

Wingless Films
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CAPSULE

by

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He awoke to the taste of metal in his mouth, a sore forehead and an alarm blaring in his ear.

“Mute,” he said, and the buzz fell silent, the soft rumble of engines filling its place. Sam found the susurrus of the below-deck power grid soothing, and it took him a moment to recognise the difference in pitch from the sound he was used to. The *Wetheral* had a lower register, a bass tone that gently vibrated the deck plates. This was an octave too high.

“Pod?”

“Good afternoon, Sam.”

He frowned, scoffed. To make a precise calculation of the time up here, not to mention relying on the orbit of the Earth to do so, was a pointless endeavour—and besides, Sam knew full well that it was still morning. He said so. “Let’s get some lights on,” he added. The only light source currently available to him was the ever-present blue glow to his left.

The halogens came to life, and Sam found himself looking at the main control board of one of twelve training capsules held aboard the *Wetheral*, which he accepted without comment, despite the small part of his mind patiently jumping up and down for attention. “Have I been asleep?” he said to the room at large.

“You were unconscious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your body lost mental responsiveness for several hours shortly after the contact between the ventral command console and your forehead, Sam.”

The pilot dabbed at his head, but found no traces of blood. Aside from a slight headache, he only had Pod's word that he had suffered an injury at all.

"I administered medicine, Sam," Pod added.

"What happened?" he asked, but the incongruity of his setting suddenly hit him. "Why am I still in the capsule? Training's over, isn't it?"

There was silence for a moment, save for the under-floor hum, then: "We ejected."

Sam regarded the soft, blue glow evenly, as if it could offer up some answers. "Show me."

Several clicks sounded behind him, and the shutter above the command board rose smoothly. Sam peered out as the first, twinkling stars shone through, followed by the roiling easel of a nebula in some distant quadrant. He stared out, momentarily transfixed, as if he could count the stars. "Where's the ship?" he asked, straining to see beyond the frame of the porthole. He dropped his gaze to the board, fiddled with the controls. "It's not on scopes—did we drift out?"

There was no answer from the blue light to his left. "Pod, did we drift out?" said Sam. "Where's the *Wetheral*?"

"There was an incident."

"Show me. Remember our talk, Pod," Sam added. For an omnipresent astro-navigator, Pod was remarkably poor at taking instruction. "Show me the ship."

If there was a hint of resignation in Pod's metallic tone, Sam didn't register it. "Playback of external feed," came the disembodied voice, and the porthole in front of the pilot resolved into a familiar image.

The *Wetheral* hung in space, engines idling, its great frame huge even amid the starscape beyond. Sam had only seen it from the outside once before, but the image had been etched into his mind. It felt like he had been staring at the sun.

The sun went supernova before his eyes. The ship's indomitable hull cracked like an egg, bursting with fire, and the entire image was consumed by a shuddering explosion that shorted the recording equipment. The screen dissolved into static, which lingered for several seconds before Pod deactivated the recording, clearing the starry window once again.

Sam sat back in his impact chair. "What happened?" he said, his voice quiet and tight.

"Readings suggest a cascade power failure in the starboard fusion coils," Pod reported. "Fail-safes triggered the launch of the capsule."

He wondered briefly if Pod had developed a fault, and had become deranged enough to report a complete fabrication. Or the machine was simply running a new training program devised by the Chief.

Sam was a relative newcomer to the Starfleet, having joined up only three seasons ago, but the *Wetheral* became the centre of his universe, and he could not imagine that it had simply vanished from space. Though he couldn't make sense of Pod's reasons for deceiving him, the cadet fell back on instinct.

"You're saying there are other capsules out there?"

"Negative."

Sam leaned forward, addressing the three-pronged blue light. "No, but you said the capsule ejected. They all must have. Maybe the, uh, the blast shielded them from the scopes; try a different frequency."

“The capsules do not appear on any frequency.”

“Well have you tried them all?”

“The capsules do not appear on any—”

“Try them *all!*”

The darkened chamber rang in the sudden silence, the coolant ticking over as if the little ship had developed the aches and groans of a sailing vessel. Sam passed a hand over his face, and felt like he'd had no sleep at all.

“I'm sorry, Sam,” said Pod.

“Sorry,” Sam said bitterly. “You're sorry. The speaking clock is sorry.” He paused, and gathered himself. There was no sense in shouting at a simple machine. “What do we have?” he murmured, and cast about the capsule for inspiration. He found little to go on.

