

The Fate of One Planet

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Chapter 17

Bogeyman

On the three ships, one of their priorities was to produce working bathrooms and disposal of waste for all the crew members. The design and making of the sections of the unit were so accurate, that they slotted together like a three-dimensional puzzle; you could not see the joints, and the plumbing connections did not leak. It had to be small enough to come out of the Spikey Ship's Parallelogram, and to fit into one of that ship's small cysts.

In the newly acquired holdall, a plastic box contained a still fresh fillet steak sandwich and a cheese, pickle, homegrown lettuce, and cherry tomato sandwich.

The Lumpy Ship's burnt down jungle area was converted back into its original form for food propagation. When Jay examined the cheese sandwich, he had noticed that when he had picked the baby, cut-and-come-again lettuce, a small section of its root was still in place. These, with the tomato seeds from the red and yellow baby tomatoes, were cultivated in the propagation area. As the Jays learnt more and more, an increasing number of systems came back online. However, there was one thing bothering Jay. Why could he not make any of the ships move, not even a little bit? He communicated with all three ships' AI's and got the same answer: quarantine. He eventually got a response that the ship's main systems were all required to self-destruct if they could not stay exactly where they were.

"So, I have three beautiful ships, that I cannot move, and if I even manage to override this built-in system, then all the other ships must destroy the moving away ship or self-destruct themselves? Is that right?"

All of the AIs agreed with this statement but would not elaborate much further. The Jay on the Black Ship had been sitting in a control cup when he consulted with its AI. He turned to the white sphere and said, "Why are all the ships in quarantine?"

The scalene triangles danced on the controls, and an external view came up on the screen. This zoomed-in and in some more, past the other ships and beyond towards a small dot, which Jay had not noticed before.

"Can you magnify anymore?" Jay asked the White Sphere.

It could not, but it did improve the resolution of the image. Jay walked closer to the screen, noticing that it looked like a circle with a bite mark out of it.

"Is that another ship? Why is it so far away from the others? It's not like the three main ship types here. And why is it so hard to get information on that ship?"

He brought the weapons systems online and targeted the distant ship for information. He quickly switched it all off again when the threat alert showed that nearly every other ship was now targeting the Black Ship.

"My mistake." He transmitted in multiple languages.

"So, everyone is very protective and secretive of the Round ship with a bite mark?"

He studied the information gathered. It was ten-times as far away as the Spikey Ship. It was bigger than the Lumpy Ships. It was cold and dead, with no heat or power source showing. "So, it's a ghost ship, and everyone is both afraid and protective of it?"

With this new information, Jay on the Black Ship decided on a course of action.

"Hello guys, we need to build me a spacesuit and a short-range transport with long-term life support. I am pretty certain these ships will not let me use their stuff to go there, and they won't let me back if I go over there."

He turned to the White Sphere and continued, "Wanna come along for the ride?" The White Sphere froze in its place, unresponsive. "I thought not," said Jay.

The ship was created and snappily named the 'Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply'. It was an ugly, boxy 'Bitsa' (as in bitsa this and bitsa that it was built from). "Dude, we have just built our first space shit!"

Shit, it was not. The Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply worked perfectly the first time. A few ships painted The Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply with their weapons systems, but did not fire. Jay left for the Ghost Ship to find what

scared the AIs and Ship systems so much.

"Look, I get you are unhappy about this, but we can all go no further until the problem there, whatever it is, is solved." Jay transmitted to all. It was quite a trek for a small homebuilt ship. There is no point going fast unless you have lots of power to waste slowing down again.

Upon arrival, Jay inspected the Ghost Ship from the outside. "No lights, heat or threat," he reported back.

"We know!" They all thought back to him.

"Look, I know you can see and know everything I know, but I am scared, and it helps to talk out loud. OK? The large round ship has a large section missing. I'm going in closer. Are those bite marks? Has something been eating this ship from the outside? The bite marks have a bite radius larger than The Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply! I cannot see what has been eating these super tough alloys at near absolute zero temperatures and is still considered a threat many years later. So, I am going to dock and look inside."

Preparing himself for closer inspection, he commented on his every movement.

"I have a hard dock but no recognition handshake from this ship. No atmosphere in the airlock and no atmosphere in the ship."

Jay opened the inner hatch with an electrical hand tool.

"Large corridors with no spin gravity and no handholds Lumpy Ship style."

The space suit had its own built-in propulsion system of cold gas venting. It puffed, and Jay bumped into things. The spacesuit was made tough to be safe, but the sacrifice was that it was not light. So, puff and bump were the order of the day.

