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Forced Forward

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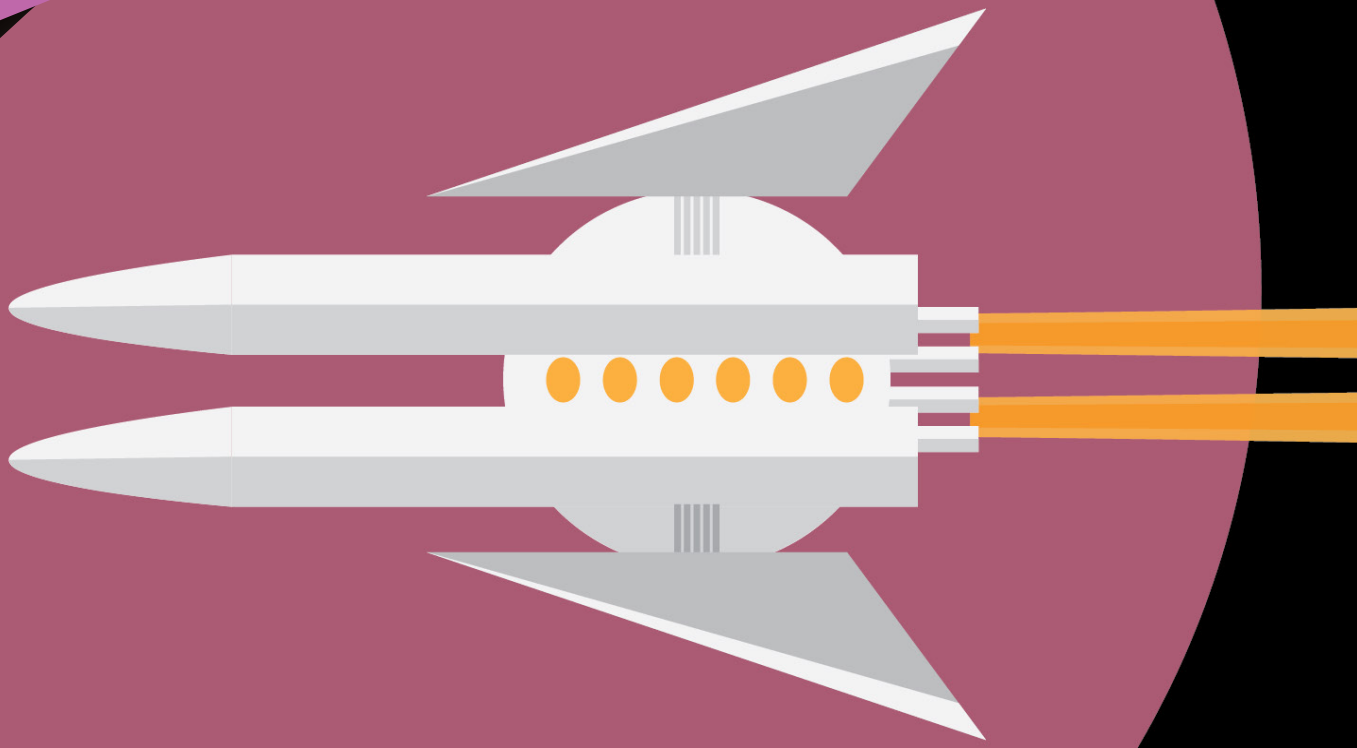
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Three hours, three hours before the ship, Betty May, would drift away beyond the edges of known space. Two hours, two hours since the steering system had failed.

The considerations and questions that ran through the captain's head were disastrous and apocalyptic thoughts about himself, his crew, and his passengers.

Three hours were all Captain Dalken had to consider the lives of his entire ship. Only himself and his bosun knew; the crew had been called through the earpiece hailer system they were all equipped with. The captain waited and stared at his partner. The bosun, whose eyes had widened in panic, dug through the emergency system records and wracked his brain for any scrap of knowledge he was given in training that might pull them out of this dire situation. Three hours had turned into two hours and 45 minutes. The captain could not even bear to look back at the clock. It seemed time was ticking to screw with him..

When the crew arrived, the captain stood from his tall-backed pilot chair, which he had swiveled to face the door, and strode towards them with confidence in his step. However, his shaking hands and quivering brow betrayed him to the team he had worked alongside for nearly an entire alignment season.

The captain, his voice on the verge of cracking, said, "You all have to know that we are in an emergency situation. Our engine's pressure exceeded the maximum threshold and has been crippled.. More importantly, we have lost our braking system."

The crew immediately realized the dangers this presented.

That it was the ultimate doomsday developing. A situation in which the crew needed the utmost precision and metric tons of luck to make it out alive. Without brakes, the crew would be forced to slip through space without any friction to slow them. They would either crash into a celestial body, or fly into the void until they had exceeded where any man had gone before. They would starve to death in their tin can ship. The helix particle engine the ship used increased its velocity to almost lightspeed. At this rate, they would go beyond any hope of rescue in only two hours and 40 minutes.

