

## Three Times Gravity

15th November 2113.

Asteroid KBX-2004.

Space. Near Earth.

Nobody had ever told him how difficult it would be to unblock a toilet at three times gravity. If the job description had said Space Janitor instead of Mechanical Engineer, Biggs probably wouldn't have signed on in the first place. Now here he was, shoulders aching and arms deep in a sludgy waste pipe, trying to reach the trap and remove what was being pulled down more than was being flushed out.

He was part of a crew of twelve: six miners, two pilots, a doctor, a commander, a science engineer and a mechanical engineer. The main duties of the mechanical engineer were keeping the hydraulic mining equipment, the robotic suits and the rock chisels running, as well as maintaining the pipes, valves, fixtures and tanks, and being responsible for every fluid system on board the Osprey Star, including the toilets.

Mining a near-Earth object was a lot cheaper than running to Jupiter's moons or to Mars, if you can call four million miles away near to Earth. There were no stasis costs for a start. NASA had found the asteroid eight years before. It took a year for the IMC to complete its spectroscopy compositional report. The subsequent mining rights were sold to the London Global Robotics Corporation when the principal element was found to be Westerite. The Osprey Star was booked, along with its crew, and lift off came three months after that.

The blockage in the toilet, however, came about

because of Beckett. He had been crushed and killed by a falling ceiling panel in the toilet cubicle, which back at home would've sounded ridiculous and even caused some people to laugh out loud, despite the tragic loss of human life. But on a mining ship on a super-dense asteroid where everything weighed three times what it should, a ceiling panel could fall like a blacksmith's anvil.

If Beckett had been a nice guy then maybe Commander Wade wouldn't have investigated quite so diligently. It was recorded in the health and safety log, of course, but when the word suspicious was used in conjunction with the word death, rumours spread more quickly than a sneezed virus.

Beckett was loud and he was obnoxious. He was also a very good poker player. Three things in themselves that didn't generally deserve death. Yet if you'd have known him you wouldn't have thought it overly harsh.

The LGRC-funded mining operation, set to last six months on an asteroid five miles long and hurtling at over ten thousand miles per hour, demanded a physically strong crew who were also light on their feet. Beckett was strong. He was also wiry like a fox terrier. He was like a prize boxer who'd been allowed to fight in the wrong class for years and had repeatedly gotten away with it. Plus he had a mouth on him that made you want to punch him, except that you daren't because he would destroy you and then dance about on your corpse.

Two days before landing on KBX-2004 four of the miners, Beckett included, were playing poker in the mess room. Beckett was smoking one of his big cigars.

Smoking was allowed on board the Osprey Star because its recirculation unit used charcoal filters. Plus the ship was owned by a Dutch company who didn't give two shits for the tobacco ban. The cigar smoke would hang around Beckett like a ghost. It had the effect of making him look bigger. Plus he would blow it out across the table whenever an opponent had a tough call to make.

Cooper was sucking on a regular cigarette. His smoke was as outgunned as his cards. Why he persisted with his queen-high flush nobody knew, especially when neither the ace nor the king were on the table. He called over the hydration robot. It hovered towards him and he pulled a slug of coffee from its carousel with shaking fingers. He drank it down, considered his move again, and then called Beckett's huge raise by going all in. Beckett goaded him that it wasn't nearly enough. What else did he want? asked Cooper, falling into the trap. A month's wages, and the secret photos of Cooper's new wife.

All Cooper could see was Beckett's smirking eyes through a hanging blue cloak of cigar smoke. Cooper's busy eyes kept roving between the queen and the jack of spades in his hand and the three spades already on the board. Another blown-out cloud of blue smoke plumed around him. Along with his smirk, Beckett flicked a cocky eyebrow. Cooper checked all the cards again. Then he verbally agreed the deal, and placed his cards down face up on the table.

He had been right about one thing though. Beckett didn't have the ace of spades, or the king. He did, however, have a full house, jacks over nines, and he roared with laughter that was way beyond mocking as he swept the huge pile of chips back across the table

towards him as though his hands were mining shovels - he even made the whooshing noise of the hydraulic rams.

