


THEY STILL CALL THEM THE COAST GUARD, EVEN THOUGH THE COAST THEY'RE GUARDING IS THREE OR FOUR HUNDRED MILES OUT IN SPACE.

IT WAS A LOT CHEAPER TO ABANDON A SHIP THAN RETROFIT AND REFUEL, ESPECIALLY THE OLD-STYLE NUCLEAR JOBS. A LOT OF THE INDUSTRIALS JUST DUMPED THEM IN DECAYING ORBIT, WAITING FOR GRAVITY AND ATMOSPHERIC BURN-UP TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEM.

THAT WORKED UNTIL ONE OF THE FLAMERS CRASHED HALF-INTACT NEAR A COFFEE PLANTATION ON THE ISLAND OF HAWAII. THE RADIATION KILLED THE INDIGENOUS POPULATION AND MADE IT DAMN NEAR IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND A GOOD CUP OF KONA.

SO NOW THE COAST GUARD TAGS THE FLOATERS AND BLASTS THEM BEFORE THEY CAN DECAY INTO THE ATMOSPHERE. KEEPS THE WORLD SAFE AND GIVES THE GUARD BOYS SOMETHING TO DO BETWEEN POKER GAMES.

"PROBE AWAY"




"SEE THAT, LYLE? THE DOOR'S BULGING OUT LIKE SOMEBODY WAS TRYING TO BLOW IT FROM THE INSIDE."

"THAT'S CRAZY. THAT'S A DRYDOCK PORT OPEN THAT IN SPACE AND IT'S BYE-BYE ATMOSPHERE."

"YEAH, AND THE PILOT'S POD IS GONE, TOO."

15:32:10

"3...2...1...  
KAPOW!"




"GOOD SHOT. TAKE 'ER IN."

15:33:08

"OH, JESUS--"


"STUPID BASTARD WASN'T EVEN WEARING A PRESSURE SUIT--LIKE HE WAS COMMITTING SUICIDE--"



"HURRY IT UP. THIS THING'S STARTING TO HEAT UP."

15:34:55


"IS THAT BLOOD?  
I THINK THAT'S  
BLOOD, MAN!"



"I'VE SEEN THIS BEFORE--IT'S LIKE MEGA-CLAUSTROPHOBIA OR SOMETHING--ONE GUY SNAPS AND TAKES THE REST WITH HIM."

15:36:20


"FINALLY GOT A READ ON THE VESSEL. STANDARD TYPE FIVE, NUKE ENGINES, OLD STYLE TRANSMITTER--DID A LOT OF DEEP SPACE TIME. TOTAL BUCKET. NO WONDER THEY DITCHED IT--"



"WAIT A MINUTE. I'M GETTING SOMETHING ON THE MOTION DETECTOR."

15:38:44






"LOOK AT THOSE HOLES. WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT?"

"THREE METERS AND CLOSING."

"WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR MYSTERIES. HULL TEMPERATURES UP ANOTHER 50 DEGREES. IT'S GONNA START FLARING ANY SECOND."


15:40:01



"--BACK OFF!  
BACK OFF!"

"IT'S JUST A DAMN CARGO CARRIER, MAN!"

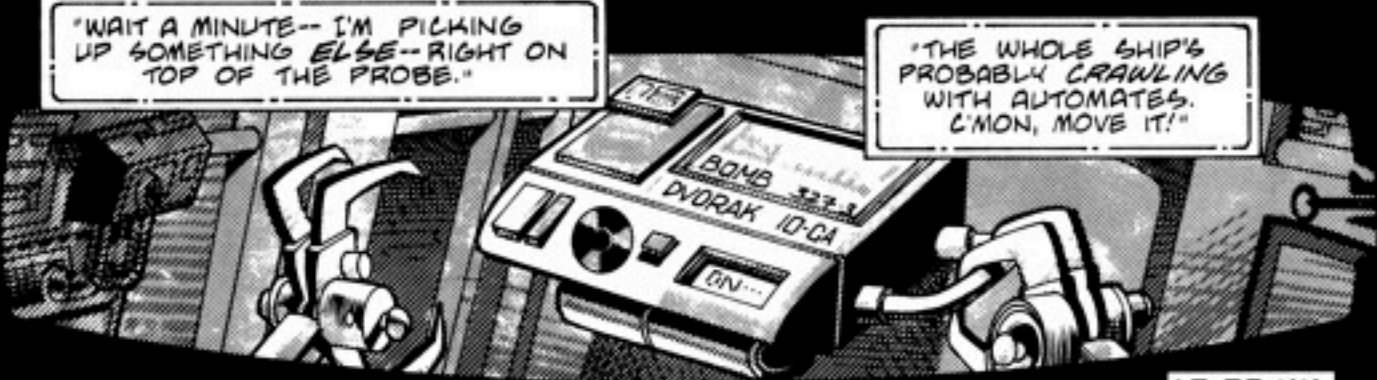
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"WE MUST HAVE JOLTED IT WHEN WE BURNED THE AIRLOCK."

