

BLIND JUMP



Oliver Davis Pike

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Arachis Press 2025

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4803 Peanut Road
Graceville, FL 32440
<http://arachispress.com>

CHAPTER 1

“JOHN’S DEATH STILL weighs on you.”

“It does, Monsignor. I will not forget the role my own recklessness played.” I must not forget it.

In official records, Father John Barbosa had died in a vehicular accident on Thule. That was true, as far as it went. That the accident was the result of assassins shooting a rocket at me was irrelevant.

Except to me.

“I have seen your self-control in action here at the university, Jack, and understand, hmm, understand some, perhaps, that a lapse might affect you more than others.”

Even without knowing all the facts, the elderly priest could come up with such insights. That was why Monsignor Schwartz served as a senior advisor here at New Rome. “I trust,” he continued, “your new wife will remind you from time to time of your human fallibility.”

At that, I had to laugh. “One of her favorite pastimes, Monsignor.”

Anna was every bit as disinclined to act recklessly as I was. It was another way in which we matched well.

Though on paper we did not match up at all. She was a tall blond Thulean — taller than me — where I was an exceedingly nondescript Scotian. She was older. ‘Four years, seven months, two days,’ as Stewie, the AI at my grandfather’s estate, had once informed me. I came from an old and wealthy family; Anna had a decidedly undistinguished ancestry. Undistinguished until she and her brother made their marks in the military.

“I hope the two of us can stop by during our honeymoon,” I told him. “Whether coming or going.”

“Off to visit Earth.” He nodded slowly and thoughtfully. I should learn to do that. “Do not neglect the paper you are also supposed to be writing. Between research and a bride, I would not expect you to have much spare time to visit us.”

But I would try. That might depend more on Anna than me. The office in which we sat was plusher than most rooms at the university, yet cramped. It still dwarfed the slight priest with his halo of white hair,

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seated behind a desk of dark wood that might have been centuries old. He leaned forward, fixing me with close-set eyes.

"If your paper is up to expectations, you can be awarded your laurea degree when you resume classes. The first only, it is to be hoped. We desire to graduate Doctor McFee one of these days." Given my record, he might not have actually expected it. "And don't let your M help you with the paper. Or not too much."

"Only translation," I promised. Well, maybe a random fact now and again. The AI was not of that much use, otherwise. Within the hour,* I was off to rendezvous with him.

My ship and its resident AI, M, had remained docked at a station in the skies above Avignon these past months. Being a jump ship, the W-6 could not enter the planet's gravity field. The jump element was simply too massive for a safe landing, and a takeoff would be impossible. At least it didn't have a finicky Li Drive that would be ruined by atmosphere or even tiny variations in temperature. Their brains needed to operate as near absolute zero as possible.

That was one reason I preferred the Ceña Drive. Only one. A small shuttle carried me up; a few minutes later I was at my docking tube. On my way home at last. To get married!

That I was marrying Anna Gallen did not seem in the least odd, though I would have laughed at the idea less than a year ago. I might have laughed at the idea of marrying anyone.

John's death and the end of all his plans, the future he had laid out for himself, hit hard. The priest had known what he wanted from life and it was taken from him in an instant. I am willing to admit that played a role in me making a decision about my own life. To stop putting things off.

I might not be quite as enthusiastic about my future as Father John Barbosa had been about his, but we are different people. Not everyone can be an idealist.

"Are you awake, M?" I called, as I stepped out of the entry lock.

"You don't have to yell, Jack," he responded. "You know I can hear you just as well if you whisper."

"But I feel like being loud! School's out!"

"And we are on vacation. Very well. Straight to Scotia?"

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“Nope. Thule first. Let’s get cleared to leave port.”

Chances were M had already started the procedure. He was polite enough not to mention it. This time. I tossed the small duffle I carried against a wall and made my way to the control cabin. Thanks to the mass of the jump drive there was enough gravity to allow me to walk about the ship. Not equal to that on the surface of any decent-sized planet, to be sure.

A few minutes later we were accelerating away from the station. I’d try for some more speed before jumping. I slipped on my headband and scanned space. That red sun there was the one to target. Not every jump pilot would go that route; a more roundabout path might be easier. Target it, Jack. And go.

“Send in our identifying codes, will you, M?” Again, he was probably already at it. “I’ll take a few minutes before the next jump.” It is sensible to rest a bit, not that I’m always sensible.

I went back into what I was calling the lounge, for want of a better word, and retrieved my bag. I went no further than placing it on one of the seats. Chances were I wouldn’t look at it again until we were home. Then back to the storage lockers for a snack.

I returned to my control chair with an ice cream sandwich in hand. “I’ll jump again as soon as I finish this,” I informed M.

“Anna isn’t at Thule, is she?” the AI asked.

“Already on Scotia. We’re picking up Gunner and Tarmo.” There had been letters exchanged while I was on Avignon. M wouldn’t know about those.

I tipped my head back to look at the medallion dangling above me, just where I had left it. Reaching up, I brushed it with my fingertips. I might have sighed.

“You never told me what that was or why it was there, Jack, though I recognize it as a medal of Saint Christopher. There is not much information on him in my memory and much of it is contradictory.”

The fact that M was sufficiently curious to figure that out and research it demonstrates just how advanced an intelligence he was. I know humans enough that wouldn’t have done as much.

“John Barbosa gave it to me, M. It will go with us from now on,

whenever you and I travel. Let's travel right now." I donned my headband. A nice, easy to target yellow sun. I went there.

"You are going to pace yourself, aren't you?"

"Probably not! I'm in a hurry."

"Anna will not be happy if you're all worn out when we get home."

Sure, M. The joke did not surprise me. I expected as much from him. His 'when we get home,' however, was not so characteristic of AI thought. He and I were 'we.' He and I had a home.

"Another one and I'll rest a little," I informed him. Another red dwarf. Two of them. That made it a little harder to lock onto one or the other. Even for me. That one, Jack. Focus. Jump.

I did need a rest after that. The jump can be mentally fatiguing and more so with the Ceña Drive, which uses a minimum of computer assistance.

So I rested and then jumped more. "This next orange star is Resnovae," I mentioned to M. "I do want to visit and ransack their archives some day."

"For your doctoral dissertation?"

"That's possible."

But not now. We jumped through the system. The star was a conveniently placed crossroads and many ships jumped in and out, headed somewhere else. That was one reason its strict neutrality was honored.

We skirted some Aiglean systems here, not a problem since the end of the war, and on through Burkut space, to land at last at Thule's orange sun. There were other routes I might have taken. I could even have attempted that long jump that added to my fame — such as it was — during the war. No point now.

"Set us a course to Thule Station," I instructed M. "It's time I got some sleep."

