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Second Time Lucky

A pipe.

Of all the bloody things.

He didn't even know where it had come from, although he doubted that mattered now; it would take one hell of a plumber to fix this mess. There would be no end of teeth sucking and long, drawn-out breaths as they delivered the quotation:

“Well, sir. I'm afraid this is no small job...”

Then leaving that sentence hanging to prepare you for the exorbitant costing to come...

“... You appear to have a dirty-great hole in the side of your spaceship. It's going to be a two man job. And then of course there's the materials...”

Well, he had a section of pipe sticking out of the side of his abdomen. Maybe they could re-use that? He glanced down at the open wound, fighting the urge to play with the globules of blood that were drifting away from the hole, causing a freefall galaxy of his life to ebb away into the compartment.

Mike stifled a giggle. He knew he was going in to shock and part of him welcomed the blessed relief of unconsciousness. But not yet.

Not yet.

His one working arm tapped deliberately on the console in front of him, accessing the one system he hoped was still functioning, his other arm drifting lifelessly to his right, perforated by bone in several places. Casting one last look at the data package that he had forsaken all else to deliver. The date was wrong, he was too close. But this would have to do.

A shaking hand hovered over the send key. He closed his eyes, uttering a silent plea to a god he had never believed in, and pushed down. The effort was everything he had left.

The small dish on what remained of the Ship squirted a final burst of data towards the planet. He closed his eyes and smiled, an impressive movement of muscle that folded the majority of his face away from his jaw.

This time, he knew, as the blackness took him, as he finally gave up the struggle. This time they could get it right. This time, nobody would die.

The Ship continued its trajectory, too far and too fast to be pulled into orbit, carrying both him and the abomination he had brought with him out into the depths of space. The necessary evil a decrepit black mass clinging to the outer hull like some giant alien cancer. Mike would have preferred its death to have been slower.

With the comical smile still in place, floating in a ruined ship above the planet he had failed to save, Mike Rhodes died.

He was wrong.

Where we Were

Dennison Industries

United Kingdom

The blackness hung around him, clinging to his skin like some dank omen of what was to come. He would stay like this, he knew. Flailing around in the darkness, not knowing where to go, unsure of where he was. Maybe this was some glaring metaphor for his life? If so the meaning slid around him in the dark as an arm once again struck outwards hoping to find something to guide him, bring back the direction and purpose he was lacking.

The bloody light switch, preferably.

“You found it yet?” called a voice from somewhere in the void, the sentence punctuated by an unhealthy clang. “Ow, sunnovabitch!” it concluded.

Joel ceased his deliberate movements momentarily to stifle a sigh. “Can you see anything?” he called out to Simon, who he knew to be lurking somewhere amid the blackness.

“No.”

“Then I haven’t found it,” Joel rolled his eyes and hoped that somehow the motion would translate in the tone of his voice. “Simon, just stand still, you’re going to break something.”

Simon’s muted shuffling stopped suddenly. “You know, on reflection, we should probably have put the main power breaker nearer the door,” he mused.

“Shut up, you’re not helping.” Joel continued feeling along the wall he had found. Simon had been a stoic friend and supporter from the very beginning, helping Joel assemble

the full team once they finally received funding. He also had a knack for stating the bloody obvious.

“I’m helping. I’m giving moral support in your time of great need.” Simon was making micro-gestures to punctuate his point, unwilling to overextend his arms only to find them embedded in something expensive.

Joel was getting close now, he could feel it. He had traversed the whole north face of the lab, expertly avoiding the ranks of consoles lined up on either side, angled towards the disturbingly thick safety glass that separated the control room from the Push chamber. He knew he wasn’t on that side of the room or he would have passed the airlock already.

He was nearly there, the culmination of nearly fifteen minutes work: The Epic Quest for the Switch of Power.

Bards would sing of this.

His hand touched something directly in front of him. He probed experimentally several times before he realised that something was wrong, the structure of the material wasn’t solid enough. It was soft, like som...

A disembodied face appeared in a sudden flash of illumination only inches away from Joel’s eyes.

“Boo,” said the face.

“Yeeaaaarrgghhhgoddammnn!” replied Joel.

His fight or flight reflex kicked in, materialising itself entirely in the latter without a thought for the former. He hit the tiled floor in an undignified heap, scrabbling around for purchase and devoid of direction.

Mike hit the breaker switch that Joel had been right next to. Removing his cell from beneath his chin and flicking off the built-in flashlight in the process as all over the room fluorescent tubes popped and flickered their way into life.

“So, which one of you geniuses’ wants to tell me why you weren’t using these.” He waved the phone in front of him accusingly, resignation and amusement squirming his features in an impressive display of emotive acrobatics.

Joel was curled up into a ball several feet away. “I could have hit something!”

“Wouldn’t have been the switch.” Mike grinned, showing off the full dental plan provided to every member of the team. “You really handled that like a man, by the way. Nice work.”

“Shut up,” Joel grumbled, pulling himself to his feet. Despite heroic effort, his dignity remained on the floor.

“You jumped?” Simon yelled from his tactical position nowhere near the target. “You could have broken something!”

Joel made a show of patting himself down. “I’m fine,” he replied, masking the near-fatal shot his pride had taken.

Simon threw both arms in the air. “Something expensive!”

Joel contemplated throwing something at him. Possibly Mike.

“Children, children.” Mike smiled. “Look, the power is on, we’ve got plenty of time to get the prelim tests running before everyone else shows up. Shall we get on with some sciency stuff?”

Joel and Simon shared a withering glance.

“You know, this is why we don’t let you speak to the investors,” shrugged Simon, turning away and busying himself on the first bank of consoles.

Joel prodded a defiant finger at Mike’s chest. “One of the many reasons,” he added while turning dramatically towards the closest console. He wished he had some shades to pull on, but you worked with what you had.

The towering stick that was Mike Rhodes loomed above him, glowering at the back of his head. Looking like someone had clothed an abnormally tall scarecrow but forgotten the straw, Mike appeared to have been designed by two separate gods, one working on his skeletal structure and the other on the skin to stretch over it. There had been little to no collaboration.

“You’re just worried they’ll realise the wrong guys are in charge,” Mike chuckled.

Joel’s mind’s-eye visualised a calendar upon which ‘Mike promoted himself to boss while I wasn’t watching,’ was written and underlined in red marker beneath the photo of an empty branch upon which the kitten of his authority had once clung.

“Yea, that’ll be the day,” he joked, nervously.

Simon’s head popped up from below the console he was working on. “Looking good over here,” he panted, wiping sweat from his brow at the effort of pulling himself upright. “Shall we call the others in?”

Joel smiled without looking back. “Let’s give them a little more time to relax, I’m sure they’ve got a lot on their minds.”

Logan’s brain was mush, neural highways at an utter standstill. Several stalled thoughts had ceased honking their horns and had stepped out of the car to see what the hold-up was.

