

## Ghosts of Liberty

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Heavy clinks rippled through the ship as The Grey Ghost seized its prey, a derelict starship called The Liberty of the Stars. It's what they were here for... but not Greg; he already had what he wanted. Derelicts... hundreds of them, just as he'd predicted! From the observation deck, he could see dozens drifting by. Now he just needed to get back to civilization and away from these criminals.

For two weeks now, The Grey Ghost had been edging toward mutiny. Since entering this steel graveyard, two men had vanished. Everyone was blaming everyone else even though the drunken schmucks probably blew themselves out airlocks or something equally as stupid. The crew had divided in two, half following the first officer, Fridley, and half following that guy Pia. Only Captain Grey's iron fist kept them all in line.

Still, it was all worth it after Professor Reston called Greg's thesis absurd. A gravitational current flowing through the galaxy, ridiculous! He didn't care that Greg had a testable prediction, a gravitational eddy out beyond colonized space, trapping derelict ships. Reston and his Doctorial Board told Greg to start over from scratch. Greg couldn't just sit there and take that. He had to get out there and prove it somehow.

Then one night, Jim showed up with a copy of Greg's thesis in his palmtop. Jim had his own money and his own motivation. For a hundred-fifty years Jim's family had been gathering notes about The Liberty of the Stars, a ship that vanished with the family's "legendary" aunt on board. Jim seemed like too much of a goofball to care about something like that, except when he talked about Trixie, the girl who ran out of his life. It seemed like Jim was using this family specter as a substitute for his lost love. That night, in a rare moment of gravity, Jim said, "Sometimes, you just have to do what you have to do. It's compelling; it's who you are."

“You can’t just sit there,” added Greg, lost in his own obsession. “It’s who you are. It’s why you are.”

With his silly smile reappearing, Jim had said, “Buddy, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” He’d been calling Greg “buddy” ever since.

Whatever the reason, Jim needed Greg to find that ship. The only catch was that the only vessel that would go out that deep was a pirate ship. Greg didn’t care as long as they got there. Now, look at it, all those ghost ships. He was vindicated... and he really had to stop gawking and go to the bathroom already.

Finally prying his eyes away from the waltzing wrecks, he opened the door to the observation deck’s bathroom and froze at what he saw. Eyes of glass gazed from the ash-white face of a dead young man. It was little Milton and he looked like his life had been scared right out of him.

His heart pounding, Greg tore off back to his cabin. Why kill the kid? What the hell was happening on this ship? He had to tell someone and there was only one person on the ship that he could trust.

In the top bunk of their shared cabin, head phones on, feet swaying to the beat, lay Jim. “Hey, buddy,” he sang as he pulled back his headphones. “What’s up?”

“That kid... Milton,” said Greg as he fought to catch his breath. “They killed him. They killed that kid... just a kid.”

“Well, they are pirates,” yawned Jim.

“But... but what about us?” stuttered Greg.

“Hmmm,” mused Jim. “I suppose I should go find out, huh?”

Jim popped out of bed, threw on a shirt, and grabbed the old-fashioned holo-pict of his great-aunt. Patting Greg on the shoulder, he said, “You should stay here, buddy. It could be dangerous.”

“What are you going to do?”

With a smile and a shrug, Jim said, “I’ll wing it.” The door slid shut and Jim’s lighthearted whistling faded down the hallway.

Greg stood in the dim silence, his heart slowing as confusion set in. Stay here? Then what? His eyes fell on his computer rolled up on the desk. If nothing else, his data had to make it out of here. Rifling through the drawers he found a backup chip.

As his files copied, he wondered, what the hell was Jim going to do? Kill them with his charm? The download completed. “Rich people are weird,” he mumbled to himself as he swallowed the chip. It wouldn’t be easy to get that back. Digging through the drawers again, he came up with another chip. This one was going in his pocket. Hopefully he wouldn’t need to go after that first one.

Now, all he had to do was wait. Yeah, right.

Outside on the hull of the Liberty, Frank tested the circuits while Bill locked down the cable that they’d lugged over from the Grey Ghost. “It don’t bother you?” grumbled Bill, his magnetic boots clinking against the hull as he maneuvered around the cable. “Two guys, just gone?”

“Ain’t me,” said Frank as he clicked through the transfer sequence. “Less shares to split means more money for me. Drunken munch heads probably got themselves blown out an airlock.”

Bill shook his head. “You’re an idiot. Something just ain’t right.”

Frank stood up, stretching and popping his back. “What, you thought being a pirate was gonna a tea party?” The hum of power flowing into the Liberty vibrated beneath their feet. “And there you go. Sure is easier with the crew pre-dead,” he joked.

Bill opened the computer embedded in his left glove and patched into the Grey Ghost’s com network. “Captain Grey, you readin’ me? We have power and life support.”

