

## STRANDED BLIND

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

“Lieutenant Baker to the bridge,” a masculine voice sounded over the intercom. “All hands; prepare to reenter normal space.” The first officer then added, “John, you better get to engineering.”

“We’re early,” Alan Baker told John, the chief engineer, as they sat at a projection table, playing classical chess. The astrogator tapped a couple indicators on the screen to store the game and rose from the soft seat. He stooped a bit as he stood. At a height of over six feet, the low ceiling of the interstellar exploration vessel Apollo-271 – named after the Twentieth-Century moon mission project. The masle always felt he may strike one of the many exposed conduits and piping along the ceiling corners.

The hatch was short and John allowed his chess partner to go first. “We’ll have to finish that game after we enter the system.”

“I don’t know why; you weren’t in a good position.”

“We’ll see about that,” the engineer stated with a smirk. A man of average stature, he held a few extra pounds on his belly. He turned aft as Alan went forward to the bridge. Once at engineering, John pressed the button on the intercom for the bridge, stating, “Chief Strauss at post.”

“Roger,” the speaker replied.

John turned to junior stellar-enlisted, the only other person in the cramped room. Jeremy was a small, but strong man with sandy-blond, curly hair. “What’s our status?”

The apprentice technician looked the indicators over again, announcing casually, “All systems at optimum.”

The chief glanced over his pupil’s shoulder. “Good.” He took his seat in the console chair across the floor. “This being your first reentry, don’t forget to lock the chair and put that comp-pad away. The sudden jolt can be startling.”

“I remember the simulators,” he said with a slightly flushed face.

The chief knew he would have at least forgotten the pad. Jeremy slid the pad into a charge slot and both men swiveled their chairs to face aft, reaching under seat and flipped the lever that secured them in place.

Alan's voice came over the overhead speakers. "Standby; on five—four—three—two—one—mark." On 'two', the crew set their heads against headrests. On 'mark', the expected jolt took place, tugging bodies into the cushioned chairs. After a few seconds, the pressure released.

Jeremy smiled. "That wasn't as bad as I expected."

"It never is. We just harass the newbies, but seriously, never underestimate the inertia change, it can be bumpy." John released his seat and swung around to view his console. "Power consumption is a tad high and the reactor is running hot."

"I see that." The apprentice adjusted more coolant. "Should I reduce the plasma stream?"

"Not yet. Let's find out why we're showing the excess usage."

"The bridge seems to be pulling energy for thrusters."

John stood and stepped behind Jeremy. "You're right. What are they doing up there?" He pressed a button on his pupil's console. "Engineering-Bridge. Why are we getting a draw for thrusters."

"Not now, John," the Captain's voice stated.

Releasing the button, the chief looked back to the meters. The dampening plates were pulling extra power, as well. "We're making one hell of a turn."

"Why are we turning?"

"I know as much as you do. Relock your chair." John stepped to his, as the ship lurched radically. The lights failed, as well as the gravity and dampening plates. The right side of the chief's body slammed against the portside bulkhead, with his head striking one of the conduits. He lost consciousness before the emergency systems and lighting returned.

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The chief's head and body ached when he briefly gained consciousness again. He heard the Captain ask, "Why was he not strapped in? I had not given the all clear."

"He had to see the gauges on my console, sir," Jeremy's voice answered.

"You're proficient. He doesn't have to double check you every step of the way."

"I'm still not comfortable with the reactor and he knows—"

"Enough." The skipper then asked another in the room, "Will he be alright?"

John's foggy gaze was at the ceiling. He couldn't move his head and only the skipper and physician was in sight.

The physician admitted, "I don't know. He rapped his head hard. I need him moved to the infirmary."

"Right." The Captain stepped back, giving room for others to maneuver.

There was the sound of people moving and John lost consciousness again.

When he awoke, the chief was alone on a bed along a wall of the infirmary. With effort he pushed himself up. His strength gave out and he collapsed back to the bed. There was a sharp pain high on his right arm and he passed out again.

Waking a third time, he winced from the illumination, reclosing his eyes. Taking a few staggered breaths, John opened his eyes again, looking around the dimly lit room. The infirmary was still empty. “Samuel,” he called out. “Doctor Dennison?” There was no reply. Struggling, the chief shifted his feet off the edge of the bed and sat up. “Samuel?”

Still, no response.

Easing to the floor, he stepped through the open hatch. The hall was empty. The masle realized the dim lighting was due to power restrictions – and not for his comfort.

He cautiously walked aft. The singular hall stretched the length of the long narrow ship from the bridge to engineering. All other compartments were to either side of the one and only level. He glanced into the three open hatches he passed. No one.