“C’monnn,” he entreated, voice breaking into a pathetic whine. His forehead pressed against the arched plastic frontage of the machine, eye line hovering just above the four foot latte that had been mocking for what seemed like his whole life.

A limp palm slapped uselessly at the row of buttons to his right. Nothing had happened in all this time. Nothing continued to happen, a hazed memory hinted that this must surely be the definition of something, but right now he didn’t care.

So he stood, propped up against the evil mechanism by his brow, one arm hanging limply while the other swatted hopelessly at his dream of clarity. Fuzzy thoughts were unable to form coherency as he stood enveloped in his own private hell.

His hell had no caffeine.

Two figures stood silently in the doorway behind him, sipping tentatively from steaming mugs.

“You think he knows there’s a kettle in here?” asked Chell.

“It’s not quite 6am. I’d say right now he knows less than usual,” shrugged Suzi, making a show of checking the watch she wasn’t wearing.

Chell pursed her lips. “That’s practically nothing, then.”

“Yup.”

The two women clicked their mugs together and retreated back into the recreation room without sparing their colleague another glance. He’d snap out of it eventually.

Probably.

Suzi slumped down into one of the settees and kicked her legs up on the arm. “No sign of Andrew?”

Chell immediately reddened, earning her a smile from the other side of the room. “Err, no I haven’t seen him yet.” She waved an arm, failing miserably to feign nonchalance.

Suzi giggled, mildly ashamed at herself for making the other woman uncomfortable, but still finding it funny.

“Urgh, if you don’t tell the big guy soon then I’m just going to have to post up flyers.”

“Oh shut up.” Chell glanced through the open door towards Logan, who was still praying to the vending machine.

Suzi sat up, swinging her heavy boots onto the floor tiles. The large metal heels making an unhealthy clang as they connected.

“Babe,” she began soothingly, “everybody knows.”

Chell saw the look and raised her a cocked eyebrow. “Everybody?”

“Apart from Andrew,” Suzi nodded.

“Apart from...”

“Because he’s an idiot.”

“Well it’s not like I’ve been advertising.”

Suzi took a swig of her tea. “You’re not subtle.”

Chell thrust an indignant finger towards the open doorway.

Suzi nodded. “Yup, even him.”

“Oh for Christ’s sakes. So why hasn’t Andrew said something?”

“Like I said, he’s an idiot.” Suzi took a large swallow from her mug, which was then raised in conclusion. “An extremely smart idiot.”

Chell sank back into her own seat and deflated, allowing air to rush through lips so tense she almost whistled. “Oh bollocks.”

“You’re gonna have to trust me here babe.” Suzi grinned, placing her mug on the floor and lounging back into the sofa once more. “I’ve known Andrew a long time, and if you want to knock something into his thick skull, you have to use a big hammer.”

Chell looked up. “How big?”

“Let’s lose a few of those buttons on your blouse for a start.” Suzi grinned.

Chell’s eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. “You can bugger off,” she said, dryly.

The laugh shot past Suzi’s lips before she could stop it. “Worth a shot!”

Chell calmly stood and walked to the door.

Suzi leaned forward as she fought to contain herself. “Oh come on, don’t leave!”

The other woman shot back a wicked grin. “Oh I’m not leaving, I just don’t want any witnesses to your ‘work accident’”. She swung the door shut with a bang.

Logan flinched.

This was it.

The world was ending.

The world was ending and it was all this bloody machine’s fault.

“What are you doing?” a rough voice echoed around the corridor, originating from directly behind him.

Logan’s hereto useless muscles tensed at once, causing him to face-butt the vending machine as his arms flailed pathetically, his right hand automatically flung outwards as he span around, ready to face his unseen attacker.

A calloused side of beef with fingers caught his wrist mid-flight and held him upright like a marionette with only one string, leaving him dangling uselessly in front of the newcomer as his hazed brain tried to take in the enormity of the figure before him.

“Oh, hey Andrew.” Smiled Logan, weakly as the large man set him down on wobbly legs.

Andrew nodded once at him, before gingerly pushing a button on the side of the vending machine with one huge finger.

“Coffee,” he growled, the bass vibrations causing Logan’s bones distress.

A paper cup was immediately ejected and began filling itself in a hiss of steam.

“I should have treated you meaner,” Logan whispered to the machine, slapping a hand against the front of the unit.

He received the bitter lava and turned gratefully towards his enormous friend. “Running a little late today?” he grinned, blowing across the top of the cup.

“Had to drop the kids off,” Andrew replied, treating Logan to what passed as a smile.

Logan took a sip, then immediately began puffing out his cheeks and sucking down air in rapid succession. “Ohhh, thatsh good,” he slurred.

Andrew produced a small packet from the pocket of his jeans, waving it slowly in front of Logan’s face. Logan reached out and accepted it greedily.

“You save my life every morning, man,” he nodded, tearing the wrapper off the breakfast bar and sinking his teeth in to it.

Andrew patted him patronisingly atop the head, his hand springing against the tangled mess of sandy hair. “One of these days you might wake up *before* you leave the house.”

“Think that’s likely?”

Andrew stared silently in response.

“No,” he admitted.

A shouted voice called from the end of the hallway. “Hey, Drew, you woken Logan up yet?”

“Sort of,” Andrew shouted back. Logan was sure the response must have registered on the Richter scale.

Mike slapped his knees like a dog owner calling his faithful sidekick. “Let’s get moving then, we’ve got some sciency stuff to do!”

The door behind the two men swung open, Suzi and Chell began walking towards the lab, Chell deliberately staring everywhere else.

Logan waited until they were almost out of sight before whispering “How did you manage to get that bloody thing working?” He jabbed a thumb behind him.

Andrew shrugged. “I plugged it in.”

“You guys managed to avert the ‘Great Light Switch Crisis’ yet?” Suzi mocked, sauntering casually through imposing security doors that marked the main entrance to the laboratory.

Simon whirled around to face the new voice, finger already raised in challenge. "I'll have you know..."

Suzi swatted the offending digit to one side with a casual swipe and continued past Simon, not breaking stride, fist bumping Chell as the other woman veered away towards her own station.

Simon stared after Suzi’s retreating form, considering a rebuke but failing completely to do so with any speed. The back of today’s tight black t-shirt featured the name of some game he had never heard of, although it must have been quite old, the characters were made entirely of blocks and rough pixels, one of them had some form of axe raised triumphantly over his head. The shirt left her lower arms bare, allowing tattoos to continue the colourful motif. Close-cropped hair bobbed slightly as she nodded along to some tune only she could hear.

He once more raised the finger of challenge. "Lab coat?" he spluttered. The barely uttered squeak had sounded infinitely more masculine in his head.

"Why?" she asked, kicking back in her chair and popping one of her earphones out, "I haven't checked the lab rule book lately, but I'm pretty sure that section 14B clearly states that lab coats are for losers."

Simon waved his arms around as if to catch a wit-laden response, "Buhhh..." He began, eloquently, searching the room for backup and meeting Chell's eyes.

