

Infinite Death
by Sophia Smith

It took them longer than usual to respond. The propagation delay between earth and the moon was about three seconds. After all, radio waves need time to travel 384,472 km, just like anything else.

But they were taking three minutes. John repeated himself, just in case it didn't go through, double checking the time.

"It is currently 15:24 hours, and according to navigation, we have approximately ten minutes, fifty-three seconds until apoapsis orbit. Angle is 27.75 degrees, adjusting to 28.00 degrees as planned for periapsis orbit. Do you copy? Over."

Then they responded immediately. "Copy that. Good luck. Over and out."

Strange. They always shunned luck. Who needs luck when you have hundreds of people doing calculations for you?

The radar blinked at him. He blinked at the radar. He'd missed the moon. One hundred some people doing careful calculations to make sure he didn't miss, and yet here he was. Not orbiting the moon like he was supposed to.

"Houston, this is Hades. Confirming course failure. Please send correction course. Over."

He couldn't wait long. Maybe ten seconds, and he'd shoot past the moon and any chance of going into orbit like he was supposed to.

Ten seconds passed.

Sighing, he turned on the manual steering controls and started toward the moon. If he was careful enough, he'd be able to be caught in its orbit without crashing to its surface. But only if the angle wasn't too acute. He wanted to go into lunar orbit, not to the moon itself. He didn't have the landing gear for that.

But he definitely didn't want to undershoot. If he missed orbit, he was dead. He'd be stranded in space and eventually die of hypoxia, hypercapnia, starvation, thirst, and pressure loss, among other things. An endless possibility of death, waiting for him beyond the moon. He tilted the wheel a little more, unconsciously, as if getting as far away from space as possible. As if that was feasible. He corrected himself. How could Joyce, the Flight Dynamics Officer, have made this mistake? She was the smartest person he knew, and a perfectionist to boot.

He felt the orbit tugging at the hull and he slowly released the wheel, turning more and more control over to the gravity of the moon, essentially shifting the spacecraft into neutral. He switched it back to automated navigation.

The spacecraft jerked out of orbit, throwing him across the wall.

He woke up with ripped seatbelts tangled around him, locking his arms in place. He untangled himself and sat up, flinching. Blood came away from his head when he touched it. He glanced around, assessing. The suit caught his attention first.

It was full of holes.

There were a lot of things that shouldn't have happened. First, why did they insist on sending him solo to the moon? For safety, that was usually against policy. Second, the seatbelts shouldn't have ripped. Third, the trajectory should have been correct, and he should have been able to stay in orbit once he'd altered course. Fourth, the suit was supposed to stand up to more than the ship shaking twice. After all, anomalies were prepared for.

Fifth, the oxygen tank alarms shouldn't be going off.

The oxygen tank was leaking. Once it ran out, he'd have fifteen seconds before suffocation. Or it was going into the ship itself and he'd die from overexposure to pure oxygen because the oxygen concentrator wasn't working. Either way was bad and needed to be fixed. Since the symptoms of both were virtually identical, he was willing to bet that one thing was broken (the tank valves) instead of two (valves and concentrator).

The tank had 11.33 kg before the breach. It had dropped to 8.59 kg in 10 seconds. If the rate of the leak stayed the same, he had about thirty seconds to get to the tank, find the leak, and seal it.

Well. He fixed the leak. Sort of. It was still leaking, but the rate had been slowed down considerably. He had a different problem now.

He could have chosen to go to Mars. Or Venus. Instead, he'd chosen to go to the moon. Would there have been these many problems if he'd gone to Mars? Or would it have been a different set of problems instead?

Alarms blared in his ears of different tones and rhythms. The loudest was the pressure equalizer. Pressure had increased to 3.0 atm. Without the space suit useable and on him to equalize the pressure, he would be crushed. Unless he was pushed out of the spaceship, but that was unlikely since the hull wasn't breaching. Hopefully it stayed that way.

Everything was shouting at him, blaring that the hull was breaching. He could have chosen to stay home, but no, he had to explore the world before he died. He hadn't gotten very far with that.