"Here, ghosty, ghosty." Jay called as he explored the empty corridors. "I know, no one can hear me in space... Wait a minute, I can see a green glow ahead. It ripples like light on an underground pool of water. I'm switching the camera systems on, so the AI's can see."

Jay turned off the suit's lights and stuck his head around the corner. There was a large set of black teeth, the entire width of which Jay could not see because they wrapped around the body that glowed emerald green. This body, which gave off the rippling green light, gave Jay problems focusing on it. It was as if it was there one moment, and at another moment, not there at all. Jay shook his head, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It just made his eyes sore when they could not focus.

Jay was distracted; he knew something was wrong on the other ships. Every alarm, klaxon, flashing light, and whooping noise were going off on the three ships due to what had appeared from Jay's camera feed.

"Yes, we get it; it's the Bogeyman, but shut up because now is not the time to distract the Jay on the Ghost Ship," The Jay on the Spikey Ship chided the AIs.

Jay was distracted and bumped into the wall. He was around the corner and backing up, but it was too late; the Bogeyman on the Ghost Ship was aware of his presence. Jay had a strange feeling and looked as a crow flies straight through the walls, towards where the Bogeyman would be, and he realised that it could see through the walls! The green glow from the Bogeyman was also visible through the walls!

"I am so fucked." said Jay as he jetted down the corridors.

He looked over his shoulder and made out a green glow behind him. As he came to a left turn back to his ship, he used something heavy in his hand to help make the turn faster by throwing it straight on, as hard as he could. "Fuuuck!" He had just thrown away the power tool he needed to operate the airlock. The green glow disappeared.

Jay came to the airlock back to The Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply, but no tool meant no escape. He turned around to accept his fate. The green glow, then the Bogeyman, came into view and slowed down in front of a very scared Jay. The back part of his spacesuit could be operated by the other Jays, and a Spikey Weapon came out on an arm that Jay took. The Bogeyman saw the weapon and slightly opened its mouth. Behind the large black triangular teeth was a void, the blackest thing Jay had ever seen. He also noticed he was now being pulled toward the mouth. Jay powered up the weapon, pushed its round rear surface down towards his feet and kicked as hard as possible. The weapon flew through the vacuum in the corridor. It went through a small gap between

the Bogeyman and the corridor roof.

"Goal!" shouted Jay in his suit. In celebration, he put his arms up and bounced between the floor and the ceiling. Jay had resigned himself to dying. He knew the weapon would not work against such an exotic being. The weapon had been on the Spiky Ship, so it could have been used long ago.

Jay moved towards the Bogeyman, arms wide, taunting it, "Come on then?"

The large being moved slightly to the left and right, then turned around and went away from a surprised Jay down the corridor. It came back after a short while, holding the weapon in a fold above its mouth. Jay then crouched by holding onto a raised part of the floor.

The Bogeyman ejected the weapon, from the fold in its skin, at high speed to miss Jay. Jay leapt and got one hand to the weapon, but it went past him. The Bogeyman jiggled. Jay retrieved the deadly weapon and pulled his leg back, but the Bogeyman had expanded to completely fill the corridor. Jay put up one arm in protest, but the passage remained utterly blocked.

"If you can cheat, then so can I," said Jay.

He played with the weapons controls, turned to face the wall beside him and quickly cut a large hole in the wall. He jetted through, kicking the weapon past the Bogeyman, who saw it pass on the other side of the wall. Jay jetted back into the corridor and did a victory bounce up and down again.

The Bogeyman bellowed with rage at Jay.

"Did you just piss off what is probably the deadliest being in the known universe?" The other Jays inquired.

"Yep. It was cheating, so I literally moved the goalposts."

The Bogeyman turned to the wall beside it and bit a hole in it as if it was not there. It went through and returned with the weapon in the fold of its skin again. It waited for Jay to crouch, then ejected an object at speed near Jay. Jay leapt and caught it and laughed, thinking he had won, only to see the weapon sail past him.

"What?"

The Bogeyman had first sent the power tool for the airlock as a decoy. Jay had caught the wrong object.

The Bogeyman was jiggling once more and Jay let go of the power tool and clapped the clever move. An alarm went off in his suit; he had not been watching his O2 supply. He started breathing hard, gasping to get more oxygen. He picked up the power tool and started opening the airlock. He was very aware of the Bogeyman behind him by the closeness of the green glow. Jay did not cycle the airlock. He left everything open now that the pressure was equalised. He got into The Flying Bog, Food and O2 Supply and plugged the line into the box on his back. It took a while to fill his tanks, but luckily, the Bogeyman made no attempt to enter the airlock. It just waited outside.

