

The Derelict

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The docking door slid open smoothly, only stuttering a bit towards the end. Kyler stepped through the entryway first, his magnetic boots clanking on the metal floor. The lean, orange and white rabbit wore a green bandana around his neck. He smiled behind his helmet as he looked around with his flashlight.

“Easiest entry we’ve ever had,” Kyler said. “Clyde, didn’t I tell you this was our lucky day?”

Behind him, a fat cream-colored horse in a jumpsuit stepped up. Clyde’s flashlight beam darted around, never satisfied with what it illuminated. “I don’t trust a door we don’t have to wedge open. Are we sure this thing is a derelict?”

“Of course it’s a derelict. It didn’t respond to our calls, isn’t sending out any distress signals, and we’ve seen no signs of life since we attached to it,” Kyler said. “That means it’s perfectly legal salvage for two honest businessmen like us. Now we just gotta hope we were the first to find it.”

Clyde nodded, but his doubts didn’t go away.

Kyler found a terminal near the door and tapped into the ship’s system. It was barebones—common for small freighters—and there weren’t any protections in place. He managed to restore power after a few minutes of skimming. Lights along the corridor blinked on and the low whir of fresh oxygen blowing through vents echoed around them. Gravity remained off-line. Kyler didn’t bother trying to reactivate it. He didn’t want any precious cargo on the float to come crashing down.

As soon as his wrist computer gave him the clear, Kyler took off his mask. He hooked it to his belt and breathed in deep. The air carried a rubbery scent, which he brushed off as a quirk in the system. He’d smelled far worse on derelicts. “Nothing beats fresh air.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m keeping my mask on,” Clyde said.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Not if there’s a hole in the ship.”

“If there was, the system would’ve told me, and the air wouldn’t be filling this corridor.”

“What if it’s toxic?”

“Then we’d have alarms going off.”

“Unless the system’s malfunctioning.”

Kyler rolled his eyes. “You’re just being paranoid now.”

“I’m not being paranoid, I’m being cautious.”

“Sure, whatever.” Kyler holstered his flashlight. “Let’s find some treasure.”

They traveled down the corridor, searching for cargo holds or crew quarters, which tended to hold the most obvious valuables in a derelict. Ship components would earn them the most cash, but also required a lot of work to remove, so they’d be left for last.

Kyler gazed at the walls and ceiling. “Looks a little worn, but nothing bad. No outward signs of damage or salvaging.”

“Then why is it abandoned?” Clyde asked. Most derelicts they boarded were riddled with holes or barely in one piece. They were forgotten junk. Not this ship, though.

“Does it matter?”

“It does if it’s hiding some dark secret or someone’s expecting to return to it and not find a pair of unarmed intruders.”

“It’s just a freighter, not a damn spy ship,” Kyler said. “And we haven’t exactly been running silent. If the owner were nearby they’d have revealed themselves to us already. The same goes for if anyone was still on the ship. Internal comms aren’t down.”

Clyde refused to be convinced, but he kept his worries to himself. The quicker they were in and out the better, and arguments would only delay them.

The cargo hold was clearly marked and the door into it put up no resistance. Kyler’s eyes widened as he looked inside. Large cargo containers were neatly bundled into place. They filled most of the hold, ready to be unloaded at the next port.

His gaze couldn’t avoid the giant, pink balloon floating aimlessly within the hold, though. As he continued to stare, he realized it was actually an overinflated, elephant-shaped pool toy. Its painted-on grin had a dazed look to it, kind of like Clyde when he got high. Kyler had seen a lot of strange things in derelicts before, but nothing quite matched the blimp. It couldn’t

dampen his excitement over the cargo, though.

“This is a damn miracle!” Kyler declared. “The entire cargo hold is untouched. This stuff could be worth a small fortune!” He’d have jumped up and down if gravity would’ve permitted.

“There’s gotta be a catch. It’s stolen goods or toxic or recalled—something!” Clyde couldn’t take his eyes off the pool toy. “And what’s with the balloon? Is it a warning?”

“It’s just a pool toy,” Kyler said, exasperated.

“Yeah, but why is it here?”

“If it scares you so much just pop it,” Kyler said, before moving to examine the cargo. He poked the pool toy as he passed, sending it spinning slowly across the hold. Clyde flinched when it bounced off a wall, but it only creaked a little in response. “Alright. Start taking inventory. We might not have room for it all, but we’ll make sure to snag the best of it. I’m gonna do a quick walk of the rest of the ship to see if it’s hiding any other fun surprises.”

“Shouldn’t we stick together?” Clyde didn’t so much ask as beg.

“Splitting up will save time. And I won’t be gone long. Besides, don’t you want to be closer to the exit if something goes wrong,” Kyler said sarcastically.