“Good work,” came Grey’s reply. “I’ll let Chuck know.”

“Alright, let’s get back inside,” said Frank.

“Yeah,” said Bill, “before someone’s splitting... our... share...”

Frank followed Bill’s gaze. A golden face plate gleamed as a helmet crested the curve of the vessel. “Who the hell is that?”

Unclipping the heavy pry bar from his belt, Bill said, “No idea.”

Frank jabbed at the buttons on his wrist. “Hey, I can’t get the Captain. And this guy ain’t answering my suit-to-suit.”

“I don’t like this,” mumbled Bill.

Frank readied a heavy wrench as the unknown suit trudged closer and closer. It stopped an arm’s length away. Bill motioned for the suit to flip up its faceplate. The suit just shook its head. Bill and Frank looked at each other and nodded. Time to knock this joker’s head off. The bar and wrench came flying down. The suit caught them both in mid swing.

The next thing he knew, Frank’s head was ringing. As he shook it off, he realized he was spinning through the void, the Liberty and the Ghost both vanishing in the distance. Bill was not far behind, his faceplate shattered. Frank screamed.

After watching the two pirates fly off into the darkness, the suit knelt down and longingly caressed the giant “L” painted beneath its feet before trudging away.

Inside the Liberty, Chuck floated through the forest of electronics filling the forward sever room. He’d have to figure out how to get the gravity working from here because the other server room was just gone. Coming in through that shredded metal that used to be engineering, it looked like a wild animal had torn the place apart. Whatever the hell happened, it ended with a giant hole blossoming out the ships butt.

The atmosphere must’ve been sucked out all at once because, in every corridor and stateroom, suffocated bodies floated around like forgotten ghosts. All those faces locked in horror... this place was going to give Chuck nightmares. He decided he’d take fighting a live crew over doing salvage work, any day.

“Hey, Chuck,” crackled Grey’s voice in his ear. “You should have life support.”

Chuck checked his wrist. “Yup, we got air.”

“Got the gravity on yet?” asked Grey.

“Still looking,” reported Chuck as he sent his helmet floating away. “I’ll let you know.”

Chuck swam deeper into the computer racks, looking, looking, looking. And there it was – gravity control. As it came online, thuds echoed from the bodies falling all over the ship. Chuck shivered. “I gotta get the hell out of this creep show,” he muttered as he dialed the gravity down to a quarter.

Turning to leave, he slammed face first into a gold faceplate. “Jesus!” he gasped. “You scared the hell out of me!” Collecting his gear, he said, “The air is on so you can take that helmet off.”

The anonymous suit unlatched its neck couplings. As the white dome lifted away, Chuck let out a scream that echoed through the steel catacombs.

At the other end of the ship, Fridley, Pia, and six others gathered around the sealed airlock. The sensors all read green. “Time to get some booty!” said a crewman.

“We have a paying job first, Mel,” reminded Fridley.

Pia grumbled, “Yeah, let’s get this crap job over with.”

“Shut it and get in there,” barked Fridley.

The seal popped and the smell of stale death swept onto the Grey Ghost. One man turned away, holding his mouth.

“Come on,” sniped Fridley, “these ain’t the first bodies you seen.”

“Yeah, well, I prefer them fresh,” griped Bruce as he sealed his suit against the stench.

The eight men entered the dim corridors paved with bodies – men, women, and little kids, all on a vacation cruise that never really ended. Sticking together, they moved through the ship, searching room by room and sending the data back to Grey for analysis. Mel didn’t need to wait for all that. It was obvious which bodies had fat money cards. Finders keepers!

After two decks, they reached the main medical center. “There ought to be some expensive stuff in here,” said Mel while he watched Pia hack the door. With a shunk, it slid open and they all jumped back at what they found.

“For crying out loud!” yelled Fridley. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

Jim glanced up. His face had been pressed against the glass of a sealed medical bed. Despite the cold, stale air, Jim wore nothing but jeans and a miss-buttoned shirt. As usual, he had no shoes on. Gathering closer, the men saw what he'd been gazing at, a beautiful young woman, her face as fresh as dew.

"Sleeping Beauty," chuckled Mel.

Seeing the slow flow of blood moving through the bed's pump system, Bruce said, "Dude, I think she's alive."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Fridley. "It's just meat in a fridge."

"Yes," said Jim, "and that's my family's meat, thank you very much. Get this tube back to the ship intact and the rest of this is all yours."

After unbolting it from the floor, they put the steel and glass tube on a trolley and maneuvered their way back to the Grey Ghost. "You ever find those missing guys?" asked Jim. "Ship seems too small to lose two grown men, don't ya think?"

"Don't get that started again," warned Fridley. "I don't care what you're paying, I don't need you starting crap."

