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It was raining on Planet K. In a mere sixty seconds, hundreds of drops had poured down, washing away about a third of the indigenous population. Walter Anders, the planet's designated god, worried for his job.

"The bounded waters should lift their bosoms higher than the shores, and make a sop of all this solid globe," he said as he scooped up some freely-floating globules of water laced with ants. "Troilus & Cressida, Act 1, scene 3." He deposited the soggy ants back onto the medicine-ball-sized planet, his hands tingling from the electrostatics that served in place of gravity on the small sphere.

But it wasn't the rain that troubled him—at least not nearly as much as the lightning.

Awkward in his magnetic boots, Walter clomped to the door connecting the studio to the control room. He shook his head. Even after a week, it was still hard to think of the two small adjoining cabins as a movie production site.

As he unclipped the lightning generator's ground from the float handle under the lock panel, he noticed the lock's 'Set Combination' display was lit. He grimaced. Maybe using a ground so close to electronics

had not been a great idea. "If K.V. wanted lightning," he said, aloud, even though, except for the ants, he was the only living soul in the studio, "why couldn't he just add it in post production?"

Startled by a pounding from without, Walter swiveled around and slapped the 'Open' button.

The door swung away. Chief Engineer Robinson, scowling, stepped into the studio. "Didn't you hear the door-chime?"

"No," said Walter. "There was no chime."

Robinson glanced at the lock panel. "My combination didn't work. Yeah. Something's wrong." He tapped a finger on the lock display, but without effect. "Engineering reported a power surge down here." He looked up at Walter and then at the meter-diameter sphere in the middle of the room. The 'planet' was at the center of an aluminum tetrahedron, some two meters high. At each vertex, an air jet sent a gentle flow on to the sphere, keeping it from drifting and providing a planetary wind that could possibly equate to weather. Robinson walked over and batted at a few of the tiny water globules that engulfed the sphere. "What the hell happened here?"

"A rainstorm," said Walter. "Rehearsing a shoot. And K.V. wanted a storm, replete with lightning."

"Jeez." Robinson gazed at the globe, alive with ants scurrying about on the surface. "They look half drowned."

"The storm got a trifle out of control."

"I'll say it got out of control." Robinson spread his arms. "My gosh. Did you expect a Noah of the Ants to rise up and build an ark?" He spun around. "Lightning? What do you mean, lightning?"

In haste, Walter considered his role; should he play 'wounded innocence' or 'astonished observer'? He chose the former and then described what happened—ending with a theatrical sigh.

Robinson nodded, then examined the lightning generator, rolling it over in his hands. "I can't believe they'd space-qualify a device like this." He slapped the little generator back onto its Velcro bulkhead fastener. "That little gadget is probably the cause of the power surge—and our lock problem, too."

"Regrettable," said Walter, "but we need it for the shoot."

Robinson leaned against the table jutting from the bulkhead—an action of ritual rather than comfort in the gravity-free environment. "Amazing, what we have to do for funding," he said, more to himself than to Walter, "tourism, high-tech billionaires having a fling, and now a movie production company." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "21st Century Flix filming their next megahit, 'The Planet of the Ants'."

Walter laughed. "And with a director, my boss, who thinks he's master of the universe."

"I sympathize," said Robinson.

"Oh, you've met him?"

"God's gift to the space station?" Robinson chuckled. "K.V. is a hard person to miss."

"I dote upon his very absence," said Walter. "Merchant of Venice, Act 1, scene 2."

Chuckling again, Robinson headed for the doorway. "I'll see what we can do about the lock," he said. "And don't use the lightning generator again until I'm convinced it won't wreck the station." He stepped through the door from the studio to the control room. Walter accompanied him.

"Why are you guys shooting your film up here, anyway?" said Robinson. "Wouldn't computer graphics have been cheaper?"

"Much cheaper. But the publicity we get by shooting live on the space station is priceless" Walter snapped down with a magnetic boot, making more noise than was necessary. "K.V. lives and breathes publicity."

"Hard to believe he'd come to the space station just for publicity."

"Do believe it," said Walter. "We're only shooting stock background shots. There's no reason for him to even be here." He closed the studio door behind him and followed Robinson through the tiny makeshift control room and onward to the outer hatch which opened onto the space station's central corridor.

