

## Happy Pills and Candy Bars

The Doc said to take the pills but if I took the pills they'd get me. They said it's "shuttle fever", out there so long that I forgot what standing under a sky was like, but that wasn't it. The other guys hated me. The pills made me less jumpy – a lot less – and a lot more happy – got no problem with happy – so I wanted to take them but I couldn't take them or they'd get me. All the way out here, no one would ever know that they got me.

Would this contract ever end?

When I wasn't working on the computers or changing light plates, I hid in my room, the pills in my drawer and my granddad's old Dead Kennedys files blasting from my new speakers. They consumed half my room. The old speakers still littered the floor, their magnets stuck to my metal walls. They'd killed my old speakers the way they wanted to kill me. But they didn't kill me. The music kept the three of them out; kept me safe.

That's how Doc found me, tucked between the sound waves.

"Captain Gronski needs you," he yelled over the music, his face like something off the cover of a Boy Scout manual. He wasn't trying to kill me but, still, I wasn't gonna take his pills.

"Why?"

"That science vessel that... Could you turn that down, please?" I turned it off and he unplugged his ears. "Thanks. We're at that science vessel, the SOS. "

I stared at him, trying to not look like anything while I figured this out. It didn't feel right but nothing ever felt right. So, I stared and I thought. There weren't many vessels out here to answer an SOS. We were probably the only ones around but, still.

"Come on, Mesmer," he pleaded politely. "They need our help. They need you; you're the computer guy."

I was, so I got up and went with him but I still didn't like it. I liked it even less when I got to the bridge. The Captain saw me first, his old, grey eyes saying *please don't fill my life with bullshit*. He just wanted to fill the bellies of those cargo drones with ore until he had enough money to cruise around in a house shuttle, wearing ugly shirts, and buying crap he didn't need. I'm pretty sure he was trying to kill me.

Croswell was there, too, bitching to the Captain about me. "I'm not going out there with that whack-a-doo. Dude's gonna get me killed!" When he realized I was there, he turned around. "Yeah," he barked, "I'm talkin' about you."

Again, I tried to look like nothing but my face had other ideas. I could feel my mouth breaking the stoic frame I'd built around it in my mind but my eyes remained steady and cold. I wondered what I looked like to them. It must've been crazy.

"Mesmer, pull yourself together," whispered Doc. "You didn't take your pill today, did you?"

I looked at him.

"I gotta get the infirmary ready," exhaled the exasperated Doc. "Try to play nice with others... for a couple hours, please?"

I nodded and he meandered away.

"You two are the engineer and the goddamn computer guy," bellowed Captain Gronski, "so you two are going over there to find out what the hell is going on."

"Call," I said.

"That's some kind of weird asteroid field," griped Croswell. "They're like a bunch of batteries that keep getting recharged in that gas out there. Nothin's gettin' through." A horribly weird smile crept across his face. "*We'll be all alone over there.*" His eyes widened and his mouth jerked at the corners. He definitely wanted to kill me. Definitely.

"I don't give a rat's ass what you two have going on," declared Gronski, "You're going. Now, go." We both stared at him. "Go." He swung his arms about as if trying to herd children. "Go!"

With the Captain thoroughly agitated, we went.

Out in the portside airlock, surrounded by the quiet of nothing, we stood, staring each other down. It stretched into forever. He was messing with me.

“After you,” he said with a bow.

I kept my back firmly against the wall. “You.”

“Whatever, whack-a-doo.” He coiled himself up against the sealed airlock door and said, “See ya over there, whack-a-doo.” Then he launched. Into the purple mist, his little blue jets vanished. Beyond him I could see the cigar silhouette of the science vessel. What the hell were they doing in there?

Arcs of lightning flashed through the clouds. In my suit, the lightning wasn’t gonna get me but that bastard, Croswell... I launched, anyway. A few yards out, I gave my jet pack a couple of clicks. You don’t want to over use that thing or you’ll shoot your ass out into nowhere.

Gradually, the hazy cigar silhouette gave way to a detailed battle cruiser, leftovers from the war. I saw no damage but, up near the bridge, I saw... *it*. It looked like a wave coming off a hot sidewalk under a Reno summer sky. I gazed at it, wondering what the hell it was. It seemed to move like an animal before squirting itself through a chink in the hull of the silent vessel. What the hell?!

I slowed down and landed. I should’ve gone first because that moron was already breaking the damn airlock with a power wedge. I broke into a service panel and got the door open before he could do any real damage. Moron.

Inside, the bodies littered the halls, dozens of them, some in lab coats, some in jumpsuits, their bodies curled up, legs curled up, fingers curled up, and eyes locked open, terrified. Everyone was dead, every single one. Without a word, I headed for the bridge.

“Where the hell are you going?” called Croswell.

I had to see... *it*. I kept walking and not talking. Croswell soon followed.

We found it in a hallway, just before the bridge. It hugged a light fixture, pulsing as it slurped up the power flowing through it. Croswell pulled out his meter and read its signature. “That light’s like totally dripping electromagnetic waves,” he said.

The light flickered into death and the electromagnetic wave moved slowly across the ceiling.

“I think that thing’s alive,” he gasped.

No shit.

The wave extended its something at us, sniffing. Then it lunged. Croswell was on the floor with that thing oozing over him. He writhed and jerked, gasping for air. I grabbed his meter and put my back against the wall. Just like the light panel, it sucked the life right out of him. Done, it slithered away leaving him just another gnarled corpse.

