

- LIMBO -

by Tim Machan

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The first meteor of the cluster flared like a blue white star as it entered the atmosphere. It traced its path across the massive face of the gray-green globe of the cloud shrouded planet as a brilliant arch, burning itself to near oblivion. It blazed across the darkened night sky more brightly than the daytime sun, breaking through the dense cloud cover at just over ten times the speed of sound only fractions of a second before its cataclysmic impact with the planet's surface. The only evidence of its passage remaining above those turbulent dark clouds was a beautiful golden trail of glowing ionized particles which stretched upwards and outwards for thousands of miles.

The remains of this white hot intruder smashed into a small continental land mass just five minutes before the second of the cluster was scheduled to enter the atmosphere. The first two "meteors" were timed to arrive seven minutes before the remainder of the group. The first was sent to create a diversion with its multi- megaton impact, the second, to land for its own special purpose. The remaining were man-made shooting stars which would ionize high above the planet's surface blanketing the landing zone with a long period of wide band electronic interference.

These planned disruptive effects were the key elements to successfully achieving his insertion. They hoped that the environmental havoc reeked by the leading "meteor" and the trailing ones, would not only allow him to arrive unnoticed, but would also give him the necessary time to leave his ship undetected. From that time on the fate of the mission would lie with only one man, Aatol Jusard.

Presenting his usual facade of emotionless confidence, Aatol had been placed in his craft by the launch crew. Carefully positioned, he lay prone in a webbed couch, suspended within the limiting confines of his cabin. The small ship's hatch was then sealed, and his isolation from its parent ship, the mammoth launch vehicle, began. Part of the standard procedure for any mission was evoking radio and Vari-Wave communications silence. However, this had been scheduled to begin much earlier than usual for this particular mission. Along with cutting these usual external communication links with the rest of the universe, all electronic equipment short of those which controlled navigation or monitored life support had been shut down. These special procedures, whose importance had been stressed to all involved, seemed very bizarre to Aatol and the crew of both crafts. It was odd that in an era of the almost instantaneous transmission of data between any two points, that they had to send all communications and orders within the ship by messenger for many days prior to his placement in his craft which also occurred long before the launch.

In his hours of solitary confinement prior to launch, Aatol was greeted by an even greater silence than any he had ever experienced, one that was nearly complete. A silence only breached by the sounds of his own body, and the life-support equipment around him. Soon, across the millions of miles he was to traverse, he would be totally on his own with this silence as his only companion.

Aatol's lander had been especially fabricated for this mission. It was unique in being totally mechanical, completely lacking the usual propulsion and power units, not to mention having none of the sophisticated electronic equipment one would expect to find in a modern day spacecraft. His ship was a simple ballistic projectile containing only one human and one life support system. Its unique design made the preflight isolation seem eerie to Aatol as he lay in the quiet of this ship awaiting its launch. He knew that even if he wanted, or needed to communicate with the outside world, he could not. Any of the specialized electronic equipment he might use in the future was lying inert, out of reach far below in the ship's external storage compartments. Mysterious circumstances had precipitated this mission and had dictated the special configuration of this ship.

Although this mission was different from all others on which he had been sent, and the mysteries it presented were compelling, Aatol wasn't drawn to contemplating those facts. He utilized all the time he had available as efficiently as he could. To accomplish this he used his favorite, and most effective mental exercise to prepare himself for what might lie ahead. His mind had always been so actively analytical that he had long ago trained himself to channel it constructively during periods of inactivity, or while waiting for the a mission to begin. At first he found that this helped prevent boredom. But then as he fine- tuned his mind, he found he could apply its powers very effectively by contemplating and selecting potential actions he might take during a mission by varying the possible situations that each special mission might present.