Clyde frowned. “Okay, okay, I’ll stay here. I still think this is a bad idea,” he added under his breath.

“That’s the spirit.” Kyler slapped Clyde on the back. He left the cargo bay and looked over his shoulder. “Don’t let the pool toy bully you too much while I’m gone.” He missed the horse raising a middle finger his way.

The corridors remained clean. Kyler found a spartan set of crew quarters void of people but still full of belongings. Dressers were full of clothing and toiletries floated around the bathroom. If the ship had been evacuated, then it must have occurred in haste, with everything left behind.

He found a second pool toy floating around, a mint green fox with a sleepy expression on its face, as if just starting to wake. It was deflated, with a ragged hole in the belly. He didn’t find anything of particular value in the crew quarters so he moved on.

Beyond the crew quarters was a well-stocked kitchen with nothing of interest and the ship’s bridge. The bridge was small, with seating for two in

front of controls and display screens. A pool toy wolf sat in one of the seats, straps digging into its puffy body. It had an expression of fear painted on its face. Kyler frowned at the strange scene. "I guess the crew really liked pool toys."

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Clyde took deep breaths as he walked from one container to another. Everything looked to be intact from a cursory glance, though he couldn't check them from every angle. They were all full, too, mostly of medical supplies. Finding the right buyer would take time, but even he couldn't deny the money they'd make would be substantial. That only made it stranger that it'd been abandoned.

Towards the back of the cargo bay, Clyde finally found a damaged container. Something had bent in one of the corners and cracked the seams. A fall, perhaps, or the impact of heavy equipment. A jumpsuit had gotten jammed between the container and the wall. It was large, probably for someone a good one or two hundred pounds fatter than him. It had ripped straight down the front, as if the wearer had violently outgrown it.

"This ship gives me the creeps," Clyde whispered to himself. He still feared someone would jump out of hiding at any moment, ready to defend their ship from intruders.

Clyde's helmet mic picked up the sound of something bumping against a container. He swiftly turned around, and caught his jumpsuit on a jagged edge of plastic, tearing a hole right over his navel.

"Damn it!" Clyde hissed, his attention immediately on his torn jumpsuit. The hole was small, thankfully. While examining the damage, something entered his peripheral vision. He slowly looked up and saw a black ball floating towards him through the air, about a foot in diameter. Light shined off its surface. He wondered if it was a balloon left behind by the missing crew, like the elephant pool toy. It could've been stuck behind something, and floated out in the open while he checked the cargo. He couldn't think of anywhere else it could've come from.

As the orb got closer, he realized it looked rather slick, like a bubble of oil or tar. He hoped it was just well-shined rubber. He raised a hoof to shoo

the ball away. The second his finger touched it, it popped.

Clyde jolted back, his boots stomping on the floor. The residue of the bubble coated his whole hoof and wrist. He tried to shake it off, but it stubbornly stuck to him. Then it moved, gliding into the thin gap between his gloves and his jumpsuit as if being sucked in. He whinnied and flailed as he felt a tingling chill spread across his hoof. It was like he'd dunked his hoof into cold water.

Clyde tugged his glove off and let it drift away. The hoof beneath had been completely encased in residue, as if painted a glossy black. The tingling sensation intensified as the hoof swelled and creaked like a balloon. It only puffed up a bit before stopping suddenly. The shine of the residue faded and the surface cracked. It dissolved in a fine mist, revealing a faintly transparent hoof of vinyl.

He raised his puffy mitt of a hoof and saw the shadows of the back wall through it. When he poked it, his finger sunk in, and the material creaked. Clyde nearly passed out then and there. The only thing that kept him conscious was the renewed horror that came when he saw more of his arm transforming to vinyl.

"No no no, what's happening to me!" Clyde shouted. He swung his puffy hoof wildly, as if he could simply shake the transformation away. It continued to spread, unfazed, reaching his elbow. He saw the sleeve of his jumpsuit stretch as the arm beneath it inflated.

Another sphere of black drifted up while he was distracted, bursting on the curve of his belly. The gooey residue raced towards the whole he'd torn in his jumpsuit and drained into it. He arched his back as the chill spread over the entirety of his gut. He saw his middle swell as if he were being pumped up. His navel bulged out, and a hard plastic nozzle pushed through the hole in his jumpsuit. It was the kind pool toys had.

"This isn't possible," Clyde muttered. "Help...I need help."

He raised his unaffected hoof to call Kyler on the radio, but popped a new bubble that'd floated over without him noticing. The residue coated the radio. When it withdrew to slide under his remaining glove, the radio sat lifeless.

Desperate, Clyde did the only thing he could think of: he fled. The terrified horse made his way across the cargo bay in zero-g at a sluggish trot.