Robinson glanced back around the cabin. "What is all that stuff?" He nodded toward two chairs with joysticks on their armrests. They had seatbelts and they faced twin computer monitors. "Looks like a big video arcade game."

Walter waved an arm expansively, indicating the entirety of the tiny cabin. "This vast vestibule is our control room." He walked to one of the chairs and waved Robinson over. "This *is* a game-controller of sorts. It controls a planetary exploration vehicle—a 'rover'. Tiny little thing." Pointing toward the doorway to the studio, he added, "It's on the surface of the globe in there—Planet K."

"Cute," said Robinson. "But why two?" He walked over to the second console.

"The rovers have high-resolution motion picture cameras." Walter threw a switch on the console, and an image appeared on his console display. "This is the terrain close up, at planet-level." He slipped his hand over the controller and the image moved. "So yes, two rovers. One to film the actions of the other."

Robinson leaned in and moved his hand casually over the buttons of the second rover's controller.

"Careful," Walter called out. "I wouldn't push that button. It fires one of the rover's guns."

Robinson drew back his hand. "Guns?"

"It is, after all," said Walter, "an action-adventure movie we're filming." He tried to strike a pose of 'studied indifference', despite knowing that in zero-g, body language was a bit iffy.

"Jeez." Robinson stood upright. "Looks like fun." He headed toward the open hatchway while Walter went to the door to the studio.

"Oh dear!"

"Problem?" said Robinson from behind.

"Locked." Walter keyed in the combination but the door still wouldn't open. "Yes. A problem."

His magnetic boots clanking on the metal decking, Robinson hurried over and peered at the lock control panel. "I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know much about these things." He shrugged. "We've never used them. In fact, you guys are the first who've ever asked them to be turned on."

"K.V's a bit batty about security," said Walter, looking over Robinson's shoulder. "The door. Can you open it?"

"The lock panel on the other side is probably stuck in 'Set Combination' mode." He straightened up. "If we knew the numbers on the display, we could key them in here. I bet that would trigger the lock mechanism." He pointed to a box mounted over the hatch to the central corridor. "I'll have Engineering switch on the emergency camera. Every cabin has one." Robinson turned to the wall-mounted comlink and activated it.

"Robinson to Engineering," he said. "We've a problem in the Flix studio. Could you turn on the camera in their inner cabin and read me the numbers on the lock display?"

"Yeah, okay. Standby," came a voice from the comlink. "Wait. We can't. The camera's mounted directly over the door. There's no way it could see the door's lock display."

"Jeez, you're right. My mind must be going. Robinson out."

Robinson snapped off the comlink. "Well, this really sucks, doesn't it?" He slapped his hand against a bulkhead. "I'm glad I left the outer hatch open. If your lightning blew the lock electronics, it might have blown the outer lock as well." He headed for the hatch. "Video arcade or not, being trapped in here wouldn't be much fun at all."

"One moment," said Walter, "maybe we could use the rovers. They have cameras." He bounded to a console and strapped himself in. Then he looked over his shoulder at Robinson. "Want to have a go?"

Robinson, his hand grasping a float handle, looked over at the video monitors. "Yeah," he said after a few seconds. "Sure. I'll play."

"Splendid." Walter indicated the adjacent console. "Have a seat." He flipped on the two monitors, then bit his lip. "I hope we can do this," he said. "The rovers' cameras have very minimal pointing capability."

"Still," said Robinson as he belted himself into his seat, "we'll be on the surface of a sphere. There's got to be a position where the rovers can aim at the lock panel. Oh, wait." He unbuckled himself and floated to the comlink.

"Robinson to Engineering," he said after pushing the call-button. "Could you activate the camera in the Flix control room—I mean their outer cabin?"

"Yeah," said a voice from the comlink. "Okay. It's on."

"Do you have a clear view of the video monitors?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Robinson explained the situation, then added. "And downlink the signal to Langley. Ask them to record everything."

"Will do, but they'll want to know why."

"They've got image processing software," said Robinson. "If we only get a fleeting shot of the lock panel, maybe they'll be able to deblur the image."

