

There's always a sense of weightlessness as you descend. The metal husk that you're sealed into prevents any source of light from creeping in. It's supposed to be because they want to make sure nothing from the foreign environment creeps in. If you close your eyes, you can feel like you're among the stars.

I do this every time. The rusted metal of the interior of the ship fading away as I float. The inside is pitch black. The regulations state that power is to be preserved at all costs until the mission begins. Outside I hear the rush of water as the ship breaks the surface and continues its descent.

The metal creaks and groans as the pressure builds on the exterior. Each small fracture could be the last one, but it holds as well as it can.

The vessel usually descends faster, the water must be thicker here. I wait for it to hit the floor, the signal that I'm still inside. But I hear nothing. Closing my eyes I drift back towards the stars.

I don't know how much time passed, but I'm jolted out of my day dream as I feel the vessel hit the ground. A low groan that reverberates through the whole thing. Steadily, the ship settles into the dirt.

The door that locked me in my room finally unseals. The light from the main section pooling into my room. The dull fluorescents buzz to life as power is activated. The room I am in is miniscule, a small cot bolted to the wall and the seat they strapped me into. The engines sputter as they begin their motion. The vessel is lifted from the floor, grinding against the sediment and rocks as it barely holds itself up.

The restraints holding me in the seat are removed. I am allowed to enter the other room. Within two steps I am at the doorway. The other room is not much larger than my sleeping quarters. I can spread my arms and touch each side. As soon as I cross the threshold, the door into my quarters shuts and seals itself. They don't want you to slack off when on the clock.

The front is filled with old measuring devices detailing things like oxygen levels, distance, depth. Everything they could want me to know as I travel. A small view port is stuffed in the center of everything. Outside the vessel is nothing but darkness, barely illuminated by the front lamps that are attached to the front.

A chime sounds, followed by a friendly voice coming from one of the speakers.

"Greetings, Employee Seven Thirty Four." It pauses. Waiting for a response. Whoever recorded this didn't even bother to change the employee number over to mine. It was a quick turnaround from the last person. They don't let anyone meet, just shoving you inside the ship and hoping you make it back with whatever they are looking for.

"Your orders should be coming through now." The voice chimes in again. As soon as it shuts off, a printer lazily shoved into one of the alcoves spits out a long series of papers.

The higher ups have said that there's a deposit of some alloy buried deep in the ocean here. I'm to get as much as possible and bring it aboard. It'll supply the whole ship for years if they can sell it. Everytime they say I'll get a cut of the profits, but it's never reflected.

I started doing these missions to earn a place to stay aboard the Thessalia. Not even a place with a view out into space. Just a small inside area where I can sleep my days away. I was told it was going to take about five missions to be able to get the down payment on that place.

This is my eighth mission, and they say I'll have to do at least five more to afford it.

I crumple the paper and toss into the corner. The ship pilots itself. I'm just here to make sure everything runs smoothly. They expect the ship to reach its destination in about three standard days, and have supplied me with oxygen for just that long.

Schedules are tight, and they don't want to afford you any additional luxuries if it can be avoided.

The next few hours pass by without much incident. The voice chimes in during meal times and extends out a small food packet. Some slop that fits the daily necessities for a healthy diet.

It tastes like warm sandpaper, but it keeps me going.

A few minutes after the meal is delivered the lights flicker. Slowly they dim until they are out. I hear the low rumble of the engine die down. The viewport that gave me my small glimpse of the outside world is dark again.

I scramble towards the power systems. This isn't the first emergency repair I've had to do. I go through the routine, checking for loose wires and bolts. Making sure that things are using the proper voltage. All the stuff they teach you before you set off on your first mission.

The repairs don't take that long. Fifteen to twenty minutes at the most. I operate almost exclusively on muscle memory at this point. As I slam the electrical panel shut, the lights return with their sickly yellow glow. The door to my quarters is unsealed and opened.

"Please enjoy your corporate mandated fifteen minute break." The voice is pleasant and soothing. Trying to make it sound like this isn't something that had to be forced onto the companies. I take one step towards the door. Hoping to snag an emergency meal packet to tide me over until the next one is delivered. But before I can step through the door, it reseals itself.

"Your break is now over, please return to monitoring the systems."

I slump into the corner of the room. Watching as the system glides along the ocean floor towards its destination.

Day and night blend together after a certain point. Without a direct source of light or people going about to tell you when it is, you start to lose track of time. For a while I stare at the clock on the wall. It's hands haven't budged in what feels like hours. I don't know if its broken or just me imagining things.

