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The Shuttle

A science fiction story for the open minded

By

Jan Brodaty

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A science fiction novel

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After the original "Skytteln" in Swedish,
reworked and translated by the author to
something that hopefully looks like English.
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The Shuttle

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A science fiction story by Jan Brodaty

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A science fiction story by Jan Brodaty

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“Please be careful young man, you might have got a concussion. Do not try to move to fast.” The grey haired woman carefully forces his head back against the bed.

“Where am I?” The young man on the bed tries to focus her.

“In safety, please rest a little more; I have more to attend to. Just stay where you are and I will come back again a little later.” Slowly and very carefully she turns around and moves with very funny steps toward the door.

He twinkles and looks after her. What a funny door, with its rounded corners it more looks like a hatch on a ship, but he never heard it slam shut. Carefully he moves his hands against his aching forehead and let the fingers of the left hand examine the bandage, a bandage, big as a turban is covering his head. It feels like a strange hangover. It is not only the pain, it is the strange feeling that something is terribly, terribly wrong. Suddenly he starts to look at the movements of his hands. The movements feel so strange and when he relaxes his arms merely floats around. Seconds later he realizes that the gravity is either very weak or non-existent. Slowly, very slowly the memoirs come back to him in fragments. He shut the eyes and tries to reveal the secrets of his tortured head.

*

“Peter Osborne?” The gentleman in the dark suit that stands in the doorway to the small study at the university has authority in his voice.

“Sir?” The man in the white lab coat rises.

“It is a matter of extreme importance, may I come in?”

“Of course, please come in, here have a seat.” Swiftly he removes a 40 cm pile of paper from the simple chair, the only other chair in the room exempt from the very worn chair at the desk.

“Thank you.” The man in the dark suit eases the knees of his trousers before he sits. “We have followed your little game with great interest for quite a while now Mr Osborne.”

“Game sir?” The young man looks questioning upon the visitor.

“You have been working for quite a time now with shuttle simulator.”

“You are referring to the old shuttle simulator we got from the Americans? Yes it is quite a nice piece of engineering, isn’t it.”

“The one at Hendon, yes. We got it for display at the new space section at the museum. It was supposed to be used for display only but you have spent hundreds of hours to get it in working conditions. You have even improved the software in it why?”

“As I said, it’s a nice piece of engineering. It would be a waste if that multimillion investment were just to be a dead object. I wanted it to be operational, just as the Tornado simulator at the very same museum.”

“The Tornado is still in use, but the shuttle has since long been replaced by newer technology. Still you have put so much work in it and spent so much of your own money in it too.” The man in the dark suit leans his head and examines the young man’s face.

“Pardon me Sir, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Chapham, Barnaby Chapham, section manager at the Ministry of Air defence.” He reaches the young man his hand.

Peter Osborne was impressed. “A celebrity I might say. Can I offer you something?”

Mr Chapham looks around. Everywhere in the study were piles of books, maps and papers. Even on the three computer monitors was papers and book in piles a feet high or more. “Perhaps next time young man, perhaps next time. At the moment I’m more than most interested in your flight experiences. In the RAF you have piloted almost everything they have in their arsenal; fighters, bombers, tankers, even carrier based ones. You also have a good reputation as a helicopter pilot. You have piloted it all and you were offered a job as chief instructor at the advanced training and research centre when you left everything and started to study astronomy. Why this sudden change in career?”

“I have always been interested in space. My dream once was to be an astronaut, but we didn’t have a space program of our own and hoping to get a seat in the Americans was out of the question. Flying for the RAF was the best I could do and I even got paid for it. If I was to change and start to study space scientifically I had to do it now, while I still was young with a brain capable to absorb and evaluate information, after all I will be thirty next month.”

“Quite so, I’m quite impressed. It was a bald decision to change career like that. Let’s get back to the shuttle. We have had former shuttle pilots to examine it and they found it even better than before, in a fact much better. You and your colleges have made a marvelous work.”

“Than you sir, it’s a hobby we have. Like the hackers at the MIT. You know the large model railroad they have? They still keep on improving it.”

“Hackers? Hmm, do you think you could fly the real one, the shuttle I mean?”

Peter laughs. “Not a chance! This technology has been abandoned for years, besides they have pilot enough themselves over there.”