“And you all heard him,” Beckett growled suddenly at the other two. “A month’s wages and the naked pictures of his wife, yes? A bet’s a bet. Nobody likes a welch. You heard him, right?”

Deff and Willis nodded that it was true, they’d both heard the call alright, and looked across at Cooper with disdain. They wondered what the hell he was thinking of, losing his head with a queen-high flush. They thought maybe tears were coming.

Beckett continued to laugh raucously, blowing thick clouds of cigar smoke out through his teeth as he joyfully stacked up his huge chip pile. Cooper stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray and slipped silently out of his chair. Deff and Willis watched him slink from the mess room. So did Biggs.

“I hate him! I absolutely hate him!” Cooper seethed later in the bunk room. He was lying in his sleep pod, the middle bunk of three, clutching the photographs his wife had given him the morning they’d all left for the spaceport.

“Then why play him?” Biggs said, although he knew the answer. It was the same answer why any of them played him. Because one day someone would beat him, and beat him good, and finally get a chance to laugh in his weasly face.

“How am I supposed to give him these? What’s Emmy-Lou gonna say when she finds out? Just imagine what he’s gonna do with them...”

But Biggs didn't want to imagine. Instead he sat down, put two cigarettes in his mouth and lit them simultaneously. Then he handed one to Cooper. He took it and drew deeply on it, lost in a downward spiral and thinking wildly.

"If only we could get rid of him," Cooper said, blowing out a continuous stream of smoke with each word. "We'd be doing everyone a favour, right?"

"Putting personalities aside, Coop, he's a good worker," Biggs said. "Plus the company ain't exactly gonna be happy about being a man down for no good reason. And Wade'd be all over it. What are you gonna do anyway? Eject his body into space and hope no one notices?"

Cooper looked back at his photographs.

"But I can't give him these," he said, his face creasing.

Biggs sucked on his own cigarette and watched him. He wanted to point out the obvious: then why'd you call that bet? But they'd all done something similar playing poker with Beckett. Maybe not quite that bad. But similar. And a bet was a bet. Cooper would just have to cough up.

"An accident maybe," Cooper said. He was still thinking about murder. "I mean, accidents happen, don't they? Maybe one of the hydraulic lines could break. Maybe one of the rock chisels could malfunction and take his head off."

Biggs quickly realised that Cooper's ideas put him and his maintenance checks at fault. Thanks, but no thanks. This was Cooper's fight, not his.

"Leave it," Biggs said to him, blowing smoke up to the ceiling intake. He watched as the recirculation

vent sucked it in keenly. "You're just talking shit now. You know as well as anyone that we got health and safety monitors up the arse. We got cameras, we got scanners, we got sensors on just about everything you can name and some on a few that you can't. Everything's recorded. Everything's logged. Everything's monitored. No one's gonna die."

"But it's a mining ship, ain't it?" Cooper went on. "This is hard work, dangerous work. Why d'you think we all get paid so much?"

"I get paid a lot less than you, remember? It's not me walking about on the surface of that asteroid. And besides, if you're making so much money, why'd you just gamble so much of it away?"

Cooper sucked angrily on his cigarette.

"Because I'm an idiot, okay?"

Biggs grunted. It was Beckett. He made you play like an idiot. He'd lost big to Beckett last flight out to Mars - a diamond-sliver necklace he wore round his neck. Biggs had found two diamond slivers embedded in the titanium corkscrew of a mining auger, and he'd had them made up into matching pendants, one for him and one for Daisy. She'd gone ape-shit when she found out he'd lost his in a poker game. He could only imagine how Emmy-Lou would react when she found out what some crud like Beckett had been doing with intimate pictures of her in the buff. Also, Biggs had noticed that Beckett was still wearing his necklace. He'd had his work fatigues wide open at the neck to make damn sure he could see it. No doubt he'd carry those photos of Emmy-Lou with him on future flights. Probably pin them up around his sleep pod too. That's how he was.