*As I must mention near the opening of each Jack Mack story, a Scotian hour is equal to approximately two of those we use.

CHAPTER 2

IT FELT ODD to head into the civil docks at Thule Station, having used the military ones so often during the war. Fortunately, my name and connections allowed me avoid most of the official formalities. Jack McFee was still a bit of a hero on Thule — more so than at home — not to mention being a friend of the royal family.

Hmm, I'm sounding a little too full of myself again, aren't I? Never mind all that.

I wallowed up to the docking station. This ship certainly didn't allow me the fine control of its predecessor. But it was faster. In acceleration, that is. To be sure, it was still a dog. It took a long time to get all that extra mass in motion.

And it was scarcely roomier inside; indeed, being less open, it wasn't as easy to move around in it. Too many compartments! That was a concession to it being, at least in theory, a civil craft, the ride of a businessman. Never mind the more powerful engines. Those didn't show up for the casual observer.

Jump drives, though rare in a craft of its sort, were not unheard of. Being an unobtrusive Ceña, it likewise might go unnoticed, unless someone detected the mass of its element. We had made no attempt to hide its existence, anyway.

'We' being the engineers at the McFee Concern factories and the folks at the Ministry of Information. I didn't have anything really to do with it.

"Permission to come aboard!" came Gunilla Sandburg-Gallen's slightly too chipper voice over the com.

"If you must. You can even bring your husband along."

Tarmo spoke up. "That's thoughtful of you, Jack. It would be nice to make it to my sister's wedding, despite her deplorable choice of a groom. And, um, we have an extra passenger for you."

Who could that be? Everyone I was expecting had been accounted for. "Sure, bring the mystery passenger with you." We were only hours from Scotia anyway.

Though I wasn't sure why I should be in a hurry. I could have gone

into the station and had a beer with my friends first. I might even have paid for it.

The man who followed my future in-laws through the docking tube looked like an older and heavier Tarmo. Not quite as tall but just as blond. "This is my father, Arto Gallen," he said. "Jack McFee."

Tarmo's father, but not Anna's, even if she had taken his name. I shook his hand. "It's good you can join us."

"I missed my son's wedding. Not my daughter's!"

So he thought of Anna as his daughter. "And, if she is willing," he went on, "I will give her away rather than Tarmo." He gave his son a quick sidelong look. "Giving away is the correct usage, is it not?"

Tarmo laughed. "It is, but a misleading translation from our own tongue." We had been conversing in Lingo, though I understood the Thulean language perfectly well.

"It is not a term we use at all on Scotia," I told them. "But then, Scotians are notorious for not giving anything away. Ready to go?"

"Fine with me," answered Gunner. "I know where Jack keeps the liquor. Who wants a drink?"

"We may need one with Jack Mack on the controls," added Tarmo.

I ignored them and went to the control cabin, settling into my command chair and called in a request for launch. It was a busy station; authorization might take a little while. Yes, even for me. I'm not *that* important.

Tarmo came up and took the seat beside me. "These aren't as comfortable as the ones in your Nativ," he remarked.

"I don't like to sleep in them. Yes, ready," I replied to a message from the station controllers. "Got that, M?"

"Beginning check list to launch," the AI replied.

A couple minutes later I parted company with Thule Station, and began a slow acceleration into space. I'd want plenty of separation before jumping. Not that I cared but the Thuleans would complain.

Tarmo gave me a looking over. "You're wearing the pin Princess Vilma gave you."

"And I shall continue to," I said, touching the small orange-and-white ceramic flag pinned at my breast. "To remind me of Vili and all my Thulean friends. Of Thule, itself."

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“I’m sure Anna will remind you from time to time.” There were moments of silence while I perused my instruments. Not far enough out yet. “Neither Gunner nor I was truly that surprised when Anna announced you two were engaged. But you must admit it was rather sudden.”

This was the first time I had seen Tarmo since proposing to his sister. “Why, we’d known each other for a couple years,” I told him, managing to keep a straight face.

“During which you chased after every other woman who passed by and relegated my sister to friend status.”

“Neither of us wanted to ruin that friendship.”

“Anna said much the same thing. I told you we weren’t surprised but we still would have put our money on Vilma.”

“A few months ago, so might I,” I admitted. “I had no direction and assumed I’d just fall into something eventually. That’s pretty much been the way my whole life. John Barbosa helped change that.”

“Ah.” Maybe he understood, maybe he didn’t, but Gallen didn’t ask for any further explanation.

“Ready to jump,” I said, targeting the yellow star of Oz. Seconds later we were there.

CHAPTER 3

THREE MORE JUMPS and we were in the system of another yellow star, that of Scotia. "Reasonably close," I muttered. "No need to redo the jump. Send our identifiers in, will you, M?"

"On it, Jack. I calculate a little more than three hours to Fundy Base."

"Not Central Station? I thought you were a civilian now," spoke Gunner, slipping into the compartment with her father-in-law behind her. It made things a little crowded.

"I have a permanent docking space there. Or at least they haven't taken it away from me yet."

"It doesn't help you keep a low profile though, does it?" asked Tarmo.

"When I'm gone for months at a time, I doubt it matters. But, yes, when I'm done at New Rome, we may need to rethink things. Maybe I'll use the McFee station out at Blue." Blue being an arid planet orbiting further out than Scotia. "Sometimes. It's not always convenient."

"Especially when it is on the opposite side of the sun," M pointed out.

I doubted anyone was paying attention to me, one way or another. "We'll shuttle down from Fundy. I've no idea to where. I'm leaving that to your sister, Tarmo."

"But the wedding will be at your grandfather's estate."

"So I've been told. If it were to me, I'd have it right here and M could be my best man. Instead, I guess I'll have to ask you."

"I'm honored to be your second choice."

Gunner laughed. "You are going look rather small, Jack, standing between the Gallen siblings."

"But it is a very safe place to be." That I knew from experience. "M, the ship will get a thorough check-up and overhaul at Fundy."

"And then to Earth?"

"That's the current plan. Keep an eye on things," I said, rising from my chair. There was no need for any of us to be around the controls though, admittedly, if my guests hadn't crowded in I might have

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napped right there the rest of the way home. Despite the less than comfortable chairs.

“Beer, anyone?” I asked as we settled in the lounge. “I stocked up before leaving Avignon. Brewed there by monks.”

Arto appeared perplexed. “Little animals in the trees?”

“That’s monkeys, Papa,” Tarmo informed him. “Monks are some kind of priests, right?” This last was directed at me.

“More or less. I do wonder what sort of beer monkeys might turn out.” I fetched four ceramic bottles.

