

“Inertia”
By
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Everyone’s in their positions and I’ve taken control of the Palatine. I feel Janus’ gravity pull on my controller as I begin the descent. I pull back. The ship creaks and groans under the pressure, but I’m not worried. I know the Palatine upwards, backwards, sideways—any way you can imagine. I know it’s doing fine now. We’re going to land on Janus—the first from Earth to ever stand on its deep, purple soil.

I remember before the incident—before the launch—my long-awaited mission to explore the vastness of space began with some damn irony—and I’m really good with irony. It was the spring of 2352 and my training came to an aggravating end when we were given the green light for Janus Six. We were set to launch on April 24th and no one knew about it. No one except for Langen and his top secret group of deep pockets who didn’t seem to know exactly how important Janus Six was. My crew—Haste, Fitzgerald, Cowan—we were all sworn to secrecy like some damn secret devil-worshipping cult. Not one word if we ever wanted to fly again.

So we’re a long stone’s throw away from what NASA used to be. And I just can’t help it: I’m a romantic, dammit—wishing it were the old times again. And so we climbed into that damn rocket with our smiles we’d been saving up and our yes-sirs and yes-ma’ams. No press. No news interviews. Just get in the rocket and go. Send us back plenty of data. Save humanity. Fine, fine, fine.

Be back soon, we said. Or maybe we wouldn’t. How were we to know?

I remember sitting in that cabin as the G’s crushed down on me and the great and terrible roar of the rocket threatened either to propel us to our destination or blow us up into tiny particles—reuniting us with the stuff of the universe. I wasn’t nervous even though I had good

reason to be. We were going to be the first to explore Janus and the Palatine was the smallest rocket in history to ever transport anyone to a different planet—let alone a different galaxy. All we had was the supply rations we needed to survive and the equipment we'd need to set up when we got there. But it was so much more complicated than that.

We strapped in for the Long Wait, wondering how Earth would fare without us. In the beginning, I remember Cowan remarking how Earth might be long gone before we even get back. It's like he was trying to antagonize.

"Shut up, Cowan," I say from the cockpit.

I don't look at him but I can feel him glance up from the trajectory readings. I don't want my second-in-command pilot to be moaning for seventy-two months. I wasn't too fond of our sendoff either. Still. Commander.

"Cowan, take a look at these readings, can you tell me if they're off?"

Fitzgerald, our PLC, liked to change the subject a lot. I'm grateful to him sometimes. But only sometimes. Cowan heads back to help out Fitzgerald and tells Haste to take over as co-pilot for him.

"Alright, gentlemen," Haste says. "We have T minus seventy-two months, two weeks, and five days to arrival at Janus. Anyone got any great stories?"

Haste has been sitting next to me as acting copilot a lot more lately. I like Haste.

"Tell me again, Haste," I say, staring forward out the window. "Why are we going Janus again?"

Haste glances at me. "No more room on Earth for the wicked?"

I hear Cowan chuckle from behind me.

“No,” I shake my head. “Because Janus is the Roman god of new beginnings. That’s what we’re looking for. That’s what we need.”

“You mean that’s what *they* need.” Cowan mutters from behind without looking up from the screens.

I say, “We’re all from the same Earth, Cowan.”

“Commander,” Fitzgerald says, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to make my report on the rations.”

Cowan finally speaks up. “You know what, Haste, yeah. I have a great story. Ever heard the one where the good people of Earth can’t even save their own damn selves so they have to send dead men like *us* to do it for them? That one really resonates, doesn’t it?”

Fitzgerald nudges him. “Shut it down, Cowan.”

I look over my shoulder back down the shaft of the ship. Cowan’s still focused on the readings and Fitzgerald is standing between me and him, looking like he wants to fix us somehow. But I’m not going to explode. I nod to Fitzgerald without a word.

“We have plenty for the return home,” he says. “But we’re going to be staying on Janus for fifteen weeks so we’re only allowed three packets a day until we reach it. During those fifteen weeks we’ll need to keep up our energy because Janus’s gravity is eight percent stronger than Earth’s. As such, I’ve figured we have enough so that we can increase our intake to four packets a day whilst we’re setting up base camp. On our way back, we can reduce our rations to three per day again. That will give us the basic energy we need.”

I nod. “Good. We all know the stakes. We’re all in charge of making sure no one overconsumes the rations, is that understood?”

“Sir,” their voices intone at the same time, though Cowan’s reply is lethargic.

I sit back in my seat and stare forward out the window again. I know it's going to be a long seventy-two and a half months. But I'm not going to explode.

It's the day of the incident and I remind everyone they have the opportunity to sleep should they desire. One million light years into the voyage and no one wants to—not even me. It's been a long three months but the Palatine is keeping the speed of about 11,000 light years per Standard Day.