“You’ll just have to let it go,” Biggs said finally, even though he knew that someone like Beckett would never let it go, ever.

But Cooper said nothing. He just sucked on his cigarette and thought.

With a day to landfall the increase in the gravitational effect of KBX-2004 became more noticeable. The size of the asteroid should’ve made little difference at only five kilometres across, but it was its super-high density, its vast concentration of Westerite, that increased its gravity so massively. Biggs had once experienced a g-value nearly twice that of Earth before, and that had felt like his guts were being pulled out of his arsehole, but not three times. This was going to be something new for all of them.

All the fluid systems on board were pressurised so the increase in gravity was less likely to affect them. The robotic suit joints and rams were sealed and the mining equipment constructed from aerated aluminium. The hull had been stripped out and the ship’s magnetic engines upgraded to more than cope, even with a full load. But the significant increase in gravity still made everything else on board the Osprey Star seem heavier and more leaden than it usually did, including the crew. Everyone had been chosen for their physical strength and light frame to counter the effects as much as possible. But when it felt like you were constantly carrying two people on your back, physical dexterity became everything. Even brushing your teeth took its toll.

Biggs was double-checking the fork seals on

the rover when Cooper found him. His torque wrench felt like a girder. Cooper came up real close and kept his voice real low. He hadn't said a word to anyone since he'd ultimately handed his intimate photos of Emmy-Lou over to a smirking Beckett. He was hunched over from the strain of the increased gravity but at least now he was talking, although this time his words came out hushed and sneaky like a street criminal.

"I got an idea," he said, looking round in case anyone was watching. They were in the plant bay twenty hours from landfall. No one was going to come in here before the Star hit the surface.

"About what?" Biggs wanted to know, supporting the weight of the torque wrench whilst trying to read the gauge.

"What do you mean, about what? About offing Beckett."

Biggs glanced briefly at him, and then got his body under the wrench and endeavoured to get it to the next seal.

"You still on about that? I said let it go."

"How can I let it go?" Cooper hissed. "He's got my pictures, man. He keeps going on about what he does when he looks at them, you know, privately, when he's in the toilet."

"He's pulling your leg, Coop. That's what he does. He's probably just stuffed them in his foot locker and forgotten all about them."

"You believe that? In case you hadn't noticed, there's no women on board this ship and we're here for six months. Why d'you think Emmy-Lou gave me those pictures of her playing with herself?"

Biggs stared at him now, his mind making his

own pictures. Cooper wished he hadn't said it. But at least Biggs was up to speed with what Beckett was doing with them in the toilet. Then Biggs remembered that Beckett still had his diamond-silver necklace round his neck, and remembered also Daisy's tears and her face of disappointment like their marriage didn't mean a thing.

"Go on," Biggs said.

Cooper tried to stretch, his back aching from the forces pulling at it.

"There's cameras everywhere, you said, and sensors up the arse, remember?"

"Sounds like something I'd say," Biggs agreed.

"But there's one place where there ain't no cameras or sensors, ain't there? Somewhere where it's illegal to have recording equipment."

Biggs was at a loss. It was mandatory for absolutely everything to be logged on board ship, for legal reasons and in the event of an insurance claim.

"The toilet," Cooper prompted.

Biggs frowned. It was true, there was no denying it. Nobody recorded what you did in the toilet. Or how many times you went in there.

"So your plan is what? Flush him into space?"

"Would if I could," Cooper said. "No, I was sat in there earlier and I looked up and I saw the ceiling panel with all those screws holding it in place, and I thought, I wonder if there's a crawl space up there or something. You know, above the ceiling panel, behind it where someone could hide."

"There's a bit of space," Biggs conceded, "but not a lot. The pipe work for the plumbing runs up and over to the macerator before being frozen and ejected

as fines.”

“Could someone fit in there?”

“Why, you planning on dropping in on him? At 3G, Coop, you’d hit him like a refrigerator. Probably break both your arms and legs too.”

Cooper shook his head.

“If we’re gonna be at 3G,” he reasoned, “then whatever that panel weighs is gonna be tripled, right?”

Biggs agreed that his maths were accurate.