But Chell only nodded. "She's right."

Simon was preparing a well authored and presented rebuke when Logan walked into the doorway, crushing his thin paper coffee receptacle between himself and the frame.

He looked down and prodded the growing stain like a confused gunshot victim. "Ouch."

Mike had locked-on and was moving in to intercept. He had almost reached ramming-speed when Logan swiftly turned and threw the cup towards the bin just outside the entryway and raised his hands in submission.

Mike's brow adopted a furrowed appearance that was hard to achieve without the use of a plough. "Were you about to bring a drink into the lab?" He thrust a finger towards Logan, who was still busy surrendering.

Logan shrugged nonchalantly. "Just a small one."

The agricultural activity on Mike's forehead increased by an order of magnitude. "How did that work out?"

Logan met the man's gaze at a steep upward gradient. "This hurts quite a lot."

"Good."

"Can I go or do you want me to stay after class and write fifty lines?"

Mike's eyes drifted past Logan towards Andrew who was standing behind him and sporting an 'I-don't-know-where-he-got-that-coffee' expression. "Dismissed."

Logan stuffed his hands into his pockets and shuffled comically off towards his station, stopping only to open his mouth in an attempt to catch a jelly bean flicked at him by Suzi. It hit him in the forehead.

"Hey! Watch it, code monkey!" he chastised, scanning the floor for the runaway treat.

Suzi flicked four more at him in rapid-fire succession. "Go play with something proprietary, cable jockey."

Logan chuckled to himself, managing to catch several of the ballistic sweets in mid-flight. "Oh you've climbed back on your high horse now you've finished playing your games?" He grinned.

Suzi's neck reddened under the ink, she shoved a handful of jelly beans into her mouth and pouted at Logan, who fist-pumped in triumph.

Chell looked up and scanned the room, deliberately avoiding looking directly towards Andrew who had been studiously ignoring his two colleagues and had situated himself behind his station. "All here, Simon could you please close the blast doo.."

"Security," Logan interrupted quickly. "Security door."

Chell waved one arm towards him while the other was gesturing blindly towards Mike, who was standing at his station to her right.

Mike didn't even bother looking up from his console. "Why do we have to rename the *door*, now?"

"Because 'Blast Door' makes it sound like there might be... Y'know." Logan nodded around eagerly. "A blast."

Chell let her arms fall and contemplated this new development. "Seconded. All in favour of renaming the door," she called with a tone of resigned authority.

There was a chorus of "Aye's" from around the room.

"Motion carried." She coughed apologetically. "Simon, would you please close the Security Door?"

Simon waded through the democratic red tape to the newly christened doorway and punched the isolation switch. The huge metal slab began sliding downwards amidst the strobe of red lighting.

Mike let out a sigh, his signal to everyone that now was the time to listen. Much to Joel's chagrin, they all fell silent.

"Prelims ran fine this morning. I would like confirmation that nothing has spiked out of the normal ranges since the last simulation. Once we have that I'd like green lights across

the board.” He was pleased to see that everyone had slipped easily into professional mode, one of the only two he could rely on.

Mike turned to his right. “Joel, would you like to do the honours?”

Joel nodded. Everything was in place, the testing and simulations had been overwhelmingly successful the night before. There was no more reason to delay.

"Seems like we've put it off long enough." Joel turned towards the grav-gantry, that imposing structure that took up nearly the whole of the room behind the glass. He looked back smiling wolfishly. "This is our day guys, we're going to do this right, and we're going to do it first time."

The others looked at him knowingly. They were probably going to blow up.

Simon looked through the glass at Chell, who had gone through into the far chamber to the storage unit and collected the timer, a black object about a foot square at the base and standing roughly a foot and a half tall. She carried it over to the gantry and placed it carefully in the centre of the depression before exiting the test chamber through the side door only to find the entire room staring at her.

Surprised, she gave a thumbs-up, then felt instantly embarrassed.

Everything was set. Joel made his way over to the master console at the back of the room, giving him a clear view of each of his team members. "We're going. Watch your screens and scream bloody murder if anything spikes out of the normal ranges. Our target is one thousandth of a second, that's all we need to prove the process. I'm raising the timer now."

The sides of the gantry surrounding the bowl began to lift and then turn, gradually building speed as all the systems came up to full capacity. After around two minutes of acceleration the spherical mechanism was spinning rapidly; he released the lock around the base of the timer device, and a small motor pushed it upwards very gently, allowing it to float slowly into the centre of the now fully operational grav-field, where it stopped, hovering in mid-air like a black obelisk, defying physics to do its worst. It wasn't actually antigravity, everyone in the room was acutely aware of this, but "grav-gantry" sounded so much cooler than "Big Spinning Magnet Thing". Logan had insisted on the name.

Joel glanced at Simon, Simon passed the look on to Mike who looked like he was about to bite off a large section of his bottom lip. He broke off the stare and directed his eyes to the window, catching snatched impressions of the timer as the grav gantry span around it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you all for your hard work and dedication. Will you please all give me a green light?"

"Green here Joel."

"Green."

"Green mate, let's do this"

"You know I'm colour-blind right?"

"This is a great time to crack jokes Suzi, gotta tell ya."

"Pretty sure it's greenish."

Joel confirmed the team's readings on his master screen, then turned his attention to the console upon which the release switch had been programmed. It felt like there should be a big red button, Joel pondered why he didn't have one installed as he tapped the Enter key on the keyboard, beginning the ten second countdown.

"We are go!"

"Seems a little dramatic!" Logan called out without looking up from the readouts on his monitor.

"I thought it sounded better than 'Hold on to your testis...'"

The lab exploded.

There had been a noise like splintering wood, but a lot bigger.

A splintering forest.

Blackness.

Ringling, like a dead dial-tone, coming from everywhere. Coming from inside his mind. His eyes taste like copper.

Something was spinning.

No. He was spinning.

Looking through the purple-tasting haze, the gantry was the forest, it now exists as part of the entire room. Shattered, flung outwards without flinging.

There was blood. Was it his blood?

Red emergency lighting. Why was it red? Can't see a bloody thing. Why can't emergency lighting just be the same colour as the regular lighting?

Flashing siren. Alarms. Yea, that helps. Thanks for the warning.

Then something had him by the arm. Very big, looks like a Pepperami, kind of pinkish.

More blood. Another noise over the dial tone. Screaming?

Resolution coming back. Purple gives way to form, noise to pain.

In front of the blast doors (it was OK to call them that now), Andrew had let go of his arm and was now dragging Suzi out of a mess of wiring and shrapnel, bright red streaks marked her passing.

The doors should be opening, he knew, allowing the team to evacuate, Joel scrambled to his feet, turning towards them.

Simon was screaming something unintelligible and pointing at the door with both arms and his chin.

"... What?"

"DOOR... INSIDE the bloody door."

"Simon... What's inside...?"