"LOOK, THE MANUAL SAYS CHECK FOR SALVAGE. I DON'T SEE ANY SALVAGE. OKAY. SO PLANT THE DAMN NUKES AND DUST THE DAMN THING."


15:55:06



"WAIT A MINUTE-- I'M PICKING UP SOMETHING ELSE-- RIGHT ON TOP OF THE PROBE."

"THE WHOLE SHIP'S PROBABLY CRAWLING WITH AUTOMATES. C'MON, MOVE IT!"

15:59:44



"DID WE GET A COMPLETE HISTORY FROM THE ONBOARD? I THINK COMMAND'S GOING TO WANT TO SEE SOME HARD COPY ON THIS TUB."

"I PULLED EVERYTHING IN THE QUEUE. THAT BETTER DO IT, 'CAUSE AS THEY SAY DOWN SOUTH--"

"HASTA LA VISTA!"

PROBE  
TWENTY METERS  
AND CLOSING.

DAMN, THESE  
CONTROLS ARE  
SLUGGISH.

YEAH?  
THAT'S WHY WE  
STILL HAVE JOBS.  
COMPENSATE, BOY!  
COMPENSATE!

TEN  
METERS AND  
CLOS-- TOO FAST!  
SLOW IT DOWN,  
FOR CHRIST'S  
SAKE!

I'M  
TRYING--  
SOMETHING'S  
INHIBITING  
THE LEFT  
RETRO!

I'M KICKING SOME  
TECH ASS IF THEY MESSED WITH  
THE RETRO ENGS.

AIRLOCK  
DOORS OPEN.

WHAT IN  
THE HELL--?

IT'S  
IMPOSSIBLE--

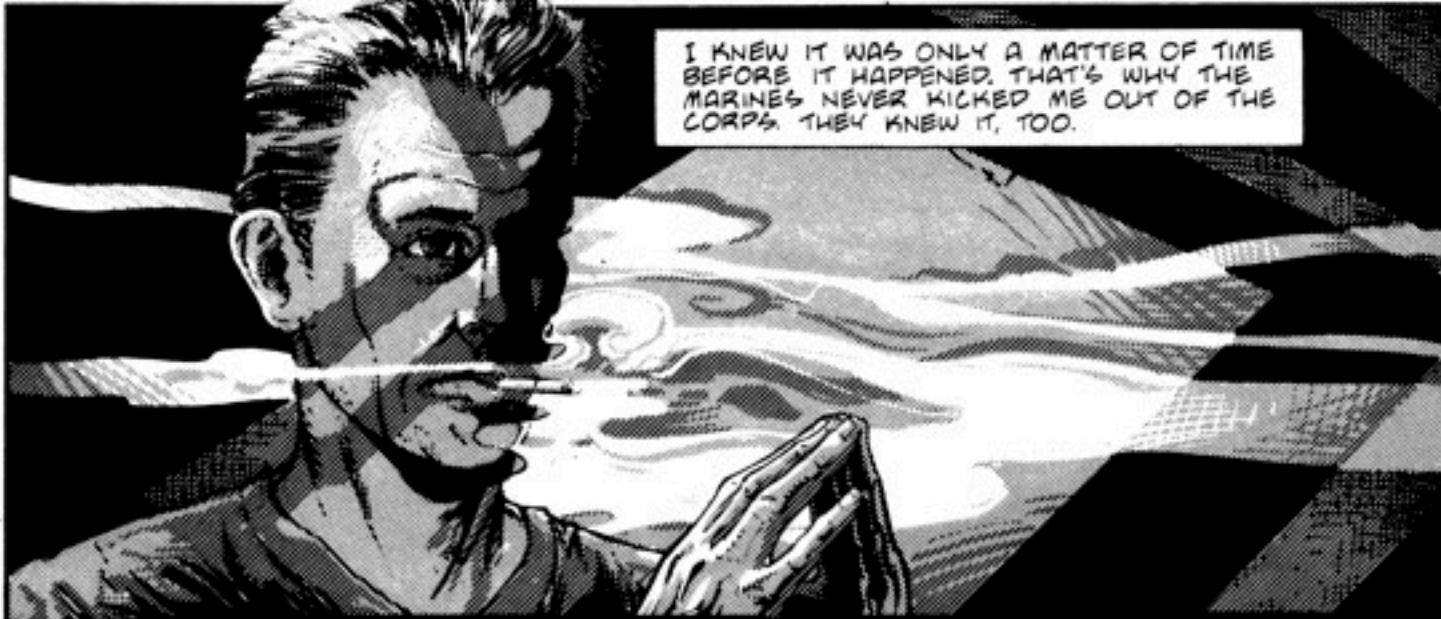
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I KNEW IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE IT HAPPENED. THAT'S WHY THE MARINES NEVER KICKED ME OUT OF THE CORPS. THEY KNEW IT, TOO.