“The capsule is secure,” Pod stated.

Sam blew out his cheeks. “Food? Water? Stims?”

“The capsule is fully stocked, minus the supplies consumed during your training module.”

Training was the furthest thing from Sam's mind; he found it far more taxing than his shift-mates seemed to, and he had made up for his average grades by ragging on the instructors' methods. Now, at least, he felt justified in his bitterness; all the training in the universe had instantly become worthless. “How far out are we, Pod?” he asked, tapping sequences into the command board.

“Twenty million, six thousand, four hundred and eighty-three point four miles from Earth, Sam.”

The cadet whistled through his teeth. “Pretty far, then.”

“Affirmative.”

He shuffled in his seat, trying to get a handle on the situation. “But it’s do-able, isn’t it, Pod?” he asked, and realized he was starting to sound desperate. “Isn’t it? It’s do-able?”

The hum of the engines seemed to intensify.

Sam cleared his throat. “How long?” he asked hoarsely. “How long will it take us to get back to Earth?”

Pod was as precise as ever. “Six months, nineteen days and nine hours.”

Sam stared out of the little porthole, watching the stars wheel slowly outside. They all looked far smaller than he remembered. “Okay,” he breathed. “That’s a pretty long stretch.”

He didn’t know how long he sat there, watching the stars, but after a while he felt his throat would close up if he didn’t speak. “Pod?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“The life-support,” he said carefully. “How long does it have?”

The machine considered its answer. “Are you sure you wish to know?”

“Pod! Yes.”

“Three days—”

Sam almost jolted out of his seat. “Three days?”

“—and two-and-three-quarter hours.”

“Three *days*?”

“And two-and-three-quarter—”

“Pod!” Sam cried, “that’s not enough!”

“Affirmative,” said the machine.

Sam looked around wildly, straining against his crash webbing. “There’s gotta be something you can do! Backup generators! Flush out the cyclers, do a full reboot—”

“The life-support system will shut down in three days and two-and-three-quarter hours.”

“*I know!*”

Sam collapsed back into his seat, the wind taken out of him. The capsule beeped and hummed quietly to itself. Even Pod’s effervescent glow remained as bright as ever. Sam wondered if the little machine would shut down at all, or simply drift through space, awaiting its next instructions.

He breathed out. “Can we send a message to Earth?”

“Negative. There will be too much interference from orbital satellites.”

Sam thumped the arm of his chair. “Great. Doomed by white noise. Can we send out the black box?” he asked.

“We have no approach vector.”

Sam wished the machine had a throat, so he could throttle it. “Just point us at the Earth! It’s the big, blue ball in front of the Sun!”

“We have no approach vector,” Pod said, like a patient mother.

“Fire it anyway,” Sam said sourly, and cut into Pod’s repeated reply with, “Please. Just fire it anyway.”

“Affirmative. Would you like to record a message, Sam?”

The cadet considered asking the odds of a message saved to the black box’s internal storage ever reaching Earth, but decided he probably couldn’t stand to hear the answer. Instead, he took several deep breaths and said, “Sure. Why not?”

The little, glowing machine clicked and whirred to itself, then stated, “Activating record mode.”

The porthole in front of him turned opaque, and an image of himself faded up in place of the starfield. He stared into his own, tired-looking eyes, and gave his head a slow nod experimentally. The image followed in perfect sync.

“Well,” Sam said, and his voice came back, tinny and reverberating. Confronted by his task, Sam felt lost, and turned to the collection of three, softly glowing lights for help. “I dunno what to say.” He supposed he could talk about the view, or how he came to be stranded in the capsule, but none of his options held any appeal.

“Would you like to record a message for your family, Sam?” asked Pod.

He stared into his perfect reflection. “No. Of course not! I should be down there with them,” he said, and his duplicate agreed. “I should be back in London with Mum, and Jenny....”

Sam broke off, seeing the look in his own eyes. Jenny would be down there now, in the apartment they had saved for since college. He couldn’t even think of what she might be doing; they had last spoken seven months ago, when she was looking for teaching jobs, possibly abroad. He wondered if she might listen to his message from Germany, or China, or anywhere else in the world.

The thought of Jenny listening to his message upset him more thoroughly than he thought was possible.

“I had to go,” he said, compelled to keep talking. “Space,” he smiled thinly, “the final frontier. Look at me. How could I turn it down?”