"Understood. Engineering out."

Robinson push-floated back to the console, strapped himself in, then grasped the joystick. "Okay, show me how to drive one of these things."

"Quite elementary." Walter gave a quick tutorial and then, their eyes on the overhead monitors, they maneuvered their little vehicles out over Planet K's terrain.

"I'll take the lead," said Walter.

"Lead on, MacDuff," said Robinson.

Walter gave a tight-lipped smile. *That's 'Lay on, MacDuff'.*

They drove in silence. Walter, engrossed in the landscape, was in no hurry. He drove his rover as if he were on a pleasure drive in the countryside. On the video monitor, he watched the progression of desert browns and the green of vegetation—mainly lichen and moss, but through the rover's eye, it looked like a primitive dense jungle.

"Needs music," he said.

"What?"

"Oh, just thinking. If we had a good director, 'The Planet of the Ants' might not be half bad."

\* \* \* \*

"How did you get into this business?" said Robinson after a few minutes of exploring. "If I may say so, you don't seem the action-adventure type."

Walter laughed. "No, I'm not, really. In fact, I'm a recent graduate of the Royal Shakespeare Academy. I probably could have gotten a trifle better job, but this was the only way I could go into space." He looked from the monitor to the cabin's porthole where he could just see the gentle limb of the crescent Earth, luscious and blue-green against the starry black of space. "And there just didn't seem to be all that much demand for Shakespearean actors in the space program."

Robinson gave a soft laugh. "And what precisely is your job, then?"

"Second Unit Director. But actually, I'm the entire second unit." Walter struggled to keep his hand steady on the joystick. "A more accurate title might be, 'K.V.'s personal slave'." His finger hovered over the 'Fire' button. "I wouldn't mind it if the man had any talent," he said under his breath.

"Yeah, I know," said Robinson. "K.V. Bushnell's sole qualification seems to be his father's money."

"The wealthy curled darlings of our nation." Walter pounded a fist against the seat's armrest. "Othello. Act 1, scene 2."

"You quote Shakespeare a lot."

"Only when under stress."

\* \* \* \*

As they drove, the geography became less desert-like and the ground more clumpy.

"This looks like mud," said Robinson. "Probably the after-effects of your rainstorm. You know, if we get stuck, we can't just call triple-A."

"True." Walter moved his rover diagonally away. "Let's try a more arid route."

They headed toward drier land, and had just driven their rovers over a rise when they saw a circular valley before them. They halted their vehicles; the steep descent seemed impossible and the environment looked inhospitable.

Along the floor and up the sides of the little caldera, wisps of sand roiled, the fine mist of the grains making the scene look as if it were shot through gauze. Even though at rest, the rovers shuddered in what could only be a wind.

"Will you look at this," said Robinson. "We must be under one of the air nozzles. I'll bet the air jets locking on the calderas keep the planet from rotating."

"I don't like it here," said Walter, turning his rover away from the caldera. "If our rovers roll over, we're dead meat." He smiled. "Virtual dead meat, that is."

Robinson steered his rover away as well. But no sooner had he done so, than he released his controller and cried out. "What the hell!" He stared open-mouthed at the monitor. "Is that an ant?"

The display screen filled with a big, jet-black head—antennae quivering and mandibles grinding.

"Just an ant." Walter chuckled. "I do hope the people who pay money to see the film will have the same reaction."

As they watched, a few more ants came over.

"I think we'd better retreat," said Walter. "If they call over any more of their friends, it could get a bit dicey."

"Yeah."

Slowly, they drove the rovers in reverse, then U-turned and raced away.

When they'd made their escape and slowed their vehicles, Walter noticed a red glow in the sky. "Looks like a sunset."

Robinson focused his rover's camera out to infinity and the glow resolved into the red LED integers on the lock-panel. He gave a two-fingered victory sign. "Now, if we could only push the 'Set' button."

"Like one that stands upon a promontory and spies a far off shore where he would tread," said Walter, "wishing his foot were square with his eye. Henry VI, part III."

Robinson stretched back in his seat.