He reached for the suit; but it wouldn't do him any good, even if he could get it on in less than ten seconds. Too many holes... Could he have saved himself if he'd done something different? There were an infinite number of things he could have done. Or not done.

The hull breached, a hole a meter wide giving him a brilliant view of space. He lost his grip on the manual steering wheel and was pushed into the void.

Flying through space is not recommended. Especially without a space suit.

John had about three seconds before death. What should his last thoughts be? Probably something profound... all he could think was this whole thing had been a bad decision. A car would have been easier. Or he could have chosen a...

“Report?”

She didn't bother turning around, still monitoring the satellite they'd used to hijack John's controls. “He's been pushed out of the ship. Previous surveillance shows that he somehow managed to temporarily seal the faulty oxygen tanks, despite the poor-quality sealant we gave him.”

“Interesting. So, he still tried to survive despite all of the malfunctions?”

She nodded. “Log shows he tried communicating almost immediately after the supposed navigation error. Then he took the wheel himself, trying to correct the course. The alarms started after we hijacked him. He didn't bother contacting us after that; probably too busy trying to stay alive.”

“Do we have evidence of that?”

“Yes. The footage of his efforts was recorded live. They're in our classified database now. Only you and the Director have access to them.”

“Good. Have you checked in with the Public Affairs Officer, yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Get on that. We need to be able to tell the public something they'll accept, since we're required to give a report of everything. Anything else?”

“Yes. His last thought.”

She could hear the excitement in his voice. Most people wouldn't have caught on, but she'd worked with him for so long that she almost didn't need a Thought-Recorder, the invention that had recorded John's thoughts, to know what he was thinking.

“So it worked?”

“Yes.”

“What was he thinking?”

“Thoughts of regret.” She finally swiveled to look up at him. She couldn’t stop the anger from tearing through her voice. “His exact thought was this; ‘I could have chosen...’ We shouldn’t have sent him.”

“Joyce, are you second guessing yourself?”

“No.”

“Good. Because he chose to go on this mission.”

“He didn’t know what the mission was.”

“I’m starting to think you’re not all in on this program. It’s important to learn these things about human behavior.”

“I know. But do you think we could come up with a different way to do it?”

“Joyce...”

She kept going, ignoring him. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be in space. Maybe we can insert these chips into random hospital patients, record their thoughts in times of trauma, and of course when they’re about to die.”

“Joyce, stop it.”

“We could even record their entire lives, since storage on the chips isn’t an issue with their transmitting capabilities.”

“FDO, we can’t make excuses. We have to learn these things.”

“I’m not making excuses. I don’t do that. I’m giving slightly more humane options for conducting essentially the same experiment. We wouldn’t have to initiate the scenarios; eventually, they’d just happen. And it’s more cost effective. And we wouldn’t be required to give a detailed false report about it to the public since it wouldn’t go through NASA. I tell you, when I was a PAO, it was a lot harder to come up with a realistic falsity than to actually tell people what happened. The level of detail they expect must be met, even if you’re lying through your teeth.”

He sighed, glancing at all the monitors around the room. She followed his gaze. They were in a sound-proof glass room with the most... sensitive information being forwarded to her monitors. Outside of the enclosure, there were hundreds of NASA workers running about, trying to make out what had happened with Hades from the false information she’d fed them from her computer. That way the story would be consistent if someone came in to investigate, without damning the two of them.

"I wish you weren't so smart, sometimes," he whispered. She turned back to him. A pistol was pointed at her head. "I enjoyed our time working together. But you know too much."

The blood sprayed against the glass. Everyone else, those not privy to the truth, were too busy to notice. His cleaning crew came in as he walked out to his own office.

They'd have it cleaned up before anyone noticed.

Closing the door to his office carefully behind him, he plopped down in his chair, running his hands over his face. He'd killed her. But it was her or him. He didn't want to make the Director angry. He leaned over and pressed the comm button on his desk. "Canberra's FDO, this is Houston's FD. Over."

A moment passed. The radio crackled. "Roger. Status? Over."

He took a deep breath, then continued. "Houston's FDO was aborted. Over."

"Copy that. Orders? Over."

"Send the next one up. Over and out."