“But the screw heads are on the inside,” Cooper went on. “So I figured, if they’re unscrewed first I can hold the panel’s weight until Beckett comes in. Then when he’s sitting down all unsuspecting, I let go and blam! He get’s a triple panel on the noggin and I get my photos back.”

“You think that’s gonna kill him?”

“At least he’d be knocked out, or concussed or something. Maybe smash all the teeth out of that stupid grin of his. And then the asteroid gets all the blame.”

“You think this is all worth it?”

Cooper nodded, but the extra weight pulling on his head made his neck crack and he quickly grabbed it with both hands and winced.

“I’m desperate, Biggs,” he said. “I can’t put up with him staring at Emmy-Lou and telling me all about it for the next six months. I mean, we haven’t even landed and he’s grabbing his crotch and rubbing it every time we pass.”

Biggs thought about it. He knew it was true. Beckett mentioned his necklace every opportunity on the flight after he’d won it, how the starlight glittered off it, how the emergency lighting made it gleam. He couldn’t begin to imagine what he’d be like if Beckett

had photographs of Daisy naked instead.

“So where do I fit into all this?” he wanted to know, grunting as he hefted the torque wrench off the fork seal.

“If I’m overhead holding the weight of the ceiling panel,” Cooper explained, “then someone’s gotta be down below undoing all the screws...”

“Jesus, really?”

“Shh, keep your voice down. I can’t do both, Biggs, and you’re just as pissed at Beckett as I am. I saw how you were looking at him at the poker game.”

“Everyone on board apart from Commander Wade is probably just as pissed at him as you are. Doesn’t mean we’re all about to try and kill him.”

“Oh please, you were fuming last flight out to Mars. Don’t tell me you’re glad he’s still flashing that thing. I see what he does whenever you’re around. You telling me you’re over it?”

“No, I ain’t over it. But you’re talking about murder.”

“Oh please,” Cooper said again. “He ain’t no saint. World’d be a better place without him and you know it. He brings everyone down and everyone hates him. Hell, I bet there wouldn’t even be an inquiry.”

“You know that ain’t true.”

“But still...”

There was a long pause between them.

“So, you gonna do it?” Cooper asked at last.

Biggs stared at him some more, trying to cram a world of sensible decisions into a handful of racing seconds. He hated Beckett’s guts as much as the next man. But maybe it wasn’t murder if everyone hated him.

There was work aplenty to be done when the Osprey Star finally ground to a halt on the hurtling asteroid and drilled in its rock anchors. Biggs didn't doubt the skill of either pilot but he was glad the computers were doing more than their fair share. One of the first things Biggs quickly noticed as everyone set to work was that the onboard robots couldn't function properly at three times gravity. They were willing, he gave them that, but their magnetic rotary engines couldn't keep them airborne. They were all pulled hard to the floor, engines roaring, still functional, but unable to move.

Deff seemed okay as he hauled himself into his mining suit and began initiating his on-board systems. Willis, however, struggled to cope with the ladder now that his body weight had tripled. He was ex-military, infantry. To see him forcing his arms where he wanted them, and lifting legs like they were made of iron, was worrying. Biggs watched the first shift of three miners begin to exit the plant bay and step out into the ferocious wind, and crossed his fingers that he hadn't missed anything.

Beckett and Cooper were on the second shift along with Axford. All three of them were in the mess room, prizing whatever drinks they could from the carousel of the hydration robot flailing on the ground. Its engine was roaring like crazy, but it was never going to get airborne. Beckett was laughing hard at something when Biggs entered. Cooper shot Biggs a look that screamed that he'd just about had enough.

Beckett sucked down two slugs of coffee. Then he noticed Biggs and tugged open the front of his fatigues like he was Livingstone lost in a high-humidity

jungle, making sure that his necklace was fully visible. Everyone's arms and legs were leaden, movements slow and deliberate, but Beckett seemed almost sprightly. He toddled from the mess room awkwardly but more quickly than anyone else was likely to manage. When Axford bent to retrieve a drink from the stricken hydration robot, he had to put one hand down on the ground for support. Cooper trudged across the room to intercept Biggs.