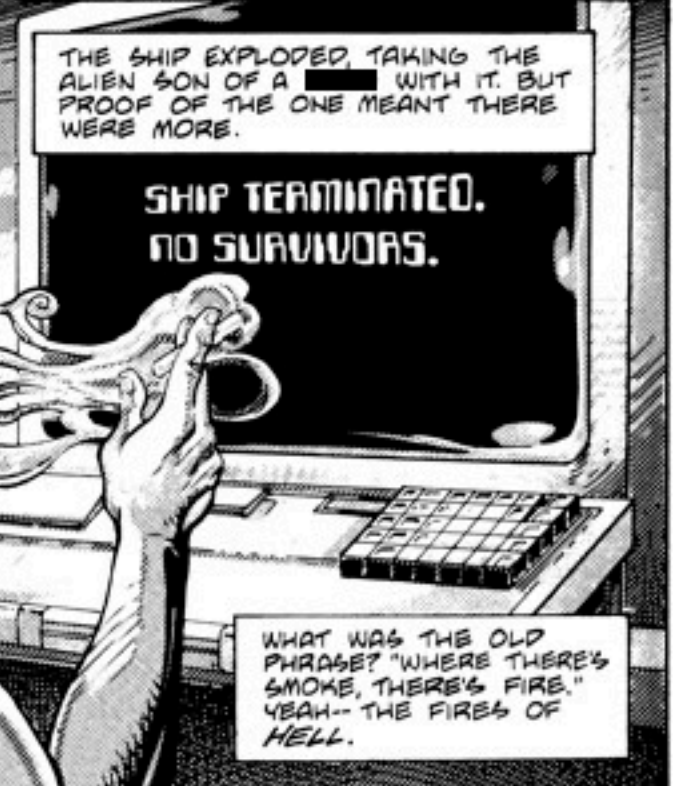
I SAW A GUY TEAR HIS SUIT ONCE. HE HAD TIME FOR ONE SCREAM--THEN HIS BLOOD BEGAN TO BOIL--



ALL THINGS CONSIDERED THOSE BOYS ON THE COAST GUARD SHIP WERE LUCKY.



PROBE SHIPS WERENT DESIGNED TO WITHSTAND A HULL BREACH. THE ALIEN WAS CLEVER, BUT NOT THAT CLEVER.



THE SHIP EXPLODED, TAKING THE ALIEN SON OF A [REDACTED] WITH IT. BUT PROOF OF THE ONE MEANT THERE WERE MORE.

**SHIP TERMINATED.  
NO SURVIVORS.**

WHAT WAS THE OLD PHRASE? "WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE." YEAH-- THE FIRES OF HELL.