

STRANDED

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

“Lieutenant Baker to the bridge,” the voice of the first officer sounded over the general intercom. “All hands; prepare to reenter normal space. 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 points on the screen to store the game and rose from the soft seat. He stooped a bit as he stood. At his height of over six feet, the low ceiling of the exploration ship Apollo-132, named after the twentieth-century moon mission project, made him feel as though he was always going to hit something. With the many exposed pipes and conduits along the ceiling corners, there was always a chance.

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.” The engineer smiled. A man of average stature, he held his moderate extra weight 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 Jeremy, 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 engineer looked the gauges and indicators over again and said, “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 class,” 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 spun their chairs to face aft, reached 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 their headrests. On ‘mark’, the expected jolt took place, tugged the 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 like to 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. “The power consumption is a bit 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 are 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.”

“Turning? Why?”

“I don’t know. Relock your chair.” John stepped to his as the ship lurched radically. The lights failed as well as the gravity and dampening plates. The chief’s body slammed against the portside bulkhead and he lost consciousness before the emergency systems and lighting went on.

The chief’s head and body ached when he briefly gained consciousness. 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 know...”

“Enough. What’s happened happened.”

John’s foggy gaze was at the ceiling. He could not move his head and only saw those in his peripheral sight when the skipper asked, “Will he be alright?”

“I don’t know. He rapped his head hard. I need him moved to the infirmary.”

“Right,” said the captain and stepped back.

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.

Wincing from the low illumination in the room, John opened his eyes and looked around. The infirmary was still empty. “Samuel,” he called out. “Doctor Dennison?”

There was no reply. With a little struggle, the chief sat on the edge of the bed.

“Samuel?” Still, no response.

Easing to the floor, he stepped through the open hatch. The hall was empty. That’s when he realized that the lab’s lighting was dim because they were still on emergency lighting and not for his comfort.

He cautiously walked aft. There was only one hall and it stretched the length of the long narrow ship from the bridge to engineering. All the 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 as he entered engineering. It too was empty.

Where is everyone? He thought as he looked around. 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.

At the bridge, he saw that it was empty as well. Most of the equipment was shut down, but two computers as well as a few scanners operated on emergency power. He noticed 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, Apollo-132 would speed off into space, further away from civilization.

After checking all the 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. “Com 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 everyone.”

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 were inside the open panel.

“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 many times, but this was the first time he felt cramped. He rubbed his head again and took a few deep breaths. It seemed to help clear his mind.

Looking over what Jeremy had already done, he said, “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 out side and then finish with the Plasma alignment. I’m sure it is way off now.”

Crawling back out, the chief 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 away from the ship. After donning his EVA suite, decompressed the airlock, attached the lifeline, he flipped the gravity plates controls to off. Floating to the door leading to the exterior, John turned the three handles and pushed it open.

The stars were 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 tugging a service pack behind him, attached to his side by a short tether.

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 said 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. He was exhausted. He eased slowly in the helmsmen’s chair. Breathing slowly, trying to relax, lightly massaging 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 full one hundred and eighty degree turn.

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 slipped into unconsciousness.

“Nowhere John,” the captain said, standing behind the chief. He then asked the doctor, “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.” To the rest of the crew, the skipper said, “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 are 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.”

THE END