There came the sound of magnetic boots clanking against metal. "Who the hell left this door open?" The shrill cry came from the outer hatchway. "This is supposed to be a secure area."

Robinson jerked his head around. "Wait! Don't close the"—SLAM—" hatch."

"Hello, K.V.," said Walter. By reflex, he tried to stand as his boss came in, but his seat harness held him fast. Straining against the webbing, he pointed to the adjacent seat. "This is Mr. Robinson. He's—"

"I know. I know." K.V. crossed his arms over his chest. "A station technician."

Robinson grimaced. Then, without a word, he unharnessed himself and push-floated to the outer hatch.

"He's Chief Engineer, actually," said Walter.

"Whatever." K.V. waved dismissively at Robinson. "Look," he said, staring at Walter, "they said there was a problem here. I don't like problems. You're supposed to protect me from problems."

"Damn," said Robinson from the door. "Locked." He stabbed at the 'Open' button a few times. "Locked and jammed."

K.V. pivoted around. "Hey! Can't you see we're having a conversation over here?"

Walter, taking advantage of the diversion, stole a glance at his rover's video display. The warm red glow had vanished—as had the numbers. "Robinson. Look," he said, pointing.

Robinson peered at the display. "Double damn. The 'Set' indicator is lit. Looks like the inner door lock has control."

K.V. shouted, "Will someone tell me what the hell is going on here?" He clomped to the center of the cabin.

"I'd say, K.V.,"—Walter struggled to keep his voice pleasant—"that we're stuck in this cabin. The door won't open."

"What?" K.V. tromped to the outer hatch. He pushed at it, pounded on the lock controls, then swiveled his head to glare at Walter before turning back to Robinson. "What kind of a grade-B space station is this?"

Robinson, still contemplating the video monitor, ignored him. "I think," said Robinson, softly as if to himself, "that the only way we can release the locks is by pushing that 'Set' button."

"Mister," said K.V. in a loud voice, "I'm talking to you."

"Sorry."—Robinson kept his eyes on the monitor—"but I'm rather busy at the moment." He sprang for the comlink. "I don't like this," he said softly as he punched the 'activate' button. "I really don't like this."

After informing Engineering of their plight, Robinson took a heavy breath and faced K.V. "All right, Mr. Bushnell," he said, evenly, "What can I do for you?"

Walter, meanwhile, had unstrapped himself from his console and leaped over to the inner door. It was still locked.

K.V. glowered at Robinson. "I demand you get me out of here."

Robinson shrugged; the gesture seemed to enrage K.V.

"You can sit on your damn haunches waiting for doomsday, for all I care," said K.V., "but I'm a pretty important item around here. Flix Films is supporting this station now." He nodded toward Walter. "I pay his salary, and when it comes right down to it, yours too." He pointed to the comlink. "So I advise you to tell them to get me out of here right now."

"Any suggestions on how to do that?"

"How the hell should I know? Use a blowtorch. You're the friggen technician."

Robinson gave what could have been considered a smile, save that his lips formed a thin, stretched line.

"We don't *have* welding equipment on board," he said. "This is a space station, not an automobile muffler shop." He gave a chortle of a laugh. "Hell, we don't even have a hammer."

"That's ridiculous."

"Hammers are just dead weight." Robinson glanced at the sealed outer hatchway. "On the station, just about every tool is specialized—designed for a specific purpose." He gave a desultory push against the hatch. "Anyway, it's really a computer problem."

"Computer problem?" K.V. laughed, harshly. "Every damned time something goes wrong these days, just blame the computer. I don't buy it. Even with this so-called space station's crummy computers. Yeah, I've seen them. They're junk."

"I don't doubt it," said Robinson. "It's twenty-year-old technology. No money to space-certify anything newer." Robinson clenched his fists. "And since the government won't give us what we need, we're forced to deal with any jerk who buys himself a ride."

"What? How dare you—"

Robinson pressed on. "This is your fault. Your stupid lightning generator." He pounded the bulkhead, making a loud thud. "And speaking of which, what kind of a fly-by-night testing lab approved that thing?"

"They were tested and approved." K.V. spoke with firmness, but Walter had been working with the man long enough to detect a tentativeness in his boss's voice.