Chapham locked his eyes into Peters. “Wrong and wrong again. There is a shuttle in working condition, kept up to date by enthusiasts like your selves but pilots? No, there are not any pilots anymore. The only who could possibly fly it is almost at the age of 80. Besides he has heart problems.”

*

The light changes and Peter was snapped away from his thoughts.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you up?” The woman studies his face. “I want to make some tests. Please look at the light.” Holding a small torchlight in her hand she examines his pupils. She turns of the light. “Very good, now try to follow how I move the torch.”

He tries to follow her hand.

“No, no, just with your eyes, try to keep your head still please.”

It wasn’t easy but with some concentration he managed to do it.

“Very good and now the reflexes.” She removes the thin blanket that for some reason had stayed over his body despite the lack of gravity. It was like it had been slightly adhesive to the bed only and had kept him on place in a soft grip. She grips his left leg, lift it and bend it so the knee is at an angle. The hit from her forefinger that was so hard that it took him by surprise and he kicked of.

“Very good and now the other one. Hmm, your reflexes are very good, but I suggest you stay here for a little longer. I will be back and then we will see what we can do, right?” She smiles a tired smile, nods at him and put the blanket back over his naked body.

*

“Why on earth should I want to fly that shuttle? Are you going to make a movie or something?”

“It isn’t we that want you to pilot it, it is the Yankees, and no, it is not for a movie. NASA is in a desperate need of a pilot or a good co-pilot. You are the best to be found.”

“None of the old shuttles have been in the space for ten years now. It will take several years to form a crew.”

“You will get 12 hours, including the flight to USA.”

“Enough! Enough of this joke; I think you better leave now please, I have students to attend to.”

Mr Chapham didn’t move. Obviously it wasn’t his intention to leave. “Does the name Pegasus mean anything to you?”

“The space station? Yes of course, I have requested some data from them rather recently. Why?”

“It will be destroyed. Probably nothing will be left of it.”

“Right, now it’s enough. I really must ask you to leave. I have no more time for this joke.”

“It’s not a joke. One of the new shuttles coming in for landing got computer problems. It accelerated automatically on short final, turned and crashed into the hangar where it put everything into flames. Only one of the eight shuttles within could be saved, but it will take months to make the repairs. At the moment the station is supplied by unmanned satellites from Russia, China and Japan.”

“You are joking!”

“Unfortunately not, another predicament is meteorites that will pass into Pegasus orbit within 24 hours. The station must be evacuated and there is no transport capacity to do it.”

*

Peter feels like he got ants all over his body. He simply must get up and move his limbs. There is a slight sound from the blanket as he tear it loose from the bed in order to free himself and then he tries to rise. He feels a little dizziness as he rises. “Well at least I don’t need to be afraid to fall.” There is no up nor down, but the furniture and outline of the cabin indicated that there normally was gravity. He tries to hang motionless in the air but whatever he does he keeps moving, finally bumping into just anything in his way and then bouncing off in the opposite direction. He tries to put his feet on the floor. The old woman had actually walked on it, hadn’t she? But no success with that either. He bunched and his bandaged head hit the roof. Finally he finds the way back to the bed and let the magic blanket keep him there while he tries to sort things out. He hadn’t been down for long until the old woman appears in the door.

“You seem to be unfamiliar with zero gravity condition.” Her English is perfect with a touch of scholar.

“Yes, that is correct and now I’m hungry too. Where am I?”

“Easy now, thirst thing first. Here I brought you some food. I will show you how to eat and drink, then I will show you how to use the toilet under these conditions, it doesn’t look like you got any astronaut training.”

“No, that’s true, but...”

“Later, now, please open this container.” She hands him a plastic box the size of a shoebox.

As he opens the box he realises that there are several stains on her light green overall and he tries to move backwards as he realised it was blood.

“You must excuse me not for dressing up for dinner. We have been rather busy the last 24 hours.”

“24 hours, but...”

“Please open that box now and I will continue the lesson.” Inside the box there are a number of sausages made of plastic. “The larger one is water. You can put the end to your mouth, bite a little to open the valve and then just suck as a child from his mother’s breast. Ok?”

He nods and she continues. “Be careful with those, we recycle them. The grey one is a complete meal. It’s soft; you don’t even need to chew the meat. It is however a little thicker than water so you might have to squeeze it a little.”

“What is it?”