Jay said, "I need a lot more information, now!" to the other Jays. The AI's and the Ships had watched the visual feed from Jay's helmet cam. They did not fully understand what had just happened, but they all started to tell the Jays about the Eater.

An Eater is a being that has no known life span. No one has successfully killed an Eater. If attached to a ship, the ship must not move, or the Eater will spread and eat all space-based objects. No one has successfully removed an Eater from a spacecraft. An Eater cannot go down a gravity well to a planet or star. Nothing on a ship or space station can stop an Eater; atomics, fission, and fusion are consumed with no effect on the Eater.

If a ship is unfortunate to bump into one, the impact will probably destroy the whole ship in one go. The wreckage will be pulled in overtime and eaten. They are the Bogeyman of space flight. If another spaceship is in this vicinity and returns to its home planet, they too will find a small eater growing on that ship. This will draw in other crafts, stations and satellites, until that planet is no longer a spacefaring civilisation and no one wants to visit it.

All ships that have contact with an Eater are programmed to self-destruct rather than move away from it to prevent further infection. Self-destructing makes the Eater spread and feed faster, so most ships just sit and wait for the end. The crews cannot get off and they cannot use shuttles or escape pods; they must all be destroyed if they try to leave. This is why the ship is allowed to

override its AI on some matters and can cut it off from control and even eject it.

The Eaters are not bothered by time. They can take millennia to consume one ship or days to eat an entire fleet. Most crews spend their fruitless time trying to destroy the indestructible. Making new and more powerful weapons that have no effect but to goad the Eater into doing what it does best. Most ships sit around and warn off any other potential victims for as long as possible. 'Here be Dragons'.

Jay left The Flying Bog and walked towards the Eater. He was amazed it had been patient with him, while he resupplied his suit.

"Ok, what now?"

It did the same little jiggle movement and it turned side on, getting slowly closer to Jay. His heart was beating its way out of his rib cage. The Eater's side got closer and closer. Jay thought the shimmering emerald green was beautiful, even though his eyes could not focus on it, not even at close range.

It gave Jay's suit the lightest nudge that knocked him into the wall and knocked the wind out of Jay. When he looked up, the Eater was not there but partially visible at the end of the corridor.

"What?" When Jay looked in its direction, it disappeared from sight. "The fuck? Is it playing tag?" The other Jays were all shouting. "Go get it then!"

Jay jetted off down the corridor in pursuit. He had now lost sight of the Eater. So, he spent time cautiously exploring the ship. The passages were set out on a grid pattern so Jay could drift down a corridor, move over one and jet back to conserve fuel and oxygen. After three deck levels, he noticed a faint green glow from below.

"Sneaky bugger is on the move." Jay followed the glow for a while and then accelerated to the end of the corridor. This was an eaten part of the ship, and Jay flew out into space. He braked and then went down a couple of decks until he saw the back of the Eater in the open end of the corridor.

Jay drifted towards the back of the Eater and swung his leg back.

"No, no, no, don't-" that was as far as the other Jays got with their command before Jay kicked the back of the Eater.

They both were very surprised. The Eater had never been hunted and caught before, and Jay, whose leg disappeared into the Eater's body. An alarm went off inside his helmet! Oxygen was leaking, and the leg would not come out from the shimmering surface. The Eater knew the sound that passed through Jays' body into its body. It moved at speed down the corridor, with Jay flapping behind.

Feeling glad that he'd done all those sit-ups; Jay could still only just bend double to squeeze the suit material on his leg to slow the flow of oxygen out of his spacesuit. The boot had dissolved, and the foot made direct contact with the Eater. A vast emotional wave hit Jay. The terrible feeling of loss, grief, loneliness and anger at being attacked, but also a millennium of boredom. As the air got thinner, the alarm got quieter. Jay was only vaguely aware of being bounced around. Grey out...slowly fading away.

"That bloody alarm is too loud and annoying... Wait, What?" Jay was now in the open airlock that is also open to the Flying Bog. He looked down to see his foot sticking out from the missing boot and where part of the leg of the suit should be. His ears were popping.

Cold. Everything felt cold. Especially his foot. The other Jays turned off the O2 tank remotely, the same way they had opened the valve. If the airlock was open, what is holding in the air? The green light was the first clue. The Eater had brought him back and then completely filled the corridor keeping the released oxygen in. Jay took off one glove, pushed over to the back of the Eater, lightly touched its back and sent thoughts of gratitude. He then shut both airlock doors and slowly fought his way out of what was left of the suit. The memory of the massive flood of emotions hit him again, and he began to sob hard. "I don't know about you guys, but I will help this Eater any way I can."