“There are no monkeys on Scotia, are there?” Arto asked me, after a swig of the brew. He seemed to approve.

“No. I’ve only heard of them on a few Corvan worlds. They would come late in terraforming, if at all.” I sipped some of the beer myself. Ah, that was good. Better than anything from either Scotia or Thule.

Alas, the authorities on Avignon — the Church, that is — refused to export it. I might have to remain a student indefinitely.

Arto Gallen took another drink and sat pondering me for a long moment. It did make me just a tad nervous. “Anna told me you know a little about pretty much everything. On the surface, you are not at all the man I would have expected her to choose.”

“Wealthy and highly educated, as well as a hero decorated by the queen herself?” asked Gunner, with a bit of a smirk. I had to admit, I sounded good on paper.

“And one of those who jump between the stars. That is something I do not understand.”

“Neither do we,” I admitted.

“I’ve heard that from jump pilots before,” commented Tarmo. “The scientists don’t either. They continue to insist nothing can travel at over the speed of light.”

“They may well be right. We joke that we therefor must travel at the speed of dark.” I gave them a few seconds to chuckle or smile, as they preferred. “Which may sound glib but there is some truth in it. Darkness has no limitations, for it does not actually exist.” I could have added something about the infinite void but chose not to indulge.

Gunner shook her head. “That sounds like some of your Nezo beliefs. Christie spouts them from time to time.”

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I could imagine. “Speaking of the princess, do you know if she will attend?”

“Of course. All your former lovers intend to be there.”

“They have to see it with their own eyes to believe it,” added her husband.

“I’m not sure I believe it myself. Refills?”

A few hours later a pair of tugs was nudging my ship into its berth at Fundy Station, orbiting above the larger of Scotia’s moons.

CHAPTER 4

"THE KNOWN CONSPIRATORS have been mopped up during your absence and it is unlikely anyone higher will be found. These were mostly mid to low level, often with no real knowledge of what was going on." To my surprise, we had been greeted not by one of my family members but by General Louis Aruna. We sat now in a comfortable office at Fundy Base, on the lunar surface.

"There is still danger then?" asked Tarmo.

Aruna answered with a dismissive shrug. "There are certainly still those who would support these people. And high-up conspirators do remain unknown, though much of their organization has been dismantled. It is possible the actions of Jack helped prevent a coup."

Gunner snickered. "The boy just can't help himself,"

"I'm going to try from now on."

"A quiet life as an academic?" asked Arto. "This is what Anna tells me." He seemed to approve of the idea.

"If possible." I'll admit I had my doubts but it was what I wanted. Or what I thought I wanted. "At any rate, I should no longer be a target." Nor a danger to those around me. That mattered more to me, at least at that moment.

"Of course," the general continued, "we continue to investigate. Though it not my area of expertise, I have been asked to take the lead on the military side. We can be certain Captain Kearney was not the highest officer involved."

"The one who blew up the ship at Toto?" asked Arto Gallen and then, thinking perhaps he shouldn't have spoken of it, gave Tarmo a quick and slightly apologetic look, saying, "So my son has told me."

"It is not a secret, Papa. You might have seen it in the news were you not off-world and ignoring what was going on."

"Oh. I am a mining engineer," the Thulean explained, "and often away from the planet."

"The best place to be, sometimes," I said.

Gunner shook her head disapprovingly. "Not when you have a wedding coming up. Isn't someone going to shuttle us somewhere?"

"Jack's cousin is sitting in the lounge waiting for you," Aruna

informed us. "You'd better get over there before he drinks too many beers."

"Bah, Scotian beer is harmless," scoffed Tarmo. Both wife and father nodded agreement.

"I've no doubts someone else will be talking to you about all this," spoke the general, rising from his couch. "Maybe Robert Douglas. Maybe your mother! Congratulations and best wishes to you. And kiss the bride for me." He shook my hand and we filed out of the room.

I wondered if he'd been invited to the wedding. If he had, he had — I fully intended to leave that sort of thing to others. Errol was indeed waiting for us, sipping at a beer and gazing thoughtfully out the windows. The only windows on Fundy, so far as I knew.

I tend to be nervous about windows that give a view of vacuum. Give me a screen and a few bulkheads between me and space.

The same Errol I hadn't seen in — what, almost a year? People tell us we look alike though I am both shorter and darker. I didn't like my hair clipped that short either. "Don't bother to sit," he told us. "I'm ready to get out of here." A grin. "But Jack and Anna have to wait another day to be together. We're headed to Dummit Downs."

My family home. That was fine with me. A day or so to unwind there would not hurt at all. "We're in my mom's boat?"

"That we are." We followed him down a curving corridor to the proper entry tube.

Typical taciturn Errol. I wasn't going to let him off with that. "So you're done being a diplomat?"

"Officially, it was a trade mission and had nothing to do with the diplomatic corps," he answered. "But of course there was diplomacy involved. We're on a reasonably good footing with the Mei Interest now."

I knew that as one of the successor trade associations to the Ning. It was also somewhat outside my area of expertise, such as it is.

"Anyway," said Errol, "Elsa and I have had enough travel. Here we are." He took a right into another corridor. "And, ah, this one." The docking lock lay to our left.

Mom's personal transport appeared unchanged since the last time I'd ridden in it. Both my parents' transport, officially, but it had my

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mother's tastes written all over its maroon and black interior. Unlike my current ship, artificial gravity generators were installed so there was a true 'up and down,' as opposed to the gravitational pull of a central jump element.

Of course, it had no jump capability. The ship rarely even left the Scotian atmosphere. Today was an exception.

"No crew?" I asked, looking about the rather comfortable lounge. Comfortable but still an eyesore.

"You'll have to fix your own drinks," replied my cousin, heading for the control cabin. I thought to follow him but decided to be polite and stay with my guests.

"Anybody want anything?" I asked, going behind the small bar. "There's Scotian whiskey, of course, and, um, brandy. From one of our neighbors at Dummit Downs, I see." I picked up another bottle to peruse the label. "Not familiar with this. A whiskey from the Sevens?" Trade had opened up with our erstwhile enemies since the close of the war.

"We're seeing lots of that on Thule these days," Tarmo told me. "Its mild flavor belies its potency."

Gunner added, "But it's not proving popular, once the novelty wears off. Pour me some Scotian, will you?"

"Me too," said her husband.

His father seemed to weigh the choices. I got the distinct feeling the reserved Arto was still weighing my worth as well. "Some of your brandy, please," he decided.

I hoped he'd decided about me as well. I chose to pour myself a shot of the Seven whiskey. Decent enough but it might be better with ice. I wouldn't mention that to my guests. Thuleans scoffed at us for drinking our schnapps cold.