“Meat stew a la carte, the last one with the small things that looks like tablets is candy based on milk, better than chewing gum as you can swallow them.”

“How can they stay in the box?”

“They stick a little against each other and against the bottom of the box. It’s similar to the blanket and the bed.”

“Have you seen how I examined the bed?”

She points at a small ball in the roof. “You must excuse us for the intrusion in your privacy. You can turn it off if you want to but I recommend that you keep it on until you feel a little more comfortable.”

At this moment the old woman’s bracelet beeps. “Excuse me, I must rush, you will have to take care of yourselves a little more.”

*

During the trip over the Atlantic he tries to understand what has happened. A civil servant, or whatever he was had fetched him at the university, simply lured him into a large Bentley. After only a few miles they were waved past an enormous queue at the main road and then he and his laptop computer had been thrown into one of the RAF’s VIP plane that had landed on the closed road. The plane had awaited him with idle engines and taken off almost before the only other passenger, a RAF captain, had helped him to a chair. The laptop computer hadn’t been of much use. The battery had run flat after only twenty minutes then he had tried to reconstruct in his memory as much as he could of the manuals that was in the computer’s CD-bay. He thought that he knew more about the shuttle than most of its pilots ever had and with more than two hundred hours logged in the simulator in intensive flight he was quite confident he was at about the same level. However there was a big difference and he knew it. He had to take in all from the manuals and by learning by doing, whilst the real pilots had trainers and experienced pilots to guide them along the path. “Damn Yankees! Can’t they find a pilot among their own?”

He shrugged as he remembered Chapham’s final word. “There are 62 persons on board that station. You can take only about 20 of them back home. Someone has to do the decision of life and death. I hope you don’t have to do that decision.”

*

The meal was a fast one; it wasn’t much, perhaps not more than 300 grams including the water. He wasn’t satisfied but felt no longer any hunger.

Chewing on some of the candy he let loose some of his curiosity.

First of all, should he turn off the camera? No, it didn’t mean anything, besides if he does, the old woman probably would pop up again, worried about his health.

Behind some small hatches he finds clothes, Overalls, T-shirts and underpants. Size and cut indicates it was woman’s wear. A container behind one of the hatches is full of electronic equipment. Some of

them are rather similar to palm top computers, but he couldn't figure the symbols out. The door to the cabin is also a mystery. There are no handles or visible locks and seems impossible to open from the inside. Another problem is the zero gravity. He keeps floating around, bumping into every wall and every item that surrounds him. How on earth could she do it? The old woman had seemingly walked at the floor. The exaltation of floating around has soon changed to frustration as he kept bumping into everything. The reason to that everything had rounded off corners and that every corner and every edge was covered with a thin, but soft rubber-like material became obvious, but still he had to be careful.

Once more he examined the door. Suddenly it vanished into one side of the wall. He looked out into the corridor. It continued left and right, whatever was left or right in this weird world. He couldn't see how far it was as it was curved upwards at both ends so he supposed he was in a cylinder or a globe of some sort. There were signs on the opposite wall, some of the similar to what he had found on the frame around the hatch but they meant nothing to him. Naked as he was, exempt for the turban and some Band-Aids on his arms and legs, he decided he wasn't yet ready for any excursions, not yet and the only other person he met here so far seemed friendly enough so he backed off into the cabin again. Seconds later the door beeped a low warning and glided back again. This time he examined the surface of the door rather than the frame and he found a spot that had some indication of having been touched many times. He tried it and the door opened. He was no more a prisoner within the cabin. Again the door shut automatically as there was nothing in its way.

*

No, the Americans didn't have any active pilots that could manoeuvre the shuttle. There had been a few of them left, but all had been killed or severely injured while the unfortunate new shuttle had crashed fatally into the huge hangar a few days earlier. There were a few elderly gentlemen and a very old woman but no one of them were actually capable of piloting the shuttle any more. The only one they could put forth was an elderly man with heart problem that now went through the routines with a younger man with experiences from the new generations of shuttles only and who had barely visited this relic on the museum.

"Welcome Mr Osborne! What I have heard about you, you are more than wanted here in this mess."

"Mr Cartwright? They told me about you on the way here. It's a really soup isn't it?"

"In deed it is. You are a pilot?"

"Only of whatever RAF could offer."