Jay unpacked the spare suit, filled and prepped it, cleaned himself up, had some food, and slept.

Later, as Jay was floating in his enclosed net hammock, he thought he heard something. He put his hand on the wall of the Flying Bog and could definitely feel an irregular vibration. Jay prepped himself, got into the spacesuit and

cycled through the airlock. The corridor was empty. He jetted along it with a lot less bouncing off the walls this time. Every now and then, he stopped and put a gloved hand on the wall to see if the vibrations were stronger. He came to the end of a corridor, and it looked as if it was crimped shut. As if a big, strong hand had pushed the unknown metal together. He went up and across the corridors and found the same thing. The passages, that had been open to space, were now crimped shut. "Ok, what are you up to?" The vibrations had stopped and the Eater soon found Jay once again.

"Hello mate, thanks for getting me back to my ship in time."

The Eater turned away and slowly moved off down the corridor. Jay followed, fearlessly. They went into a large room with a White Parallelogram, but it looked wrong; it was a dull off-white, not the usual bright white.

The amorphous shape of the Eater wrapped its body, but not its mouth, over the Parallelogram. It convulsed once and then got off. The Parallelogram was now bright white again. The Eater waited. "What did it want?" Jay thought. "Nope, the wrong question; what did I want?"

Well, it would be nice to get rid of the suit rather than have to keep running back before I am asphyxiated. Jay turned so the dump valve, from one of the tanks in the box on his back, faced the Parallelogram. He put his helmet against the side so it would conduct sound when he shouted the word 'oxygen', then he opened the valve for a few seconds.

There was a flash; luckily, not the type that ignited oxygen. The Eater brushed up against the machine, and constant light came from the Parallelogram. Jay was blown out the door and off down a corridor by the continuous gas flow. It took a while for the atmosphere in the round ship to stabilise. Jay kept the suit on because the ship was still near absolute zero temperature of space. The Eater led Jay to the power systems for the ship. He recognised the mash-up of Black Ship, Lumpy and Spikey technology.

Jay inspected the systems for about an hour before he spotted the mistake. He noticed that two components were the wrong way around and it seemed as if they had been deliberately sabotaged. He swapped them back, went to the control panel and pressed start.

A hum began to rise, and lights came on. It was time to inspect the Environmental Controls, and it seemed he could now read this language, helping him to understand what the equivalent scales were for temperature and humidity. One control was labelled 'spin gravity'. Was that part of the bite or not? There was only one way to find out. He pressed the screen area, and it flashed orange several times. He pushed the second button, and this did the same. The third button on the screen was big and purple and also flashing orange.

"Yes, I am sure," and he pressed it.

Lights flashed, and he could hear a whooping sound through the new atmosphere and his suit. Nothing happened for a minute, but then the control panel moved towards him and slowly pushed him back. A ping noise went off in his helmet, causing him to turn to the Eater. Jay actioned, pointing back towards his ship, before returning to the Flying Bog.

After some rest, Jay woke up in a funny position in his hammock. Due to the spin gravity building up since going to sleep, there was now a down direction in the Flying Bog. Living up to its name, Jay enjoyed the facilities and a shower that was now working properly.

The handshake (now working) from the Round Ship confirmed the atmosphere was safe with tolerable temperature and pressure. Jay still held his breath when the outer airlock door opened into the Round Ship for all the good it would do. He wore his warm sailing clothes and gloves because the air might be up to tolerable temperature, but something as massive as the ship would take quite a while to get from near minus 273 to plus 20 centigrade.

Jay found the Eater again, dropped an insulating mat on the floor, sat down and asked in all the languages he now knew how he could be of service to the Eater. This did not work, but the Eater turned and brought its side within range of Jay's reach. Jay put his hand on the shimmering surface and thought, "How can I help you?"

A voice in Jay's head said, "It's very doubtful that you can."

Jay thought, "How do I understand the terrible things that have caused you so much grief?"

The reply was, "For that, I would have to eat you."

Jay withdrew his hand and paused, taking a few long, deep breaths. He steeled himself, putting his hand back, and bravely said, "I consent to you eating me."

The Eater moved very quickly. It spun to face Jay and opened the vast mouth of black pointy teeth. The inside of the mouth seemed to go on forever onto blackness. Jay felt a strong pull from inside the mouth, and the last thought he had was, "Is that a black hole?"