Robinson and K.V. stood glaring at each other.

In that pause, Walter noticed that the cabin had become unnaturally quiet. He glanced over at Robinson. The engineer, a look of startled concern on his face, jerked his head around and fixed his gaze on the bulkhead. Walter followed the stare and saw only an air vent.

"Damn," said Robinson under his breath. He darted to the comlink, hit a button and, head leaning against the bulkhead, talked softly.



Walter couldn't hear the conversation—except where the voice from the other end asked Robinson to keep the comlink engaged.

Hearing a scratching sound, Walter turned to see K.V. lighting a cigarette.

With a cry, Robinson push-glided to K.V., grabbed the lit cigarette and snubbed it out. Wide-eyed, K.V. stepped backward.

Robinson took a long breath. “Things are not good,” he said.

“What's wrong?” said K.V. For the first time he could recall, Walter didn't hear any arrogance in the director's voice.

Walter glanced at the air vent. “Why don't I hear machinery?”

“It's the air circulation system,” said Robinson. “It's shut down.”

“Why?”

“Can't say, exactly,” said the Engineer. “But the lock system is linked to the emergency hull-breach system.”

“I don't understand,” said Walter. “Is there a hull breach? And what does that have to do with the air.”

“No. The hull seems fine.”

“That's good,” said K.V. “Isn't it?”

Robinson shook his head, slowly. “If the electronics thinks there's been a hull breach in a cabin, that cabin is isolated from the rest of the station—even the air system is sealed so that air won't be sucked out of the station.”

Robinson and Walter exchanged glances.

“And you think that's what happened?” said Walter.

Robinson gave a hint of a nod.

A high warbling tone broke the silence.

Robinson jumped at the sound. “Hull-breach alarm,” he said. “Spurious, I hope. But it means we're isolated now.” He turned to the comlink. “Guys. Get us out of here.”

“We're working on it,” came the answer.

“I don't see how they'll do it,” said Robinson under his breath. “Not in time.”

But K.V. apparently heard the words. “What do you mean, ‘not in time’?”

“All right.” Robinson looked down at his hands. “Unless we can get that door open,” he said quietly,

almost at a whisper, “we’ll suffocate in here.”

"Doomsday is near. Die all. Die merrily," said Walter. "Henry IV part 1."

"Shut up, please," said Robinson.

"Sorry."

Walter thought he saw K.V. go limp—in zero gravity, it was hard to tell. But an instant later, the man drew himself up, ramrod straight.

"You're saying I'm going to die." There was a hint of tremor in K.V.'s voice.

"We'll think of something," said Robinson.

Walter almost laughed; Robinson was certainly not much of an actor—and even K.V. seemed to know it.

"How long?" said K.V.

"There's not much free space in this cabin." Robinson bit his lip. "With three people and the catalytics using oxygen.... Oh, I don't know. Half an hour, maybe a little longer."

K.V. rubbed a hand across his forehead and then down over his eyes. "I'm going to die." He seemed to be talking to himself.

"The lightening generator wasn't really approved," said Robinson, "was it?"

"Would it help us get out of here," said K.V., hand still over his eyes, "if I told you our idiot producer set an impossible schedule—that we didn't have time to get the approvals?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

While Robinson and K.V. talked, Walter looked off through the porthole onto the star-sprinkled blackness. *I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space.* Suddenly and like a collision with a truck, he felt the impact of their situation. *I am really going to die.* He took a sharp breath, aware for once, of the precious value of oxygen. *This is real death—not playacting.* And now, he didn't know how to act. *Act! What am I thinking?* He'd been acting his life—living all his life through the window of a stage. *I am a caricature of myself.* Walter resolved then, that he'd at least make a good exit. He almost laughed. Acting again, but he'd not give K.V. the satisfaction of seeing him crack. *Petty, vile man.*

A motion on the video monitor caught his attention, giving him a desperate idea. "You know," he said, not knowing if he was acting brave or actually being brave, and uncertain if indeed there was even a difference. "You know, we might be able to use the rovers to push the 'Set' button." He locked eyes with Robinson. "If you're right, that would clear the lock mechanism, and let us open both doors."