"RAF? But they told me you had simulator training on the shuttle."

"That is correct sir, about 200 hours of logged takeoff's, landings and manoeuvres."

"200 hours of logged activity? That's more than most of us ever got. Skip that sir, my name is Chester but call me Chess, everyone else does and please explains to me how you got that simulator training.

Were you a part of the NASA's space program? You seem a little young to that."

"No sir, we got the old simulator sent to us in England. It's in the new space exhibition hall at Hendon. I patched it up and made it working again."

"Chess it was." He twinkled at Peter. "I have heard about the project at Hendon. You were the fellow that did that? Then you probably know more about the technology than I do. Now, here is what we are going to do. Young Campbell here will be our flight engineer."

Campbell greeted Peter Osborne, then excused him selves and left the cockpit.

"Campbell has something to work out with the ground crew and will be right back. Now here is how we will do it. There are only six hours to take-off. Take the seat and we will go through what's not in the

manuals.”

*

Peter continued to examine the cabin once more in a chase for clothes. In a drawer under the bed he found some socks, thinner one as well as rather thick one. One of the socks got in touch of the floor and stayed there. It took him a few seconds to realise the oddity since he was floating horizontally with his head barely two-foot over what was expected to be the floor. When he grabbed the sock to put it back into the drawer he found it stuck to the floor and needed some force to be removed. With increased curiosity he tried it once more. Yes, it was sticky to the floor. He tried it elsewhere in the cabin, the walls the roof, the door and even the bed, but no, it was only sticky to the floor. It was small but he couldn't resist trying it on and after some effort he had used its elasticity to its maximum and managed to get in on his left foot. Suddenly he smiled by relief, he got a point of reference as he put down the foot to the floor. After having tried it several times he was sure that it would be possible to walk like the woman and he dived into the drawer again to find the other sock.

*

“Mr Osborne?”

“It's me. What can I do for you?” He looked at the grey haired newcomer.

“My name is Taylor, major Alex Taylor. I'm coming with you as the fourth member of the crew” Chester turned around, his wrinkled face turned into a great smile. “Lex! That wasn't yesterday. What are you doing here?”

“I jumped into a plane as soon as I heard about your predicament. You need a trained flight engineer and here I am.”

It looked as if Chess considered the offer, but. “Alex, you are the best. We did great together, but it is 25 years since the doctor grounded you. I'm sorry Alex, but we can't take you in.”

“But you can't handle this duck yourselves! Please let me join in and you will at least have a little chance to bring her back.”

“Sorry Alex, even if you could I considered dumping one man already. Three might be too much. There are 62 persons up there; we have to leave most of them behind at the mercy of those meteorites as it is.” The two elder looked at each other and Chess continued. “Look Alex, this bird has been at a museum for almost 15 years. It has a ton of preservation chemicals inside that we can't wipe off. If there were time I would have her disassembled to the last bolt and let her have a real overhaul, but there is no time for that. This is an act of panic. Please stay at the control and assist us by radio the best you can.” Alex sighs heavily. “Anything else I can do?”

“Yes, tell young Peter here what you know of her that's not in the manuals, he know them backwards but you remember how we used to do it.” He nods at Peter. “You have an hour then I want my co-pilot back.”

*

“Here is an overall at your size.” The woman handed him a package. “There is some underwear too. I did see on the monitor that you found something for your feet. Good. Now, let me show you how to manage the more primitive essentials.”

Peter was very embarrassed as she helped him at the small toilet found behind one of the panels. But after all she was a doctor and there was no reason to be shy.

“With zero gravity we have to use the emergency equipment or as we use to call it, the vacuum cleaner.” She showed him how to deal with urine as well as others. “This is emergency level 1, you are lucky that we are not at level 3, then it would have been much more complicated. Actually this is one of the most energy consuming levels, but for the moment energy is not our biggest problem. Here is how you can wash up a little.” She showed him where to find a supply of wet wipe and where to dispose it after use. “Now please wait a little more. I will be back to you in half an hour or so.”

“I would ask you...”

“Please, not now, I will be back.” Having said that she vanished out through the door.

