

The lone man

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Planets spun on their axes and suns rose, their light glittering through space dust speckled over the endless deep-space sky. Life, as it had been before the crash, continued on. His eyes slowly blinked open, trying their best to make out shapes and silhouettes in the synthetically made dark of the decimated common room. A now familiar heaviness sat over His left shoulder, anchoring Him down. Blood pooled across the floor as the sound of cables frying and machines short-circuiting rang through the stale air of the forgotten vessel.

It had been two days since the crash. And seemingly nobody back on Earth knew it had even happened.

Inky black darkness swallowed everything in its wake, making the trapped private feel utterly alone. He was accompanied only by a low hum ringing throughout His ears. Over the past twenty hours, He'd been desperately trying to get out from His metal prison, pushing and grunting at the fallen bearing that was trapping him. The bearing moved in increments. A push, a shove, a kick. Another push, more shoving. Finally, the bearing creaked and scraped. He moved quickly and slid out, finally free. The heavy bearing dropped, its weight denting the floor. He laid out on the cracked floor and scanned his memory for answers.

The last thing He remembered was crouching down in the common room by the bearing, holding on for dear life as the ship plummeted through darkness littered with debris. Screaming, begging, praying. All in vain. Then an earth shattering crash. Then nothing.

A light flickering on the edge of his peripheral jostled Him from His stupor. He slowly got up on shaky legs, using His good arm to stabilize Himself. He moved towards the source of the flickering light on the automatic door panel. The smashed screen tried desperately to display its usual cheerful message, politely instructing the ship's staff to use their I.D. card to open the heavy sliding door. He swiped his I.D. across the sensor and the door slid partially open with a cringe inducing metal scrape. He pushed it open the rest of the way and cautiously peeked out into the hallway. Seeing no one, He carefully called out a broken "hello". The echo responded, but faded out eventually in the bowels of the ship. Then only silence followed.

A cacophony of beeps flowed down the dark hallway to His right. He decided to follow the sound. He moved cautiously, occasionally stopping when confronted by a dead body or a new startling sound. Only the fluorescent green glow of the emergency guide lights led him along. Eventually He made it to the source of the horrid beeps. The bridge.

Most of His colleagues still sat in their seats, tied down with their "crash proof" seatbelts. Now, all dead. The usually bright lights were now only sparkling flickers and the chatter had been replaced with the noises of bogged down machines. The communication stations were set to their emergency settings. Supposedly, they were sending out distress calls through the whole universe. Yet nobody had responded. They reminded Him of the last seconds before the crash. Lieutenants grasped onto the desks and shouted at each other through hot tears, as if they could yell the compromised engines back into working order. The captain watched the scene unfold through the glass walls, utterly helpless.

It had been a routine transport mission, made different only by the new transport technology they were using. Take a part of the crew to the next post through a pre-programmed hyperspeed tunnel. As is with most things, all was going well, until it suddenly wasn't. An enemy vessel jumped into the tunnel behind them, shooting out their engines and sending them crashing through the wall of the tunnel into the ever present abyss of darkness.

There was only one working panel left on the bridge. The pannel's glow was slightly dimmed by a spiderweb crack in the corner. His fingers clicked on the screen, looking for absolutely anything. Through His frenzied searching, He managed to find the communication controls. The panel beeped angrily and displayed a simple message. "Offline". He tapped on the screen again, demanding connection to the fleet's network. Only "Offline" again. Panic overtook Him and He became frantic. Nearly cracking the screen with the strength of His taps. "No connection to online databases", "Repeat connection", "Connection lost", "Acces unavailable", "Offline".

He was surprised to find himself talking out loud. Mumbling the word "no" to the void around him. He tried again, this time searching through the ship's offline database. Part of the ship's man-made gravity in its west wing seemed to be out of order according to the panel. All engines down, shields compromised, emergency escape pods still docked in their respective places, no heat signs anywhere on the ship.

Frozen, he turned to face the windshield. Cracks seeped through it like streams of water on a mountain range. Out there, nebulas flowed, stars burned out and comets shot through the onyx sky. The complete and crushing loneliness sent His heart sinking. His legs gave out and He dropped to the floor. Utterly and endlessly alone.

Back on Earth a meeting room was alive with aggravated yelling. High ranking officers shouted at each other while scientists scrambled to gather whatever information they could on the recently lost vessel. Gallons of coffe stored in ketles sat on the little corner desk and the air was thick with cigarette smoke. In another room, far away from the hubbub, a press conference was taking place. PR managers were sweating through their expensive suits as families of the ship's staff and journalists screamed unanswerable questions at them. The public was getting anxious.

A group of engineers had been working for two days straight in a control room. Utilizing satellite after satellite, they scanned through space, looking for any signs of the tragically lost spacecraft and its crew. All of them felt a deep searing guilt in the pits of their stomachs. Each of them blamed themselves for the accident, for the death of their friends and colleagues. If only they were more careful, if only they didn't let themselves get distracted by celebrating the success of their new tunnel.

"Hindsight really is 20/20, huh guys?", said one of the engineers currently working in satellite #873. No response. Seconds turned into minutes and then morphed into hours. The sounds of keys tapping, heavy breathing and the occasional sip of coffee became the control room's soundtrack.

"Oh my God."

"What is it?"

"I found them! I FOUND THEM!"

The exhausted scientists piled up around their successful colleague and eagerly gawked at his computer screen which showed a grainy photo of the familiar spacecraft. The group of men laughed in relief and joy. The satellite scanner closer and closer, eventually gaining remote access to the ship's computers.

Nothing could've prepared them for the crushing disappointment that followed.

"System failure, Internal atmosphere breach, no signs of life" the screen read.

One of the scientists swore, one ran out and keeled over in the hallway, one collapsed to the ground. The rest looked on with tears in their eyes.

Finally one of them broke the deafening silence.

"They're all dead, every last one of them", he breathed, almost as if he were breaking the news to himself.

A high ranking officer burst into the room, demanding answers. The engineers looked at him with eyes glazed over and full of tears. They didn't even need to say anything to get the message across.

The officer composed himself and walked over to the screen to have a look. A tear almost willed itself into existence in the corner of his eye.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen", he said curtly, turned on his heel and walked out, heading towards the PR circus. The news broke soon after that. The country went into mourning and vigils were held all over the world. The vessel was deemed irretrievable and left to decay away in darkness, abandoned by its makers.

He saw the suns rise and fall many times over in the seven weeks it took until the ship finally succumbed to its mechanical injuries. He stayed there for all seven of those weeks, watching life through the cracked windshield. His processors slowly started to die and his fuel ran out. His joints rusted over. The welding in his skeleton cracked and crumbled. On the last day of His life, the mechanical man looked out into the calm universe, now at peace with His fate. The ship's core died off quietly and all machines on the ship did so along with it. Finally, offline.