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SHIPWRECKED

Jason McMurdo awoke aboard the advance colony ship *Starbound.* "Are we there already?" he said out loud before remembering that in ship-sleep there was no awareness of time passing — he could have been asleep for a day or for several years.

He crawled out of the sleep pod and quickly dressed. *We must have arrived. The engine is silent... The whole ship is silent. Where is Dr. Lin? Shouldn't she be here to monitor the waking-up of the children?*

The silence was broken by the voice of the ship's Brain coming from a speaker. "Jason McMurdo, please report to the forward mess-room," it said, and repeated the message again and again.

"Okay, I'm coming," said Jason impatiently. "Er — sorry, I mean I'm on my way." The *Starbound* had been designed with a revolutionary new type of Brain, intended to manage the ship on its own for the entire journey while the colonists remained in space sleep, protected from the physical and mental stress of travel through hyperspace. Although he knew that it was only a sophisticated program without emotions, Jason had never lost the feeling that the Brain was a real person, and one smarter and more confident than himself.

On his way out the door, Jason noticed that the monitor on the

pod of Dr. Lin's daughter Mei, next to his own, had cycled from SLEEP to WAKE. Beyond, the two pods containing the Gomez twins were still on SLEEP.

The forward messroom was empty. There were no signs that anyone had been there before him: the table was clean and the chairs neatly arranged about it; no empty cups or dishes, no cutlery. *Where's Dad? Where's First Officer Gomez? Have they all gone outside already?*

Just as he arrived the Brain began repeating a request for Mei to report there also. Before long she arrived at a run. "What's up?" she asked breathlessly.

"Darned if I know," replied Jason. "Did you see anybody on your way here?"

"No."

"What about Pom and Pommy?"

"They're waking up. Jason — I've got a hunch something's wrong."

"I don't believe in your hunches… But it *does* feel like it."

"Don't knock my hunches — they're right most of the time," retorted Mei. "Remember — " She was interrupted by the Brain's voice, asking Aloysius and Bernadette Gomez to come to the messroom.

Jason, having taken a chair, sat unmoving. Short and stocky, dark of skin, dark of hair, and dark of eye, he was now dark of mood as well. *I wish Dad was here. Dad would know what to do. Dad always knows what to do.*

Mei, full of nervous energy, paced about. Also short, she was otherwise a contrast to Jason, having light-brown hair, fair skin, and pale blue eyes. She was so thin that one might wonder how she could move; she seemed to have no room for muscles in her arms or legs. Both she and Jason were thirteen years of age.

A quarter of an hour later the Gomez twins had not arrived. *"Now* what?" said Mei. "I'd better go look for them." She went to leave the messroom and at the door was almost knocked over as the twins came in.

They were a year younger than Jason and Mei, and as alike as a boy and girl could be. Their hair was just too light and fine to be called golden; some called it gilt instead. Their eyes were also blue, but unlike Mei's they were dark-blue and piercing. Only the Brain still used their real names; somehow, no one remembered when or why, they had acquired the nicknames "Pom" and "Pommy." They had a peculiar way of speaking in turn, as though each knew what the other was thinking.

"Where were you?" asked Jason.

"We went to the bridge —" began Pom.

"And looked out the viewport," continued Pommy. "Have you seen —"

"What it looks like outside?"

"Nothing growing."

"Just rock —"

"Not even any soil."

"The sun's in the sky —"

"But the sky is black —"

"Which means there's no air," they finished together.

"Let's go to the bridge," declared Mei. "I want to see for myself."



The view outside was as the twins had said: a landscape of bare rock, dimly lit by an orange sun in a black sky. Scattered about the irregular ground were craggy hillocks and small crevasses. A mile or so distant was a chain of low mountains. As they watched, from the top of one of the mountains came a plume of smoke, lit redly from below. The ground beneath the *Starbound* trembled.

"A volcano!" exclaimed Jason.

"Yes," agreed Mei, "and not far away. We don't want to be here longer than we must."

"But where is *here?*" asked Jason. "This certainly isn't Epsilon Camelopardis III."

"The Brain should know," said Mei. "Hey, Brain. What's up? Where are we?"

"I do not know," replied the Brain. "This planet has not been charted."

"What?" chorused the four children.

"The *Starbound* was about to Fling into hyperspace when it intersected the path of a large group of meteors. The deflectors were overloaded and the ship suffered several direct hits. The impacting meteors caused the ship to Fling with a heading and velocity different from that which I had calculated —"

"So we came out of hyperspace —" said Pommy.

"Not where we aimed," finished Pom.

"The ship was damaged," resumed the Brain. "It was necessary to make an emergency landing. Fortunately, the engine and the hyperdrive were intact. In accordance with my programming I took the *Starbound* in a search pattern until I found a system with a suitable planet to land upon —"

"You call this one *suitable?"* asked Jason. "Er — sorry."

"For an emergency landing, yes."

"How bad is the damage?" asked Mei.

"It appears to be severe, although I do not know the full extent. Many of my sensors are non-functional."

"But why are you telling *us?"* demanded Mei. "Why didn't you wake up Captain McMurdo and the rest of the grown-ups?"

"I do not have contact with that part of the ship."

"Then," began Jason slowly, "I guess…we have to wake them up ourselves."

"I guess," said Mei. "Let's go."

"Wait," said Pom.

"We should first put on spacesuits —" said Pommy.

"In case there are places on the ship —"

"That were holed by a meteor —"

"And so have no air."

"Oh — right," agreed Jason.



The children's spacesuits were stored in a locker in their sleeping chamber. Donning them was little more than a matter of stepping into them and sealing the helmet. Lightweight and flexible, each had a built-in three-hour air supply (which could be extended by attaching cylinders of compressed air), a radio, and a lantern for use in places where there was little or no light.