“Jeremy. What happened?” he asked the air, as he entered engineering. It too was empty.

*Where is everyone?* he thought, viewing the chamber. The access panel to the reactor on the back bulkhead was open. He peered inside. It was vacant. Checking the gauges, he saw that there was no power from the fusion reactor. He rubbed his temples.

The bridge was also empty. Most of the equipment was shut down, but two computers and a few scanners operated on emergency power. Those scanners were directed to a planet within the solar system they entered. He was not an astrophysicist, but he could tell that it was not like any terran planet. It had an atmosphere of methane and other equally unpleasant gasses.

The helm panels were on limited power, giving some thrusting control. John could tell that it was not enough to push the ship into orbit around the planet or to prevent the ship from leaving the system. Given time, the vessel would speed off into space, further away from civilization.

After checking all compartments and still not locating anyone, the chief went to the forward airlock for the shuttle. The access hatch was in the ceiling and locked, indicating that the shuttle was not attached.

“What? You thought I was dead? You left without me?”

John returned to the bridge. The radio was operational. After setting the frequency to the standard communication channel, he pushed the mike switch. “Captain Jacobson, this is John. Do you read?” No reply. He tried again. No reply. He changed channels. Still nothing. Another change and still static. He tried several others. Nothing. He verified the equipment and was satisfied that they were working properly. “Comm checks fivers,” he muttered to himself.

“All right, there’s only one thing to do,” John commented to the ship in general. “I have to fix you, then go find the others.”

His mind was still hazy as he returned to engineering. He went to the tool cabinet to select a few instruments and found that the ones he wanted and several others were already removed. Concerned, he moved to the reactor hatch with a portable hand-light. Inside he could see the tools he needed for the repair.

“So, Jeremy, you did try to repair her.”

The chief crawled in. His head ached as he pulled himself into the shaft. There were no gravity plates inside and he went weightless. He had been in the small tunnel on many occasions, though this was the first time he felt cramped. He rubbed his head again and took a few, slow, deep breaths. It seemed to help clear his mind.

Looking over what Jeremy had already done, he commented, “You did good. You shouldn’t have given up. All you needed to do was adjust the A-103 points and then the GRB. There are a few things to do outside and then finish with the Plasma alignment. I’m sure it is way off now.”

After making those adjustments, the masle crawled out. The chief then went to the personnel airlock on the portside, the side the lunge came from. He figured they were hit by something that the repulser could not repel. After donning his EVA suite and decompressed the airlock, he attached the lifeline. Flipping the controls for gravity plating to the off position, he floated towards the door leading to the exterior. John turned the three handles and pushed it open.

The local star was bright as he looked out. He lowered the filter visor and exited. The heat from the yellow sun warmed the outer membrane of the life-protecting suit. The chief pulled himself along to the location of the damage, pulling along the service pack attached to a short tether at his left hip.

The damage was extensive. John saw that all the repairs were complete except for a power junction box that was missed because of its location.

“So close, so damn close. Why in the hell did you give up?”

Completing the outside repairs, John reentered the ship and finished the last adjustments. At the control panels he systematically flipped switches, bringing the ship’s reactor on line.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, noting the power levels and the consoles coming to life. “That is a pretty sight.”

Once the reactor was at full operational temperature and a few last details were done, he returned to the bridge. Exhausted, the masle eased slowly in the helmsmen’s chair. Breathing slowly, trying to relax, John lightly massaged his face.

“All right, lets turn this baby around.”

Checking the controls, he pressed the thrusters on the starboard side long enough for the ship to make a turn towards the nearest planet. Checking coordinates, he adjusted the speed and trajectory, ensuring that the vessel would be captured by the gas giant, pulling it into a casual elliptical orbit.

Once satisfied, the chief laid his head on his hands, elbows on the console and looked at the monitors. Weakly, he whispered, “Now where did they go?” He lowered his head to the console, slipped into unconsciousness.

“Nowhere John,” the Captain stated softly while standing behind the chief. The skipper then asked the physician, “He was unaware of us the entire time?”

“Completely. The damage to his brain blocked us out.”

“I’d say,” Jeremy stated from further back. “He crawled into the reactor with me as though I wasn’t there.”

“Is he dead?” the skipper asked the doctor.

Samuel removed the med-scanner from the back of the neck. “Yes, he’s gone.”

“All right. Have him brought to the infirmary.” The skipper told the rest of the crew, “We’ll have a ceremony when the doctor has completed the autopsy. For now, let’s get busy. We have a few planets to explore. Contact the shuttle and inform them that we’re on our way back and won’t need the materials as urgently.” He took his seat.

Alan adjusted the course as John was carried out. “I guess we’ll never finish the game.”

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