Tarmo sat staring at his drink, holding it with both hands. "The last time we drank together, it was in memory of John Barbosa," he said.

So it was. I did not intend to offer any new toasts. To the future? It would take care of itself.

"Anna admitted to me she was almost ready to accompany John to some new world," he continued. "Instead she accompanies you." The Thulean did no more than slightly raise his glass to me before drinking.

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None of us spoke for a few moments, each with our drinks and our thoughts. "The idea of starting over in a new world is a powerful one," said Arto, breaking the silence. "I have been tempted."

"But you remained for Anna and me," his son said. "And for that I am grateful." A small smile. "As I am sure is Anna."

"I should probably be too," I allowed.

At this, Gunner laughed. "That is certain. We owe Arto for the way our spouses turned out."

My spouse-to-be. No reason to say that. But there was a question I'd been unsure of asking; this seemed as good a time as any. "What of your mother?"

Tarmo answered this with a shrug. "She works security somewhere." With his resources, the man undoubtedly knew exactly where 'somewhere' was.

After the briefest of pauses, he went on. "She and Papa split not long after I was born but he did his best to remain in my life. Not easy considering both frequently took off-world jobs." He lifted his eyes for a second to his father, who gave him a brief nod. Approval maybe. Permission to go ahead. Something of that sort.

"Anna came along four years after I did, but her father did *not* stick around. So Papa was father to the both of us, when he could manage it. That's why my sister chose to use his name, rather than that of the father she didn't know."

"They never married, either," murmured Arto. Then he gave a smile that spoke of his love for his son. "Tarmo raised his sister as much of any of us. It is he, maybe, you should most thank, Jack McFee."

"Then I shall," I stated, raising my glass to Tarmo.

CHAPTER 5

“YOU SHOULD CALL Anna,” advised Errol, as we set down in the landing field below Dummit Downs.

“No doubt. My personal com is somewhere in my luggage.” I never carried it at New Rome. The university frowned on them. “You’ll be hurrying back to Elsa?”

“My wife is busy planning the wedding and won’t miss me. She took charge early on.”

“So Summit Up is for sure.” I might have allowed myself the least of sighs. “I’d as soon have had a smaller scale event here.”

“So might Anna, I suspect. Between Elsa and our grandfather, the two of you don’t have a chance.”

He completed his shutdown and rose from the command chair. It was comfy, as I recalled from flying Mom’s boat myself. Maybe I could get one like it installed in my ride.

The two of us ambled back to the lounge where my friends were gathering their bags. We had all traveled light. “The gravity is stronger here than on Thule, is it not?” asked Arto. “I do not feel much difference.”

“You will after a day of activity,” warned Gunner.

I nodded to that. Fortunately, Avignon and Scotia had similar enough mass I wouldn’t need to re-acclimate.

“No matter,” said the older Thulean. “I have been on many planets with different gravity during my life.” He chuckled. “But mostly less than Thule.”

No humans greeted us but a robot cart had been sent down from the house. “We won’t make Arto walk up a hill today,” I said, tossing my bag into the open cargo compartment. Everyone hopped in and we wound our way up the tree-shaded drive.

“Tarmo will probably want to ride our horses while he’s here. Me too. Do you ride, Arto?” I chose to use that name for my soon-to-be father in law, at least for now. ‘Papa’ seemed a very unlikely alternative.

“I have never seen a horse.”

He must not have worked on the Janic worlds, where Tarmo learned horsemanship. Those systems were now split away from Thule, their

alliance being a casualty of the war. "Well, we can at least show you one."

"But I recommend you stay off the beasts," was Gunner's advice.

Though not an enthusiastic horseman himself, Errol noted, "They remain a good way to get around on planets without much infrastructure."

"As was Scotia at one time. They were introduced early here," I said. "Did you see many in those Ning systems you visited?"

"Quite a few. Thinking of writing a paper on their dispersal through the galaxy?"

"If I had the time, I just might. Jock!" I waved to the old family retainer, waiting at the front doors. He could have been called the majordomo but no official title had ever attached itself to his position here.

I stepped to the ground. "Arto Gallen, this is Jock Amaran. He knows Gunner and Tarmo."

"Ah, the father of the bride," said Jock, shaking his hand. "I could fill you in on Jack here but I think his intended already has him figured out. You're carrying your own bags? Go on in and Miss House will sort you out."

We grabbed our luggage and headed in. Jock hopped onto the rear of the cart, legs dangling, and rode it toward the workshops.

"Miss House. That is the AI here, is it not?" asked Arto.

"That I am, Mister Gallen," announced a feminine voice. "Welcome to the McFee's home. Do you wish to have a room near your son?"

Errol spoke at once. "Put him next to me." A room was kept ready for his visits in the opposite end of the house from mine.

Arto nodded agreement and followed my cousin. I assumed Gunner and Tarmo would have the room across from mine, as in the past. "You know the way," I told them. "I'm going into the library to call Anna. Are either of my parents here, Housie?"

"Both are out, Jack, as is your brother. Nira and Durga are here."

Brendon's wife and son. Durga would still be pretty much an infant. I was certain it was too early for him to be tottering about. "Thank you. We'll see them later." I started toward the library and then

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stopped to ask, “Um, what time is it here, Housie? For that matter, what day is it? I’ve quite lost track of local time.”

“It is a little after four,* on a Monday.” Early! But I’d seen that it was morning when I arrived. Anna should have been up for some time at Summit Up, which was hours ahead of us.

The library looked more like those at New Rome than what one would expect on Scotia. Shelves full of printed books extended from floor to the high ceiling. Wood paneling — yes, real wood. There were large trees enough on the planet these days. There was the copy of *The Book of Being* Christiana Torgerson had gifted me not so long ago, very old and in antiquated English. Princess Christiana Torgerson-Lempsen, these days. It was an interesting relic but somewhat outside my area of concentration.

And an awful lot of books and treatises had already been written about Adamazdes. I went to the built-in com. It had a much smaller screen than I might encounter in many houses and offices. Big enough for me. Big enough for anyone!

Ha, I’m sounding like one or another of my parents. Or both of them. I put a call through to Anna’s com. No answer, not even an automated response. I could only shrug and turn to leave.

Of course, it called me back as soon as I started away. Jeanne Freneau? “Hi, Granny,” I greeted her. We seemed to be voice-only.

“If you call me that again I’ll tell my Jack to disown you. It would be permissible for any children you and Anna might have.”

“That I’ll have to discuss with *my* Jack,” came Anna’s voice. “Shall we have a dozen maybe?”

“Oh, at least. You’re on Jeanne’s cruiser?”

“And headed your way. We heard you were trying to avoid me at the old family estate.”