Once in their suits, they checked the air gauges and tested the lanterns and radios before heading aft.

In the *Starbound's* nose was the bridge; heading aft from there one would pass through the forward messroom, then a passageway with cabins on either side, the recreation space, the sick bay, and the main sleep chamber. Beyond those were the cargo hold, the hyperdrive, and the engine. The children's sleep chamber had been improvised from two adjoining cabins when, unexpectedly, it had become necessary for their parents to accompany the advance expedition.

When they attempted to enter the sleep chamber an alarm light flashed. There was no air inside.

"Pom and Pommy were right," observed Jason. "It's a good thing we're in our suits."

Access to each main space within the *Starbound* was through a double door with a small airlock in between, so that if, as appeared to be the case here, the space was in vacuum, it could be entered without losing air from the rest of the ship. The children entered the airlock, closed the outer door, and opened the inner one.

"You see?" said Mei. "I *told* you there was something wrong."

"Yeah, yeah," replied Jason. "I see."

The far end of the chamber was about forty feet away. Along both sides stretched a row of sleep pods, ten to a side, in two sets of five; between were lockers containing clothing and spacesuits. Slumbering within the pods were Captain McMurdo, First Officer Gomez, Dr. Lin, and the rest of the grownups.

The lights were not working, but the chamber was dimly illumi-

nated from outside by orange sunlight entering through an irregular hole in the hull. One of the meteors that had struck the *Starbound* had pierced the ship and gone completely through.

"Are they all okay?" asked Jason. The children went down the rows, checking the pod monitors. All pods were operational and all the lights were green. "Well, that's a relief," he said.

"But we do have a problem," said Pom.

"We can't wake any of them up," added Pommy.

"For if we did —"

"Without any air —"

"They would quickly die."

"If we had a suit right there, *maybe* if we woke someone up, he could get into the suit fast enough to survive," suggested Mei.

They found Captain McMurdo's suit in the suit locker and brought it to the side of his pod.

"Are you sure this will work?" inquired Jason.

Mei considered. "Maybe we could write a note and show it to your father before opening the pod."

"Okay." Jason went forward and returned with the note. Mei began the wake-up sequence. After a few seconds the ALARM light flashed crimson and she hastily canceled the awakening.

"What happened?" asked Jason.

"I don't know," replied Mei. "I can call the Brain over the suit radio. Hey, Brain."

"Yes?"

Mei explained what had just taken place.

"The pods have fail-safe sensors," said the Brain. "If the outside environment is hazardous as it is in this case, being in vacuum, they will not permit awakening. Had you not canceled, the pod would have done so automatically."



They returned to the bridge. "Is it up to *us* to do something?" said

Jason. "This is stupid. What can we do? We shouldn't even *be* here. I wish we'd stayed on Earth."

Mei retorted. "That's not what you said back on Earth when half the advance crew got messed up in a crash and they had to bring in our parents from the follow-up crew to replace them. You were all excited then."

"I wish Dad was here."

"Well, he isn't. So put your thinking cap on."

The ship trembled again. There was a prolonged low rumble that seemed to come from everywhere.

"Is that the engine turning on?" asked Jason.

"Hey, Brain," said Mei. "Did you just start the engine?"

"No," replied the Brain.

"Then what just happened?"

"I believe there has been a minor quake. The nearby volcano is erupting more forcefully. The planetary surface below the ship is becoming increasingly unstable."

"Can you get the ship off the ground?" asked Jason.

"Yes."

"Then do it!" cried Mei.

This time the Brain did start the engine. The *Starbound* rose up just seconds before a major quake opened up a wide crack where it had been.

Through the viewport they could see that they had escaped catastrophe. The planet below was in violent convulsion. The volcano they had seen was now hidden beneath the clouds of smoke and ashes it was vomiting forth, but as they watched two others erupted. The rocky terrain, which had seemed so solid, was rippling like water.

"Whew — that was a close one. At least we're still alive," commented Jason when the ship was in orbit. "No thanks to the Brain," he added under his voice.

Mei caught his words. "Why?" she asked.

Jason's face reddened. "Never mind," he said.

Mei laughed. "Are you afraid of what the Brain might think?"

"I said, never mind."

"Oh, all right. So what *should* the Brain have done?"

"Well…it seems to me that if it knew the ship was in danger, why didn't it take off by itself? Why did it have to wait for your order? After all, it knew what to do when the meteors hit it."

"I — I don't know. I guess because one case was in its programming and the other wasn't."

"Meanwhile, apart from being not dead, we're no better off. We don't know where we are, we don't know what to do, and we can't wake anybody up to ask them."

"Well *I* have a suggestion," said Mei. "I'm hungry. I bet we all are. Let's go to the messroom, eat, and *then* think."

"Good idea," said the twins.



The autochef, fortunately, was intact and produced a meal. They ate in glum silence, each waiting for one of the others to produce an idea.

Mei was the first to speak. "With the Brain's help we might be able to find our way back home," she suggested. "We can tell them what happened and they'll send a rescue mission. Hey, Brain."

"Yes?"

"Can you take us back to Earth?"

"I cannot," said the Brain.

"What?" they all chorused.

"My control programming was damaged; I could not land the ship well. A hyperdrive crystal shattered and the energy released from it destroyed several other components. The hyperdrive is now inoperable."

"Then —" began Jason and stopped, unwilling to state the conclusion.

"The *Starbound* is stuck here permanently," said the twins together.

"Well that's just *peachy,"* groaned Jason, sagging in his chair in defeat. "We're done for… What did they tell us in training? If a ship is