He felt the chill everywhere. It puffed up his arms, his waist, and his thighs. More and more the room filled with the creaking of vinyl. It sounded like balloons being rubbed together by his ears. His legs grew stiff and bent awkwardly as they became inflatable. Progress was agonizingly slow.

Then Clyde saw something that froze him in place. A large snake as black and glossy as the bubbles slithered out from between two containers. It glided through the air with ease, noiselessly circling Clyde. When it stopped, it blew a shiny bubble from its mouth, the same that had been assaulting him. The newest one only had to travel a foot before popping on his chest. He whimpered as the residue slipped under his collar and coated the rest of his upper body. Within seconds, everything below his neck had turned to creaking vinyl.

The swelling, once subtle, abruptly picked up. The pressure squeezed his feet free of his boots and set him adrift. His hips and belly ballooned, giving Clyde a bottom-heavy pear shape. He struggled even to flail as his limbs and body grew stiff. He'd always been teased about his weight, but now he was becoming cartoonishly round.

His eyes darted between the strange snake and the pool toy elephant floating nearby. Dread filled his hollow chest as much as air. The pool toy had been a crew member. That's why the ship was adrift but in working condition. They all must have met a similar fate. And now he was, too.

The chill finally spread to his head, dispersing his thoughts. His mouth sealed shut and his cheeks and muzzle rounded out. His helmet popped off, unable to contain his puffy, inflatable head. His shaking ceased. A swollen pool toy horse drifted in the cargo bay, inexplicably dressed in a tightly stretched jumpsuit with a look of shock painted on its face. It bumped into the elephant pool toy and began a new, slow course around the room.

The snake, meanwhile, slithered into a vent and out of sight.

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Kyler shook his head as he closed the ship's logs. He'd hoped to find information on why the ship had been abandoned but had come up short. The ship had been on a routine cargo run from the look of things. There'd been a report of damage in the cargo bay on the second day of transit,

followed by a brief alert. After that, he only found automated status reports and a note about the ship going into standby due to lack of crew. There were no mentions of catastrophic accidents or an evacuation, no boarding alerts or distress calls. It was as if the crew had simply up and vanished.

The situation made Kyler uneasy, but not enough to counter the potential payday. Some mysteries were better left alone.

“Clyde, how’s the cargo looking?” Kyler asked into his wrist communicator. Silence. “Come in, Clyde.” He gave up on the connection after more silence. “He better not have forgotten to turn his damn radio on again. Whatever, not like there’s anything else to do up here, anyway.”

He turned around to find his path blocked by a large, glossy black snake. It opened its mouth and began to blow a bubble. Rounder and rounder the bubble grew, until it was as large around as Kyler was tall. The snake released it, and it slowly wobbled Kyler’s way.

With no way to escape, Kyler backed himself against the ship’s console. “What the Hell is that?” he muttered as it closed in on him.

He held his breath and turned his face away, closing his eyes. The massive bubble bumped into his chest, quivered, and then popped with a loud splat. The residue wrapped around Kyler, coating the entire rabbit from head to toe. He stumbled about blindly and felt his body grow chill and numb.

Kyler nearly tripped over the pilot’s chair, his fall cushioned by the wolf pool toy strapped in. The residue cracked and disintegrated. Released, he gasped for air and pushed himself up.

The first thing Kyler noticed was that he couldn’t actually grab anything. He felt his paws, but no fingers. When he held them up, he saw a pair of transparent pool toy mitts painted to resemble paws. His whole body felt off. He couldn’t lift his feet and he seemed curvier and lighter all at once. And whenever he moved, creaking filled the air.

Somehow he’d turned into a living pool toy. The thought made him dizzy, or maybe the fact his head was hollow and filled with air.

The creaking grew louder as Kyler began to inflate. His flat middle puffed out, pushing up his shirt and revealing a nozzle. His lopsided ears shot up and straightened as they filled with air. He swelled out of his boots and drifted upward, gently bumping against the ceiling. The shirt and pants

he wore didn't stretch like Clyde's jumpsuit. They clung tightly to the blimping pool toy before slowly ripping apart.

Kyler's belly rapidly ballooned, the once-lean rabbit taking on a spherical shape. His vinyl hide creaked and stretched, becoming more and more transparent as he blimped up. His arms and legs swelled into domes, stiff and useless. He found he couldn't open his mouth anymore, while his eyes were frozen open. A dream, it had to be a dream. The score really had been too good to be true. He'd wake up soon in his bed, flesh and blood rather than vinyl and air. Soon, soon.

A confused expression froze on Kyler's puffy face, barely visible beyond the massive curve of his belly. The massive pool toy slowly bounced around the cramped cockpit, creaking lightly on every impact.

The snake watched silently for a moment before slithering back into a vent, leaving the ship quiet aside from the occasional creaks of the pool toy crew.