

The Lighthouse

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The Lighthouse

I'd been here for just under twelve years. Been a bad boy back on earth, smashed some windows, stole some shit, killed a couple of stiffs. That sort of thing. When they took my ass, I took three coppers down. Permanently. Why am I still around? See, back in The World, they don't believe in killing anyone. That would be barbaric. Instead they ship us 'maladjusted individuals' off to the far reaches of the universe to man remote posts.

They don't call it a prison. They say you have your freedom. Both are a lie.

I sit at the port window, staring out into the starfield for most of my waking hours. Above me in the tower, the quasar blinks its scarlet warning out to anyone who is listening.

Nobody is. The last person I saw with my own two eyes was the judge herself. From that moment on, they sedated me, transporting me to the LaunchShip for storage. I awoke on the Transport, locked within the coffin, unable to move more than a wriggle. Every now and again, I'd awaken to a thump as the Transport docked at some exotic locale I'd never see.

I stayed that way for a long time. Death would have been preferable. I'd say I went insane twice.

In storage, your left arm is locked inside the Glove, pierced through with I.V's and various sensors. It's what keeps you alive during the trip. Sure, you could rip it out,

but you'd lose your hand and die from blood loss if not starvation. I'm sure some have done so, lost their marbles enough to commit suicide that way. I never got to that point. Too much of a coward I guess.

Weightlessness came next, followed by a high gee thrust. I guess that was when I left the Transport. A couple of days later, I felt another thump as the LaunchShip docked with the Lighthouse. The bottom of the coffin opened and I was unceremoniously dumped out onto the ice-cold floor of my prison. I mean my new home.

And here I sit.

Basically, I'm a caretaker. Supposedly if I don't maintain the machines, I die. Mostly though the place runs itself. I went nuts once and tried to trash the consoles and the food distributor but just couldn't do anything with just my bare hands. There are no loose items with any weight or mass. Just a small toolkit for any delicate repairs on the circuit board.

I watch out the window at the stars, dream. My shit and piss are recycled, algae is grown in the tanks below my feet, which I'm forced to eat. Fucking hell it is.

I read the manuals on the computer, discovering exactly what type of ship I was on. Its designation is Lighthouse 17483-736JW. The JW stood for Juniper's Well. Juniper's Well, I discovered was a small black hole somewhere outside of Epsilon 736, a small star system about four thousand light years away from The World.

By my calculations, I left Earth in 2275. Even with the faster than light drives, relativity still had its effects. I figured it was at least 2792, since the last I heard the drives were running at eight times light. The things you learn as a child...

Bet you thought I couldn't do the math. Not bad for a criminal, eh? I've had a lot of time to sit and think, regretting the first twenty-two years of my life. My hands are scarred from the beatings I've done to the bulkheads. Regret is one of the worst feelings you can have.

The Tower sits above me, the tachyon array spewing out visible radiation. It sat on a rotating cylinder, spinning every five seconds or so, sending out a signal to any passing ships to stay the fuck away. The tachyons were the only thing that the ships could see while running faster than the speed of light, the onboard computers adjusting to the various beacons that were stationed around the more local gravity wells. Especially those that were hidden, like black holes were.

It was behind me, I knew it was there, but I couldn't see it. It was nothing but blackness, a void that was limitless. I knew that there was another Lighthouse on the other side of it, doing the same job. Not that I could get there, the LaunchShip had neither the range nor the controls I needed to operate it. Believe me, I tried to figure out a way to get me over there. Any company was good company.

The Lighthouses sat on the very rim of the gravitational eddies of the Well. Internal gravity wells prevented me from slipping into it as well as providing me a way of being able to stand. I've always hated weightlessness.

Each day I awoke, pissed, eat the green crap, shit and stare at the stars. Thinking of long since dead friends and lovers. I never saw anything. Shit, the stars didn't even blink like they were supposed to.

I thought I was having another episode when I first saw it.

Seeing things when you're isolated like I am is par for the course. It just happens. The first few times you get all excited, and then it becomes so commonplace that it no

longer bothers you. I can't tell you how many times I've seen a ship or someone in the Lighthouse with me, a bug crawling on the ceiling, ghosts of relatives and friends floating through the holds.

