

502

The Society for The Preservation of Humanity had been prepared for a long time. They were also went by the acronym S.T.P.H. more often than not. Toward the end most just called them the society. Some things tend to get lost after billions of years. One thing the society made sure humanity did not lose was the will to survive. And survive they did. Humanity survived the death of the Sun, and they would survive what the society had prepared for. The heat death of the universe.

The society's enormous and nameless vessel slid through the inky blackness of the dying universe. The vessel's size was dwarfed by the immense darkness that engulfed it. A crew of three stood over the last remnants of humanity. Five hundred men and women had been kept in stasis for trillions of years. Two of the three guardians went in and out of stasis. They had been genetically engineered to be able to enter and exit stasis indefinitely. Their names were Jonson and Jen. The third member of the was not technically considered to be alive. It was the ships bio-supercomputer, that the other two simply called "Computer", though not without some affection.

Jonson and Jen's stasis beds were located to the back of their living quarters. The beds sat snug against the walls of the small sleeping room. They were called beds, but looked more like curved, glass coffins. The two guardians laid completely still in their respective beds. They both had short brown hair, Jonson's was nearly black and Jen's was the color of the fudge that Computer had pictures of in his data of the entirety of human history. They were both about the same height. They each wore a grey jumpsuit with dark blue accents on the shoulders, forearms, and calves. Computer awakened them for the last time.

“It’s time,” Computer’s voiced echoed through the ship. “Finally time.”

A red light flashed over each of their heads, then turned green and stopped flashing. The glass lids opened and the two sleepers stirred. Jen swung her legs over the side and eased herself off the bed. She had dark green eyes that were almost black. She stretched as Jonson dropped out of his bed and crawled to the sleeping room’s attached bathroom. He dry heaved over the toilet, more as a ritual than from any kind of stasis sickness. Jen smiled and shook her head. She enjoyed his little quirks. They reminded her that they were still human. He walked out and wiped his face with a stiff, sterile towel. He had icy blue eyes.

“What are you smiling at,” asked Jonson.

“Just thinking about why you still do that,” Jen answered.

“Million year old habits die hard I guess,” he said. He threw the towel down onto the bed, and mentally punched himself for not telling her how much he loved her smile. “Damn it,” he said under his breath.

“What,” Jen said as she stood up from her final stretch.

“Nothing,” he replied.

“I hate to interrupt,” said Computer, “but you two need to take in your protein paste so I can tell you why I’ve woken you up about one hundred years too early.”

“Computer,” said Jonson, “why did you wake us so-“

“Don’t worry, I’ll explain while you eat.”

“Alright, we’re going,” said Jen. She grabbed Jonson by the hand and pulled him into the dining area.

Jen squeezed a ribbon of pale green protein paste out onto her index finger and licked it off the had been trained to. Jonson sat across from her at the lone glass table in the room. He squeezed off a dollop of paste on the tips of each of his fingers, and licked them off one at a time. Jen smiled.

“I love when you do that,” she said. She tilted her head and let her chin rest in her hand.

“I love your smile,” he sputters through a mouthful of paste. Small green dots appeared on the table. He swallows hard. He wipes the table off with his hand. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

Jen laughed and placed her hand over his. “It’s fine.” She looked into his eyes. He looked into hers and thought what he saw might have been love, but he was afraid that it was just pity. It could have been pity, because she had never shown signs that she had felt anything for him in the past. Although he had only really felt something the last time that they were awake. Computer voice crackled over the room’s speakers.

“Now that the two of you have eaten, and are sitting down,” Computer said, “let’s get down to business.” Jen gripped Jonson’s hand. His eyes widened and he matched her grip.

“It’s time, isn’t it Computer,” asked Jen.

“But I still have to...” started Jonson, “I mean, how long to we have?”

“What do you have to do,” Jen asked. She squinted at him; worry crept over her face.

“Nothing,” Jonson said, “It can wait.” He put his hand over hers.

“Anyway, the event is indeed upon us,” Computer continued. “The event that the society created us to witness.”

“To survive,” Jen added.

“Indeed,” Computer said. “For that, the two of you are essential.”

Jen took her hand from between Jonson’s and stood. She walked to the door to the observation room.

“Time to get to work,” she said.

“I’ll be right there,” he said. She left the room and he put his head in his hands. “I don’t know if I can do this Computer.”