The crew stood uneasy, staring at the captain and glancing at each other as they sought words to understand their predicament. A young crew member named Jane, broke the silence first when she lunged for the trash can and vomited twice, falling slowly to the floor on the second heave. Jane usually dealt with crises with relative poise and grace, despite having minimal experience around interstellar ships.

Adam, a fellow crew member, grabbed her shoulder as she crouched on the floor with the can between her knees. Adam spoke first, his voice shaking slightly "What is there that we can do?"

"Not much; our bosun is looking into what we can do, checking our emergency manuals for anything we can use," replied the captain with false bravado as he patted Stephen, the bosun, on the back.

Stephen looked up and exclaimed, "I think I've found something! The precision adjustment system is a pressure-based design, and if we can adjust it to face towards the direction we

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are flying and expel all the gas at once, we may be able to slow ourselves at least." Stephen's eyes dodged rapidly from side to side as he spoke; anybody could tell that he did not truly believe his solution would work. The crew set aside their uncertainty and went to work into the engine rooms and steering voids. Within 20 minutes, the vents were aligned to force the ship backward.

There was only one thing left to do. Somebody had to handle the passengers. It was a group of winter sports enthusiasts headed to 90377 Sedna, a dwarf planet renowned for its wintry landscapes and low-gravity winter sports. They would not be happy to hear their vacation may be going awry. Behind all of these passengers stood Claudia and Nick, a duo of utmost efficiency when resolving passenger conflicts, an important skill to have for a two-week trip with guests who suffer from the effects of extraordinary cabin fever.

Nick turned his intercom transmitter to the main cabin. However, his lips quivered when he went to speak, and his mouth stayed shut. Claudia reached over, grabbed the transmitter from his hand, and tilted her head back, raising her eyes to the ceiling for a moment to think. Looking back down towards the people on board, Claudia pressed the button and spoke clearly into the intercom. "Attention, Betty May passengers, we are experiencing some mechanical difficulties. Please remain calm and keep in mind we may be having a bumping ride in a few moments."

Chatter began almost instantly. Children looked to their parents with questions. Husbands and wives turned to each other to try and understand. Some passengers attempted to speak with the crew only to find the back of the capsule vacant and the doors shut and locked from the outside.

As the ship moved forward, so did the crew on their plan. With the passengers aware and the systems aligned, it was time to attempt to save themselves. The crew divided to watch the steering vents. Stephen stood beside the captain, whose hand no longer shook as he prepared his station. Stephen was ready to transmit orders to the crew depending on the location and feedback he would receive during the operation.

With just less than two hours before becoming the first people to enter the unknown parts of the cosmos, the captain counted down (three, two, one) and slammed on the controls for precision steering.

The ship did not change course, nor did it slow. Nothing had happened at all. When the pressure spiked, it must have

ruptured the exterior vents and stolen the gas from within the ship. The crew heard nothing for a minute before the bosun finally spoke to the crew, his voice slightly wavering as he leaned on the table for support. "We have failed; this ship is one hour and 47 minutes from reaching unprecedented territory, and we shall become the incidental explorers of a foreign solar system."

Captain Dalken pulled off his shoulder bars and threw them across the room, a failure of a man who hadn't prepared his ship to survive this journey. The captain laid back in his chair and raised the lightspeed shade on the view glass in front of him. As the brightness of seemingly stationary light filled the cabin, the captain lost sight, peering into all the brightness of the universe at once.

Stephen stood on the back deck of the Betty May and stared into the inky blackness in the depths of space. Somewhere in that dark were the humans. Despite being within their explored territory, Stephen was far beyond the communicative distance people still needed to achieve. He hoped on his homeworld of Mars; his fiancé, Gina, was staring out at the cosmos looking for him just as he looked for her. She did not know what he did, they would never meet again, and it was his fault; he was not able to save the day when it had truly mattered.

The crew found themselves on the cargo deck. They refused to give up. They sought desperately for a solution.. The danger of interstellar travel meant exposing yourself to all risks, known and unknown. The failures weren't their fault, yet each of them felt they should never have gotten on the ship. They would have given anything to return to the time before they entered Betty May.

The main deck hosted the most important on board, the passengers. Locked into the main cabin of the vessel, the travelers had felt no bumps and saw no effects of the ominous warning the crew gave them. The guests had calmed and spoken to each other as old friends might. After all, they had sat by their neighbor for nearly two weeks. There should have been more fear on that ship. Rather, they chuckled as the clock ticked down on their lives.

One hour before certain death. Thirty minutes before certain death. Ten minutes before certain death. Nine seconds, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. The stars, planets, and asteroids shrank from view as the ship lunged into the unknown depths of the universe, unwitting, unwilling, and uncertain in all but death.