

Out of Space - Paul Blake

Arcs of electricity illuminated the darkened cabin. Purple and blue sparks rained down from damaged circuits onto the steel floor. A monotonous robotic voice announced its garbled warning through one of the speakers. It stopped, and an ear-piercing squeal followed until the speaker blew. An underwhelming wisp of smoke came from the plastic case in the sudden silence. Major Michael Pitman opened his eyes. He winced at the sight before him: steel support beams from the ceiling crisscrossed the cabin like a snakes and ladders board; bundles of cables dangled above his head, knocked from their racks; various steel rods and other debris littered the floor. He reached down and undid the clasp of his safety harness. Once free, on shaking legs, he crossed over to his co-pilot and Commanding Officer Kellie Traynor, she was still. Strapped into her chair. Her neck at a wrong angle. He felt her throat for a pulse, noticing the skin was cold to his touch. *Damn. No heartbeat. Damn. Damn.*

Must contact base. Pitman looked on the floor for his headset and saw it across the cabin by the airlock door. He picked it up and moved back to his chair in front of the centre console. The electronics looked dead. No blinking lights. No illuminated dials. No video display. He plugged the headset connector into the slot on the console and pressed the “talk” button.

‘This is Major Pitman for Houston Base. Come in. Over.’ Nothing. No static. No atmospheric hiss. He pressed the talk button harder and repeated the phrase. Again nothing.

‘If you can hear me, Houston Base, we have suffered an unknown event. Commander Traynor is dead, and the craft is damaged. The diagnostic system is down so I will attempt to determine our condition and report back.’ *I hope they’re receiving this.*

He removed the headset placing it on the console. Behind him, a fire started from one of the sparks on a wall panel. Pitman grabbed the CO2 extinguisher from its place by his feet, pulled the safety pin as he walked towards the fire. The cabin was only ten metres by twenty metres. He aimed the nozzle at the wall panel and pulled the trigger. The CO2 gas bloomed out engulfing the orange tongues of flames. He swept it from side to side until he was sure the flames had extinguished. He put the extinguisher on his chair. The emergency lights overhead flickered but remained on. Pitman crouched down by the centre console and looked for the hard reset switch. It was tucked underneath to prevent accidental activation. His groping fingers reached it. The switch was similar to the one Pitman had at home on his fusebox. A selector switch with a lever that pointed to on or off. Pitman twisted the switch to the off position, and the cabin went dark. He counted off ten seconds in his head and twisted it back. Nothing. *Damn.* He repeated the process, and the second time the overhead lights came back on, and the console kicked into life. Different systems and functions beeped their readiness like a chorus of electronic birds in the morning. Pitman stood up and picked up the headset. He pressed the “talk” button and repeated his earlier message. He was rewarded with a blast of static in his ear, then, ‘... Roger..., we hear you. What is the status of your ship? Over.’

Pitman breathed a sigh of relief. ‘It’s good to hear your voice. I have restored electrical power to the console and will be opening the front shield to see if I can see anything. There is no engine noise or vibration, so wherever we are, we’re dead in the air.’

‘Ok Pitman, keep us informed. Over.’ The line went dead, and Pitman removed the headset. He reached over to Traynor’s side of the console and pressed a button. The craft shuddered as the reinforced metal plates of the front shield separated into halves and exposed the seven inch thick, triple paned, aluminium silicate glass and fused silica glass windows. Sunlight streamed into the cabin making Pitman close his eyes at the sudden glare. The

afterglow behind the eyelids was intense, and he raised his arm to shield his eyes until they recovered and adjusted. *Sunlight? We were headed away from the sun.*

After a few minutes, the glow faded, and Pitman slowly opened his eyes, still behind the arm. The sun's light was still penetrating, so Pitman pressed the button to close the shield. The plates slid back into position with a clang. *That's not going to work.* He turned to the video display and popped the keyboard out of its slot below the screen. He tapped a few buttons to look at readings from the sensors dotted around the exterior of the craft. Expecting a temperature of around 2.7 Kelvin, or -270 Celsius, Pitman was astonished to see the temperature was close to positive 28 Celsius, similar to a balmy summer's day back on Earth. *What the hell?* He pressed a few more buttons to take a sample of the outside atmosphere. Less than a minute later the screen displayed the result. Largest proportion was Nitrogen, then oxygen, and argon. There were trace amounts of gases like carbon dioxide, nitrous oxides, methane, and ozone. *That is not possible.* The chemical composition of space is made up of hydrogen and helium with tiny traces of other elements such as carbon, oxygen and iron. Pitman shook his head in disbelief. *Let's see if I can get the computer's track up before jumping to conclusions.* The track contained details about the craft's journey and how it actually compared to the set trajectory.