"We gotta do it," he hissed. "Before our shift, we gotta do it. I can't take a six-hour shift with him constantly in my earpiece."

"We just got here -"

"Then it's even better. We can just say that those screws gave out under the immediate and colossal strain of all this gravity." He tried to lift his arms up to demonstrate the extra weight, but even that took considerable effort. "Come on, show me this hatch that goes up and over the toilet."

Biggs looked from Cooper to the door through which Beckett had disappeared, and then back to Cooper.

"You're still serious about this?"

"Shit, yes. Let's do it. Let's do it now. We've got hours til our shift starts. More than enough time. And everyone else is super busy."

"But how do you know when he's going to be in there next?"

"He's been swilling coffee for the last twenty minutes, psyching himself up he keeps saying, psyching himself up for six hours with my photos. He'll be in there soon enough alright, for one thing or the other."

So it was now or never then.

Biggs shuffled round with feet that felt glued to the floor. He plodded from the mess room with Cooper slowly in tow. The Osprey Star was not a particularly big ship but it took them over ten minutes to negotiate the two corridors to the tool room. Biggs took a screwdriver from the toolbox and handed Cooper a crowbar and some rope with which to further brace the ceiling panel. And he'd be needing them. It took them a further ten minutes to get to the toilet block.

Behind the macerator access hatch was a ladder. Cooper struggled to climb it, especially in such a confined space whilst holding an impossibly heavy crowbar. With gritted teeth and a constant stream of curses he finally dragged himself up and out of sight. When he called back down from the darkness that he'd managed to secure the ceiling panel, Biggs made his way into the toilet and began undoing the eight screws that held the panel in place.

The burning in his shoulders began quickly and reminded him of a lifetime ago at Hunton Primary School, hanging on the monkey bars and being shouted at by Mr Hiscox to hurry up. The first screw had not been too bad, the second had ached, the third had screamed. Halfway through and Biggs wondered how he'd ever raise his arms again, or put the screws back in if he suddenly had to.

From above, Cooper hissed at him to hurry up. But it was okay for him because he was lying down in the small quiet space. The last four screws were torture, and his shoulders were on fire when at last he slipped the last of the eight screws into his pocket, which weighed him down like a fistful of loose change.

"All done," Biggs hissed back up, dropping

his screwdriver into his other pocket. It felt like it was going to rip straight through. But Cooper was already aware because he'd been watching him through the open screw slots.

Biggs shuffled his heavy feet out of the toilet cubicle and hobbled away as fast as he could down the corridor, which wasn't fast. He went back into the tool room to idly occupy himself, busy himself with something in plain view of the camera system - close enough to be first on scene, but far enough away for a decent alibi - and waited for the crash. After half an hour he thought something had gone wrong. Another half hour passed and still nothing. But then came a tumbling crash followed by a scream.

Biggs was off, shuffling as fast as he could back down the corridor. The toilet door was locked, of course, but Biggs heaved his screwdriver out of his pocket, jammed it into the slot and jugged at the mechanism until it released.

Inside the cubicle he found the ceiling panel lying at an angle on top of the toilet. Beckett's leg was visible beneath it, splayed but motionless. Cooper was sprawled face down across the top of the panel like he'd been shot, sobbing with pain but unable to move. He craned his head to make sure that it was Biggs who'd come in.

"Get me up," he gasped. "I can't move."

Biggs shuffled his feet across the floor and bent to pick him up. But Cooper was too heavy and the panel was angled like a ski slope. Blood was running down the panel from a gash in Cooper's forehead. A shard of bone was jutting out of his right leg.

"We need... to get outta here," Cooper said. His

eyes were glazing from the impact of falling eight feet head first, and with a new body weight of over thirty-six stone.

Biggs managed to lift Cooper's torso but then the ceiling panel slid sideways off the lip of the toilet and shot Cooper like a runaway toboggan heavily into the corner of the cubicle. He screamed again. Biggs contorted his whole body awkwardly to see behind him in case any of the other crew members had arrived to see this mess, but the doorway was as empty and quiet as the corridor beyond.

