

BLINDERS

Book One

Discovery

"Space Liner..Planetary Class Transports"

"...few were built new for that purpose, most were converted from older ships that had outlived their usefulness. The rigors and demands created by the upsurge of mining in that century produced a surplus of worn out vehicles and many space liner ships were rebuilt and modified mining vehicles. They were still useful as transport ships once the engines were replaced with Delta 4 engines....most notable of these was the "Maiden" for the small historical role that it played..."

The Encyclopedia Of Inventions And Their Creators, rev. 22

#1

Keeper had always hated snakes, and here he was fighting one for his life. It wasn't really a snake, it was only a vent tube which had pulled loose from the side of the converted mining craft that he was working on. But the wriggling tube seemed to have taken on a serpentine life of its' own. On a planets surface, this would only be a minor problem, but here in space, traveling at 20 times the speed of sound, the flailing hose threatened to send him flying off into an unforgiving vacuum.

As he fought to get control of the cold, gray vent tube, which writhed and rotated in his gloved hands, spitting out trails of moisture, he was reminded of the fountains at home that had sprayed water into the air in spirals, making interesting patterns. But this was space, and the spirals of condensed moisture which froze almost immediately upon leaving the tube and boiled away into vapor later, never came back, they only continued to spiral out, in ever widening circles, into the void, towards the stars. As Keeper fought to get the recirc-tube down the side of the ship and locked onto the housing which normally held it in place, he wondered, briefly about those droplets of moisture, jettisoning off into the blackness. "Where do they go," he wondered, as the moisture froze instantly in the vacuum of space, reminding Joshua of the fate that awaited him, if he got even a slight tear in the fabric of his space suit. He'd become first moisture, then mist and then only the memory of a gas, a freeze dried shell of a man, it had happened to quite a number of explorers in the old days and there was no cure for it. One minute you were a normal, healthy human being and the next, you were a mummified relic of the space age.

As he replaced the hose into the lock down housing and tightened the stainless steel ring that held it in place, he realized that the threads on the ring had been partially stripped. He cursed under his breath and then quickly asked a ritual prayer of forgiveness and asked for help as he realized that the tube wouldn't be held tightly by the damaged fastener. That would mean a safety hazard, the tube could come loose again. Space Liner rules made it the responsibility of the repairing individual to fix things correctly, even if it wasn't their job.

"I'll have to come out here again," despaired Joshua, breathing deeply, as an involuntary shudder ran coldly over him. This always happened when he'd finished something dangerous. It wasn't that he was a coward, it was just that a man needed to have a healthy fear of the danger he was facing, or he might let his guard down and get hurt and now he was going to have to face the danger again. A wave of depression filled his thoughts. "You'll never win, you're a loser, you gave up your faith, you gave up your family, you might as well give it all up," a voice seemed to say, "It's never going to get any better, you're going to live your whole life a loser, a failure." As Joshua listened to the taunting thoughts that filled his mind, he imagined himself punching a hole in his suit, it would be a quick, painless death. "No one would ever know that it hadn't been an accident," whispered the voices. "No one but me," he thought angrily, not sure if he was mad because he was so weak that he would contemplate such thoughts or if it was because he was so weak that he couldn't follow through on them. He imagined himself holding a gun to his head and pulling the trigger, ending it all, the easy way. He worked to shake off his dark day dreams of hopelessness, he imagined unseen crowds of dark figures, cheering for his destruction; destruction that would come from his own hand. "Not today," he vowed silently. He viciously tightened the stripped ring as much as he could under the circumstances. The black ptyosene gloves in his suit were slightly stiff. Their resin filled covering had been developed to remain flexible in the extreme temperatures of space, heat and cold. The material was most responsive when hot, now, in the cold that existed in the shade of the ship, the sun hidden from view, his gloves had become awkward.

Joshua held onto a rail, with one hand, both feet on the rung below him and turned to look at the view. The sky wasn't black out here, it looked dark, but close study always revealed far distant stars. The magnitude of space served to calm his thoughts and restored him to happiness. It amazed him, the vastness and the density of space, it made his own problems seem insignificant. "Got to keep telling myself that, can't give in to depression." He gazed at the seldom seen view. There was so much room from star to star and yet there were so many of the distant suns and even more planets. He often wondered at the enormity of it all. He figured it must have been this view that caused pioneers to settle the planetoids, inspired explorers to chart them, drove scientists to search for a faster than light star drive. They hadn't achieved it yet, but it was only a matter of time. "And I'm part of it," he mused, "finally, I'm part of it!"

Joshua turned and began "climbing" the ladder on the side of the ship. There was no artificial gravity out here, so up and down had little meaning, it was all a matter of perspective. Some space walkers could scale the side of the ship like they were walking along a log. Joshua felt safer using both hands and treating the ladder like a ladder. Being new at it, he was still cautious about the dangers of space, he didn't yet consider himself a cowboy, out to tame the wild frontier. Yet, he didn't think of himself as a settler either. He wasn't the cautious type who put down deep roots and avoided unnecessary chances. He felt that he was, in many ways, the exact opposite of his father who had been a settler and a missionary on Earth78 and had helped it to become a thriving colony.