"The rovers? That's impossible," said K.V., his tone as imperious as ever.

"What's your idea?" said Robinson.

"Rovers have guns." Walter leaned in over a console, grabbed the joystick and maneuvered his rover to focus on the other. "And they're relatively big." He pointed to the monitor. "Look there. The launchers are on either side of the hood."

"Relatively, yes," said Robinson, "but they're still pretty insignificant."

"But there's nothing to stop the missiles—no gravity, only air resistance."

"This is stupid," said K.V. "We should be battering down the door, or something."

"A waste of oxygen," said Robinson, without turning around.

"Morons," said K.V.

Walter gritted his teeth.

K.V. turned his back, walked to the porthole and leaned his head onto the glass.

Robinson clapped Walter on the shoulder. "Okay. Let's try your idea." He vaulted to the console seats and belted himself in. Walter followed.

As he fastened his harness, Walter wondered how K.V. had kept his composure: had so quickly reverted to his usual, nasty self. *Maybe his nastiness is just the way he handles stress—not all that much different perhaps, than reciting Shakespeare.*

"Which way?" said Robinson.

"What?"

"Where do you think we can get off a clean shot?"

Walter, pulling out of his introspection, stared up at his monitor. "I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way amongst—"

"Not now, please," said Robinson.

"Sorry." *Damn. I'm doing it again.* Walter focused his rover to infinity. "I say. I think we're drifting."

Robinson glanced over at Walter's monitor. "Yeah, you're right. With the circulation pumps off, there're no air jets keeping the planet in place anymore."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and drift toward the lock mechanism."

"Yeah. Maybe."

It took about five minutes to find a position where they had a clear view of the 'Set' button.

"How steady are your hands?" asked Robinson.

"Steady enough."

"All right. You take the first shot. I'll watch your aim. If you miss, I'll try to compensate."

"Good." Walter brought up cross hairs, and waited for the 'Set' button to drift into the center of his field. He hit the 'Fire' button.

Walter saw the little projectile enter his monitor's field of view, speed toward the button—and miss.  
"Damn."

"Jeez," said Robinson from the adjacent seat. "I can't get a shot off. We're moving too fast."

"All right, then," said Walter, wearily. "Let's move on and find another sight-line."

Robinson moved his rover to follow Walter's. "Yeah, fine." He pounded a fist onto the armrest. "But it doesn't make sense. How could the rover's recoil move this whole planet? It doesn't make sense. The gun couldn't be *that* powerful."

Walter sighed. "Except for a small electrostatic generator," he said, "Planet K is hollow."

"Hollow?"

"The shipping rates to the station," said Walter, eyes on his monitor, and hand guiding his rover, "are, well, astronomical."

"Yeah, I know. You wouldn't believe how expensive it was to have my audio system shipped up."

"We'd planned to fill it with water up here, but we'd not known how scarce water is on the station."  
Walter released his joystick. "This is hopeless; we're drifting too fast."

Just then, K.V. shouted at them. "What the hell are you doing? I'm dying and all you can do is have a pleasant little chat. Don't you understand what's happening? I'm going to die in here."

Walter, making claws of his fingers, brought his hands together, imagining K.V.'s neck between them. But before he could frame an answer, the sound of loud pounding reverberated through the control room.

As if he'd been hit, K.V. started. "Damn it. What now?" His magnetic boots holding him to the nominal floor, he bent his knees into a chair-less sitting position, with hands over his eyes and thumbs pushing against his ears. "I can't stand this."

"It's just the crew trying to break in," said Robinson. He shook his head. "But God knows how they expect to do it."

Walter caught sight of the monitor. Through the lens of the rover, he saw the planet hurtling toward a bulkhead. "Whoa!"

"What?" Robinson peered up at the monitor. "Hey. I've got an idea."

Walter, unable to tear his eyes away from the impending planetary impact, said, "We could use one."

"We'll use the planet itself to push the button."

Walter jerked his head around and stared at Robinson. "You call that an idea?" he said. "Maybe the planet would eventually ricochet enough to hit the button, but that could take days."

"But we can put 'English' on the planet," said Robinson, "to control the direction of the bounce. Like playing a 3-D version of Pong."

