

Decade: 2010's

What it is to be Alone

by F.G. King

Timothy James Norwalt. That's my name, a name that had been announced all over the world. I had won the International Space Exploration Lottery; the publicity stunt that had become a recurring tradition. I didn't intend on winning... I just got the ticket because my girlfriend was into the whole 'pioneer to the final frontier' thing and it seemed to make her happy that I bought it. The thing is I didn't consider myself lucky to be getting an "all expenses" paid trip for an "out of this world adventure." The thing is... I won, and that was a billion to one odds that that would actually happen. So now I'm going, now I'm the middle class nobody who gets to go to space. I'd be famous for as long as I was up there and then I'd be forgotten the moment we touched ground as the real astronauts would have lots of real important data to share with the world and all I could say was how weird it is to vomit in space.

I was acting as enthusiastic as I could. Only I hadn't paid much attention to the well displayed information on the mission I was to attend. This wasn't a run-of-the-mill spacewalk. Nor was it a quick run to mars. It was to be the fifteenth inter-solar flight. Our destination was the surface of an alien world. Not just any planet though. This one was 'special.' It was a planet just about the size of earth, a little larger in fact. So we would be able to walk around fairly easily. What wouldn't be easy would be lugging around the two hundred twenty-three pound suit to protect me from radiation. Yeah, it was *that* kind of planet. They wanted to go up and get some rock readings from the surface to see if they could learn how long the planet had taken to form. It had formed sometime after the star it orbits had gone nova. Which meant that the star had exploded, leaving behind a pulsar star. So all in all, everyone was excited except for me. I was enthusiastically attempting to be enthusiastic, only I wasn't doing too well at it. So I received the basic training for walking in an environment with slightly higher gravity, as well as training for lift off and so on most of which was not as enjoyable as it might sound to those unfamiliar with the experience. Two months and I was being hustled into a "Photon-propelled low orbit elevator" which would take me to the space ship that had been assembled in a high-altitude factory, to save the expense of taking off from the ground.

That's where I met the rest of the crew. They had been up there preparing for the launch long before I had even known I was to go on the trip. There were three other astronauts who would be the real stars in space: Kathy Butcher, who had graduated high-school at ten (She was in charge of all the serious research); Cooper Altonson, who was the newest generation of fighter-pilot; and Yuri Gagarin who shared a name with the first man in space (a coincidence?). No, as soon as he joined NASA he changed his original name. Yuri would be the team mechanic.

A few brief hellos and they were shuffling into various holding containers. Locked away in these stasis chambers we would be safe from the many millions of years that would pass as we traveled deep into space. I wasn't going to return to find my family dead and the world a different place, thanks to the Saint Brigid effect. Once our ship moved into deep space, where gravity fields would be diminished, time for us would be long and grueling, but the gravity at home would make it as if our lengthy trip took us only a few months. An anomaly that was both perplexing and convenient for interplanetary travel.

So I fell asleep, a short dreamless sleep. I awoke to Cooper stretching out in front of my holding chamber. He was holding himself down with the handle of my container. Then the door automatically popped open and he turned to see me, still groggy from my millennia of sleep. “So how’s it feel to be older than the pyramids?” he asked, a broad grin spreading over his face.

“Stiff,” I answered. I pushed myself forward and drifted weightlessly out of the chamber. I had trained for this kind of zero-gravity movement but it was none the less disconcerting to do so in a space shuttle several thousand light-years from home. If I had some kind of gravity I would’ve liked the chance to try some yoga or something. Every joint in my body was in dire need of some oiling.

Kathy called from the front of the ship, “Cooper, enough messing around! We’ve got half an hour before we prep for entry of the atmosphere.” I could hear Yuri reading off a check list of the systems, sounding satisfied.

I pushed myself forward and drifted to the closest porthole window. Outside all I could see was stars, for the moment. The slow spin of the ship brought the great monster into view that we would be visiting. The dark side faced us, so black that it merely looked like the stars were vanishing. Just one day on the surface, look at a few rocks and leave, that’s all I had to do; as long as nothing went wrong. NASA tends to know what it’s doing, but I’ve heard stories of them blowing up a few things they shouldn’t have early on in their history. I really don’t want to blow up; it doesn’t sound that appealing to me.