Without warning, Joshua was suddenly thrown out into space. There had been no sound, only a sharp blow to the back of his helmet which caused him to cry out in fear and pain. Frantically, Keeper tried to reverse his direction. He'd just been locking his safety tether to the latch channel on the miner when he was hit by something from behind and the force of the blow

caused him to miss the channel with his tether clip. The hit to his head hadn't knocked Joshua very far away from the ship, and he was confident that he could get back to it. He'd been trained for this at the academy and he'd always been able to "swim" back to the ship, using the thrusters in his pressure suit, in simulation. Still, he felt a surge of good old healthy fear, rising inside him, almost like a welcome friend. He began maneuvering his position toward the ship, but he couldn't seem to stop his spinning. All around him was the blackness of the eternal night sky of space. The ship looked huge from out here, but it was ever so slowly getting smaller. He aimed a sharp thrust opposite of his rotation, which slowed his spin in relation to the ship, but it was a little too much and he began to spin back in the other direction. It was amazing to Joshua, how just a little bit of rotation could throw his body off. He felt the blood rushing to his head, as if he were standing on it in normal gravity. Fighting down a feeling of panic, he tried to understand what was happening. He was confused, his thrust had been calculated to stop his rotation, yet he had slowed from his counter-clock wise rotation and had begun to spin slowly clockwise again and he still seemed to be getting farther away from the ship. "It's just like swimming, just take your time," he counseled himself.

Sparks flew past Joshua's helmet. He hoped it wouldn't be hurt by them, he 'd saved for months to buy it and he'd purchased it just before leaving the academy. He didn't want it scratched up while it was still new. He had just gotten it last month and it had all the latest in comfort features. But the helmet couldn't help him think more clearly, he had to do that on his own. The sparks seemed to spiral about him. Light little clinks sounded through the helmet when some of them spun past hitting the headgear. "But how could there be sparks"? There was no oxygen, no way for fire to burn here. Joshua was showered again, and this time he could see what they were, just crystals of ice that reflected back the light from Joshua's helmet lamps. "The vent tube must have come loose again", Joshua realized, "that's what hit me." And then panic did set in, because if it had, it would be blowing out crystals in a never ending spiral, one which was blowing Joshua away from the ship, and could puncture his suit. No longer did Joshua want to know what happened to those drops of moisture shot into space, not if it meant that he was going to find out from first hand experience. "My father warned me that technology was dangerous, maybe he was right," Joshua worried. Angrily he fought to rid himself of the poisonous idea, shaking his head to clear it.

In a moment of panic, he began to struggle towards the ship, trying to spin himself into a better position, flopping ineffectively back and forth, like a fish out of water. His arms and legs danced about like a demented marionette. Suddenly tired, he stopped and allowed his mind to clear. "Have to act fast," he whispered to himself, in a tension filled squeak. "Need to use all of suits' thrust to break free of the spiral...means I'll have to get to the ship under my own power." He wished that he could think this out, but there wasn't time, he had to trust his intuition. "Better get this right," he worried, unlocking the control safety ring, "because if I don't, there's no one to help me...won't even know I'm gone for a couple of hours. Someone'll just ask, "Where's that new guy," and when they don't find me, I'll be reported missing." Deftly, he depressed the main and auxiliary thruster controls, felt the solid click as they locked into the open position and set his teeth in utter concentration. The main thrust was aimed to blast him out of the vortex that had him caught, but it was pure "seat of the pants" guesswork, getting back to the ship. "Not even a homing beacon on this suit," he reflected darkly. He strained, pointing his escape thrusters away from the stream of ice crystals and towards the lower half of the ship, so that he could grab hold

of one of the unused mining pods. "Have to aim for the big one at the bottom," he thought, imagining that he could hear the hiss of the thrusters as they opened and slowly began to push him free of the vent stream. A thin vibration started in the backpack of his suit and coursed through his body, oddly it made him feel that he needed to go the bathroom. He wrapped his booted feet around one another to make his body more rigid, more "bullet-like". "Yea, that's going to do it," he breathed hopefully, stifling an urge to shout in relief as he broke free of the ice shower that had been pushing him away and began to head in the direction of the ship.