Now the panel had moved, Biggs could see Beckett more fully. His skull had a big hole in it, and grey stuff was coming out of it along with sticky threads of blood. He wasn't dead but he was groaning from somewhere deep inside his body. His forehead was knotted, his eyelids roving, but they now flickered open and found Biggs staring at him. He made a handful of correct conclusions instantly, just like he did when he played poker.

"You're screwed," Beckett said, "when they... when they find us all like this."

He laughed then, and blood splattered out over the front of his fatigues. Biggs saw his diamond necklace and suddenly wanted it back more than anything. As he reached over, Beckett realised his intention and somehow managed to find enough strength to grab hold of it first.

That was when Biggs looked straight into Beckett's eyes. He'd never been this close to him before, but now beneath the bright toilet cubicle lights he could see the subtle, scarlet sheen of his red-lens eye implants. Beckett saw that he saw it too, and laughed as loudly as

a town drunk on a pub crawl. Blood spilled in rivulets from the corners of his mouth and ran down the front of his throat, coating the edges of the necklace. Biggs made to grab it again but Beckett wasn't ready to let it go just yet, not even now that it was all over.

"None of you idiots ever found out," Beckett stammered through the blood, his eyes all over the place. "Always my deck... with cyan writing hidden in the red pattern on the back of every card. I always knew... always knew what everyone had."

He laughed again, blood spattering.

Biggs grabbed hold of him and shook him hard but still he laughed.

"You cheated?" Biggs roared. "Every time?"

"Why d'you think... I enjoyed playing you losers so much?"

Biggs raised the tremendous weight of his right fist, and then dropped it down into Beckett's face with more force than he'd intended. Beckett's laugh snapped instantly into a glut of pain as his jaw smashed. But then he looked up and tried one final laugh, which came out choked and strangled. He snapped the diamond-silver necklace from his neck. Biggs mistook his intention and thought that he finally meant to give it back. But Beckett had one last trick to play, one final gamble, and he pushed in his last remaining chips with a heaved gasp of effort.

"I bet..." he said, "you're gonna be right in the shit when they find this. Good luck with your explanation for how it got to be where it ended up."

And then his hand that held the necklace deviated back up towards the toilet bowl. Biggs watched Beckett's fingers open, and then he saw the necklace

slip from his grasp and clink down into the steel pan.

Biggs lurched to catch it, but his arms were like yule logs and were never going to move as quickly as a necklace dropping straight down. He watched the last of it slide down the curved slope of the metal bowl and out of sight at least, chinking loudly as it hit the bottom of the sludgy waste trap beneath.

Beckett's eyes glittered despite the pain. There was still laughter in them, and Biggs saw it as Beckett died. In the top pocket of Beckett's fatigues he noticed the edges of the photos of Emmy-Lou. He reached to retrieve them for Cooper, but then realised that Cooper was dead too and so he left them in Beckett's pocket.

The scene was complete and almost logical with both of them here. With Biggs' necklace now mysteriously in the toilet system, Beckett had involved him too. There was no easily explainable reason why it should be there, other than Beckett must have put it there. And that begged the question why? Everyone knew the story behind it, knew that Beckett had won it and that Biggs had wanted it back. And Commander Wade would have this cubicle sealed off as soon as the bodies were discovered. There was little time.

Biggs heaved the screwdriver back out of his pocket and knelt painfully on the floor next to the toilet. There wasn't a lot of space in which to kneel what with the two sprawled bodies and the ceiling panel. His shoulders still ached from where he'd removed the screws from the panel, but now his knees creaked as they took the full brunt of his tripled weight, grinding against the hard floor.

His hands burned with the effort of removing the screws from the access panel behind the toilet pan,

and with a screwdriver that now felt like it had more heft than a fire axe. His head was bent over and pounding, his neck felt ready to snap, and his chest heaved with the simple effort of just breathing. No, nobody had ever told him how difficult it would be to unblock a toilet at three times gravity.