say they never did me any harm, but that doesn't mean they're harmless, Iris. A lot of people say they're real sinister, those wraiths. They'll mess with your systems, silly things like food processors will go on the fritz when they're around, radios will go wonky, that sort of stuff when they're around. I can't say that never happened to me, but I can't say it did, either.*

*But now some people, this is where that sinister bit comes in, some people say they ain't really their own thing, per say. Some people say they're part of something bigger, or serve it at least, or are drawn to it if not. Maws, they call them. Great big things, like black holes... but... alive. At least that's what they say. Some people say they've seen these maws. And everyone who's said they've seen one says the same thing: wraiths by the dozens flock near them, mess with you, hinder your escape.*

*Don't know what they are, don't know if they're evil or not or whatever. But they aren't something to take lightly I don't think. You take care if ever you see one, Iris. You'll do that, won't you?*

"Oh Jaiden," Iris mumbled, closing the journal and tucking it back in her pocket. "Why did I ever doubt you."

She had seen a wraith, she had no doubt now. She didn't know if it had messed with the engine, or not. But she was sure she'd seen it. And now... now they were heading towards a nebula, *the* nebula.

Then she realized the real worry that was nagging on her. Black hole. Jaiden's stories described this *maw* thing like a living black hole. And black holes would generate gravity wells. And gravity wells make the engine whine.

She jumped up, resolved to tell Reid the whole thing. She raced up to the bridge, where he was sat gazing, as ever, out into space. Ahead of them the horizon was dominated by a great swirling cloud of dust, purples and golds and reds swirling together.

"Hey, Ree," she said, and he immediately swiveled in his seat, his brows furrowed.

"What's wrong?" He asked, sensing her tone was off.

"I've got something to tell you. I thought you would think I was crazy if I said something about it again, but you said to say something," she paused.

"Is this about the thing you saw? That's the only thing that I've seen get you this flustered in a while. Go ahead, I'm listening and I won't judge," he stood up and walked over to her, patting her on the shoulder, before sitting on the floor and gesturing for her to join him. She did, and pulled out the journal, telling him all about her fears.

He nodded along, and sat in a long, contemplative silence. Iris felt a great relief.

"I'll send a message to the company, ask them if we can change the flight plan again," he said finally. "There's always some truth to legend. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Thanks, Ree. I appreciate it," she bumped her head lightly against his arm. "I don't know why I always kept this from you. You're all into this sort of thing, even if it is just in fiction. I guess I didn't want you to think I was nuts, to even make room for a thought that I was buying into this fuel depot spacer-rabble."

"Look Iris, you're one of the smartest people I know," he squeezed her hand, then stood up. "The only thing I'll judge you for is hanging out on a hauler with little old me. Other than that I'd never think you're nuts. And even if you were, you know, I don't know if that's such a bad thing."

The company wouldn't hear anything of their suggestion. Reid was careful to frame their sincerity over the risks, citing the lost pirates and their engine strain as the primary factors of their concern. The company had summarily declined their request, though, after some consideration, offered to move a Naval rescue frigate into actionable range should they need to signal for help.



Reid and Iris, of course, had already believed they had such a frigate at the ready, so that wasn't much of a reassurance.

It was in this state of fear that they entered the nebula. It was a brilliant sight to behold. The stars within lit the dust around them like a fine glitter. It dusted along their windows like a multicolor flurry, and the light lit up the ship like a disco ball.

In the spirit of the brilliance all around them, the natural wonder they were now a part of, Reid and Iris held a small, giggle-filled dance. It went a long way to ease their tensions, but Iris' eyes were always searching through the windows, through the glitter and glee, for the slithering, chilling sight of wraiths.

She didn't know that she very well liked this new era of hers, of believing in monsters and ghosts. But here they were.

Everything, however, was going smoothly.

Until it wasn't.

They were awoken with a start a week later by a great shudder which ran through the ship, a fierce rattling vibration following suite, and then a metallic shriek which rang through their ears.

The red emergency lights flicked on, and in their glow Iris tumbled out of bed, and found her watch, knocked down from its perch on her nightstand. It was displaying endless warning alarms, but on top of them all shone the engine diagnostics, and they were all decidedly in distress.

She snagged her work boots and a vest, and juggled them around as she made her way towards the engine room, eventually getting them all on. Reid was close behind her.

"Are you alright?" He called over the engine's roar.

"Yes! You?" He nodded, and she climbed down into the room. "I've got this, you get to the bridge!"