These vessels are old. Supposedly refurbished and renewed after every mission, but no one has been able to verify it. The higher ups are supposed to disclose when you are put on a new vessel. Each new mission moves you up in a queue to get the latest model, but I have yet to see if I will ever get one.

The lights dim as the door into my quarters unseals. I wait to make sure that there isn't another failure happening. Once everything feels safe I retreat into the confines of my room. The door reseals itself. A measure to make sure extra work isn't being done. Eventually I drift off into sleep.

The next morning, I am awoken by an alarm. It feels earlier than normal. Sitting before me is a small platter that descended from the ceiling. On the platter is a small cut of meat. Actual meat that seems have been cooked a few days ago. It smells of old garlic and a bit too much pepper. But it smells like something. There is even a small set of silverware set aside against it.

A small voice crackles in from the ceiling. "We remember this day, for the home we left, and the home we have yet to find." It's not the same false pleasantries that the main voice gives. This one is tinged with a sense of sadness. "For this Dispersion Day, please enjoy a taste of something we left behind." The speaker crackles again as the voice disappears.

I stare in silence at the meat for a moment. They haven't given us anything like this in years. I wonder what they took out of this in order to add this small luxury.

After a moment of contemplation, I tear into the meat. It is tough and chewy, like eating a solid block of fat. Swallowing it takes extra effort without water. As soon as I place the silverware back on the lowered tray, it lifts itself back up into the ceiling.

The door separating the two rooms unseals again. The pleasant voice returns. "We hope you enjoyed your Dispersion Day Meal! Please return to your station."

I trudge my way out of my quarters and back into the observation room. Through the viewport, off in the distance, I can see a small gleaming silver pile. The ship guides itself towards the pile.

“Arrival at destination in two standard hours.”

I stand at the view port and watch as the pile grows larger. The lights on the exterior shine off of it as we approach.

After the approach the vessel comes to a halt. Two mechanical arms reach out of towards the pile, before stopping in place above them. A small warning appears in the corner of my eye. One of the monitors is gently glowing red. It's bulb barely bright enough to see the bold text saying *Malfunction Detected*. I watch as it spits out a small paper.

I have to use the one emergency function of this vessel. Its supposed to be a last ditch effort in case the mission is unable to be completed.

I am supposed to leave the vessel and get what the arms are trying to collect with no regards for my own personal safety.

The paper contains instructions of how to open the emergency airlock in order to get the one suit they keep on board. As soon as it is triggered, the ship will have thirty minutes before it begins its resurface protocol.

An opening appears in the side of the ship. A small airlock barely able to hold the diving suit let alone myself sits inside.

I cross in and put the suit on. Pressing a button to let the computer know I'm ready, the door pressurizes behind me. The exterior opens letting a torrent of water into the system. “Countdown starting now.” The voice says.

I step out into the ocean. A wide open expanse is before me. I take my first step beyond the vessel. My foot sinks. The mud below isn't made to hold a person. Even through the suit it feels very different from the mud on the station. I lift my foot and move towards the pile of material. There's a sluggishness to my movements that I haven't quite adjusted to.

I push off against the ground and am no longer touching the ground. I float above the ground for a few moments before stumbling back down. Slowly I adjust my movements to the thickness of the water. I take another leap, this one purposeful. Once again I am floating. I drift towards the pile of metal.

I enjoy the sensation. It's just like descending from orbit onto each planet. The water extends so far up that I can barely see the sunlight breaking through the waves. I float past the pile and continue further away from the ship. Losing track of time, I continue to leap and float through the water.

The voice creeps back into my helmet. “The countdown has almost finished. Please make any final collections and return.”

As the voice cuts out I move back towards the rocks. They are tightly bound together. I pull against them but they don't budge.

A countdown begins, going down from one hundred. I pull at the rocks again. Harder. A single piece comes off.

“Sixty Seconds remaining.”

I clutch at it as I barrel towards the vessel. I slam my hand into the button, sealing the door. Steadily water is drained from the room and I am stuck inside again. The door into the workstation unseals. I deposit the metal into a storage chamber. Never to be seen by me again.

“Beginning surfacing sequence. Please return to your station.”

I watch as the vessel drifts upwards, slow and steady. The faint light from above getting stronger as we approach the surface.

“Please return to your room.” The voice returns, firmer. I don't want to fight it. So I step back into my room as the door seals behind me. I sit in the chair as the restraints gather around me. Once again I am stuck inside. After this mission I doubt they will let me have another mission for a while.