Alone again he dresses. The overall fit him rather well and it was a very comfortable stretch material. He continues his examination of the cabin and standing at the floor the soft railing around the room suddenly made sense to him as it was far easier to move around with something to grab on. Once more he examines the door. It was about one decimetre thick. It didn't look like metal but it gave an impression of great strength. This time he passed through it and entered the corridor. He jumps off as the door slides shut behind him. With a feeling of panic he studies the door from the outside. There are symbols similar to those found on the inside. He tries a spot that had some traces of had been touched frequently and the door opens again and some of the symbols above the door changes colour. With the knowledge of how to open the door he continues down the corridor.

*

“Two hours to take off, what do you think, can we do it?” Chess looks into Peter's eyes.

“Are there any alternatives?”

“For those in Pegasus? No.”

“Why on earth did they send up that much people there. The station is only 50% completed and not entirely operational.”

“Some of them are scientists, others are technicians working on the assembly and then there are ten tourist as well.”

“Tourists? What the hell do they do up there?”

“They helps to pay the bills and it was supposed to give goodwill to the project as well.”

“Goodwill? Not any more, if something happens to them it will send the space program down the drain.”

Chess was just going to answer when he lifts a finger and listens to his headset. After acknowledged the message he turns back to Peter. “They are unloading a new set of launch rockets from two aircraft that just arrived. They found some problems with the old ones and want to change.”

“Now? There is time for that?”

“There must be. I'm happy that they do it. I imagine they known the problem for a long time and if the rockets hadn't arrived they probably had taken a chance and sent us into space any way without telling. Let's hope nobody drops a spanner now.”

*

He passed eight doors with symbols similar to those above his own and the corridor ends at a door with quite different symbols. Any attempt to open it fails and he turns back. He doesn't really dare to try the other cabin doors, but while passing his own he tries to open it and it slides instantly into the wall. The room looks the same. The colours are however totally different. Disoriented he backs off and starts to count the doors again. Ah! It was the wrong one. This was number eight from the end. His cabin was the

next one. Exhausted from the walk he tries to rest standing but as he can't relax. Despite the lack of gravity he finds his way to his bed and let the blanket keep him there.

*

"45 minutes and counting, how do you find the space suit?"

Peter answers the question and asks him selves if this isn't just but a bad dream. Makeshift adapters to make the new space suits work with the old system had been made in a hurry. A sack full of more of them for the passenger's spacesuits was on its way in a jetfighter flying from California and was supposed to be hurled into the shuttle minutes before takeoff. The new launch rockets was already connected but the explosive bolts that should release them after their work wasn't yet adapted.

"You know Peter, the cargo bay will be divided into sections with cargo nets and the passengers are supposed to strap themselves into the nets. Our oxygen system will have adapters for the new suits, if we get them in time, and in the cockpit we will run on the emergency oxygen system all the way back to earth, just in case anything happens aft. However if we doesn't get the adapters in time we can just as well stay where we are. We will not be able to communicate with the cargo bay since our electronic wizards hasn't solved the problem yet and are not likely to do so before takeoff."

"It may be just as well I guess. What really gives me the creeps is who is going to do the selection up there. Let's say we manage to get 25 on board, who will tell the rest?"

"I understand your problems young man but what really worries me is the ton of preservation chemicals we carry inside the hull. I have no idea how it will affect the shuttle nor has the engineers"

"You really know how to pep someone don't you."

"I just heard that the Chinese are launching their single shuttle by now. It's small and can take only four; two of them are the crew. Perhaps they can take some more in their cargo bay, but I don't know what possibilities they have. We had worked together so they are using the same connections for communications and oxygen as we and I have heard it's not the first time they will dock into the Pegasus."

*

"Is this a woman's cabin?"

He only got a short nod as an answer.

"How do you feel now? I know you have been scouting around."

"I feel good, but my brain hasn't yet accepted to trust on the eyes to determine what is up and what is down."

"It is the same for me. We had to stop rotation as it nearly tore us apart. Now we will have to fight zero gravity while the engineers are doing the necessary repairs."

"Am I onboard of Pegasus?"

The woman shakes her head. "Give me your arm please." Then she snaps a bracelet around his wrist.

"It's a bio monitor. It will send me your medical status and position too if needed."

"You didn't give me this before?"

"It became available only a few minutes ago. Now, please take it easy and I promise I will be back within half an hour." Having said that she disappears once more.