There was a horrendous *screach* as the rising blast door halted barely halfway open and jammed, the motors still whirring as they tried to lift it further. Joel followed Simon's wide-eyed gaze up to the top of the door and froze in place.

There, sticking out of the huge steel blast door at an angle, mangled from the motors' attempts to force it upwards through the metal frame, was the black timing device.

Its display was thousandth of a second behind the control clock.

Escapism

The man went ridged, eyes snapping wide open, the pen falling from limp fingers to land on the tray in front of him, sending blotches of black ink across the page he had been meticulously working on.

Something had changed, in that instant, something had re-sculpted the landscape of human endeavour. Something new, even to Them. How was that possible, how could They not know?

With some effort he sat forward in his chair, contemplating this new event as the broken husk seated in front of him continued flicking over pawns and giggling to himself, facial expressions showing that mirth had died long ago, casting contrast to his incessant chirping.

“Old Mo”, he was pretty sure that was the husk’s name, not that he cared.

He glanced down, seeing for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime the hands that belonged to him. This him. Blotched with black ink and curled inwards like the claws of an arthritic witch. His face sank into those tarred digits. What had he done? How much time had passed? He did not know. He had placed himself here in order to forget time, to escape from a world he had wandered for too long to call it a home any longer.

But he had brought his demons with him, for his demons *were* him.

And now they were silent.

He looked up, shock at the revelation releasing a sudden burst of adrenaline into a body at rest for far too long. His neck strained at the sudden straightening, fighting to return to its hunched position.

They were silent. No, more than that. They were still there, still *present*, but now suddenly unwilling or unable to bring themselves to the fore. In a flash of sudden comprehension he realised that they were with him, thinking as one. Intentions melded in a unison he had thought himself incapable of achieving any more. Suddenly, all of the pieces of him had one purpose, and he was in control.

A cool calmness washed through the body of the man with many souls, bringing with it the flush of a personality borne of necessity, of calm and empty determination.

The man stood up, toppling the table and sending dead chess pieces cascading over the chipped tile floor. Old Mo screamed and rose to his feet, so he punched him in the forehead, the blow sending the gibbering man sprawling backwards and into another table.

Noise erupted from everywhere, he could hear the woman they called “Bald Sue” blubbering behind him as she spontaneously attempted to rip off her clothing.

Several orderlies had appeared, and were making quick work of placating the room, one of them was crouched over Old Mo, while nurses busied themselves issuing calming words and ushering the most hysterical back to their rooms. But one nurse remained, stood with her mouth agape, staring right at him.

“Uhh... John?”

He looked her in the eye, and saw nothing he cared for, where once he may have seen hope. A reason to believe in humanity.

“Aaron,” he said.

The woman flinched as if struck by an invisible blow. This was too much. Seven years, and he had never stood, not without being led. And as for speaking... An orderly had now come to her side, a burly man that looked as though he possessed a temperament at odds with his job title.

“Joh... Aaron,” she stumbled over the words, “I think we had better get you back to your room, wouldn’t that be nice?”

A look of complete expressionlessness met her hopeful gaze. “No,” he said, “I am leaving.”

The cacophony of insanity flared at his words, patients began screaming or moaning in equal measure, for everyone one cowering, there were two more lashing out, exhilarated by the sudden release of inhibition. Objects were flung at staff and patients alike as an alarm began sounding a warning, bringing more orderlies to contain the situation.

And amid all of this, the noise, the incoherence, the sunken fear of minds that had lost their way, he stood, the clarity building as the fog of his own pathetic inadequacies drifted away to join the reflection of his failure. He felt bolstered, singular, no longer weighed down by echoing remnants of the past. Not as he had been only moments before: a portrait in oils by an indecisive artist, the canvas of his soul sagging under the weight of so many revisions.

He held up a hand. "Be quiet."

And as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. Patients fell silent, some returning to their seats, others collapsing into a willing unconsciousness. He chastised himself inwardly. Weak minds, these were all he could manage now. His own fault.

His stare was still directed towards the nurse. "I am leaving," he repeated.

The orderly stepped forwards, the confusion and fear shown by the nurse was replaced by a towering confidence of a man assured of his dominion over this place. Of his elevated status.

He began at a growl, "John, you will sit dow..."

Aaron punched him in the throat, the movement so sudden and precise that the man had no chance at defence. He collapsed to the floor in a gurgling ball of confusion and pain.

"My name is Aaron. And I am leaving," an impassive voice.

He walked towards the door.

The nurse stood, dumbfounded, staring at the empty chair and the stack of bibles that the man named Aaron had so carefully redacted, as the sounds of his escape receded behind her.

Static Push

Joel felt better. After being humiliatingly hosed and scrubbed during the decontamination procedure following their hurried evacuation from the lab, he'd gone back to the locker room for a proper shower. Nobody could get back in for three hours, the doors wouldn't open before then, having sealed shut once the last of the team had escaped. Security protocols were a necessary evil, although Mike was trying to circumvent the system and force the doors to open sooner, Joel knew it wouldn't work. It frustrated him no end that he couldn't go back in to see what the hell had happened and he was still in shock from the sudden destruction that had been visited on their workplace.

Simon and Chell had gone to see to Suzi, whose blood Joel had seen on the floor as he was fleeing the room. She had cut her leg on a section of the metal framework that had broken off the gyrating components of the grav-gantry. It looked worse than it was, she would be fine. Chell was stitching her up now, Suzi had asked for the needlework to be in the shape of a lightning bolt. Simon was just trying to avoid filling in paperwork about the incident.

As disasters go, they had all gotten off pretty lightly. The other four members of the group had suffered some small burns, but mostly scrapes and bruises as they scrambled to avoid the falling equipment. Andrew and Logan were showering and calming their nerves while they waited for the cut-off to end and access to the lab to be restored.

Joel hoped that the computers weren't too damaged to be rebooted immediately, he didn't want to wait while Logan went through the process of recovering hard disks just to retrieve his information. Since all of today's data was stored exclusively on the lab's computers for security reasons, he had no choice but to wait for the doors to open, or for Mike to hulk-out and bust his way in there.

He already knew what had happened. He had theorised early on that static shift was a possibility, but had dismissed the idea of a universal anchor as it would limit the base theory

and throw almost all of the maths in to question. The only way to be sure would have been to perform a micro Push of a few molecules, but this project had already been running for so long that both himself and Simon were concerned that if they took much more time to provide tangible results they would have to start paying for it all themselves. To keep their funding, it had to be bigger, a recognisable object, something that would keep the suits' attention. When the investors' minds started to wander, so did their cash flow.

The theory was fairly simple. The "Push" wasn't really a time-travel device, it was more of a stasis field, with the added attraction of extremely low power requirements. The object being "Pushed" was paused and taken out of it's timeline, reappearing the designated amount of seconds, hours, days or weeks later, unchanged and unaffected by the time that had passed. Other people would call this travelling into the future, Logan had affectionately dubbed it the "Quantum Freezer", and on this occasion he wasn't far off. Many time-leap theories had been tested by other groups over the years, but Joel knew that unlike those failed attempts, the Push was attainable, even though it was a one-way street. The Push removed something from space, shielding it from entropy while events occurred around it, the field decaying and eventually failing after the designated length of time, depositing the object back into normal space. Using this method there was no way of moving backwards, but then, that wasn't what he was aiming for.