Pitman stood up and went across to Traynor's side of the cabin. 'Excuse me,' he said automatically as his knee hit hers. *Damn.* As CO she had the computer that contained the track. Pitman powered it up and went straight for the track's location on the system. They had been in space for seventy-five days out of their planned 15-month journey to Venus. The two-person mission was to see if it was possible to colonise the planet's upper atmosphere. According to probes that had been sent out, the surface of the planet was determined to be a write-off. An atmosphere made up of 96.5% Carbon Dioxide was too toxic for humans, practically total greenhouse effect and the planet's surface was thought to be highly volcanic

and have an atmospheric pressure equivalent to a depth of 1km under Earth's oceans. The Upper Atmosphere was supposed to be more promising and could help alleviate the growing population concerns back on Earth.

The track came up, and Pitman traced the craft's journey. They had remained on course as planned, as he had known they had. However, for some unknown reason, the craft had veered off course in a trajectory that looked like a preschooler's drawing of a pig's curly tail. As far as Pitman could determine the spaceship had travelled four hundred thousand miles off course until it had come to a stop for the past three days. *What the hell happened?*

He returned to his chair and picked up the headset. 'Houston Base, this is Pitman. Over' He waited for a response. His mind whirling.

'Pitman, this is Houston Base. We read you,' the voice on the other end of the headset wire said. 'What have you found out? Over.'

'For some unknown reason, the ship went off course about four...' He did the rough calculations in his head, '... no, five days ago. We're currently four hundred thousand miles or so off course. Over.'

'That tracks with our systems here. We have you on course and then lose you five days ago. There had been no signal from your craft until we spoke to you. We can now see where you are. We're working out a solution to get you home. Do the engines still work? Over.'

'I don't know. They're not on now. I'll see if I can igni-' he stopped as he heard a noise coming from the airlock area. It sounded like a high-powered welding torch.

'Pitman, are you there?'

'Yes, I'm still here. I can hear a noise coming from the airlock area. I'm going to check it out. I'll be back. Over.'

Pitman put down the headset and walked over to the airlock hatch. He looked through the thickened Perspex viewing window, and his eyes widened at the three figures he saw emerging from the fissure in the airlock door. Tall, much taller than Pitman. Wearing a dark hooded garment. One of the figures looked at him, and Pitman screamed at the visage he saw. Black reptilian eyes that showed his own petrified face in the mirrored surface. Steel-grey skin leading to a mouth with a shark's smile. The figure stepped forward.

Pitman scrambled backwards, his left foot stepped onto a fallen rod that rolled under his sole. His arms flailed about trying to correct the overbalance. He fell backwards, still looking at the airlock door. The back of his head came down, along with the rest of him and bounced off the steel floor. Once. Twice. Pitman saw the figure at the window peering in as his world went black.

Pitman came to. Confused. Disorientated. An image of the figure from the airlock flashed into his brain. He gasped and tried to sit up. He found he was restrained. Unable to move his limbs. His blood ran cold and then warm and then cold. It rushed to his head and then left. He slumped back down, eyes closed. His breathing ragged then slowed.

The pain in his side woke him a second time. An intense burning inside him. Pitman opened his eyes in shock. The glare of artificial light making his pupils contract and his eyes water. He blinked away the tears as he cried out. He struggled but to no avail. He couldn't move. His heart hammered in his chest. His vision cleared and he could see he was in a bright, laboratory-like room, he looked to his left and saw Traynor on a metal table. Nude. Her

greying skin dulled and dead. A figure standing over her with a sharp knife in its hand? *No that's not a hand. There are claws instead of fingernails.* Pitman looked at the figure. The hooded cloak had gone. In its place was what looked like chain-mail over olive green skin, which rippled with muscle. The lizard eyes and shark mouth had gone. Replaced with small pig-like features. Small, hidden eyes. A snout and tusks. *W-w-what?*

Another tear in his side, this time on the other side brought his attention to what was happening to him. He raised his head as high as he could and saw two creatures, similar in appearance to the one beside Traynor. One held a wicked, sharp knife. The other. *Oh my god is that a probe?*

© Paul Blake, 2018

<http://paulblakeauthor.com>