I ran my ass off.

As soon as I got outside, I jumped. Over my shoulder, there it was, swimming through the void like it was a cross between a dolphin and a flying carpet. I cranked my jets to the max and put on my screamer, a really annoying emergency beacon. Gronski was probably up in the bridge holding his ears after I did that.

Webs of white lightning filled the clouds. I blew through. The thing didn’t stop. All that lightning, all those electrically charged asteroids and it wanted me like I was a chocolate bar in a bushel of broccoli. I had to get the hell away from it. Our mining trawler got closer and closer. I kept my throttle open until I bashed my face right into the hull. After missing the airlock by twenty feet, I scrambled to it and got inside. I overrode the safety locks and opened the inner door before the chamber could even start to pressurize. The rush of air knocked me on my ass.

“What in the holy hell!” screamed Gronski, still holding his ears as he stood over me outside the airlock. “You trying to blow out our freakin’ doors?!”

On my ass, I crawled backwards, my eyes locked on the airlock. That door wasn't going to stop it. Nothing was. I needed to get up and run. My hands shook. My legs shook. That thing was gonna get me.

“Where the hell is Croswell?”

I looked up at the Captain. “Dead.”

“What? ... What?!”

The wave squirted through the seam around the airlock door. I somehow stood up, my eyes bolted to it. The Captain turned. It lunged. Gronski pulled his gun before falling backwards, smothered under a blanket of electromagnetic pythons. His eyes bulged. His fingers curled. Gun in hand, his cringing finger pulled the trigger. A bolt of red laser shot through the air, drilling into the airlock door.

A translucent tentacle rose from the magnetic blur and looked down the laser's path. Before it had even finished its Gronski bar, it dashed away, chasing after the curious stream of light. Captain Gronski was free and still alive but he couldn't talk. He just clutched his chest, shuddering and gasping for air.

I knew that thing was coming back so I dragged Gronski into the elevator and headed for the infirmary. The doors opened and there was Doc. He had one hand in a box and the other in a drawer, frozen by the sight of me dragging our captain off the elevator. That's when Gronski died.

While Doc tried to resurrect the Captain, I told him everything. Everything. I hadn't told anybody everything about anything in years. It kept shooting out of my broken spigot and all I could do was listen. At first, Doc thought I was crazy, I could tell. Then he looked at Gronski again. Something clicked and it all came together in his head.

He pointed Croswell's meter at me and it came to life with stats and graphs of my own electromagnetic signature. That's why they were all curled up, suffocated, and heart attacked. It ate their EM, screwing up their whole nervous system.

The lights flickered. The thing was still on our ship, eating our juice, but what it really wanted was us candy bars. We had to get away but how do you get away from a magnetic wave? No matter what the Doc thought, we were gonna die and I knew it.

He wanted us to get to the bridge. We could at least point the ship at home and get it moving before the thing sucked our engines dry. That would be something, I guess. I followed the Doc up the stairs. We didn't get far before it oozed out of the floor, slurping up the Doc. He threw the gun and the meter at me and said his last gasping word. "Run." Out of blind fear, I obeyed.

I knew I was dead but I ran. Why? It had no purpose. I was just running. I decided that, if I was gonna die, I was gonna die happy. No one could get me now, might as well take the happy pills.

Everything I passed, I turned on, computers, lights, shavers, holos, toy cars, crap that I didn't know what the hell it did. I gave that thing as much to feast on as possible and ran. I ran until I got back to my room and sat in my chair and turned on my granddad's Dead Kennedy's as loud as I could and I took the pills because they couldn't get me anymore. I was gonna die happy.

The pills kicked in real good, a nice triple dose. Time dripped through my fingers in slow, gummy gobs as the rumbling music lapped over me. Death wouldn't be so bad. No more problems. No more worries.

Finally, my guest poked its ethereal head through my door, probing my room. It sniffed at the magnets from my murdered speakers and recoiled from the stench as if in pain. Avoiding them, it slithered toward me, eager and hungry. I closed my eyes. I was ready but then it paused, sniffed, and finally shrunk away. "Hey!" I yelled. "You were supposed to kill me!"

I ventured into the hall. It was waiting for me. I opened my arms, inviting it to feast. I was happy, so very happy. Now was the time. Eat me. It swam forward, sniffing and probing, sniffing and probing. I waited. It surrounded me in a magnetic tempest but did not collapse in. I tried to step into the shimmering curtain but it backed away. What the hell?

Something occurred to me so I headed back to my room. It followed me until I breached the magnets. It definitely didn't like the magnets. Finding the meter, I pointed it at myself. My signature was all wrong. Nothing read like before. Duh, the happy pills, they're neuro-something-somethings. I guessed that, on the pills, I wasn't even broccoli.

After plucking the magnets from my walls, I came back for it. It shrunk away. I maneuvered around. It kept sniffing and sniffing and sniffing. It wanted me but it didn't want me, the poor, confused little thing. Gradually, I herded it down the hall and corralled it in my room between the speakers and the used-to-be speakers.

Alone out there with the whole ship to myself, I felt safe. It had been so long since I'd felt safe. I had pills for a lifetime, food for a lifetime, water for a lifetime, and a very nifty pet. I feed it rechargeables. It likes them and doesn't seem to mind being crated. The ship is mine. The contract is over. I am free and I am never going home. No one's gonna get me all the way out here, no one.