“There went that plan!”

“Elsa was driving her crazy,” said Freneau. “I sprung her.”

“I thank you for it. Now I can avoid Summit Up and Elsa a while myself.”

“Expect us within the hour.”

*That would be eight in the morning for us.

CHAPTER 6

THULEANS MIGHT BE renowned for their engineering but that did not extend to robots and machine intelligence. Arto Gallen was somewhat awed by Miss House.

“What should I call you?” he asked. He’d heard us call her Housie but I think he was uncertain whether it was appropriate. And his son might have told him how House had put him in his place on his first visit.

“If I might address you as Arto, you may call me House,” she replied, her tones measured. “Housie is really for youngsters, don’t you think?”

“Um, yes, House. I suppose it is.”

I strongly suspected she was having some fun with him. Maybe I should tell House to call him Artie.

The two of us walked down the drive toward the landing field. That would put us outside Housie’s range soon. If I wished to speak with the AI down there I’d have to use a com.

Tarmo and Gunner had chosen to watch us from the deck that jutted out on this side of the house. Probably while sipping cold drinks. Errol had disappeared somewhere.

Arto squinted at the sky. “Is that the famous Wall?”

The great cloud that bounded one side of the Scotian Group. “It is. Only visible here in the daytime, at this time of year.” It was a ghost of the wonder that filled half the sky on summer nights. “It will be easier to see at Summit Up.”

“It is larger than your home, is it not?”

“Far larger. Summit Up is practically a city unto its self.”

So was Dummit Downs on a much smaller scale. A little feudal estate, almost. “Here they come. I see the general is still flying her military transport.” She remained on active service, despite having married Grandpa Jack. Freneau set the ship down with reasonable grace, its pulse tubes whisper-quiet.

A set of steps extended itself from the W-7’s side. I was pretty sure that was not standard equipment. The lock door slid open to reveal

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Anna Gallen, standing with hands on hips and glaring at the pair of us. "You would do this to me. Now I don't know which one to hug first!"

"Arto has seniority," I immediately responded.

Her father amended this. "Only until you two are married."

She rushed into his arms. "That will be next year!"

And less than two weeks. We were to wed on the Yule, the first day of the new year.

Anna switched to my arms, as General Freneau casually descended to join us.

My fiancée pulled away from me. Too soon! "Jeanne, this is my father Arto."

The two acknowledged each other and we set off toward the house. No cart. Arto gallantly took Freneau's bag. I knew Anna would be insulted if I made the same offer to her. Yes, I knew my bride! "Will you stay long, General?" I asked. I remained loath to call her Jeanne, despite being a civilian these days.

"Just today. I have official duties, you know. Also, Captain Baldwin and I are making plans for a little jaunt before the wedding."

"Sacky?"

"Yes, and her partner in crime, Livi Radia. They're a, um —" She seemed to search for the proper word. "Brash pair. Quite unlike our Anna. She's almost as reluctant to take chances as you."

"We think things through," sniffed Anna.

"At least sometimes," I added.

"You two almost took too long thinking things through. I think you came to the proper conclusion."

So did I. By her nod, Anna agreed as well. "So where are you going?"

"Where are *we* going? You're coming along, Mister McFee. We're off to Bono. The explosion in the Park should be visible on the planet surface three days from now."

Explosion might not be the proper term for what happened to Mike Gordon's ship a year and a half ago. The proper term might not exist. "So we go to see a flash in the sky?"

"Think of it as fireworks in celebration of your wedding."

"I guess we can't miss that," felt Anna. "Plus it will get me away from Elsa and her wedding planning."

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We made our way up the drive. Arto showed no sign of the gravity bothering him. Give it time. "Has anyone jumped into the Park to look things over?" I asked.

"Not since the initial discovery of the blast. Radiation remains high and decidedly dangerous. Reports I've seen say unmanned probes with Li drives have jumped in a couple times to check on the system."

So the pilots from the flight school on Bono couldn't visit anymore for their war games. But then, there would be fewer of those with the war's end. "Very well. How many of us are going? More than can fit in my ride, I assume." Which was undergoing service anyway.

"We'll work it out. Oh, there are Nira and Durga on the deck." She gave them a wave. "I must spend time with my favorite great-grandson."

CHAPTER 7

A CHILL BREEZE had sprung up this afternoon, out of the hills to our west. The towering pine swayed.

“With all the family going away, there wasn’t much point to putting up a Yule tree inside,” said Jock. “We’re decorating this outdoor one, of course.”

“Some sort of conifer, isn’t it?” asked Tarmo, peering upward.

“It is,” I informed him. “They typically precede deciduous trees in the terraforming sequence. My brother knows more about that sort of thing.”

As had John Barbosa. I wondered if that same thought had passed through my friend’s head.

I knew they celebrated the Yule on Thule. The word was even the same — more or less — in their language as in English. Completely different in Lingo!

To be sure, Thulean Yule did not take place at the same time as on Scotia, or any other planet, for that matter. And they didn’t decorate Yule trees. Trees of any sort were scarce on Thule.

Robots, mostly tiny, were scurrying up and down the trunk and branches, spreading strings of lights and decorations. A pair of humans supervised, occasionally laughing at their antics and mishaps. It both looked and felt like the Yule season.

Winter is not warm at Dummit Downs. Mild or temperate might be a better description. Snowfall is rare. All this is largely thanks to the warm currents circulating in the nearby Bay of Brunswick. It does get cold in the interior and up in the mountains.

Scotia’s calendar is tied to the southern hemisphere, simply because it was settled first and those early colonists wanted their holidays to align with the seasons. Halifax and Dundee, our two largest cities, are both south of the equator. Thus, the new year comes with our winter solstice. It would be midsummer at my grandfather’s estate, well north and across the ocean.

‘North’ and ‘south’ are admittedly arbitrary in any newly surveyed system. But the convention is that the sun rises in the east and most stick to that. Things become tricky when there are two or three suns.

Tarmo and I ambled back toward the house. "You won't want to ride too early in the morning, will you?" I asked. "It may be frosty."

"It feels like home to me. But no, Jack, I won't roust you and my sister out of bed too early."

Yes, Anna and me. I wasn't inclined to wait two weeks and a Thulean wouldn't even think of it. Yet we had waited quite a while already. That, I think, had been a good thing. It gave us both time to grow. Me more than Anna.

"I suppose we'll all have to go to Summit Up before Freneau's outing," I said.

"I'd as soon not join in that. My papa and I could relax here a little while instead. If no one objects."

"Even Miss House is likely to think it's all right."

"I hope so! I've wondered just who House might have originally imprinted on. One can tell M reflects your personality but I don't see much of your father or mother in Miss House."