Washed and dressed, Joel went first to check on Suzi, who was getting more and more agitated, eager to return to the lab. He then made his way to the outer door, where Mike was squatting, fingers furiously jabbing at a keypad, wires and circuit-boards hanging out of the panel he'd pulled apart, trying to convince the door that it was time to open itself.

"Who in the almighty hell designed this security system anyway?" Mike was demanding as Joel approached the access panel he was squatting next to.

Joel stared at the back of his head. "Logan," he sighed.

"Then I'm amazed it worked at all." Mike slapped the side of the panel with his palm in agitation. "I'd have thought he would have put a backdoor into this damn thing." He fell back onto his posterior, cursing.

Logan sauntered up behind the two men. "Wassup fellas?"

Mike swivelled round on his buttocks. "You!" He jabbed out an accusing finger.

Logan walked over to peer over Mike's shoulder. "Hey! You pulled out all the impressive looking bits!" He reached down and ripped out one of the control boards, flicking an antique-looking brass light switch which was nestled behind it. The door began to slide upwards.

Mike's mouth fell open. he wheeled the accusatory finger towards the panel. "A bloody manual switch!?" he yelped.

"What? Didn't want to make it too complicated." Shrugged Logan.

Mike struggled to draw his stretched frame up to its full height. "And why exactly didn't you document this particular feature?" he demanded, shaking a sheaf of paperwork.

Logan waved with both hands at the slowly opening doorway. "Se-cu-ri-ty," he read pointedly, gesturing at the stencilled letters on the outer facade.

Mike took a step back, drawing himself level with Joel. "We could say he didn't make it out?" he whispered.

Joel chuckled and stepped forwards, reaching in to flick the newly discovered switch, halting the door's movement before it had opened halfway. "Don't want to damage the evidence." He grinned at a questioning look from Logan.

Joel nudged Logan to one side and ducked underneath the partially opened entryway, waiting as the other two men followed suit. Glancing back down the corridor he could see the rest of the team making their way towards them.

The lab was a mess. As the rest of the team (Suzi groaning as she brought up the rear) came under the low entrance, Joel surveyed what had, only a few hours ago, been a pristine and well organised place of work. Only half of the interior lights were still functioning, the rest having been blown, their fluorescent tubes shattered during the turmoil, leaving the predominantly red emergency lights to cast an eerie glow over the rest of the wreckage. The gantry had completely collapsed, most of the metal twisted beyond repair as the moving parts had spun out of control, and Joel noticed several sections missing completely. He frowned in confusion.

Despite the immediate impression of total devastation, most of the computers looked physically intact, their chassis having been shielded by the work stations. The ones with

smoke damage would have to be checked over, but they hadn't provided enough fumes to indicate a total internal meltdown; hopefully just the power supply had blown.

Suzi was attempting to avoid the debris that littered the floor, walking barefoot and hoping she didn't step on anything sharp whilst attempting to juggle her shoes and using crutches at the same time. Chell was doing her best to clear a path for her.

Suzi shot a look at Logan. "What?" she demanded, following his nod towards her clutched footwear. "I can't bend my bloody leg to put them on." She waved one at him, punctuating her point.

"So... You're taking them for a walk?"

She ignored him and continued scanning the devastation along with everyone else.

Joel pulled his attention away from the wreckage at the centre of the lab, turning to face in the other direction and looking up at the chewed remnants of the timing device. It would have to be cut out, he knew, and to avoid damaging the proof of their success, the door, rather than the black box would have to be cut through. The process would not be fast. Scanning the area surrounding the blast door, his eyes lingered on the sections of the gantry which were protruding from the wall in various places, fused with it in the same way that the timer was fused with the door itself. Realisation dawned. "We expanded the field too far," he whispered.

Mike was standing next to him, also looking up at the remains of the timer. "Right then, so, you want to explain that sentence? Because from this angle you're almost looking like you expected this to happen."

Andrew followed Mike's gaze. "I wasn't following Chell's every movement, but I'm pretty sure she set the timer up over there." He pointed towards the ruination at the far end of the room.

Chell was nodding vigorously. "I would have remembered melting it into the door." There was a general murmur of assent from the rest of the room indicating they would probably have spotted that, too.

Simon answered before Joel could gather his thoughts. "We didn't expect this, no." He rubbed his neck uncomfortably. "But it's a possibility that was touched on when Joel began theorising the Push."

"Care to elaborate?" Suzi sounded irritated. Joel was acutely aware that she was wielding crutches.

He turned to face them all. "We theorised, that without an anchor of some sort, there was a possibility that the object being Pushed wouldn't just freeze in time, but also in space." When Suzi's wrinkled look didn't get any smoother, he forged on. "The Earth rotates. It moves around the Sun. Our solar system and galaxy are also moving, around, away, towards, it doesn't matter. The point is that if there were any fixed points in space, an object would never occupy the same one within its lifetime. When we pushed the timer, time, and the world, moved around it, so that when it came back, technically, it was still in the same place it was when we sent it, it's just that we weren't."

Mike looked down from the timer and directly at Joel. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Because we dismissed it as impossible." Joel sighed.

Andrew was still looking at the wreckage. "Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast," he mused as softly as his voice would allow.

Joel quickly backpedalled. "Errr, we dismissed it as... Probably not going to happen?" He knew he should have mentioned it, but these theories were all ones he and Simon had come up with before they had put the full team together. "Our working theory was that there were no fixed points in space, because for that to happen, there would also have to be a fixed object to be the point of reference. If the whole of space is in flux and constantly moving, then nothing like that would exist, and so everything would move with its own pointers', suns' and gravity wells'."

"That's a fairly big guess isn't it?" Mike looked more amused than annoyed. Suzi didn't.

"That's why this is called an 'Experiment', we went with the most likely scenario, the research was too solid to cancel the whole thing on a wild possibility."

A shoe hit him in the side of the head.

"HEY!" He rounded on Suzi who was now brandishing a crutch menacingly.

"Wild, huh?" She waved the end of the crutch inches from his face.

"Woah! You're going to have my bloody head off!"

Suzi fixed him with a deadly stare. "There can be only one," she intoned menacingly.

The woman was certifiable, Joel backed off a few steps. "Alright, it was... Wild... Ish?"

Suzi lowered the crutch and smiled. "Oh well if it was only *ish* then I totally understand."

Mike looked down at him, stretching out a grin. "Calm down man, I get it, I think we're all still a bit shaken up." He shot Suzi a glance. "OK, so I get that the timer moved. But what about all of... This." He gestured with one hand at the metalwork now decorating the once-pristine wall, while waving the other towards what was left of the gantry itself.