Shit doesn't even faze me anymore.

The lights in the distance began to move. A star I didn't recognize appeared and slowly approached. Several others followed it. I stared at it for three days straight before I decided that it was probably real.

Excitement began to fill me. If a ship was approaching, it had to be coming for me. Why else would a ship come out of Speed? Perhaps someone remembered me! Perhaps my sentence had been commuted! Perhaps...

I would have killed for a radio. My keepers deemed it unnecessary to include one since there was no reason to. Who was I going to talk to? Aliens? The thought was laughable.

It never occurred to me that something might be wrong with the ship. As time went on I realized that they weren't running lights I was seeing. They were fires.

Not fire like the caveman built, not any relying on air or combustion. No these were worse. They were the antimatter drives burning through the matter of the liner, annihilating everything in its path. Even I could see that.

I could see the ship approach as the days went on. The AM drives were on the tail of the ship, happily producing antimatter at a great rate. The couplers on the drive had failed, and each molecule of created antimatter was spit out of the drive and into the coldness of space. The ship was rolling in a tumbling fashion, encountering the antimatter as it tumbled. Some say that antimatter explodes on contact with matter. From what I saw, it doesn't. It simply burns its way through matter.

The ship's name was the *Philadelphia*. It was the name of a megalopolis back on earth. The liner was pockmarked with burn holes; most were larger than the Lighthouse itself. The *Philadelphia* was bigger than any ship I had ever seen, but then, in five hundred years who knew how large the ships might be?

I checked the instruments on the console, thinking it would be bad for me if the ship collided with me. It wasn't going to, passing by to the left of me, but it would be close. Out this far, the Well wouldn't have dragged her in otherwise, but the liner's forward momentum was more than enough.

The *Philadelphia* was going into the Well.

Damn it was close. The computer kept saying it wouldn't hit me. It was a good mile long, probably carrying at least a hundred thousand passengers, likely immigrants on their way to their new home. The tachyon array's visible light played over the ship, lighting up the entire length of the burning ship. As it drifted by, the port windows became visible. I could even see in them I was that close. There was still power in some of these holds.

The first of two bizarre sights struck me.

There were parties going on inside, dancing and carousing. It was as if nothing was wrong. The gravity wells were still working, though much of the ship was black without power. Not here, not in this ballroom. It was a regular celebration.

Then they were gone out of sight, the ship continuing on towards the Well. The tachyon array fired again, bathing the next porthole in its blue light.

I was treated to another disturbing sight.

A solitary man stood in the window, his eyes staring back at me. He was regally dressed, a glass of drink in his hand. His free hand waved at me while his face was one of grim acknowledgement to his fate.

The man knew the Well was going to swallow them up. That nothing could save them. No ship would be making a rescue like the others believed in the other hold. It occurred to me that he was more of a fool than the others were. Once the Well's relativity caught them, those ignorant partiers would be much better off than his sorry soul. Better to spend eternity in a never-ending party than sipping a cold glass of wine in the darkness of space. Time would stop for them all until the Well tore their atoms apart.

The *Philadelphia's* rotation took it away from me then, the sheer mass of it carrying the AM spewing drives away from me. I tracked the shower of AM, watching as I passed through the cloud of negative atoms. There was a terrible ripping sound and the Lighthouse rocked once. The console screamed at me and I became aware that the LaunchShip was gone, burning as the AM consumed it. The Lighthouse jettisoned the remains and it disappeared into the night. I didn't really care; I never was able to use it anyway. But it had always been an option.

Calm came back to the Lighthouse and it was as if the liner had never been there. The stars resumed their consistent positions with me by the port window. I fell asleep with my head against the bulkhead.

When I awoke, I wondered if I had dreamt it all. The lights on the console were all green. I had imagined this sort of thing before. There was nothing to indicate that a ship had drifted by. Perhaps I had imagined it all. Again.

It was the lack of the LaunchShip that convinced me.

It was the only proof I had.

Maybe I wasn't completely crazy after all. I know you probably find it sad that the most exciting thing that happened to me in twelve years was the destruction of a hundred thousand lives.

Not that I could have done anything about it, but I got a feeling they'd just blame me for it anyway.

Fucking bureaucrats.