The launch at Houston was the second most exciting day of his life. The crowds cheered, Jenny kissed him goodbye, and the shuttle had taken off with a thunderous blast that had shaken his whole body. But that hadn't been the bit he continued to replay in his mind's eye.

"It was beautiful," he said, watching his own mouth form the words. "In all the pictures, it looks so small. But it wasn't. It was so... big. So beautiful. The Atlantic, covered in rain clouds. The whole of America; all the states, just lying down there. England, too, somewhere." He smiled. "Silly, tiny little thing. It made my life."

There was so much more he wanted to say, to tell, to explain; but Sam couldn't voice any of it, and turned away from his reflection. "Turn it off," he said, and he saw the glow fade out before he put his head in his hands.

The ship was refusing to let him reroute power from the auxiliary drives. He had crawled under the deck plates, and managed to prise open the main circuit board, and was now faced with a morass of wires. Pod was helping where possible, but it was acting as steadfast as usual. "The auxiliary drives are supposed to have power, Sam."

"Yeah," he grunted, lifting off an access panel, "but not right now. I can feed them into the oxy-tank."

"The system won't allow it, Sam," Pod said, sounding like it was peering over his shoulder with an unimpressed expression.

"What else can I do?"

"You could finish your message."

Sam ignored the comment, working instead at hotwiring the thick leads in front of him. The regulator pipes extended out onto the smooth carapace of the capsule, feeding back into the main core at the rear of the vessel. Back aboard the *Wetheral*, Sam had studied the designs of the Mark-III capsule, and believed his knowledge of the systems were rudimentary enough to effect manual repairs. He only needed to get out onto the hull and swap the couplings over manually....

“You should get some rest, Sam.”

Sam grimaced, wiping his oily hands on his overall, which had faded to a dull, dusky orange. “I’m not sleeping, Pod. I’ve got three days; I’m not wasting a second on sleep.” He took hold of the edge of the command board, lifting himself up from the foot well.

“It’s important for your well-being, Sam,” Pod advised. “I am programmed to look after you.”

Sam clawed his way back into the seat, sitting heavily and immediately setting to work on the console, attempting to deactivate the overrides. “Yeah,” he said distractedly, “me too.”

He continued working, becoming frustrated at the unresponsive system, finding his progress was only tripping evermore complex layers of security. The cramped cockpit was filling with urgent beeps and hums. A light flashed on the console. “What’s that, Pod? A sub-routine just activated.”

“Affirmative.”

Sam glanced across at the motionless set of blue lights. “What did you do?”

“You should get some rest, Sam.”

“No,” he said, focusing on the console. “I need to keep working.” He could feel himself sweating, and his overalls were heavy as if they were filled with water. “I need....”

The alarms were increasing, ringing in his ears. He tried to shake the discomfort off, but the noise persisted, like a crow pestering at his neck. The console didn't seem stable, and Pod's cluster of lights was pulsing in and out.

"Oh," Sam murmured, and sank back into his seat. He closed his eyes, and the sound and fury washed over him.

He awoke slowly, finding the capsule tranquil and still. The stars were floating by peacefully outside the porthole. Pod's lights were soft and still. Sam stretched, feeling his body responding well. "How long was I...? Pod, I fell asleep!" he said, the detail of his situation flooding back to him. He pored over the console, checking the failing systems. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"You needed rest," said Pod.

"I don't need rest! I'm not on holiday," Sam groaned, hands flying over the console as the coolants flashed up a warning of imminent shutdown. "I can't waste time!"

"I have been monitoring all systems and frequencies in your absence."

He glared at the little collection of lights. "It's no good sitting there monitoring, Pod, we've got to *do* something!"

"I have been doing many things," it said.

Sam paused, and turned his attention fully to the three, blue lights. "Pod...?" he said carefully. "If you start whistling, I'm going to disconnect you."

"I am only trying to look after you, Sam," it explained.

“I’m fine,” he replied bitterly to the world at large. “It’s this damn capsule that’s the problem.” He paused, having caught sight of his right arm, the sleeve rolled up from his earlier work. “My arm doesn’t hurt,” he said.

“I am glad to hear it.”

“No, I got a cut when I was working under the console,” Sam said, feeling out his forearm. There was no blood, no soreness; no mark at all to suggest any injury had been sustained. He turned a wary expression to Pod. “How long have I been sleeping?”

“Seven hours and twenty-three minutes,” Pod reported.