Peeling away from the others, Pia tried his helmet com, then the Liberty's internal network. "I can't get Chuck. What the hell?"

"Probably back on the Grey already," dismissed Fridley. "The signal is crap over here. I can't get the captain, either."

As they entered their ship, Pia got on the intercom but couldn't find Chuck anywhere. "Okay, I am not liking this."

Fridley stopped the whole procession and tried calling the captain. While both men wrestled with their radios, Greg came creeping around the opposite corner. Spotting him first, Jim shot Greg a stern look. The message was clear. Don't mention Milton. These guys were already at each other's throats.

"Captain Grey ain't answering. You three come with me," he ordered, pointing to the guys he knew he could trust, "and the rest of you stay here."

“Screw you,” declared Pia. “We’re going to go looking for Chuck.”

“Fine. Look for Chuck.” Stomping away, he almost plowed right over Greg. “You! You and you,” he barked, pointing at Jim. “Both of you get back to your cabin and stay there or I swear I will kill you myself.”

“Aye aye, boss,” chirped Jim, throwing up a comical salute.

Fridley and his men just marched away while Pia and his crew headed back onto the Liberty.

“This isn’t good,” whispered Greg as he watched the pirates vanish around the corners. “Maybe we should try to get off this ship? They had a long range shuttle down in bay five. You know anything about flying?”

Jim gave him a slanted smile. “I knew you wouldn’t stay put. Seriously, I’m trying to take care of you here.”

“Take care of me? By planting me in a cabin to wait for one of these guys to come kill me?”

Jim chuckled. “Trust me. You will be okay. Hmm?”

Reluctantly, Greg headed back for the cabin, planning to lock the door and change its security code. This wasn’t good; none of this was good.

It wasn’t long before Pia and his men found Chuck in the server room. Splayed across the floor, his silent eyes stared out of a death mask of terror. Waves of anger radiated from Pia as his fists clenched and unclenched in time with his grinding teeth. “I’m gonna kill the bastards, I swear I am.”

Bruce patted his shoulder but Pia fiercely shook it off. “You two carry Chuck,” he ordered. “Bruce, get your gun out and take the rear. I’ll take point.”

As they trudged back through the corpse-lined corridors, Pia scouted ahead, treating each corner like a trap. He’d be damned if he was going to let them kill another one of his friends. They reached the coupling to the Grey Ghost and Pia made them hang back while he checked it out. If Fridley wanted to take them out, this would be the bottleneck at which to do it. The corridor was clear, too clear. The tube was gone. “What the hell.”

While Pia fought with the intercom, trying to get through to the bridge, the airlock slammed shut. Banging his fist against the portal window, he tried to warn them but it was too late. The couplings released. Air rushed from the Liberty, sucking his men and a flurry of corpses out into the void.

In his sealed suit, Bruce flailed helplessly as he sped away, surrounded by his frozen friends. He'd be alive for hours but there was no way Pia would be able to find him out there, flying away at that speed into all that debris. "I'm gonna kill him," muttered Pia. "I'm gonna kill all of them."

Several decks away, Fridley cranked his rifle to maximum power as he watched his men slam sledgehammers into the bridge door. Finally, it popped off its rails. While Fridley led the rush onto the bridge, Mel hung back, his pistol shaking in his hands.

"Bastards," growled Fridley, standing over Grey's body. It was a mutiny and, now, it was up to him to stop it. Calling the pain in the ass passengers, he demanded to know where they were.

"In my cabin," answered Greg, reluctantly.

"Jim?" called Fridley. "Jim!"

"What?"

"Where the hell are you?!"

Jim hummed thoughtfully over the com. "Somewhere aft, I think. Aft is the back, right?"

"Get to your cabin!" roared Fridley. "I want both of you in that cabin and stay there or I swear I will kill you myself!"

"Sure thing, boss," sang Jim.

Fridley shook his head. The radio off, he muttered, "I am gonna kill that guy, so help me." Turning to his men, he ordered, "Arm up. Rifles, now."

This time, Mel was the first one in. As he unlocked the gun rack in the captain's office, a loud buzz rose from behind the wall. Realizing what it was, his eyes widened. "Overload!" he yelled but it was too late. The wall exploded. Blue flames shot from the ruptured steel. All three men lay broken and burned.

Fridley was alone.

“Pia,” said Fridley over his mobile com. “I’m gonna kill you for that. Those were good men, you piece of crap.”

“Yeah,” answered Pia, “they were good men that you just killed and when I find you, I’m gonna rip...”

An avalanche of static broke the link. Fridley threw his com at the floor. It shattered. Then, without warning, all the lights went dead. Now what?! Fridley stumbled across the room and out into the dark corridors. A grey light seeped in from the distance. It was definitely a trap but it was also where he’d find Pia. Slowly, he marched toward the dim light while, half a ship away, Pia followed his own dim beacon through the darkness.