Not unlike a fighter, he fought his battles many times outside the ring. Outside the ring was where he decided how he could adjust his strategies to play to win. He always wanted to win, so he made sure that he was well prepared long before he entered the fray. Many times his survival had depended on quick and decisive actions he had taken that were derived from this thought process. It was a process that long ago had also begun to serve him as a mental stabilizing exercise. He applied it both before and during every mission. He was aware that he had developed it into a finely tuned mechanism which others only saw as his “gift.” In reality it was a process that helped assure his survival and had become his most valuable asset. But sometimes this analysis brought the darker possibilities into his consciousness. Therefore, in those countless hours he was alone before launch, he found it all too easy to imagine how well this particular craft might serve as his coffin.

The launch began, interrupting this dark thought. It began as a smooth building of gees, forces which soon would reach a level at which his vision would blur, a level just below the one at which he would lose consciousness. But that factor was quickly of no concern to him, for as his weight was multiplied to a factor of seven, his mind and body were triggered into a state of pseudo-hibernation. A state that was programmed by a post hypnotic command deeply embedded in his unconscious mind. Aatol entered a blissful state of dreamless sleep as his long journey began. During his months of travel, the ship quietly saw to his needs. His mind was oblivious to its own, or any other presence.

Now awakened, and just moments before his craft would enter the realm of the mystery giant, Aatol quickly checked his orientation within the ship. His positioning in the unique sling that he had spent months of travel lying in was crucial for a safe landing. He lay in a webbed couch, his body cocooned in a myriad of life-support umbilical cords and retaining straps. Aatol knew that any errors in his body’s orientation on this sling could jeopardize his safe entry and easily cost him his life. The launch crew had carefully checked the fit of his clear-membraned Osmotic body suit, and had positioned him centrally in this deceleration sling at the top of the ship’s only cabin. His back was perpendicular to the vertical axis of the spacecraft. He was to begin his most challenging mission with his back turned to its potential dangers. The webbing holding him was linked to marked slider rails which extended the length of the craft. His cabin was only fifteen feet in width and length, but it extended deep into the darkness behind him. In the pre-launch preparations, once his position had been double checked, the crew had pumped in the all important fluid.

It totally immersed his body, a thick colloidal liquid whose flow dynamics would offer him the greatest odds for surviving his high velocity entry through the planet’s atmosphere.

Aatol smiled to himself; he was pleased that he had maintained his proper positioning over the long months of travel. This was a good indication that all was going as planned. He noted that during those months only one breathing umbilical had managed to work its way out of its ideal position. It was hovering just above his face. As he moved his hand to correct this, he noticed that his naked skin showing through his clear suit had become very whitened and wrinkled from its constant contact with a higher concentration of his own sweat than it was used to. The gelatinous fluid that surrounded him allowed his Osmotic suit to transfer wastes and fluids away from, and dissolved gases to and from his skin, servicing his body while protecting him both from asphyxiation and drying during the long flight.

On previous missions vapor lamps had shone on his body helping to maintain its normal healthy color. But this time, he was denied that luxury. Right now, the only illumination in the ship was a dim yellow-green chemical luminescence coming from the fluid surrounding him. This light which would slowly dim over the next few hours had been chemically activated an hour before he was awakened. It shed its eerie glow on his surroundings, barely bright enough to allow him to see the ceiling of his compartment directly in front of him. Unseen equipment around him steadfastly maintained his body functions.

As he neared his destination, the first indication of its proximity was a gradual increase in the gravitational pull on his body. This pull changed rapidly. It was the only indication of the high velocity his craft had attained as it approached the single sun of the planet on which he was to land. He watched, almost entranced as the webbing he lay in began to tighten, and observed the free floating umbilicals around him as they began to bow downwards in slow motion. He was fully alert to all the changes taking place, and fine-tuned his senses for the coming events. After hours of feeling the pull of gravity increasing, which indicated the elliptic orbital deceleration trajectory

mission. They knew they had to devise a way to send a man. A very special man, one who had the best chance for survival, and one who had beaten the odds often enough that he stood the best chance of returning alive with reliable information. Knowing what had to be done technically, they set about figuring out a way to accomplish the near impossible. At the same time they had gathered in the most likely candidates for the mission.