"That would be my Grandmother Jun, from all I've heard. My mom's mom. I can barely remember her but I'm told she spent a lot of time here when the Downs was being built."

"So she's still here, in a way."

"I suppose. But no AI that powerful remains static. Miss House has grown to be Miss House and no one else."

"If an artificial intelligence actually is someone."

That I wasn't willing to debate. At least at the moment.

Jeanne Freneau was making plans for departure when we returned to the house. I let her know Arto and Tarmo would not be part of her little expedition.

"Nor will I," said Errol. "When I shuttle Nira and Durga to Summit Up in a few days, the Gallens can come with us. How many Gallens?"

"I'll stay put for now," said Gunner.

"But I have to see the fireworks," Anna told him. "They're especially for me and Jack, you know."

"Plus she doesn't trust me on a ship full of women," I added.

"But I do trust them."

The general considered all this. "If you two are the only ones, you might as well ride back home with me."

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I thought it a bit endearing that she referred to Summit Up as 'home' now. Jeanne had spent most of her life in the military, with no real home. "How soon?"

She undoubtedly wanted to leave right then, but she gave Anna and me a look and said, "Tomorrow afternoon will do. Can you put me up, Nira?"

"Certainly. I'm sure Housie is getting your room ready as we speak."

"As long as it's close to Durga."

"Gummu!" crowed Durga McFee.

CHAPTER 8

ANNA AND I had much to say to each other, and managed to squeeze it in, here and there. I'm afraid neither of us got much sleep.

Until, of course, Tarmo whisked me off to ride. Then the girl may have gotten in an extra hour or so. Frost had rimed the landscape, as I had predicted. It melted away as the sun slid up the clear sky.

Dummit Downs always left me with mixed feelings. I loved the place even while feeling restless here. Unlike my brother, I would never want to settle down to a country estate. As for Anna, I'd have to consult her on the subject! She seemed to like being the new head of security at Summit Up, taking over when Boris McFarland retired.

But not forever, no more than I would always be a student. We'd discussed that, at least, in letters. For now, we'd trust the future to take care of itself, and us to take care of each other.

"You'll have to get Nira to ride with you tomorrow," I told my companion.

"Maybe we can teach Durga to ride."

"And his great-grandmother can train him to be a jump pilot."

"Of course. Eventually, he'll be named head of the McFee Concern so we'd better treat the tyke well."

"His favorite uncles." I reined in my mare there on the hillside and surveyed the countryside for a few seconds. "Time to get back."

We turned out horses toward the stable. "You sound almost regretful about returning to my sister."

"Not Anna but all the rest of it."

"Nothing the two of you can't handle. I've seen you in action as a team, remember."

"So we just need an assassin or two to chase after?"

"It would spice things up."

It would indeed. "Anna and I are planning an uneventful and ordinary life. Maybe faculty luncheons as an occasional highlight."

"As if either of you can keep out of trouble. Here you are running off on another adventure after little more than a day of rest. And this honeymoon trip all the way to Earth —" Tarmo shook his head. "You could have simply relaxed right here."

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"I made promises about visiting Earth to both Anna and my friend John." That I also intended to write a research paper sounded trivial so I didn't mention it. It was important to me, though. I needed a real career. Too many McFees had simply spent money and done nothing useful. If not for Mom, my father might have been one of them.

Not that there would have been anything particularly wrong with that.

We tended to our horses — Tarmo had learned we didn't leave that to robots here — and went up to the house via the elevators hidden in the hill. Those came out near the kitchens, where pretty much everyone was gathered. Anna included, busy with a late breakfast. I could eat another one myself.

"Coffee, please," I told a servbot and took a place at the table. "So how many of us are going on this jaunt, General?"

"Just five. You two and me. Sacky and Livi Radia. I invited Princess Vilma but she said that story was finished and she had no wish to revisit it."

Knowing Vili, she probably phrased it just like that. "Baldwin has leave, I take it?"

"And plenty of it. Me too. Aleks can run the jump school perfectly well without me. He'll probably take over my position one of these days, if the brass at Force Command have any sense."

"He is a pretty good jump pilot," I allowed.

"The third best I know," said Freneau. She and I were, naturally, one and two. We might debate which was which.

Errol informed me, "He was promoted to captain, largely on the basis of the little adventure I hear you two had at Oz."

"I'll have to congratulate him sometime."

"Oh, you'll see him at the wedding," the general let me know.

"Which of us invited him?"

"Sacky did. But I introduced the two of them."

Matchmaker Freneau! But maybe not a bad combination. And maybe better than me and Baldwin would have been.

"I could fit us in my ship but it's undergoing maintenance,"

"We're borrowing one of your grandfather's freighters. It's at Central

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Station now, waiting for us. I decided to skip returning to Summit Up.”

“So why are we sitting here?” asked Anna, gulping the last of her cocoa and coming to her feet. “Let’s get packed.”

CHAPTER 9

CENTRAL STATION SERVED as the hub for commercial traffic to and from Scotia. Jeanne Freneau allowed me to take us up to it, while she and Anna gabbed. Gossiped, I might say but of course I won't. They saw plenty enough of each other at Summit Up, didn't they?

"The girls are already on our ship," the general informed me as I brought her W-7 in to dock. "We can get over there and be on our way to Bono immediately."

"Jumping Jack McFee and his all-woman crew," quipped Anna.

"I have a reputation to maintain. Hooked up. And — all systems off. This is a pretty nice little machine," I commented. "Never flown one before."

"More of them were built during the war than any other type. As Group Force hates being dependent on McFee designs, I suspect they'll be selling some of their surplus soon. Got your bags? Let's go." Freneau led us out through the docking tube.

We needn't go far. Our destination was practically next door. Someone with a bit of clout had surely arranged that. The jump ship seemed roomy enough inside. Pretty spartan. I had no idea about its exterior dimensions.

Nor was there any advanced enough AI aboard to answer that sort of question. I could pull up the stats later, if I still cared.

I called out, "Anyone home?"

"Up here!"

We found Baldwin and Radia sprawled in the command chairs, surrounded by a familiar layout. "This could pass for the control cabin in my parents' ship."

"Built to the same prewar design, I'd think," said Sacky. "Except about twice as big and with a jump engine added to it."

Livi waved an arm in the direction from which we'd just come. "There's a lot of cargo space back there, much of it refrigerated. I'd guess this ship delivers food most of the time."

"Ice cream sandwiches?" One could hope some were aboard.

"Fraid not. You get a royalty on the ones McFee distributes, I assume?"

"I did suggest the idea but drew the line at putting my name on them, even if I would have made more money. What do we have in the way of cabins?"