Walter looked at him, blankly. "English."

"By racing the rovers on the surface, we could affect the spin. Conservation of angular momentum."

Walter rubbed his forehead. His hand came away, wet. "May as well try it," he said. "I'll follow your rover."

"And at the right time," said Robinson, "we can fire the guns to give us even more spin." He gripped the joystick. "Okay. Let's hope all the time I spent playing pool when I was a kid wasn't entirely wasted."

"Let's hope." Walter inhaled and noticed an acrid smell in the air, like smoldering electronics. More quickly than he wanted to, he had to take another breath. "By the way," he said, "it's getting a little hard to breathe in here."

Robinson nodded.

\* \* \* \*

"Now," Robinson gasped. "Fire."

Walter, thinking it was probably his last conscious act, fired his rover's gun. He saw that Robinson had fired both his vehicle's guns as well. This was it.

While struggling to breathe, Walter witnessed a miracle; Planet K ricocheted from a bulkhead, throwing off ants as well as mounds of dirt. Then the sphere glided directly toward the 'Set' button. Walter held his breath—what little breath he had left to hold.

Planet K hit the button square on, sending more ants into weightlessness and filling the monitor with a shower of sand. A click came from the studio's door and Walter exhaled.

With obvious effort then, Robinson struggled out of his harness and push-floated to the door. He pulled at it, and it opened—bringing an influx of oxygen-rich air to where it was sorely needed.

Walter, his head resting against the padding of the console seat, watched Robinson silhouetted against the now vacant aluminum tetrahedron. The man's chest was heaving and his mouth was open. Walter closed his eyes and concentrated on his own breathing. Then, by the abrupt occurrence of a breeze, he was aware of Robinson floating past him toward the outer door.

"Damn it. Damn it to hell," came Robinson's voice from the outer hatchway. Walter opened his eyes and rotated his head toward the voice.

"Still locked," said Robinson over the sound of the pounding outside. "All we've done is bought a temporary reprieve."

While Robinson and Walter exchanged sad nods, K.V., still crouched, banged his fist into a bulkhead.

"Wait a minute," said Robinson, pointing toward the open door to the studio. "Is there a screw driver in there? I can unscrew the lock panel and manually release the door."

"Yes," said Walter, from his seat—he was still too weak to move. "In the supply drawer over the table."

Robinson shot back toward the studio, disappearing into the general clutter and the floating topsoil dislodged from planet K.

Walter heard the sounds of rummaging, and then Robinson's voice. "Flathead! Who the hell uses a flathead screwdriver anymore? I need a small Philips head. Do you have a Philips?"

"No."

"Damn!" Robinson, holding the flathead, push-floated out to the studio and made for the outer door's lock panel. After a few minutes of fiddling with the lock, he threw down the screwdriver. It ricocheted, its specially designed soft-coated handle causing inelastic collisions with the walls, reducing the rebound speed at each bounce.

"Wait a minute." Robinson retrieved the screwdriver. "Maybe I can grind it down." Breathing heavily, he began scraping the blade against the bulkhead. "It's hardened steel, but maybe...."

Walter heard a loud blow against the outside door, and then a rasping noise. He looked over and saw that a thin rod had broken through. He smiled, recognizing that the rod was the tip of a Philips head screwdriver. With another rasping noise, the rod withdrew, leaving a quarter-inch round hole.

K.V. unwound from his crouch and leapt for it, putting his mouth over the hole. Robinson flew at the man and pulled him away. No sooner had K.V.'s mouth left the aperture than there came another pounding sound and another rod came through—a thicker screwdriver.

"That screwdriver could easily have gone through the back of your throat," said Robinson.

K.V. put a hand over his mouth and, taking quick, shallow breaths, withdrew to the free rover-console seat.

Not comfortable with the company, Walter unstrapped his harness and floated over to join Robinson. They both watched as the hole was made steadily larger.

Then a voice came from the comlink. "Okay, the hole's large enough. We'll pass you a small screwdriver. I gather you know what to do with it."

Robinson laughed. "You bet." He reached down and grasped the screwdriver as it was passed through. He began to remove the six screws that held on the lock panel's cover. "By the way," he said as he withdrew the fourth screw. "What did you use as a hammer?"