I spent fifteen minutes watching that great dark shadow, waiting for any sign that it was not just a smooth orb of blackness. Then a voice came over the intercom, Cooper, “All right everyone we are going to be heading for atmosphere soon so get ready to detach from the primary unit.”

Our multi-piece rocket was designed so that the main mode of transport could be left in space saving the land craft the need for large amounts of fuel. I quickly propelled myself along the cramped halls to the separation chamber. Yuri and Kathy were already strapped in. Cooper was in a separate compartment ahead of us in control of the flight sequence.

I strapped myself in and pressed the button on the armrest to signal I was ready. Almost immediately I heard a grinding toward the back of the ship. Several locking mechanisms slipped out of place and we were released from the primary unit. Once again a voice came over the intercom, “We’re separated, and y’all get ready cause here comes the fun part.”

Now I began to feel pressure pushing against me forcing me back into my chair and holding me there firmly. More and more, the ship rattled and shook. I could feel the movement of the ship as it leveled out and we tore through the planet’s atmosphere like a blazing bullet. Whipping around the world to kill off the momentum, we needed a smooth landing as there would be no one to come pick us up if we happened to hit the ground too hard.

I forced my head to turn toward the window to see the world that I would be walking on. All I could see was the multicolored fire as the excited gasses burned in their own bizarre way,

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without oxygen to help. Steadily we descended and the plasma receded. The pressure decreased and I could see the ground of this strange world, and even the distant sun of this system.

We landed without incident, but the world around us seemed completely against us. There was no wind, but a sweeping serpentine aurora borealis filled the sky. Kathy looked toward the window, out at the alien world, "Beautiful isn't it."

"Yeah, beautiful," I replied a little less earnestly.

Yuri chuckled, "Don't worry; the radiation won't cause us any trouble. We're ready for it."

"I'm not worried about radiation. It's the fact that I kind of expected there to be a bit more here," I said looking out at the empty world, as flat as an ocean of rock.

"Well there is quite a bit here; you're just not looking at it the same way." Yuri said, before Kathy could rebuke me for being so pessimistic.

A door slid open in front of us and Cooper walked out of his navigation room. "So you people just gonna' sit here chatting or are we going to do what we came here to do," He said. I unhooked myself from the seat and stood, at least something to do would put my mind at ease. "Great! You can help he go out in the buggy and pick up the probe they sent ahead of us."

I wanted to say I'd prefer a job in the ship, but he was already pushing me into the preparation chamber and shoving my suit toward me. The weight wasn't actually supposed to be carried. It was designed so that once it was on metal braces along the legs and back would hold you up, but when you were actually *holding* the suit you realize how heavy three hundred pounds is. With Cooper rushing into his it was hardly like me to back out now. So I struggled into mine. Once the weight was out of my arms and was wrapped around me the rocket science suit felt much lighter.

I followed Cooper into the exit chamber after checking all my suits systems. A crackle in my ear indicated the radio snapping to life, "So you ready to go?" I nodded and hit the "first cycle to exit" button. The door we came through sealed shut. A second red button glowed next to the first. The second cycle drained the atmosphere of our little room. The door to the outside world opened.

I stepped out; breathing in compressed air and realized that I had been wrong. Whilst this world was alien it was truly awesome to behold. Pools of liquid nitrogen collected in craters, but from it poured white vapor. In the vapor was a fiery display, yet I knew it had to have been very cold. After a moment Cooper drove up beside me in our two person convertible pickup-truck, complete with tank treads. A vehicle designed to be lightweight and capable of carrying a heavy load. I jumped into shotgun and we took off. This specialized buggy used a built in triangulation system which used several sensors that had been sent ahead of us. These pre-set beacons provided a good way of keeping track of where everyone was.

Our little convertible ran over the rugged terrain at a good forty miles per hour. Yet I don't think there was a single hole that Cooper didn't hit. Either way we reached the probe in about ten

minutes. It sat in the only actual crater in the area. It took both of us to move the stupid thing. It was designed to be loaded into the back of our vehicle though so in short order it was set and ready to go.