*

The acceleration was much more violent than he ever could imagine. He was one of RAF's top pilots and four times a year he used to report back to service for exercise and to act as an instructor as well. He

even had to use the rocket chair once in order to rescue himself but never he had been near anything like this. It was like he was shot into the sky by a live volcano whose flames followed him and rattled him around all the way into the space, then came the silence. There was a vibration in the shuttle and then silence again.

“There goes the launch rockets. The solid fuel isn’t more stable than firecrackers and I hate them” Chess turned toward Peter. “You fainted didn’t you? Ah, well, it was the same for me the first time. There is nothing like it is there? Tight curves in a jet fighter are nothing compared to this.”

“I thought I was well prepared but this...”

“Now let us put ourselves into orbit and climb a little. Let’s see if we can find Pegasus, shall we? Try to contact Huston while I check the gauges.”

*

Peter was shocked. He had tried to open one of the doors in the corridor that have had other symbols. Instead of open it had beeped sounds of warning and a large part of the door had flashed and became the screen of a monitor. It showed a room similar to his own but it was quite messy and large portion of the opposite wall looked like it was blasted away. The walls were covered with red stains, like a can of paint had exploded inside.

“Are you feeling well?” The woman looked into his eyes. “Look at me and take a deep breath.”

“Yes, yes I will be fine in a second or two. What has happened in here, where am I and what is this?” He pointed into the screen.

“One of my colleagues rested there, now grab the railing and try to stabilise yourself.”

*

“Huston, we got a visual, Pegasus is 80 kilometres and closing.” But there wasn’t any answer, only static filled the ears.

With open mouth Peter looks at the metal monster they were approaching while Chess was synchronising their speed. The enormous construction was bigger than Peter ever could have imagined. The solar panels were several kilometres wide and the main body of several large cylinders and globes formed a cluster and were interconnected with smaller tubes.

“Wake up Peter, we must slow down and synchronise and then we will have to go around it. The only gate we can dock into is on the other side. All the others have the newer system. Look! There is the Chinese shuttle.” He pointed at a red craft on one of the large globes. “Now, let’s see if we can find our gate.”

*

Peter had finally calmed down and the woman had kept her eyes locked into his.

“You must apologise our lack of hospitality, but we are doing the best we can during the circumstances.

Do you think you have recovered enough to give us a hand?”

He nods. “Just tell me what to do and I will do whatever I can.”

“Follow me please.”

“Where are we?”

“We are onboard Alpha 2.”

“Then it’s a spaceship?”

She doesn’t answer. Behind a door they find another corridor.

“Then please tell me at least your name.”

“Maria. Here we are. I think you can be at best service in here.” She opens a door into a large sickbay with twenty beds or more. On every bed does a thin blanket cover a body and to every face goes cables and tubes going to the mask covering mouth and nose.

“Are, are they alive?”

She nods. “Barely, they are put into a deep sleep to preserve our resources that are down to the limit at the moment. We can’t produce oxygen fast enough and we try to be careful with our reserves. Peter tries to accept the facts he are given and on the walls he finds screens showing the interiors of other bays similar to this one. Everywhere he finds bodies and in some places there are persons attending to them.

*

It takes almost an hour to get the shuttle into docking position. The docking device is on a long thick tube that stretches toward them as a tentacle.

“Can it be manoeuvred from the inside?”

Chess shakes his head. “No, it was hit by a meteorite about five years ago. Nobody bothered to repair it since the old shuttle system was abandoned several years earlier. We have to do the connection from here. Hopefully the sealing are still intact or we will lose a lot of air.”

“More good news or any more secrets you have been hiding from me?”

“Well, this tube doesn’t have room for a spacesuit, at least not with the oxygen tank in the back. If they are coming without the tank, they will have to go with only the small emergency bottle and that give them only 20 minutes to embark and connect to our system. I really hope the adapters we got will work and that they can read the instructions back there. We can’t help them. Any contact with Pegasus yet?”

“No, too much static. Huston is dead too. Do those on Pegasus know to what docking station they should go?”

Chess didn’t answer. He has his hands full in his attempt to manoeuvre the shuttle so it’s docking mechanism could lock into the tube. “I can’t do it. You must give me a hand here. Ready?”

Peter takes the small joysticks on the panel and millimetre by millimetre he adjusts angle and position. Twenty minutes later he announces. “We are in position, engage the lock!”