He hurried away, and she got to work as best as she could. She grabbed a pair of earmuffs from a rack on the wall, and tugged them into place one-handed as she rifled through her bag. She ran diagnoses, ratcheted at bolts that were rattling, opened the auxiliary energy buffers to their max... she did everything she could do and more, but the engine was being strained to its fullest.

"What's going on up there?" She called into her radio.

"I'm going to imagine you're asking for a status report over all that noise!" Reid called back, speakers in the earmuffs allowing her to just barely hear him. "It's bad, It's really bad. We're caught in a gravity well, you were right, there's one right here."

With nothing more she could do in the engine room, she grabbed her gear and hurried to the bridge, throwing herself into the seat of the engineering console where she could monitor and adjust the entire ship's systems.

"How'd we get stuck? Shouldn't the autonav have adjusted for it? Shouldn't the sensors have picked it up ages ago?"

"Yes, and yes," Reid called back. "But I don't think its any ordinary gravity well. I think it came *to us*. The sensors clocked it just moments before it appeared, and it had *velocity*. Then it stopped and started sucking us in."

Iris pulled up one of the exterior sensors. It was hard to see, the dust was flying past them at great speed, being sucked in like they were, it would seem, but with no propulsion of their own to stop it.

But she could see it.

A great, big, black hole. But it wasn't, it was, just as Jaiden's stories had said. Alive. It had long tentacles reaching out for them, and a great big, cavernous mouth into which the dust was being pulled like a whirlpool. All around them, she could see wraiths swirling, unaffected by the force.

"A maw," she hissed. "They're really real..."

"It would appear so!" Reid agreed.

"Can we call for the frigate?" Iris offered, but they both knew it would only get stuck too, if it even existed.

"What can we do?" He asked. "Right now we're fighting it, but we're slowly losing ground, err, space, ah, you know!"

"I know," she muttered, deep in thought, hands playing across the console like it was a piano. "The engine can't keep this up for long, either. If we didn't have the cargo maybe we could warp out of here, but I don't know..."

"It probably doesn't know we have a hold full of highly *volatile* cargo, does it?" His laugh came out more like a wheeze.

"I honestly doubt something like this would care even if it did. But..." she ran through scenarios in her mind. "What if we dropped the cargo pods? It would probably pull them in, and an explosion that big. Well, it's bound to do something. Then we could punch the warp."

"The company would kill us if we dropped our load," he allowed himself a chuckle. "You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, but I'm pretty sure this thing is already trying to kill us so that

seems like a *later* problem,” she began priming the warp coil –a small, emergency unit for short jumps bolted into their systems– and prepped the cargo pods for release.

“Yeah, yeah it does,” Reid nodded his assent, then looked back at her and gave her a thumbs up, his hand shaking fiercely. “Let’s blow this.”

“Aye aye, three, two, one...” she palmed the release, and there was a great pop, and the ship shuddered, then bolted forward. “Hit it!”

Reid slammed the warp ignition forward.

Behind them, out of view, the maw inhaled the pods, and shuddered with a bad case of acid reflux. It halted its intake for just a moment, and in that moment the hauler’s warp coils shocked to life, and the ship vanished into the void.

“I didn’t think I picked a spicy one,” one of the wraiths warbled to the being inside the maw.

“I always told you to watch what you eat,” warbled another. A great tentacle rushed out and seized both of the fiends in one swift swoop, and smote them from existence with a petulant squeeze. The others fluttered away, off in search of new meals.

Iris and Reid sat against the window, staring out into the void.

“What a week,” Reid broke the shaken silence.

“What a week,” Iris agreed with a meek grin. “At least I know my grandaunt was onto something.”

“Yeah! You solved the mystery,” Reid grinned.

“And you now know your heroes in those movies weren’t *totally* unattainable goals,” she winked. “You just did it, you escaped the monster’s clutches!”

“We did it! A good hero is nothing without his sidekick,” he nudged her.

“Ah, glad you finally accepted your role,” she nudged him back.

They let the good mood sit for a minute, before addressing the looming question.

“So what now?”

“Maybe we need a career change,” she said after some thought.

“Oh?”

“Well, the company might actually want to kill us,” she winced. “So maybe we should go out for ourselves, go on some adventures. If these monsters were real, who knows what other legends are too!”

“Iris and Reid, Adventurers,” Reid nodded. “I like it.”

“So do I,” Iris grinned, and looked out into space with a renewed sense of wonder.