That the capsule was seven hours and twenty-three minutes closer to total shutdown could wait; Sam fixed Pod with an intense glare, as if he could pierce the impenetrable blue glow. “No way I healed that quickly. What’ve you done?”

“I am looking after you, Sam.”

“You’re drugging me!”

The blue glow remained still. “I am administering medicine.”

“You sent me to sleep!” Sam yelled. “Did you knock me out as well?”

“Negative. That was not a result of the medicine,” the machine said flatly. “I do not like to see you hurt.”

“Wonderful,” Sam said, throwing up his arms, “the Tin Man’s found a heart. Pod, I don’t need you making decisions for me. I need to keep working.” He returned to the console, inputting more sequences but getting no further than the vessel’s many restrictions.

“Why?”

The word incensed Sam, and if he had anything to hand, he would have thrown it. “Because I’m going to die!” he cried, and his throat caught at the statement. “If I don’t get out of here, I’m going to tumble off into space...!”

“That cannot be prevented, Sam.”

“God damn it, show a bit of *compassion!*”

Sam ran his hand over his face wearily. It took Pod several moments to respond. “I’m afraid I cannot do that, Sam,” she said simply.

The cadet turned to regard her. He idly wondered if the colour blue had been chosen for its softness. Perhaps more than one astronaut had been comforted by the soothing, blue glow of an astrogation unit. “I’m sorry, Pod,” he said quietly. “Don’t worry—not that you can worry. It’s all right. Not your fault.”

“Affirmative.”

Sam shot the unit a look. “Smug.” He tinkered with the unresponsive console for a moment, then said, “I’d like to finish my message now, Pod.”

The unit powered up the requisite systems. “Affirmative. Resuming record mode.”

Sam’s own countenance flashed into view in front of him. It was, he considered, a somewhat comforting sight.

“Hi. Me again. Lost in space. Well, I’ve got a day or so left by now... so there’s still time. I guess I’ll keep drifting all the same. Might make it to Earth in the end, who knows? Or I might miss it completely. That’s the trouble—no approach vector.

“I think it’s all right, though. I think.... I might find, I don’t know, a wormhole or something. All that science-fiction stuff. I might fly in, and come out on the other side.”

He paused, gazing at his mirror image. Its eyes were ringed with red.

“I love you. And I’m gonna miss you very much.” The two Sams smiled in unison. “Bye, then. Pod?”

“Message saved. Shall I eject the black box now, Sam?”

His throat was sore, and he rubbed his neck idly, still watching the screen as it faded out.

“Sure.”

The unit initiated the eject sequence, filling the little cockpit with noise, and Sam saw a tiny object shoot out across the starfield beyond the window. He watched it go, following it as it grew smaller, until he could no longer pick it out from amid the vast sea of stars. He thought of his message, and of home, and of Jenny. Meeting her at the observatory had been the best day of his life. He had assumed there would eventually have been a day to beat it.

He lowered his eyes, and listened to the hum of the cockpit.

“Can I ask you a question, Sam?”

He blinked, coming back to himself, and glanced across at the soft, blue light. “Go for it.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’d rather you asked me what my favourite colour is.”

“Affirmative,” Pod said, “what is your favourite colour?”

Despite himself, Sam laughed. “No, it’s all right. I don’t know how I feel,” he said, soberly.

“It’s... a bit difficult to tell.”

“If not you, Sam, then who else?” asked Pod.

Sam gazed out of the porthole. The view was tinged with a deep, red light, coming from somewhere out of sight. Likely a nebula of some kind, though for a moment Sam thought of a wormhole, swirling in space, his capsule tumbling towards it.

“It isn’t like that,” he said, speaking slowly, letting his thoughts drift out. “All those stars, all those galaxies... that’s what I feel. Sort of. It’s a big, brilliant mess whirling around forever. It’s too big, Pod. I’m going to die in less than a day’s time.” He shook his head. “Can’t process it. Not enough space.”

“I don’t think I understand, Sam,” she admitted, her voice inflecting slightly with the equivalent of a shrug.

“No, neither do I,” Sam said, and somehow it reassured him. Who could fit a whole universe in their head and make sense of it? He let the view take him, as if he could see the roiling cloud of matter swirling behind his dying ship.

“How do I feel? Honestly, Pod,” he said distantly, “I don’t know.”

Beyond the porthole, the nebula hung like an open eye in the darkness, impossibly big, and the tiny space capsule drifted silently towards it.

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Wingless Films, 2011