Cooper and I were heading back at a steady rate when all at once disaster struck, or as it would seem, rolled. Ahead of us a large stone simply rolled over, apparently of its own accord and struck the side of our little automobile. All at once the vehicle was overturned and we were thrown through the air, err...or the lack thereof. Have I mentioned that this planet had gravity just about the same as Earth's? When I hit the ground I knew that had it not been for my super protective suit I would have had a broken back. Though while it saved me from a broken back these suits were not made to sunbathe in. It took me and Cooper several seconds merely to get back on our feet; luckily neither of us was injured. I have to hand it to NASA; they do know how to make a more durable cloth than denim. Taking a look back at the car I realized that this was a good thing. From here on out we were walking, the little, light-weight, super mobile was completely totaled. Our suits would be able to last us back to the ship.

"What the hell happened?" Cooper asked.

"I'd like to know too," I said, "But I don't think we have time to figure that out."

I started to walk back toward the direction of the shuttle. Then Cooper said through the vehicle's still working radio, "Hey, the probes still intact, give me a minute and I'll have the hard drive out of it, then we'll head back to the ship."

I started muttering inside my helmet, "Great, I get in the first car crash of my life. And I'm not even on earth so there is no way in hell that I could get a tow home. Then to top it off I've got Captain America asking me to wait as he saves some world shattering information on a bunch of radioactive rocks."

Cooper however noticed that I was talking, and even though he didn't hear me he was able to read my lips, "Hey, just think about the stories you can tell everyone when you get home." I elected to remain silent. Waiting patiently as he pushed button after button to finally unlock the boxy memory center of the probe. "Got it," he said, "Let's go."

Then we set off like a pair of Olympic runners stuck in molasses. The heavy suits must have suffered some kind of damage I decided, as the knee joints seemed to lock-up after every step. Progress was slow; our only hope of communication with the shuttle was our short range radios. I suggested that we could try them but Cooper turned the idea down, saying that the signal wasn't designed to be used for more than half a mile. After that short exchange we just kept walking in silence, and then I felt it. It was like a weak earthquake; a tremor that shook the ground gradually. But that was not what scared me the most; no, what terrified me the most was that the rocks around me began to reflect a very bright light.

I turned to see what the source was, at about the very same moment that Cooper did. "Oh," was all I had a chance to say before it was on us. It was a pillar of light, streaming down from the star's southern pole; a freak incident, a miscalculation of lethal proportions. At least it would

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have been if it were not for another miscalculation. Inside this large pillar of radioactive intensity, was an area as clear as the eye of a hurricane.

Though whatever the outer-wall of the eye was made of was undeniably dangerous. I felt an incredible weight press down on me as it passed over, and I felt it pass *through* me. My ears felt suddenly like I was deep underwater. It made my skin tingle and itch everywhere. Yet, it seemed to have a far worse effect on Cooper. He fell to the ground writhing and screaming inside his helmet.

“Cooper! Cooper! Get a grip, we’re alive!” I shouted while clicking the radio button on, but to no effect, in fact, my own ears didn’t even hear my voice. I was deaf and the radios didn’t work. I grabbed his arms and tried to get him to calm down. After a little while he stopped struggling but he kept moving his mouth like he was talking. He still wouldn’t open his eyes to look. I helped him to his feet, but he didn’t seem to want to stand, so I let him lean on me. Strangely he didn’t seem so heavy. He still clutched the hard-drive like it was his last link to life. I looked down at the small plasma screen read-out on my wrist. It still worked, apparently, but it said that the radiation level was zero. I didn’t quite buy that, but I cycled through the other programs till I came to the map. Once it zeroed in on our position it pointed me in the general direction we had been going, so I hoped for the best and helped Cooper start walking again.

It wasn’t like sticking around was going to help answer any of my questions. We were walking again, and as it were this world pulled another surprise from under our feet, literally. I stepped onto a wide rock and all of the sudden it moved. I fell back shouting into my helmet. A six foot wide crab scuttled sideways across the ground. I had to be hallucinating. I thought that once more when a bird, vibrantly colored even more-so than the aurora borealis, flew past.