Cowan is standing near one of the safety hatches and piercing a ration packet with a thin, plastic straw and begins sucking on it. He looks at me and grins—his canines are stained red.

“Why sleep and miss all the exciting goings-on in the Palatine?” he says.

“That's your third packet today, Cowan,” I say.

Cowan shrugs. “Got to keep my energy up.”

“You need to—”

“Commander, a moment.”

I jerk toward Fitzgerald who's peering into a screen. I can hear something in his voice. Something in just those three words.

“What is it?”

“Something's wrong with one of the storage containers in the aft compartments.”

“*What's* wrong?”

Fitzgerald frowned. “If these readings are correct, there's a breach in the hull near Storage Unit B-2273. I can't know anymore unless I see it up close.”

I stare at him a moment. “We have an engine close to that unit.”

“That’s why I need to see it up close,” Fitzgerald stands up. “It’s positioned in a way that it can only be reached from the outside of the Palatine—Commander, do I have your permission to investigate?”

“Commander,” Cowan says, stepping forward. “It’s too dangerous getting that close to the engine. He wouldn’t last long out there. Whatever’s in that container isn’t going to last much longer either.”

“It’s a ration storage,” Fitzgerald says. “We need to act fast to save whatever we can.”

Cowan looks like he’s going to say something but he glances at his packet and shuts up. I make my decision.

“Fine. Go.” I grab onto Fitzgerald’s arm before he moves away. “But we’re going to play this safe. It’s not going to be safe if the engine’s blazing five feet from your head. We’ll monitor your progress and disengage all engines before you get there. Take a com with you—and any equipment you might need.”

Everyone knows the consequences of turning off the engines but no one objects. Fitzgerald nods curtly and hurries away. I turn around and make my way for the controller, noticing that Haste is turned around in the co-pilot chair, staring at me.

“If I’m right,” I say. “We won’t lose too much speed and gravity will propel us forward. Haste, open the video from Fitzgerald’s quadrant and keep it on screen six. I will be taking over manual control. Prepare to fully disengage all ion engines.”

“Sir, what should I do?” It was Cowan.

“Your damn job. Keep an eye on Fitzgerald from the science station. Haste has me covered from up here.”

I notice Cowan hesitate, but he does what he's told—always does when it comes from me. Either way, I'm not worried about hurting feelings anymore when I see Fitzgerald already outside the Palatine without a suit.

“Bastard!” I shout. “I told him to bring a com!”

“What the hell's he doing?” Haste asks, staring wide-eyed at the screen.

“Looks like he's more concerned with speed,” Cowan says. “He's almost to the unit.”

“Switching to manual!”

“Disengaging engines on your mark, Commander.”

I'm not hesitating, I'm waiting for the right moment. Fitzgerald could technically do it without a suit. I watch him climb his way across the hull toward the aft units, grabbing onto the protruding holds as he goes, and I try to imagine what sort of profound silence he's in. Whatever tool he's carrying looks like it's not enough to do the job, but I realize I trust him more than I thought I did. He's the best man for the job.

“All engines disengage.”

“I never asked you. Back then. How much blood did we lose from the container?” Cowan asks.

“Will we have enough for the return trip?”

Fitzgerald doesn't respond at first, focused on a screen.

“I want to know.”

Fitzgerald straightens. “Not enough to warrant abandoning the mission. I spoke with the Commander. If we stay to the normal schedule, we'll have enough to continue as planned.”

I look away from them and glue my eyes on Janus. What the reports say don't really add up to what it looks like up close. I completely forget what I had pictured in my mind at that point. The sooner we land, the better.

"The Palatine's drinking in everything, Commander," Haste says. "We're getting more data than we ever read in training."

I nod curtly. "Good. Hold the course. I'll be taking manual control shortly."

"Million-dollar question," Cowan says, a smile on his face. "Did we get here because we're a bunch of blood-sucking dead men, or are we the chosen ones meant to colonize the infinite space?"

"It's because we were patient," Fitzgerald says.

Haste speaks up. "It's 'cause we're damn good at what we do, that's why."

I smile. "Damn straight."

As we descend toward the designated landing zone, I avert my eyes from what I can only imagine is the amazing view of the planet. I need to stay focused as I hear Haste gasp, "Wow." I pull up on the controller and ease the Palatine to the landing spot—a small field of purple foliage near an outcrop of trees. The Palatine's ion engines rev down like a sigh.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking," I say wryly. "Local time is unknown. Temperature appears to be...sixty-eight degrees. Looks like we have some wind and slight rainstorms coming in from the northeast. Please do not remain seated. Get off your lazy asses and get to work."

"Welcome to Janus."