Back in his cabin, Greg cringed in the corner, wishing he hadn’t answered that call. They were on their way and they were going to kill him. He had to get out of there. Without warning, the lights died and darkness consumed the room. They were definitely coming to kill him.

Crashing over everything, Greg grabbed his data scroll and stumbled across the room. The door slid open so power wasn’t dead. Someone just killed the lights. Why? Whatever the reason, it wasn’t good. Down the long hall, he saw a dim glow reaching around a distant corner. Cautiously, he inched toward it.

He tried the doors along the way but every one of them was locked. Maybe he should head back? Maybe he should stay here? There didn’t seem to be any good choices so he inched on toward the distant light.

Finally, a bright yellow poured from the mouth of the aft hold. As he approached, gunshots rang off the metal walls.

“You scum bag,” screamed Fridley. “Captain Grey was good to you! How could you kill him?!”

“You killed three good men,” yelled Pia. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

Greg had to see whatever the hell was happening. His life depended on it. He crept up to the opening and dove behind a pile of supplies. From behind their own piles, Pia and Fridley exchanged fire and accusations, never even noticing Greg.

Greg peered over the crates and found the tube, girl and all, sitting right in the middle of the crossfire. How the hell did that get there? Not knowing what else to do, he just watched and waited until a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. After almost jumping out of his socks, he looked up to find Jim's smiling face shushing him.

After waving for Greg to stay down, Jim waltzed on out into the crossfire. The shooting stopped as disbelief set in. With a goofy smirk spreading across his face, Jim asked, "Perhaps you're wondering why I called you all here?"

"Damn it, you moron," yelled Fridley, "I said I'd kill you!"

"Like you killed Bruce and..."

"I didn't kill anyone!" screamed Fridley.

"No, no," corrected Jim. "He's right. He didn't kill anyone. It was me."

"You?" asked Pia. "What?! Why?"

"Oh, I was hungry. Well, not for all of them but I had this whole plan thing going. I did the decoupling and the overload. After a couple of thousand years, you tend to pick up a few things, like hacking. Allow me to demonstrate." Jim bent over the medical bed and opened its locks.

As Fridley watched Jim punch the keys, Fridley's anger burned brighter and brighter until he raised his rifle and burned a hole right through Jim's chest. Jim just shook his head at Fridley as the charred tunnel gradually closed back into clean, healthy flesh.

Jim shot across the room faster than their eyes could follow and hoisted Fridley by the collar. "Normally," said Jim as he squished the barrel of Fridley's rifle, "I'd just kill you but my lady is rather hungry."

Dangling, Fridley stared in shock as the medical pod's door slid open and the young woman within rose from her slumber. Seeing Fridley displayed like a side of beef, her sweet face morphed into something dark and monstrous. In an instant, her fangs were in Fridley's throat, sucking his life away.

Horrified, Pia backed away, unloading his sidearm into the creature from the tube. It turned and lunged. He could barely gasp before she was on him, draining every last drop of blood.

It all happen so fast, Greg couldn't believe that he saw what he saw. Then those hungry, black eyes turned to him. Blood stained the corners of her mouth but she clearly had room for more. Like a bolt from the sky, she swept across the room. Greg cringed but death did not come.

"No, no, my dear," said Jim, standing between the girl and Greg. "No feeding on my little buddy."

"Jim," she sighed with great relief as her face melted back into beauty, "you found me!"

"Of course, Trixie," laughed Jim. "It took a while but of course I found you. You really need to stop running off like that." He could still remember her cute, little nose pressed against the portal of The Liberty, laughing and daring him to catch her if he could. He loved her playful side but this was ridiculous. "So, what the heck happened after you ran off."

"Oh," said Trixie whimsically, "you know how it goes. I was having a little nibble down in engineering when a whole bunch of them barged in on me and one thing led to another and... yeah."

"Yeah," mocked Jim, "yeah."

Trixie looked over the frightened Greg. "Is this one for you?" she asked.

Greg was pretty sure that his first backup chip was suddenly no longer in his body.

"I'm well fed, thank you," said Jim. "This fellow helped me find you, my love. I think it would only be fair to let him go. Don't you?"

Trixie placed her finger on her chin and hummed thoughtfully.

A couple hours later, in the cockpit of the long-range shuttle, Greg looked over the pages of how-to notes Jim and Trixie had written up for him. The back was packed with tons of supplies and a safe course home was already plotted into the shuttle. Greg would hardly have to do a thing to get back to colonized space. As he watched the Grey Ghost speed away on a separate course, he knew no one would ever believe any of this... except for the data. They'd have to accept his thesis now! He had all the proof right in his scroll and he planned to upload it to the galactic net as soon as he got in range.

He couldn't wait to see Raston's face.