A sharp jolt pulled Aatol's mind to its real world time frame. Finally his three interminable seconds had ended. His sling had reached the bottom of its travel, and except for a rather sharp blow delivered low to his spine, he felt uninjured. He now awaited the final bumping to end, indicating that his craft had settled on the bottom of the "sea."

During the next few seconds he reviewed the correct sequence for the disconnection of his life support umbilicals, body function catheters and sling restraint straps; then he set his mind on the steps for leaving the ship and gathering his equipment.

As expected, a few gentle bumpings rocked his craft. It then settled at an odd angle, and all sounds of movement ceased. He had arrived! Quickly, with little struggle against the fluid environment around him, Aatol freed himself from his womb-like ship and exited it. The sea offered no illumination, and as the glowing luminescent fluid from his ship leaked into it, its glow dissolved into the water too quickly to light path. Total darkness closed around him. But that didn't impair him because he was well-trained for this moment, moving smoothly handhold to handhold along the exterior of the ship to retrieve his equipment. Once he reached the exterior storage compartments he efficiently removed his gear. He pulled on a second custom designed suit over the one he now wore and began his slow ascent to the surface.

His progress was slow because the "water" of the sea was more resistant to his swimming strokes than had been anticipated. As he rose towards the surface, he was struck by the odd consistency of the water around him. Even stranger was another sensation he felt, a presence about him. But he discounted it as the probable by-product of the usual anxiety he experienced each time a mission entered its active phase. He continued upwards, directing his attention towards the surface above, constantly prepared for the unknown.

The night's illumination of the sea's surface varied so little from the darkness around him that he almost broke through it. However, he stopped just short of its dim greenish translucence, "hovering" one hundred and ten feet above his ship. Within five feet of the turbulent surface of the sea above him, Aatol began to carefully work his way in the direction of the nearby shore. Unfortunately, this was where failure awaited him!

Like the muffled growl of a violent beast that becomes a ear-shattering roar as it attacks an intruder the strange sound he heard grew louder as he neared the beach selected for his landing. Although he greeted this sound as an indication that the shore was near, it seemed to be more than the crashing of a violent surf; it seemed to be an emission of the sea itself. This sound surrounded him with its alien eeriness.

Just then a large swell carried him ashore, dashing him roughly onto a grainy beach. As it broke around him on the shore, this wave drowned his ears with its low pitched, throaty, growling-crunch. He tried to roll off of the side he had landed on attempting to bring his knees up under him. He had almost maneuvered to a stable crouch when another mammoth surge submerged him again and then tumbled him further up the shore.

This time as the wave pushed him inland, he rolled and scrambled reaching a half crouch, and then ran for about ten yards, slipping as quickly as possible away from the edge of that strange sea. The noise around him was deafening and the waves continued to test his balance as they broke around him. As soon as he cleared the reach of those, he threw himself flat on his chest. There was a violent wind accompanying the rough surf that was shrieking around him, tearing at his body. Between these two noises assaulting his senses, Aatol was practically deafened. But, as he made his way up the beach, crawling on his belly, at least the noise of the surf began to subside.

As he lay there on that beach, out of immediate danger from the waves, he finally had time to adjust his aural compensators, setting them to quiet the roaring and shrieking. and his eyes slowly began to adjust to the low light level of his surroundings. His night vision was aided by a pair of small light amplification goggles, but they were crude compared to the electronic laser night sights he would have preferred. But nonetheless, these now offered him his first clear pictures of the terrain around him. He couldn't see far, but he did see a gently sloping shore slanting upwards towards a low cliff that he estimated was about a quarter of a mile away.

Between his present position and that sheltering outcropping, he saw that the ground was littered with

rocks that seemed to grow in size as their distance from the sea increased. He imagined that they must have broken away from that distant cliff, and that time had worn them down from the giants he saw near that cliff to the grainy sand of the beach on which he now lay. The rocks were scattered at random, all displaying signs of the erosive effects of the pounding surf and the incessant blasting from the winds that he guessed were whipping around and through them in an excess of sixty miles an hour.

