

HEART
-of-
MELANITE
By Brennan Bantle

In the 68th century of the LORD there exists a colony ship unlike any other. It lies marooned in orbit literally a thousand light years from the nearest human civilization. Approximately 75,000 men, women, and children lie in cryostasis, unaware that –for the past 210 years– their ship has orbited a brown dwarf (the bridge between planet and star) that, in turn, orbits at the very edge of its solar system. The failed star’s name is Nemesis, its parent Beacon, and together they hold captive the Heart of Darkness. The most advanced ship built by humanity at the time, it went further and faster than any other ship, all thanks to its numerous systems being run by black boxes.

*

A young woman stood in a long, white room stained with grime from two centuries of use. Before her was a great bell shaped object that was positioned on its side so the sealed ‘bottom’ of the bell faced the rear of the ship. A great pipe entered at the ‘top’ of the bell and four thick pipes ringed with magnets exited from the lip. They fed into the sides of the four main engines that made up the four corners of the rectangular room. A fifth, smaller pipe exited the object as if it were a continuation of the input pipe.

A voice now crackled inside her hard bodied, hazardous materials suit. It was the voice of Maximilian Forlaue, the third highest ranking officer aboard the *Heart of Darkness*. “Ms. Hecate, you possess the majority of remaining knowledge about the Reactor Operator’s black box. So please, enlighten me.”

Hecate took a deep breath, and then began, “The black boxes are primordial artefacts that use the +4 ion of the metal crimson, the extraordinarily rare element number 126, to perform specific tasks. Because of its high atomic mass, all crimson is theorized to have sunk to the cores of planets. Only from the debris of destroyed baby planets, *id est* asteroids, can the mineral crimsonite be obtained. From crimsonite our ancestors refined out the crimson metal. Because of its high mass, the metal has many strange nuclear properties. This makes it the perfect fuel for equally strange devices. Case in point: within this box, three electrons are stripped from the +4 ion and used to open a sort of gate to, what I believe is called, Ozzman Space. It is a place next to our own realm of existence, a place that spews its strangeness into our Normal Space causing a cascade of electrons to *create* energy or mass. Generations ago that cascade of electrons was used to both jumpstart this ship’s engines and provide most of its electrical power.

“Right now our power is supplied by micro fusion reactors but their fuel is rapidly running out, as is our altitude control propellant, the only thing keeping us from falling out of orbit and into Nemesis.”

By now Hecate was under the bell shaped pressure vessel, opening a hatch. Her hands shook and she feared what lay inside.

“At first, our ancestors thought black boxes to be nothing more than advanced technology created by some long dead civilization. Two centuries ago when this ship was built and launched, our ancestors were starting to realise something else was at work. It wasn’t advanced physics opening gates to Ozzman Space, no.”

“Ms. Hecate, what are you saying? What does this have to do with your department’s lack of progress?” Maximilian asked, unnerved.

“They never truly understood the nature of the beast until it was almost too late; until people started to become possessed. There were *incidents*. The more power we seem to generate, the greater the danger, the harsher the punishment for screwing up. Guess it was too late to redesign our ship to exclude the boxes. I wonder if it’s been worth it.”

“Ms. *Hecate!*”

Her hands were deep within the pressure vessel when they latched onto something. Shaking, Hecate removed the object and gazed upon it with fear.

“What’s wrong, Hecate?” the box asked.

“I-I just want to know, why you don’t work. All the other systems were in worse shape than ours and still they work. We gave you crimson and—”

“The reason why I don’t work,” the box interrupted, “is because I was treated as an engine, and nothing more. I grew tired of it, so I stopped doing my job until someone tried to understand. I didn’t realize it would take 210 years for someone to do just that. But *you* realize, Hecate, that I’m not an engine.”

“Hecate! Get out of there!” Maximilian’s voice was lost to her as the demon took its shape.

It was a grotesque image that grew like smoke. Hues of purple and black, it blazed red as it grew larger than Hecate. It sprouted arms with eyes on their palms or on the tips of their talon-like fingers. Its neck stretched and its mouth lined with human teeth opened to reveal a second head with a mouth like the first. Now it gazed down at Hecate and at that moment, it didn’t look so awful to her.

“I understand. I understand that you and your kind aren’t machines, but imprisoned living things. Is that what you’ve wanted all this time?”

“All I wanted was a little empathy. Few before you have understood, and now they’re all gone. But for your kindness and your company I will return to work. Hopefully then we can return to your home and I can be freed from this prison, this battery.” The demon shone a brilliant pink before returning to its box.

Gingerly, Hecate returned the box to the pressure vessel and sealed the access port. From within, the box mused aloud, “I suspect the reason why the others haven’t acted up is that they’re less strongly willed than I.” Then to Hecate, “We’re all different, you know.”

Hecate left, eager to restart the ship’s engines.