With a shudder and a jarring bang, his thrusters ran dry. "No, too soon, I need more time," he hissed hoarsely. The fear that had been driving him started to rise again, "In the direction I'm headed, I'll miss the retrieval arm by twenty feet! If only I hadn't needed to use all of my juice to break loose of that spray." Urgently, he forced himself to remain calm, it was an effort to keep his emotions from running away into full blown panic. He'd been forced to meditate often as a child, maybe it was a good thing after all. He closed his eyes tightly and tensed the muscles in his hands and arms, fighting for self control and began to think about the lessons he'd learned at the academy, there had to be something that could help here. "What are the forces that act in space," he asked himself. He remembered a lecture he'd had in a basic physics class. They had talked about Newtons' laws of motion and the professor had said that if you stood in space, on a platform and threw snowballs in one direction, it would force you to travel in an equal and opposite direction. He didn't have any snowballs, but his suit did have tools in the zippered outer pockets, for repair work! Joshua reached down and took a wrench from a leg pocket, he was facing the ship, so he curled into a ball and threw the wrench away, between his legs, into the opposite direction. The wrench went flying quickly off into space, but Joshua couldn't tell if he had improved his direction, because he was moving so slowly in relation to the ship. One by one, Joshua took the tools from his pockets and hurled them off into the void. He tried to throw them as hard as he could so that their loss would do him the most good. When they were gone, he held very still, one eye closed, measuring his new direction of travel. It looked like the throwing contest had worked, but he would still miss the ship, by only a foot or two now. "So close and yet so far!" He and the ship were both traveling at similar speeds, so it appeared to Joshua that they were moving very slowly towards each other. "I can't just float by without trying something," he said to himself, "what can I do, can't just miss it. Gotta' think fast, it'll be here in a moment and I'll never catch it if I go past it." Joshua swallowed hard and ground his teeth together, time seemed to slow down as he desperately tried to think of a way to propel himself to the ship. The space liner looked like a giant fish trying to swim away from him into a deep black ocean. "Fish!" thought Joshua, "that's it!" He might have a chance if he could catch the end of the old retrieval arm on the mining pod with his suits' tether cord. He pulled it out it's full five meter length.

Joshua steeled himself as the ship seemed to grow larger. Here it came, it seemed to him that everything was in slow motion, or was his brain just on another speed? "Please God, don't let me miss...", he prayed in sincerity, sweat breaking out all at once. He held the tether in both hands as he approached the retriever. "There it is, if I can just..." He didn't complete the sentence, because he had thrown the tether, and it was snaking out towards the arm. It caught on the edge of the first set of jaws, but slipped off and the line went slack. It slipped down over the second set of jaws and fell free. He quickly yanked the tether back to himself, winding it up and twisting his body into a half sitting/half standing position. He was rapidly moving beyond reach of the arm,

but forced himself to pause to calculate the best position for the throw. He twisted his torso and flicked the tether back across the widening gap between himself and the mining pod. A panicked cry forced its way into Joshua's throat but caught before passing his lips as the tether caught on the last set of jaws on the mining retrieval arm. Fortunately, someone hadn't locked them in place and by some miracle, the arm's electro bearing pulled itself toward the ship, away from Joshua's fall, catching the line tightly. The line went taut and felt good to Joshua as he pulled himself solidly against the cargo ship. "Yep, old Newton was right", he thought, hugging the side of the craft. "Thanks," he breathed to whichever unseen guardians might have helped him out.

It took over half an hour for Joshua to climb back up the side of the converted mining vehicle. As the adrenaline rush of fighting danger began to wear off, he realized that he'd missed another chance to end the struggle of life, he could have just floated away. "Must want to live more than I thought," he mused, the faint mental image of a gun to his temple taunting him. Sometimes, Keeper wondered about his sanity. "But if I'm nuts, it's my own choice, I'm in control," he thought defiantly, to imagined hosts of ill wishers. The lengthening silence, climbing the side of the ship, began to be maddening, he had heard himself breath and gurgle all the time he'd been out, it was the only sound in this lonely vacuum. He found himself muttering under his breath, reciting each action that he would take, to avoid thought. "Step up, hold tight, grab with right hand...wonder if a person could go mad more quickly in space than on Earth." The LEDs in his helmet which gave out the status of his suits' functions were reflected in the clear view plate of the helmet, it had full on board video projection, but the helmet was so new, the registration for the displays hadn't been coded yet. When he paused and listened, he could hear the faint whir of the pumps in his suit which cycled on and off to regulate the temperature inside of it. Joshua began to weary of "climbing". The Maiden was shaped like a huge mushroom and the inexperienced spaceman was required to climb the "stalk" towards the "cap" to get back inside of the ship. The emergency escape pods and life rafts were located up inside of the underside of the "mushroom" rim of the ship. Engineers had placed all hatches under the rim to shelter vehicles and repair crews from space debris that they might encounter. Joshua took another fifteen minutes to lock down the vent pipe again. "Make double sure it's secure this time," he advised himself, as he headed back towards the airlock and the safety of the inside of the ship.

Inside, the sealing door banged shut and the floor vibrated beneath Joshua's feet with the force of oxygen being saved on the other side of the vault-like door. "Guess the old man was wrong this time, technology didn't get me, it saved me," Joshua thought in triumph. It was a relief to feel the solid safety of the ship once again. As he left the airlock, and began to unsuit himself, Nina, the personnel officer, walked up to him. In a loud voice, she teased, "With an arm like that, you might think of taking up a career in baseball!"