It was hard to believe that the sea he had just emerged from had ever reached that distant cliff, but Aatol remembered that it was thought that this planet once had been accompanied by at least five moons. The gravitational pull of those could have exerted the necessary force to create both the tides and massive storms that easily could have formed the broken landscape lying before him.

He selected the cliff's overhanging edge as his first objective. Aatol, ready to face any enemy, began to crawl forwards towards that secure looking cliff's face. He snaked around and over the smaller rocks near the shore and then crept between small boulders as he moved further and further away from the crashing surf. Reaching shoulder high boulders he cautiously moved from one to another, running low to the ground. As he advanced, the unabated sound of the sea's assault on the shore was never lost behind him. Even when he crouched between the massive stones near the overhang of that cliff, the clouds above seemed to reflect the low muffled grunching noise, while the wind still shrieked as it forced its way through the cracks in the rocks around him. He knew that this planet had never been without these sounds since the seas themselves had been formed countless eons ago.

Aatol was pleased that he was able to move so swiftly despite the difficult conditions of that wasteland of broken stone. He readied himself to slip from behind one low flat stone to cross to another. In that instant, he spotted the pencil thin beam of white light that quickly traced its way directly towards his position across the last several hundred feet of open ground he had hoped to cover. It swiftly zeroed-in on him! The sudden brightness of the light transfixed him. Its path to him was retained by his vision. It appeared like a bright laser hologram, a brilliant sheet of light ending in a solid white rod which touched the back of his left hand.

He suddenly felt an odd pressure on that hand, a sensation that was unexpected. The beam was pinning his hand to the rock as effectively as if it had been nailed there. His transfixion with the beauty of the beam's course to him, quickly changed to a stunned fixation on it, commanding his full attention. It wasn't hot, but its energy trapped his hand. Still, he hoped that he had not yet been identified. He held as still as he could, but that trick proved useless and that hope was quickly shattered.

Suddenly the beam began to grow in diameter! Aatol tried to wrench his hand free, but found that the beam seemed to have soldered his hand and rock as one. He quickly pulled a mirror out of his suit's pocket with his right hand hoping to deflect the beam. But that was also a futile attempt! By the time he had the mirror in position, the beam had enlarged so much that its edges overlapped those of the reflecting surface. His right hand now joined the left, entrapped by the beam. His second ploy was useless also!

Had it not been for the careful design of his suit's electrical activation system, he would have had no way to turn on its protective instrumentation now that he had been detected. But thanks to a surgically implanted packet of dipolar chemicals in his cheek, and its connection to an inductive coil implanted below the skin on the outer curve of his right shoulder, he still had a chance. He would have lost his battle right then without a fight because he would have had no way to push the on button located in a recessed cup at the center of his chest on his outer suit. Instead, Aatol had to crush that packet in his cheek to activate his electronics' power supply. It wasn't a painless task, but it was a necessary one.

He quickly bit down hard, feeling the nausea of the pain, and tasting the rich warm blood as the soft tissue of his inner cheek gave way. But, he also felt the pouch crush, and knew in moments his suit would begin to come to life. Unfortunately, it couldn't react instantaneously; it was the price that had to be paid when it was designed to keep its electronics a secret until they might be needed. So by the time that the power pack came alive, it was too late! He was suddenly bombarded by a series of events that took place too quickly for him to separate one from another, and in a blurred instant he lost consciousness.

With bits of images flashing before his eyes and broken memories tangling with reality, he awoke very dizzy and totally disoriented. It took hours after this initial awakening to capture his last fleeting images, and to congeal them into a definitive set of separate events he could analyze.