"None," said Sacky. "Just a smallish bunk room, so the sooner we get to Bono, the better. Want me to take it out?"

"Might as well," said Freneau.

The general or I would have to take over once we got some distance from the station. We were the jump pilots. "A Saldhana Drive?"

"It won't hurt you to practice with it a little," Jeanne Freneau assured me. She was used to it, of course. It was the first drive she taught her students to use. Some never advanced beyond it.

"Cleared to decouple," declared Captain Baldwin. "This is an antiquated pile of junk. Varitube maneuvering units."

"Which are perfectly adequate," I assured her. "Just less efficient than pulse tubes."

"I though you prided yourself on not knowing things like that, Jack," remarked the general.

"Can't help learning a little, try as I might. What are the main drives like?"

"A quartet of your Riley eight-tube engines."

"I doubt they're original. Won't push us very fast either."

"Don't I know it. It's taking forever to get some separation from the station."

Livi relinquished her seat so I could access the jump drive. I picked up the head band but didn't slip it on yet. No real hurry.

"It would only ruffle the feathers of a few controllers if we jumped right now," stated Freneau.

"No point," I said.

To which, Anna added, "Ruffling is best saved for when it's needed."

Livi shook her head. "Despite your reputations, the two of you are just a tad boring in person."

Which might be why we were still alive. "Simplest to jump through Bannock, I think." There was a red dwarf binary that offered an alternate route.

"You know," said Freneau, settling beside me as Sacky relinquished

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her command chair, “either of us is capable of jumping from Scotia to Bono directly.”

“The opposite would be easier. I wouldn’t chance either with a Saldhana.” A Ceña would be another matter.

“I know when you jumped through the Wall it was straight to Scotia, not Bono. I’ve seen the data.”

“I thought it best not to say much about that. Targeting.” There was the orange sun I wanted. “And go.”

We were instantly in the Bannock system. “Hmm, where’s our com?”

“Don’t concern yourself with it. I’ll send our ID codes and you can jump again as soon as you feel like it.”

“Thanks, General. You’re nearly as useful as M.”

“High praise,” murmured Anna. She’d dropped into a jump seat at the rear of the cabin, while Livi and Sacky hovered over our shoulders.

That red dwarf next. I focused on it, locked in, jumped. “Well out,” said Freneau. “I’ll make the last jump into Bono.”

“Be my guest.” Not that these short jumps with the Saldhana were particularly demanding. The drive’s brain did a lot of the heavy lifting, though not as much as with the Li Drive. My main problem was that I sometimes found myself fighting with that brain when I tried to lock onto a sun. With the Ceña I had complete control — for better or worse.

“Ready?” asked the general. “Here we gooo — and we’re at Bono. Hey, pretty close to the planet, too. You’ll all be able to sleep in beds tonight.”

“If it is night at the base,” Sacky reminded her. “The flare will appear at the wrong time to watch from there. We’ll have to go to the other side of the planet.”

Which, I assumed, had been arranged. If they could figure out when the event could be seen they could figure out the best place to watch it.

The stars here in the Scotian group were a tad closer together than the average in the inhabited part of the galaxy. I understand they are much more closely packed further in toward its core but no one had traveled anywhere near that far. No one we knew of.

Anyway, the Amusement Park’s red sun lay about one and a half

light years from the Bono system. Not near enough for them to have much — if any — gravitational impact on each other, though some do theorize that Bono and the Park are a binary system. It is easy to jump between the two, whatever their relationship might be. That's usually impossible inside a system.

And now, a year and a half later, we were going to witness, as Vili Lempsen put it, the end of a story. The final destruction of Mike Gordon's jump ship. It had been caught in some sort of loop no one could understand, jumping back and forth faster and faster until it could no longer be detected and, eventually, self-destructing.

We let Sacky take over as pilot. She called in to the Group Force base on Bono.

"Baldwin? Welcome back," came a voice over the com. "Joining the crowd?"

"Yep. Lots of other gawkers showing up?" asked the captain.

"Quite a few, considering how far we are from civilization. A research ship is floating somewhere out further, too, ready to take all sorts of readings. Let me transmit a docking number to you and — there we are. You're expected at the station and a shuttle will take you down to the planet. How many are you, anyway?"

Freneau cut in. "Five, under the command of General Jeanne Freneau. You might want to warn your commandant I'm here."

"Yes, ma'am."

Rank, as they say, has its privileges. I'm sure Jeanne intended to make use of them in this situation. "You should have told them the heroic rescuers of Princess Vilma of Thule were with you. That would get us extra-special treatment."

"The pair responsible for this event," added Anna. "Made famous by Vili's book!"

Freneau gave us the sort of look she usually reserved for her denser students. "Some of us would rather avoid notice. I'm trusting Brigadier Sullivan to help with that." Then she softened. "I sometime forget what children you four are."

"Not Anna," I piped up. "She's four years, seven months, and two days older than me. Hey, that means you have a birthday coming, doesn't it?"

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“Eventually,” she admitted.

M would probably know the date. Or House for that matter. Oh, and of course Steward at Summit Up. He gave me that figure in the first place.

“Half an hour till we dock,” announced Sacky.

CHAPTER 10

BONO RESEMBLED THULE — similar mass, an orange sun — but was hotter and less suited to human habitation. Originally a sterile rock, albeit with extensive sulfurous seas, the planet now had thin but breathable air. If one didn't try to breathe it too long. The military reservation and flight school accounted for most of the residents, though small civilian colonies existed in the cooler latitudes.

The Wall loomed up close here. In truth it did not look any more impressive than on Scotia. I stood on the planet surface and peered up at its shifting colors. Violets and fuchsias and those sorts of hues, mostly.

I lifted my respirator to speak to my companions. It was really only necessary to slip it on now and again. "It actually feels fairly nice here once the sun goes down," I remarked.

"The nights aren't bad," agreed Sacky Baldwin. "Even this close to the equator." She would know, having been stationed here a few weeks for fighter pilot training.

No one chose to live in this region. The base and the colonies were closer to the poles. We were here simply because this spot should give the best view. In theory, the Park's red dwarf could be visible to the eye from here, if one knew precisely where to look and had really good eyes. I'll admit I couldn't pick it out.

The consensus was the flare-up should be bright enough, just going on the initial radiation levels in the Park. Anything beyond that had to be a guess. "This may look like nothing more than a dim star flashing for a moment," I mumbled, mostly to myself and maybe to Anna. I didn't want her to be disappointed. I didn't want me to be disappointed!

Sacky remarked, slightly off the subject, "They're saying the radiation is dropping quickly enough it's probably safe now to jump over there."

"With sensible shielding," interjected General Freneau. "But there's nothing much to learn in the Park at this point, I suspect. This night should provide the best opportunity for some answers."