“Of course you can Jonson, it is what you were engineered and trained to do,” Computer answered.

“That’s not what I was talking about... never mind,” said Jonson. He headed for the observation room.

The impossibly shaped vessel slid through the blackness; it was the last triumph of human engineering. The vessel was an elongated rectangular form that was suspended in the center of a constantly rotating circle that was several miles in diameter. The hull bristled with antennae that continuously took in data. Some of the antennae extended several hundred kilometers from the hull of the vessel. It was the only visible light left in the universe. There were no more planets, solar systems, or galaxies. The stars burned out long ago. There was only the S.T.P.H. vessel, five hundred and two humans, an artificial intelligence and a universe that was full of nothing but darkness. There was no visible way to tell that it moved, since there were

no more points of reference. The universe was on the verge of heat death. That was what the society had planned for; not only the preservation of humanity. They needed to see what came at the end of the universe, and what might come after. That is why Jonson and Jen were there, in the vessel, as they waited for the end.

Jen and Jonson sat at their respective stations in the vessel's observation room. A long hallway connected the room to the kitchen and their personal quarters in the back of the vessel. Behind those were the cargo bay and air lock. The entire front of the vessel housed Computer, who controlled the ship, and ran the millennia spanning simulations that allowed the last humans alive to reach the death of the universe. In the middle of the observation room was a holographic map of the universe that updated in real-time with only a few seconds of delay. A tiny model of the vessel moved through the map. The blue-green light from the map fell on the backs of Jonson and Jen as they looked over the data on their stations' screens. The data poured in from the raw information taken from the sensors that fed into Computer, who then displayed the data on their screens as comprehensible information.

Jen's screen flashed and a low-pitched siren sounded with a slow rhythm. Jonson jumped up from his station and ran across the room to Jen. He gripped her shoulder as he looked at her screen. She reached back and placed her hand on his. He quickly pulled his hand away.

"Sorry, I got excited," he said.

"Don't be," she said, "it was nice."

"Oh," he answered and put his hand back on her shoulder.

The screen was divided into two halves. On the left side was the data that the sensors were gathering in real time. On the right of the screen scrolled the data from the computer's simulations. Both sets of data started to run in parallel. Jen looked back at Jonson.

"The events started," she said.

"Here we go," Jonson said. "Computer, what is the siren for?"

"It means that it is time to test the Event Barrier."

"Of course," said Jonson. He headed back to his station as Jen sat back down at hers. They pulled metal keys from pockets in their jumpsuits, and inserted them into slots just below the screens. Jen looked back towards Jonson.

"Alright, we activate the barrier on my mark," she said. Jonson looked back at her.

"Right." They turned back to their stations. The siren continued in its monotonous rhythm. Jen's count followed the beat.

"Three. Two. One. Mark."

The keys turned and clicked simultaneously. The siren stopped. A low hum spread throughout the entire vessel. The two humans listened to the hum intently, and waited to see if the means of their continued existence would start. The holographic map in the center of the room switched to an enlarged view of the vessel. A series of green check marks appeared beside it as the barrier started up. A golden-red energy barrier slowly enveloped the vessel. The barrier stopped forming. A red "X" appeared next to the holographic vessel. A newer, violently loud and fast siren blared. Jonson and Jen spun around to look at the holographic vessel. One of the

many protrusions on the hull was highlighted and zoomed in on. Jen walked over to the image to see what the problem was. Jonson moved to her side.

“What’s the problem,” he asked as he put his hand on her shoulder. She leaned back.

“This barrier projector is disconnected,” she said as she pointed at the base of the barrier projector. Jonson’s screen flashed incessantly. He reluctantly pulled away from Jen and returned to his station. He read the screen, and then turned back to Jen.

“Well, we’ve got a new problem,” he said as he gestured for her to join him. “Look at the data streams. The real time data has been coming in faster than the simulation predicted.” She took his hand into hers. He entwines her fingers with hers.

“The energy of the event is building too quickly. If we don’t get out there and connect that projector, we’ll be engulfed and disintegrate instantly,” she said.

“That being the case, who is going out reconnect that projector,” asked Computer.

Jen let go of Jonson’s hand and stepped forward. “I’ll go. I’m the better-”

Panic and then concerned flashed across Jonson’s face. “No, I’ll go. If you didn’t come back I don’t know what I would do.” He took Jen into his arms. “I need you.”