Flocks of birds and animals of all kinds scuttled about, rapidly hunting down prey or digging up some form of subterranean plant. I hurried back to my feet and began to push myself harder in the direction of the ship. I slung Cooper over my shoulder now that he was no longer walking on his own. I didn’t even realize how much weight this had to have been, and the suit’s well-constructed bracing system nearly gave out under the extra weight. My intention was set to reach the shuttle as quickly as possible yet with such incredible hallucinations I couldn’t be sure to say I was even going in the right direction. Then, one of them touched me. Startled, I nearly fell to the ground to jump out of the way, as a curious looking mouse creature rebounded off my shoulder and snatched one of the insect-like creatures from the air.

A flock of birds the size of swans flew all around me. The longer I remained within the radiation free zone the more colorful the dead world became. Moss like patches seemed to turn out of the dirt. Semi-circular rocks broke open revealing animals of a variety of kinds. Some seemed compact and rugged whilst others were like an artist’s visual representation of wind. They ranged from wispy insects that were as glassy as ghosts to three foot tall bull-frogs the color of a piña colada. They all had a sense of the familiar with an unorthodox twist for the bizarre.

Thousands upon thousands of creatures, appearing from the dust and rocks of a world that was just a few million years old, under the light of a star that should be killing everything here. Living without oxygen or water, but living all the same. The creatures here were so unbelievably

distant from Earth, but were still so unbelievably alive. I walked in a state of wonder the entire way.

After what seemed like an eternity I found the shuttle, the wall of the storm just barely breaking upon it. I hammered on the door until someone inside cycled it open. I stepped inside the airlock and the heavy water sprayed in washing away any radiation that might have been left on our suits. I collapsed as Kathy opened the door leading into the ship, she said something but my deaf ears heard nothing. I didn't want to move anymore; even though I felt no pain across my entire body I was exhausted as far as to not care if I ever woke again.

I only vaguely recall being moved back to the sleep chamber. The next thing I remember with any clarity was waking up in the hospital. I could hear again; they told me they had put in several artificial implants into my head to replace my hearing. Then they told me that I would however not be able to feel very well with my skin as the radiation had damaged nearly all the nerve ends in my skin which was why I was able to carry Cooper, coincidentally. The suit had helped to brace the weight but my own inability to feel the weight could be accredited to the apparent ease of the task. My muscles were also not nearly as responsive as they used to be. It would take several months of therapy in order to be able to determine what was hot and cold again.

On that very same day a man, along with several associates, came to speak with me. They were there to ask me what happened. I told them; like a fool I told them everything. Then they looked at me and said, "That's not what happened. You were struck by a heavy amount of radiation, and you carried Captain Altonson as you said, though you were in a heavy radiation field the entire time. There were no life forms of any kind. Do you understand?"

I suddenly got a very bad feeling, "What happened to the hard-drive that Cooper was carrying?" I asked carefully.

"The radiation wiped out the circuits. It's been destroyed," he replied evenly. Yet, his voice didn't hide the lie; the hard-drive still existed. "You have been scheduled to speak to the public, to let them know what happened up there. You are to tell them that there were no aliens. You are still in a fairly critical condition, and we've never had such unusual radiation damage before. Understand?"

I nodded. Tell the lie, and I get to live. That was the bargain. I was too small a person to deal with this. Tell the lie; it was my only chance. I'd still need medical attention, and I doubted that a public announcement would keep these men from me.

When the time came I was escorted to a small room. A camera and a few reporters stood looking toward me expectantly. I sat down and readily answered their questions before the camera. Then the fated question, "What happened when the pulsar's pole turned on you?"

My voice stuck; I couldn't talk, and I tried to clear my throat several times. I couldn't think of what to say. The memories were still so vivid, but my life depended on a false truth. So, when I opened my mouth the words I was planning on didn't come out, instead all I could say was, "We're alone."

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The interviewer, who was intrigued, asked, "What do you mean?" Then the lights went out. The power had been cut. The interview was over...and so was my chance of revealing what I knew. A moment's indecision cut away my best opportunity to let the world know what happened, to let them know how truly alone we are.

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