At the same moment Chess moves his finger to the lock-button everything explodes and their helmets slams shut automatically.

*

Some of the faces under the transparent masks seems familiar to Peter, he have seen them on television or in the newspapers. “Are they from Pegasus?”

“Most of them.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Most of them have been still on their beds since we brought them in. We have to activate their skin and muscles.”

“To prevent pressure damages?”

She looked at him, smiling as she had realised it was a joke. “No not here in space. The lack of gravity helps us there, but a little massage is good for circulation and assists their hearts a little.”

“Are you alone here?”

“At the moment, yes. Please do as I do.”

The woman removes the blanket revealing that the body was fastened to the bed with straps around wrists, ankles and torso. It was a man and he had nothing on but a large diaper. “You will have to

change that one as well. They always leak some fluid and there is nothing to do to it. First you have to unbuckle them but not totally. If they wake they can be very violent without actually mean any harm.”
“If they wake?”

“We try to keep them down as low as possible. Their biometrics will warn us and sedate them again through the mask within seconds, but still there might be a slight risk.”

He followed her moves and founds that the straps probably wouldn't lock anyone down, but merely slow down a sudden move. The diaper was removed and she showed him how to use some wet wipes to clean and gave him a small towel to use to dry and rub the skin.

It took them a couple of hours to wash and massage the twenty patients. At first he had felt uncomfortable touching another human body, men and woman alike without them actually asking for him to do it, but as she said, it had to be done and there was no one else to do it. It had been a heavy job. The lack of gravity made it difficult to find a stand while working. He tried at first to do it with one hand, the other one holding a steady grip on the edge of the bed but that wasn't the way to work, he simply had to use both hands.

Exhausted he rests on his bed after having washed himself with a large wet wipe. The woman had given him two boxes with food, similar to the first one and an extra tube with water to drink and he had enjoyed it all.

He wakes with a feeling of being observed.

“You are one of the pilots on that shuttle?” A bald man stands in the door.

“Yes I was.”

“You had one hell of a luck young man.”

“What happened?”

“We were getting into position to protect you when your damn space station opened fire against us. Naturally our defence system acted automatically.”

“Shot at you? But there were no weapons at the Pegasus.”

“No? Well a bloody larger rapid firing laser took us by surprise and no weapons you say. Ha!”

“Slowly, once again please. What happened?”

“We were going into position so we could use our shields to protect your Pegasus.”

“Protect Pegasus? How?”

“By using our shields of course. Not the whole bloody station, but the main section.”

“Shields? You have shields?”

“Magnetic one, yes of course. They can lock particles into a sphere or almost any shape. Those particles can then be used to reinforce the sphere around us.”

“Wouldn't the pressure from the meteorites push you away?”

“No, no. You see...” Now the newcomer was excited over his superior knowledge. “You see, the magnetic field forms bubbles or clusters of particles and they are highly explosive. Masses up to let say 50kg will disintegrate into dust when they hit such a bubble. We had of course to divert the whole shield away from Pegasus otherwise it would have been torn to pieces.”

“But you did destroy Pegasus anyway didn't you?”

“Destroyed? Bah! Our system did what it was meant to do. It defended itself and us. Whole our belly was exposed and took quite a few hits, that's what happened.”

“Report to Bridge immediately!” The woman had appeared in the door. Her eyes were black of anger. In his eagerness to escape the man nearly bumped into her as he darted off.

“You have rescued many from Pegasus?”

“41 but we lost over fifty of our own. It was a terrible loss and our first incident for many years.”

“You are from Earth?”

“The shuttle is badly damaged, but with our assistance it can be brought back. Are you prepared to bring it back?”

“We can’t take 41!”

“No, you will get 14.”

“That’s kidnapping!”

“If it weren’t for us none of you would have returned. We have rescued some but it was very expensive to us. We are in a desperate need for replacements. Do you prefer to stay? If so you are probably the most qualified, but then all must stay.”

“But Chess...”

“You commander? I’m sorry to say that neither he or your young engineer made it.” She looked into his eyes. “Well, are you going to stay with us?”

“We will tell!”

She shakes her head.

*

One year later a man in a dark suit stands in an open door to a study at the university.

“Mr Osborne?”

“Sir?”

“May I have a word please?”

“Mr Chapham! Please come in.”

A pile of paper is swiftly moved from a chair to the floor.