Jen pulled back and looked into his eyes. “I need you more.”

Jonson her gaze. He was sure of what he saw there.

“Besides, I’m better at space walks,” Jen said. She pulled him closer and they kissed. It was long and passionate. Jen was happy that Jonson had finally come out and said how he felt. Jonson thought of nothing but them.

Computer made a noise as if clearing its non-existent throat. “Pardon me, but I believe that we have more pressing matters to attend to.” The two humans pulled away from each other reluctantly.

“Let’s get you suited up then,” said Jonson. He held her hands, reluctant to fully let go. He smiled, yet worry still created a slight furrow of his brow.

“I’ll come back,” Jen said. “I have more of a reason to now.” She returned his smile and led him back towards the air lock that was situated between their living quarters and the stasis hold.

The vessel idled in the vacuum. A red light poured out of the air lock as the hatch slowly slid up. Jen stood silhouetted in the red light. She grabbed the sides of the air lock and eased herself into the darkness. The suit she wore was made of a thin yet sturdy material for ease of movement; tools were attached to her waist. The helmet was bulbous and completely translucent to allow for a complete three hundred and sixty degree view. The pack on her back had small thrusters that allowed her to control her movements. She slowly drifted away from the vessel.

After a certain distance she turned back to face the vessel. The blue heads up display in Jen’s helmet helped her quickly locate the disconnected barrier projector. The display highlighted the projector, and the small thrusters on her back sent her in the right direction. The vessel loomed before her. For a brief moment as she drifted freely in the vacuum, she had a sudden, small urge to turn away from the ship and drift off into the blackness.

“Have you found it,” Jonson asked, his voice came in so clear through the helmet’s speakers that it sounded like he could be right beside her. The urge to drift away left her, but also left her feeling uneasy.

“Yes. I’m moving in to connect it now. Shouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes.”

“Good. The event is happening exponentially faster. The simulations are way off.”

“Don’t worry. I’m about to save the day.”

Jen floated into the side of the vessel near the barrier projector, and immediately fastened the short safety tether to the hull. The projector was close to a meter away. She crawled along the hull until she came to the projector. The blackness behind her shifted to a dark shade of grey. She removed a tool from her waist, pointed it at a panel at the base of the projector and then slid it open. There was the cable that should be connected to the vessel. It laid there, unconnected, probably over looked by a negligent engineer during the final inspection of the vessel. She reached in and connected the cable to the projector: their salvation. She slid the panel back into place.

“That’s it. We’re connected,” Jen reported as she crawled back to where the safety tether attached to the hull.

“That we are. I’ve got green checks across the board. Now get back in here.”

Jen smiled as the thrusters on her back guided her to the red circle of light that was the air lock. She reached the air lock and when she turned to close the hatch she finally noticed the space beyond the vessel: it slowly turned lighter shades of grey. She looked on in awe as the hatch slid shut. The air lock hissed as it pressurized. She turned to the inner hatch, opened it, and entered the cargo hold.

Jonson stood in the center of the observation room, staring intently at the holographic map. Jen strode into the room, but he did not notice. She walked over to him and put her arms around him.

“I did it.”

“You did it,” he said. He smiled at her and she smiled back. He pointed at their location on the map. “Do you realize where we are?”

“That’s not important right now. We have got to get this barrier up,” she said and moved to her station.

“Right,” he said quietly. He hesitantly walked over to his station.

“Alright, we are reinitializing the event barrier on my mark: three, two, one, mark.”

Their keys clicked simultaneously into place again. The center of the room glowed with green light. The golden-red barrier completely envelopes the vessel. It clings to the hull and protruding antennae. It was a new light in a swiftly brightening universe.

“Some kind of video file opened to me when the barrier activated,” said Computer.

“Let’s see it,” said Jonson.

The room darkened as the holographic vessel morphed into the face of a man. Jonson and Jen turned to look at the new projection, a look of shock on their faces. He was a smiling and bearded man with kind eyes. The blue-green lines that made up the man’s face moved awkwardly as they imitated his lips and he began to speak. Every wrinkle and hair was

reproduced in the hologram. His voice poured from the vessel's speakers. The computer adds in their names.