He remembered preparing to move out from behind a large flattened boulder, and that he had chosen to raise himself but a few inches for a brief scan of his immediate surroundings before crossing the next break in his cover. It was just as he was pushing away that reality had begun to blur. He remembered the sheet of light, and his attempts to protect himself. Only now, however, did he recall the brilliant white blind spot which after trapping both his hands had grown incredibly quickly until it surrounded his entire body in a pool of brilliance. That bright area, whiter than white, blotted out his surroundings completely, temporarily blinding him.

As the events of his capture began to come more clearly into focus, Aatol began to relive his horror as his trapped hands were bathed in that surrealistic light. Then his body shuddered as he relived the panicked moment when the beam had swept upwards into his eyes. He was amazed that a scanner had so quickly singled him out. How the hell had he been so easily detected?!

He recalled that an instant later he totally lost control of his body. A “power” had seized hold of him, energies he had never experienced before forced him involuntarily to rise to his feet. Although he wasn’t able to see it, he figured that beam must have widened until his entire body was bathed in bright light. He could almost picture his exposed helpless plight as the beam must have silhouetted his outline in its radiance. The light would have sparkled against the dark green surface of the turbulent sea behind him. From the sea, his figure must have appeared as a black outline superimposed in front of a light which radiated around him like the spokes of a wheel.

As he had stood fully exposed, he had furiously yet silently cursed himself. He knew that he was the very best, more finely trained and more experienced than anyone else who might have been chosen. And yet, there he stood like a rookie, as though he had completely stumbled into the first pitfall that had been placed in front of him during his training.

In the past he had always been scrupulously careful, and this planet’s mysteries had hyper-sensitized his sense of caution. So even after he had so carefully mentally prepared for any unknowns, he had somehow been identified, singled out, and then caught totally off guard. Although he hadn’t expected to be detected at all, let alone neutralized so easily, he knew as he reviewed the situation he had been as cautious as possible!

He shouldn’t have been so easy to detect! He had been wearing a special suit designed only for this unique mission. It should have given him near total invisibility. Even at the first sign of being in danger, he hadn’t panicked. He had calmly awaited the beam as it traced its direct path to his position. Only when his hand was touched and pinned, did he attempt to negate the beam’s effect and activate the sophisticated electronic equipment he carried. Unfortunately, its role of additional concealment and protection came too late to help him. It had proven useless! Although untested in the field, the suit he had been wearing was the latest in cooling suits designed to keep his body temperature identical to that of his surroundings. It had baffled all attempts to detect his presence by any known infrared detection equipment during its testing. And, this newly fabricated suit even had a full head cover. The designers of his equipment had thought they had left nothing to chance. No expense had been spared in creating, fabricating, and custom-fitting his suit. Therefore, he was sure that he hadn’t been picked up by ordinary intrusion detection equipment. Some new form of detection existed which was well beyond the technological know-how of the known worlds!

Thinking back on the time of his actual capture, he remembered that he had told himself to “freeze” when the beam had first found him, hoping to appear as an inanimate object, like the boulders and rocks that lay scattered around him. But he hadn’t had a chance! To his horror, as that abominable beam forced him to his feet, the detection equipment built into his suit began beeping! It warned him of what he feared most! The signal identified multiple high speed projectiles approaching. He stood helpless, transfixed by the beam waiting for the impacts. His suit’s protective barrier failed to activate in time.

The stunning pellets hit him low. The impact buckled his knees, blowing his legs out from under him. His head hit hard as he fell backwards. The nearly explosive impact drove him down just a fraction of a second before his brain functions were neurologically overloaded by the penetrating, and now pulsating beam that was shinning deeply into his eyes. The pain of those pellets was nothing compared to the burning and searing sensory overload caused by that beam. Just as he lost consciousness he remembered issuing a last silent profanity for having underestimated the sophisticated technology of his still unknown captors. Time was passing, but now Aatol was fully alert having gained a firmer hold on reality by reviewing the details of his capture. Later, he hoped he might sift through these and possibly by probing deeper into his memories of them uncover some clues. Clues which might help explain, or at least help him to understand his predicament.