Joel buried his face in his hands. "We expanded the Push field too far. It must have grown outwards and enveloped sections of the framework, they were Pushed along with the timer."

Mike nodded sagely. "OK, you can go ahead and spell out exactly *why* that happened."

Joel would never live this down. "The maths was wrong." He jerked his head sideways as a second shoe sailed past. "Hey! Mike checked it over!"

Mike reeled from the sudden change in direction the blame was taking and backpedalled. "Hey, now. Nobody's pointing fingers!" He was extremely thankful that Suzi had now expended her arsenal of ballistic footwear. "So now we know this, and once we confirm the time difference from the control timer, where does that leave us?" he continued quickly.

Joel drew his face up from the confines of his palms, his sudden slack-jawed smile could have swallowed the universe.

"Ladies and gentlemen, unless we can somehow anchor the Push, this leaves us with a technology that is effectively useless as a method of placing objects in stasis, or sending them into our future in a way that we can collect them here on Earth..." He now held everyone's attention very firmly. "What we have here, is an extremely cheap and effective way of *moving* objects. We Push something, and with some very precise timing, it will re-appear elsewhere after a short while in our time. No time will have passed for the object." Joel could

hardly contain himself now, the enormity of what they had stumbled upon was now sinking in as the words formed in his own mouth.

"What we have here, is a launch device."

Mike looked like he had run out of room on his face for the grin he was now sporting.
"Anyone fancy a trip to Mars?"

Objects in Space

Four Months Later

ISS2

240 miles above Earth

Lights were strobing unnecessarily all around him as Ginn finished fastening the remainder of his equipment to the various pouches and belts surrounding his suit. The pack itself was already large, barely fitting into the small ancillary airlock when strapped to his back. With the added bulk of the portable power unit tethered to his waist he couldn't even turn.

The radio crackled faintly. "Cycling in thirty seconds, Ginn. Everything alright in there?"

He sighed inside his helmet. No it bloody well wasn't alright. "Yep, all good," he lied, allowing a tinge of anger to colour the edges of the sentence.

The receiving voice wasn't convinced. "Man, I'm sorry, alright?" It apologised a little too aggressively. "I know you're off-schedule, but this is the very definition of the word emergency, and you're the best we have," it said, wielding the flattery like a crude weapon.

Ginn slapped the side of his helmet absent-mindedly, some habits you just couldn't break. "I'm OK," he said. "I wouldn't be going out there if I was frazzled. I'm just a little jittery. This walk would be a serious event, even if we had all the time in the world to get it right."

"Don't rush out there. We have time." Came the uncertain response. Nobody really knew how much oxygen the Russian crew had left.

Ginn shook his head inside the helmet. Typical Russians, they built everything to last. Strength and reliability were qualities present in all Russian engineering; finesse was

conspicuously absent. Which was probably why the underside of the shuttle itself appeared to be relatively unscathed in contrast to the docking ring, which was no longer responding to any of their remote commands.

Popular opinion was that the shuttle had been moving nearly twice as fast as it should have been on approach, although upon inspection the fault had not been entirely with the pilot, it appeared as though the docking assist sensors had been malfunctioning. Unfortunately what he lacked in speed awareness, the cosmonaut at the controls more than made up for in accuracy, crunching unhealthily into the docking locks at a velocity far beyond that which they had been designed to withstand. The whole pedestal had cracked and fractured in several places, visible stress lines appearing along its length, reaching all the way back to the station airlock.

But the bloody shuttle was fine.

The first thing they had tried was disengaging the docking clamps remotely, but three had remained locked on and failed to respond to systems analysis queries, it was possible they were not receiving power at all. The failsafe releases had safely failed.

The crew inside the shuttle were trapped. Their main airlock jammed uselessly to the side of the station, refusing to function and causing the section which held the docking pedestal to be dangerously compromised. The risk of decompression from the damaged airlock was simply too great, the entire Arm had been evacuated, the whole interior of Herbie's non-rotational communications hub and spaceport was now devoid of life, cutting off the option of approaching this issue from the inside, even in a suit. They couldn't even bring the crew over to Herbie via EVA, they didn't have enough suits capable of self-propulsion, and the distances involved in reaching the habitation ring's external airlock from their shuttle was prohibitive with the equipment they had with them. Besides this, having a dead shuttle attached to a cracked and failing docking ring was out of the question, if the pedestal finally gave way and sheared off, the shuttle could hit any number of components, not to mention the habitation ring. Repairs could not begin until it had been disengaged, and for that to happen someone needed to be aboard to fly it clear.

Herbie was just too damn big.

The International Space Station II, or "Herbie" as the station's long term residents had affectionately named the ever expanding project, was made up of two main sections. The

habitation ring, and the "Big Arm", a long pressurised tunnel connected to the the axial tube on the habitation section, sporting a vast array of sensors, sensitive radio telescopes, solar scoop deployers, as well as the all-important docking rings. The names for both sections were completely inadequate to describe the complexity of either structure, but it was the relation between the two which caused this incident to be so hazardous: The habitation ring span, providing artificial gravity by means of centrifugal force to both the stations inhabitants and their valuable experiments. The Arm was stationary. There were two pressures now resting on Ginn's shoulders. The lives of the Russian crew, trapped aboard their shuttle, and possibly the wellbeing of everyone else aboard Herbie. If the damage to the Arm became more severe, they would not only lose their means of safe egress, but also communication. The thought had everyone on a knife-edge.

In a fit of desperation, and quickly running out of options, the decision had been made to fire the explosive bolts on the outer airlock door. The bolts were designed to eject the entire docking ring away from the pedestal in case of emergency. Only half had fired, ricocheting uselessly off the underside of the shuttle and sending shrapnel back towards the airlock itself. That's when they had lost power completely. All further remote commands were useless, the entire artifice had ceased responding to any electronic requests, the airlock door and assembly remained stubbornly attached.

And the goddamned shuttle was fine.

Ginn was going to put in a request to have Russian engineers replace the whole docking system. It would probably be able to withstand a direct asteroid strike.

The ancillary airlock door slid open soundlessly in front of his visor. He gave a sluggish thumbs up to anyone watching on the station cameras. He suspected that was everyone.

Moving forwards, he slid both tether cables along their rails, already feeling dragged down by their presence. He wanted to be free, to allow himself to fly forwards to his goal. But there was too much at stake, too much to go wrong. Time was of the essence, but speed brought disaster, the common rules of operating in space echoed through his mind. There were no second chances out here.

"Ginn. This is Control, please acknowledge."

Ginn took a mental pause as he drifted through the outer hatch, frowning at the accent. "London?"

There was a fuzz, which itself carried the confusion of the voices owner. "Ginn, this is *Houston Control*."

Terrific. "Roger, Control. I have cleared the lock, moving out to the axis swap now."

"Movement to axis swap acknowledged, please disengage habitation ring tethers with good time."