“Hello [Jonson] and [Jen], I am Edward Holmes, the founder of The Society for The Preservation of Humanity, and I would like to congratulate you on successfully attending the vessel to the very edge of the universe and time itself.”

Jen and Jonson approached the holographic face in the center of the room hesitantly. They stood before the face, and looked curiously upon it. Jonson reached for Jen's hand, unable to look away from the man's blue-green face.

“It must be fantastic; to be able to witness the absolute end of everything. I wish that I could witness it with you. If I am right, however, then this is not the end. Not the end for the universe or the end for humanity.”

Outside the vessel, the color of the universe turned a neutral grey. The golden-red light of the event barrier grew less intense as its surroundings lightened.

“If my theory is correct, the heat death of the universe is not merely an end, but a new beginning. The tremendous amount of energy that will be released will generate a second big bang. Or maybe the millionth. There is no way of knowing how many times this event has occurred before.”

Edward's face minimized, and a holographic image of the Earth appeared beside it. The two humans' eyes widened at the sight of the birth place of their race. Jen leaned in towards Jonson.

“Oh my, it's beautiful,” she whispered in his ear.

“Yes. It is,” he whispered back. Edward continued on.

“You are probably wondering why I show you the image of our long dead home. Your vessel should now be at the point in the universe where the Earth was long ago.”

“I knew it,” said Jonson.

“Let’s just say we ran simulations, and this is the point that the Earth would be at if it still existed, when the vessel reaches it. All this has been done to help emphasize your new mission, which will commence once the two of you and your five hundred wards on the vessel have survived the heat death and second big bang.”

Jonson and Jen looked at each other in surprise.

“What could we possibly do after the event,” asked Jonson.

“I think that should be pretty obvious,” replied Jen.

“You [Jonson] and you [Jen], along with the vessel’s computer will be responsible for carrying the entirety of accumulated human knowledge into the new universe that is born out of the old one. The you and the chosen five hundred will restart the human race, and with the nearly countless years of knowledge at your disposal, you will be able to guide this new human race and avoid the mistakes that the old one made.”

“Now that you know your continuing mission, I hope that you will perform it with honor and wisdom. Good luck.”

The face of Edward Holmes dissolved, leaving the room dark for a few seconds. The map of the universe blinked back into existence. Jonson let go of Jen’s hand, returned to his

station, and sat down hard. He put his face in his hands. Jen walked over and rubbed his back. He looked up at her. His eye seemed to be lost.

“This is crazy. How are we supposed to lead an entire race?”

“It will be fine,” Jen answered. “ We have Computer to help.”

“Always happy too,” said Computer.

“Don’t forget the five hundred unique minds in stasis.”

Jonson stood up and put his arm around her. “I guess you’re right. We’ll be-”

“Here we go,” Computer said with electronic excitement.

A new siren sounded with a fast tempo, yet unobtrusive pitch. Jonson’s screen flashed. He let go of Jen and sat down at his station.

“Look at this data,” he said, and waved his hand for her to join him. She walked over to his side and looked intently at his screen. “The event is happening days ahead of what the simulations predicted.”

“Not only that, but look at the increase in energy. It is five times greater than predicted.”

She looked back at Jonson and frowned. He took her hands in his. She glanced back at the screen.

“Will the barrier be able to compensate for such an increase?”

“Of course. It can compensate up to ten times the predicted event energy.”

“No it can’t.”

“I know, but there is no use worrying about it. Whether the barrier holds or not, whether we make it through or not doesn’t matter. Either way, we have to see this thing to the end. Together.”

As he said the word “see”, panels on both sides of the observation room slid back to reveal their view of the death of the universe. Chairs with safety harnesses rose from the floor beneath the observation windows. External cameras allowed them to view the event without it being obstructed by the barrier. The universe was the lightest shade of grey that human eyes had ever seen, but not quite fully white.

Jonson and Jen marveled at the sight as they strode hand-in-hand toward the observation window next to Jen’s station. Outside the window the universe turned fully white. They took their seats and strapped themselves in. The white light grew more intense by the second.

Jonson raised his hand to shield his eyes from the light. He stretched his other hand towards the window and the universe.

Jen raised a hand to shield her eyes from the brilliant white light. She stretched out her other hand and intertwined her fingers with Jonson’s.

The observation room filled with the white light until there was nothing else. The vessel was engulfed in the death cry of the universe. Then it cried again.