Mr Chapham eases the knees of his trousers as he sits. “We are very grateful over what you did at Pegasus. Many died, but at least we got the tourists and some of the scientists back to Earth.”

“Too many lives was lost out there. There must be a way to prevent this from happening again.”

“True, very true and I’m sure that NASA does what ever is in their power to do. I have heard that the Chinese have invented a high power, rapid firing laser to deflect meteorites. It’s a pity they didn’t have that operational. It might perhaps have saved the space station or at least some more lives out there.”

They looked at each other in silence then Mr Chapham continued. “We are so surprised that no one remember what happened at the rescue. It appears as if you alone landed on a beach, on a small isle in the Pacific after more than five days in space. You were lucky in deed. The supply with all reserves was calculated to be enough for only four days.” He shook his head. “Are you sure you can’t remember anything at all?”

Peter Osborne shook his head. “No, not a thing.”

“Neither does the others. It was a terrible storm when you landed and it went on for several days. Don’t you remember anything? I mean it’s a miracle to find an isle during that condition and to bring down something like the space shuttle on it! I don’t how you did it. We found a part of a wing and some fragment from the ceramic shield on the isle, but the rest of the shuttle was washed away to the sea with out a trace. The Yankees has an entire navy in the region and still, after almost a year they still have found nothing.” He chuckled. “You are a true hero my friend. Well can’t you here, man to man, tell me what actually happened?”

“Unfortunately not sir, it’s a total blackout.”

“Anyway I want to congratulate to your PhD examination last week. It was a brilliant work! Haven’t heard anything like it for years.”

“You was there? But why didn’t you attend to the party afterwards? It was open to anyone who participated.”

“Perhaps we can repair that little damage now, how about dinner tonight at our home? You have become a celebrity I understand and my wife is eager to meet you.”

“Tonight? It’s a short notice sir, but naturally. After all it was you who made me a real pilot of the shuttle.”

Mr Chapham smiles as he rises. “All set then. Seven o’clock?”

Peter Osbourn confirms and Mr Chapham salutes with his umbrella as he leaves.

*

Seven o’clock precisely Peter Osbone knocks on the heavy door to the Victorian villa. The door opens and a young girl greets him.

“Please come in Mr Osborne, you are expected. I’m Maria and Barney is my father. He is a little late but he will soon join us.

Her smile blinded him as a flashlight. “B, Barney?”

She laughs. “His name is Barnaby, but we all call him Barney. Please come in. Don’t stand there in the rain. May I take your coat?”

Before dinner she shows him around in the large house. “Here is the library and over there is my father study.”

He walks through the huge library. Everywhere hangs or stands models of aircraft from the first ancient one on to WWII and after, excellent and very detailed models. “So many models and so detailed. Have you father made all this.”

She giggled. “Mm. and there are more. Come, you must look into his study.”

There were more models but was baffled him mostly was a huge model of a spacecraft he never has seen.

“Do you like it?” Her eyes glimmered.

“With all this historical models, what does it do here? It’s so huge and futuristic all this details. Has he made this one too?”

“It’s mine! Actually we made it together. We had a lot of help from some friends of my father at the ministry, friends who also build models. It’s all metal and extremely detailed. I could show you the inside, but it will take an hour to open it.”

“You made this?”

She giggled again. “Come, you must see our workshop in the basement!”

When the light went on it revealed several workbenches, some for electronics, some for metal work or other crafts. He found two different lathes and to the left there was two mills, one of them computer controlled. Behind glass doors tools and instruments was stored away on very good order. He shook his head. “With all this equipment your father must be very interested in technology.”

This time she laughed. “Most of it is mine actually. My father had a carpenter’s workshop down here for his models.”

“Are you into electronics?”

“Well, more likely astrophysics. Electronics only provides tools and are merely a step on the road. Look! Here is my first real project. It’s a Collins ham radio receiver. My father and one of his colleagues helped me to modify it and to build antennas on the roof. Now it’s actually a part of a radio telescope connected to a computer in another room.”

On their way back his eyes fell on a photograph on the wall. It was a woman holding a newly borne baby in her arms.

“Maria!”

“Yes, that’s me and my aunt. She disappeared during a sail trip in the Pacific 25 years ago, only five days after that photo was taken. I’m named after her. Come! I guess mother is waiting.”

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