Ginn had no intention of being spun like a catherine wheel. "Roger, Control. Tethers will be disengaged with time to spare." He used a small burst from the pack to maneuver himself so that he was facing the pull-rails along the hab's main axial tube and began applying pressure gently with his arms, pulling himself along the length of the tube. The tethers extended behind him from the open airlock, keeping uncomfortably taut. He reached the axial swap and pulled himself into a relative standing position, the light effect of his magnetic boots locked onto the outer frame, he imagined a clanging sound, although his world was silent. "Reached the swap, Control. Disengaging tethers." He raised his left forearm to expose the suit's control console and tapped several keys with his right-hand. Both tether cables disengaged and snaked away silently behind him. He was now exposed.

"Ginn, Control. Disengage boot-traction and step lightly across the swap. Please give yourself several seconds to orient yourself before engaging the magnetic traction." This was the first obstacle. The "Swap" was the point where the Arm and the habitation ring met, both spinning languidly in what appeared to be opposite directions. Here, at the axis of the station, that spin was finite, manageable. Way up on the spokes, in the main ring of the habitation section itself, the relative motion was much greater. Ginn was extraordinarily glad he wasn't jumping from there. That would just be stupid.

He did as he was instructed, dropping the mag-lock on his boots and thumbing the packs controls gently forwards, giving himself several seconds to orient his new position. He applied a small amount of lateral thrust to match his velocity with the non-spin of the Arm and then re-engaged his boots. "Control, I'm locked onto the Arm. Proceeding." He walked as fast as he dared, elongating his steps in arched, loping movements before engaging the magnets on the next boot, his forward momentum was considerable. He was pretty sure that

Control would have a thing or two to say about his progress but he kept on imagining the souls trapped ahead of him, and the possible implications if he failed.

"Ginn, Control. Your forward momentum is quicker than we'd like. There's no rush, here."

"Control, Ginn. My forward momentum is barely fast enough. There are people out there that might die if I take a stroll."

There was a slight pause. "Ginn, Control. We appreciate the urgency, but organising another EVA if you fail will take even more time. We realise that you have an exemplary record, and have clocked up more hours out there than anyone else..."

"Ever," whispered Ginn.

Another pause. "We are aware of your service record. But we want you to stop, now, and tether yourself. You can then proceed along the central rail to the pedestal."

Like hell. "Control, Ginn. Blow it out your arse." He continued at his previous pace.

The pause was even longer than before, and now the voice had changed. "Ginn, we are behind you one hundred percent. Are you sure that your current approach is acceptable within safety parameters?" The new voice seems more authoritative, Ginn felt slightly bad for the agent he had been speaking to previously.

He grunted from within his suit. "I'm not going to risk stupid manoeuvres when people's lives are at risk. Do I tell you how to push buttons and sound pompous?"

"Good enough for me. Control out."

He continued his progress for several hundred metres, time seemed to be moving extremely slowly through his haze of concentration. The docking pedestal was now looming above him, he could see the shuttle perched atop the ruined end of the structure. "Control, I'm moving up to the damaged airlock now."

"Ginn, Control. Roger that, apply the portable power unit directly to the coupler on the pedestal first, let's see if we can give those motors the juice they need to release the clamps. If that fails we will move on to more invasive procedures."

Ginn cringed at that thought, "More invasive." invariably equated to "More dangerous".

He had reached the damaged mechanisms atop the pedestal now and was searching around for external access points. The damage really was as bad as had been predicted, the whole airlock mechanism would have to be replaced - possibly the whole pedestal - the damage looked to be beyond the limits of safe repair. He pulled on the nearest access panel. Thankfully it swung open without argument.

"Control, I'm in to the electrical circuits, it's as we thought, the whole thing is dead. Hooking up the PPU now."

He reached down and unclamped the power unit, swinging it upwards gently until it was within range of the panel, he engaged the magnetic lock and the device clamped to the side of the airlock. Ginn extracted the coupling cables and plugged the nozzle into the exposed port on the inside of the panel, several lights winked into life at the contact.

Several things happened at once. Not all of them expected.

The three recalcitrant clamps received the power they needed to complete their pre-defined program, their mechanisms retracted, freeing the shuttle from its confines. Minute thrusters fired from the underside of the craft, gently propelling it away from its erstwhile parent as the Russian crew cheered across the comm band.

The remaining explosive bolts fired simultaneously, sending small plumes of shrapnel away from the airlock in their wake, Ginn almost didn't notice, there was no sound to mark the event, but he glimpsed the slight movement from the corner of his vision. "Shit!" Instinct cut in, he immediately disengaged himself from the side of the pedestal. Too late. The remaining pressure inside the airlock blew the whole hatch outwards and away from the station with irresistible force, flinging it upwards and causing it to ricochet off the underside of the retreating shuttle, it careened back towards him at an incredible speed. His vision did strange things. Shadow-forms were overlaid against reality. He saw the faint outline of the hatch coming towards him a mere second before it actually hit. The strange foresight gave him time, he gunned the controls on his thrust-pack, forcing him sideways suddenly in a wild attempt to get clear of the incoming chunk of debris. It wasn't fast enough.

The airlock hatch hit him on his left-rear side, smashing into his pack and fracturing the sensitive tanks contained within. The impact jarred him badly, his skull rattled around uselessly within his helmet, his neck was whipped left and right as the force of the collision sent him careening into the pedestal itself. The wind was knocked out of him, along with the

rest of his senses. Gas was now venting uncontrolled from the damaged pack, firing him away from the initial devastation. The pack had taken the majority of the impact, shielding the suit itself from any significant damage but also rupturing the cut-off valves and causing uncontrolled propulsion to jet from the newly formed holes. Along with this, the damage to the pack's control systems had caused the thrusters on Ginn's right side to fire constantly, adding to the velocity he had gained from the impact and flinging him from the side of the station with ever increasing speed. He was vaguely aware of shouting over the comm link. Lights blinking on his HUD. A large spinning metal object getting further away from him.

Ginn blacked out.

By the time Control had beamed his suit an instruction to kill the thrusters, and done what it could to slow his acceleration using what was left of the propellant in the damaged pack, he was floating limply in space, nearly a hundred miles from the shrinking station.

The distance was increasing.

Red

The suit is red. Why is it red? What a stupid colour for a suit to be, really.

White. That's the colour space suits should be. Preferably with fish-bowl helmets so you can move your head and see everything.

They just don't make things like they used to. Red suits.

And who came up with the idea of that ruddy great spinning thing? Probably the same guy who designed the damn suits, that's who. Can you imagine that meeting? Was there a meeting to decide the colour of the suit?

I look like a Power Ranger.

I'm going to die, floating in space, looking like a Power Ranger.

Maybe I should ask Control to fire a tombstone after me with something poignant on it just in case my body is discovered by aliens or something.

"Here floats Ginn. He didn't usually look like this much of a prat, just they were out of white suits."

That might be a bit wordy for a tombstone.