The comlink was silent.

"Well?"

"In your lab, we, ur..." came the voice. "We cannibalized your stereo—a speaker magnet."

Robinson froze. "Oh no. Not my Acousticon Twelves."

"Just one of them," said the crewmember. "Anyway, it saved your life."

Robinson leaned his forehead against the bulkhead. "Not sure it was worth it. You don't know what I had to go through to get those speakers."

K.V. twisted in his console seat. "Get on with it," he said. "You can chitchat on your own time."

Shaking his head, Robinson took out the remaining screws. He removed the faceplate and stuck his hand in. Walter saw the man grimace and then there came a click. Robinson pulled out his hand and pushed open the door.

Five crewmembers peered in. Walter was surprised to see that one of them was none less than Commander Hendrix, the ranking officer on the station.

Hendrix walked into the cabin. There wasn't really room enough for anyone else to come in with him.

Robinson stepped back and leaned casually against a bulkhead. "Good of you to drop by, Commander," he said.

Walter smiled. *This Robinson is a rather better actor than I'd thought.*

"Oh," said Hendrix just as casually, "just wondered what you've been up to lately."

K.V. pushed himself erect from the console seat and clomped over to Hendrix. "I'm glad to see you," he said. "I'm not sure how much longer I could have kept these two from losing it." He laughed, a warm friendly laugh, and gave Walter an avuncular pat on the shoulder. "A word here, a word there, and they thought their ideas were their own." He turned to Robinson. "I'm sorry I had to be devious, but I had to keep you and Walter focused."

Walter opened his mouth in dismay. "But..."

While K.V. turned to give Walter another pat on the shoulder, Robinson and Hendrix exchanged amused glances.

"Um," said Robinson, stepping forward from the bulkhead. "I think that—"

"You behaved rather well," said K.V., returning his attention to the engineer, "It was our young companion here that I was worried about."

"I think," Robinson repeated, "that the emergency scanning camera might tell another story." He nodded toward the camera over the door. A tiny green LED showed it was active.

"Camera?"

Ignoring K.V., Robinson turned to Hendrix. "Thanks," he said. "And I mean big-time thanks."

"Any time." Hendrix turned to leave. "But, duty calls,"—he shot a quick glance at K.V.—"thankfully." He left the cabin.

"What's this about a camera?" said K.V. He stood, as if rooted, looking up at the green LED.

Robinson, standing beside a console, absently played with a rover-controller. "The entire station watched it, I imagine," he said.

K.V. stood mute, his eyes wild.

"And," Robinson went on, "the signal was downlinked to Langley for image processing."

Walter, listening, lounged against the bulkhead and gazed idly at a monitor where a magnetic-wheeled rover in the studio moved in synchrony to the engineer's twiddling.

Robinson shrugged. "But considering how hard it is to keep anything secure these days," he said, lightly, his eyes on K.V., "I imagine a number of news stations around the world have picked it up and are broadcasting it live. A real life-and-death drama."

K.V., his eyes still on the LED, took a step back and sideways, as if trying to hide from the camera.

Walter gave a hint of a nod, bit his lower lip, then went over and switched off the power to the rover console.

Robinson took his hand from the controller and pointed at the emergency camera. "All the world's a stage," he said. "Hamlet, I think."

Walter chuckled. "As You Like It', actually. But very apt."

The comlink came to life. "Call from the surface for K.V. Bushnell. From a Mr. Zandor."

K.V. yanked his gaze from the LED and over to the comlink.

"The producer," Walter whispered to Robinson. "The big boss."

"Says it's private," the comlink voice continued. "Take the call in the observation lounge. Afterward, he wants to talk to Mr. Anders."—Walter stiffened—"Something about a promotion."

K.V. inhaled, sharply.

Robinson leaned in toward Walter. "Congratulations," he said, softly.

K.V., mopping the sweat from his forehead, skulked off without a word.

Walter smiled. He felt reborn—returned to the land of the living with a second chance. He'd learned his lesson. This time he'd live life, not act it. *'All the world's a stage'?* He chuckled. *Not any more. God help me, not any more.*

END