Air is at 9%. No propellant. Herbie is so far away that the rangefinder in the stupid red suit won't even lock on.

Nothing on Herbie can get to me, there isn't anything with enough range to get out here and get back, and of course the bloody shuttle was damaged when the airlock rebounded off it. So much for indestructible Russian technology.

I can barely see the station now.

Is 9% an accurate reading?

My car's orange light comes on and beeps when the fuel gauge is nearly all the way down to nothing, but I know damn well I've got another 25 miles in the tank if I play my cards right.

Does the red suit have an orange light?

8%. A purple light comes on and the suit comm beeps.

Purple.

I'm going to find this colour blind bastard and explain a couple of fundamentals if I don't die out here.

"Ginn? This is control, can you hear us?" There's a slight fuzz of static, but the comm is still plenty clear enough.

"Finally! We need to have a hue related discussion fairly urgently."

"Ginn? Are you OK? This is control, please recite your birth date and spell your name backwards."

"To be honest I find it rather reckless of you to send someone out on such a dangerous EVA if you weren't sure he could spell his name."

"Please, Ginn, we are trying to assess your physical state, how are you holding up?"

"I'm in a red suit with a purple light, I have 8% O2, my propellant tank is empty and I'm concerned that the former two points are bothering me more than the latter."

"Ginn we have your au..."

"NO"

"Ginn. Ginn, it's been half a day. We've tried everything, Ginn. We can't..." There is a stutter and a sharp intake of breath. My ground control agent fights back a sob. Great, that's given my morale a boost. "There's nothing we can do, Ginn."

I know.

I know and I don't want to speak to my Aunt. I don't want to use up the rest of my oxygen with despair.

"Tell my Aunt I love her, but I can't speak to her. Please don't let her access the comm feed, even to listen."

"We won't, Ginn. Do you need anything?"

"Do you have any white suits?"

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

There is silence from the comm. The kind of silence you know the other party wants to fill, but has no idea how to. They are talking to a man at his own funeral, I'm not sure I would know what to say either.

"I'm just going to rest for a while, thanks. I'll let you know if anything changes."

"OK, Ginn."

The comm is silent.

I'm gone. For a while. I haven't looked at my chronometer in a while and it's really hard to get a sense of passing time out here.

This would be peaceful if it wasn't so stupid.

What a stupid way to die, in a red suit.

"Ginn? Ginn please respond."

I sigh. "I thought you were going to let me rest a while?"

"Umm, Ginn, it has been nearly three hours since we last spoke."

I focus on my HUD. 2% air. What the hell have I been doing for three hours?

"Ginn, we have someone here, we need you to focus, we need you alert, can you speak to him please?"

If this is a priest I'm going to take my helmet off. "Sure."

"Ginn? Hey there, my name is Mike Rhodes, I work for Dennison Industries. We have been called in to consult on this emergency. How are you holding up?"

This again. "I'm nearly out of oxygen and my suit is red."

"They didn't have a white one? Who the hell makes red spacesuits?"

I do the mental equivalent of sitting forward in my chair. This guy gets it.

"It has a purple warning light."

"Jesus wept, as if you didn't have enough problems."

Now I'm paying attention, who is this guy? "What's going on, Mike?"

"OK, Ginn, this is going to sound a bit crazy, but we need you to get your rangefinder ready. In about 90 seconds a green light is going to appear roughly ninety degrees sunward relative to the station. We need you to focus on it and feed us range and velocity information. Can you do that?"

"I have no propellant, I can't turn."

"OK well we'll keep trying until we get it, OK?"

"Yes."

"Good, we expect it to be a good deal away from you, and it will be moving pretty fast, the light will go out after about fifteen seconds, please track it for as long as possible... Here it comes."

A green light. I level the rangefinder in the suit arm and track it. He's right, this thing is moving pretty fast. What is this? I relay the telemetry information back to control. The light goes out.

"Ginn that's great. Now try and orient yourself another ninety degrees away from the station, release the water from the drop-pouch on the suit, it should give you a small amount of adjustment. There will be a yellow light, same drill, ok?"

"No problem." I'm glad for the distraction, whatever the hell this is. He was right, water release acts as a poor man's propellant.

More telemetry. All fed back to control.

"Perfect. Last one, Ginn. And then I have a birthday present for you."

It's not my birthday, but I'm not going to mention that right now.

Last light is moving directly towards me, it disappears a few hundred meters short of my position. Telemetry sent.

"Ginn. Now I'm not going to lie to you. This next part is going to suck. Did you ever play "British Bulldog" as a kid?"

"What, where you stand in the middle of a field and bigger kids take it in turn to run at you and smack you in the chest? Yea. I wasn't very bloody good at it."

"Ginn. You're going to have to get a bit better."

"What's going on?"

"We're sending you a heavy duty external propulsion device. Think of it as a space bike and you're almost there. It's going to arrive from the direction of that last light. And Ginn, it's going to be travelling fast."

"What..."

"We're pre-programming it to decelerate as hard as possible on its way to you, but we can't risk using up too much of the fuel and we have to cut the jets way before it gets to you or..."

"Or?"

"Or we'll cook you."

"Fantastic. Because suffocation is so boring. How fast is this thing going to be moving?"

"We estimate around twenty one to twenty six miles per hour, relative."

"I was just starting to like you, Mike."

"I'll buy you a beer after this to apologize. ETA 30 seconds on my mark... Mark."

Chronometer synchronized.

"Mike, I don't mean to sound cynical, but how the hell are you going to get this thing to me?"

"We're going to give it a little Push."

There's a flash, and I'm braced, with nothing to brace myself against. Plasma jets are firing directly in front of me, the visor on the stupid red suit polarises to prevent me from being blinded.

Getting closer.

The light is gone.

The space bike hits me in the chest. Grasping for handles, air gone from my lungs. Alarms are wailing, there are purple lights everywhere. My vision is blurry, I'm grabbing something, HARD. Hanging on for all I am worth. Spinning, disoriented.

I pull myself forward and swing, hit the engage mark and my suit legs lock to the sides of the propulsion bike. There's noise in my ears, not just alarms, desperate chatter over the comm. Ginn, something. Are you something, something. They sound desperate.

Correctional jet bursts fire seemingly from everywhere. The spinning stops. The panic ebbs. I'm facing Herbie. Thrusters fire. I'm moving.

I'm going home.

"Mike?"

"Yes Ginn?" I can hear cheering in the comm background.

"This bike is orange."

"You're damn right it is."

That one was intentional. Coordinated. *Planned.*

They still didn't know what this was, or more importantly how they had done it, and that was the most dangerous aspect of the whole thing. If They perceive this as a threat.

Of course They will.

Two left, only two.

Aaron would have to advance everything, he had to move now.

One was not enough. Hell, two was not enough. But these ones could manage it, this wasn't even aggressive, it was *progressive*, and intent was everything. But They wouldn't care a jot for intent, They would just see:

Threat.