"Which is why scientists are gathered here," I said.

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"We may or may not learn something about the nature of the jump. There is so much we really don't understand."

"And Anna and Jack will get their fireworks," added Livi.

"That's the important part." Anna squeezed my hand in wordless agreement.

"One minute," came a public announcement. Many eyes turned in the proper direction.

I turned my own attention from the Wall. Our light should appear almost sixty degrees away, and about halfway between horizon and zenith, with plenty of dark starless sky behind it.

"The count could be off by several seconds," whispered the general. We all were aware of that.

It began: a series of flashes, at first hardly discernible, then each brighter than the one before, building to a crescendo, and finally subsiding until no more could be detected. The whole thing lasted almost three minutes.

"Not what any of us suspected," commented Freneau.

I nodded. "Yet it makes sense, doesn't it? The drive element was still jumping back and forth even as it disintegrated."

"Maybe," she allowed.

"Those really were pretty decent fireworks," said Anna. "How soon can we get out of here?"

Yes, pretty decent. Not as bright as the most luminous star in the Scotian Group, 'Big Blue,' which lay hidden somewhere behind us. "I'd just as soon sit here and watch the stars a while longer." Which we would have to do anyway, until a shuttle was ready to take us back to Bono Base. The scientists with us were already packing up. Best to stay out of their way.

Someone in uniform came hurrying up to the general. The two engaged in urgent whispering for a minute or so, before he hurried off to whisper with someone else. Freneau came over and told us, voice subdued, "Robert Douglas is dead. Apparently his airplane crashed."

Anna and I immediately gave each other knowing looks. Accidents can happen even to powerful spy-masters but this one felt most unlikely. "We will have to sweep our ship before we use it again," she stated.

“Absolutely.” And Anna would have to be the one to do it, as much as I hated the idea. She had the expertise. “No one goes aboard until we’re done.”

“If we’d been thinking, we would have done it before ever starting this trip,” said Anna. “We let ourselves be distracted.”

“You’re a pretty decent distraction,” I told her.

I’m not sure whether it was Sacky or Livi who snorted at that.

“There’s no reason to believe it was anything more than an accident,” Freneau reminded us. “Nor that it has any connection to you.”

“But it is best to be cautious until we learn more.” Could my return have something to do with it? I’d been out of sight and maybe out of mind the past few months.

“Not just cautious,” added Anna. “Suspicious.”

“Oh, you’re always suspicious,” Livi asserted.

“I trust those I know are my friends. I do worry about the next stupid thing Jack might do.”

“Someone should,” I informed her. “Looks like the shuttles are loading.”

We definitely wouldn’t want to be left to face the day in this hot, arid terrain. But not lifeless — desert vegetation had begun to take hold here, bits of green amid the ocher and sienna hued rocks and sand. Bono was undergoing its own version of terraforming, not one that would ever make this region habitable but would improve the planet overall. More of that was going on in the seas; that was pretty much always the best starting point.

Most returning in the shuttle we had boarded were tourists like us. The scientists had their own rides. More than a few were personnel from the Group Force base and school. Sacky’s old friends. New ones, too, it seemed. I dozed off while they gossiped.

Things had died down when my eyes opened. Anna was awake beside me. “We’re not going to let any of this get in the way, are we?” she asked. She sounded as if she hadn’t a single misgiving but I’m certain she did.

As did I. “I intend to be far away before any trouble can find us.”

“Running away is always a good solution,” she agreed.

“Yes. I’m not at all afraid to be a coward.”

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“Sure, Jack. You know, we don’t have to live on Scotia. We’d always be welcome on Thule.”

“Or even further away. I could still make an academic career on some Corvan world.”

“We’ll have to ask Jitha about that! He’s invited to the wedding, of course.”

I hadn’t given that any thought but, yes, of course Jitha Jones would receive an invitation. He was the equivalent of a Corvan ambassador to the Scotian Group, though the Corvans did not use that title, claiming to be only a trade association. Anna’s onetime boyfriend, too. Never seriously as far as I’d been able to discern.

More important, perhaps, was the spy network to which he was attached. A network reasonably friendly to our interests at the moment. They might know something about Douglas.

Put that out of your mind, Jack McFee! I shouldn’t allow myself to be drawn into anything other than honeymooning with Anna.

“Five minutes out from the base,” came the announcement. Our fellow travelers began to rouse themselves, gather their things. The noise level in the cabin rose slightly.

Sacky came over to sit beside us, saying nothing. I could see Livi Radia and General Freneau a couple seats ahead of us, in private conversation.

The three of us, Sacky, Anna, and me, had last been together here on Bono, during the rescue of Vili Lempsen. It seemed long ago. Maybe it was.

“Are you still serving somewhere along the frontiers?” I asked.

“Nah. The carriers are rotated through the systems and we’re closer to Scotia now.” Almost as an afterthought, she said, “I may be off carrier duty soon, anyway.”

Neither of us questioned that. If Sacky received new orders, we’d hear about it eventually. One way or another.

The shuttle — more a large air car than a ship — settled onto a field at the base. The orange sun was rising through banked clouds. “We were fortunate none of those rolled in last night,” observed Sacky. “It does rain here. Even storm some.”

“Any large cyclones like back home?”

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“None that I saw. Not that I was here that long.”

“Cyclones?” wondered Anna.

“Or typhoons or hurricanes, depending on planet and language. Scotia is fairly prone to them. Sacky would have been safe in Dundee, where she grew up.”

“Reasonably safe. They would hit the coasts south of us. Your parents’ place is vulnerable, isn’t it?”

“A bit. I would think Thule is too cool for powerful tropical cyclones to develop.”

“But there are storms, none the less,” Anna informed us. “As everywhere.”

“Everywhere with an atmosphere. Anna and I need to get up to the ship and run our sweep.”

Only Anna needed to, in truth, but she did not point that out to me. A few minutes later the two of us were on a shuttle, heading up to Bono’s orbiting station.

CHAPTER 11

“SO NO EXPLOSIVES?” asked Jeanne Freneau.

“Nor sabotage of any sort. But there was a snooping device. All our gossip was recorded.”

Livi thought on this only a moment. “Should we let anyone know it was discovered?”

Anna shook her head. “No point right now. Simpler just to get rid of the device.”

“And let whoever planted it think what they will,” I said.

“But we will examine it when we get to Summit Up.” She would. I don’t know enough to be helpful. Others might. Military sorts. Her brother. My cousin Errol.

It was unlikely anyone would learn anything useful from the snooper. I was more interested in who might have had access to plant the device and how they intended to retrieve it.

We might do well to keep a watch when we got back. “All aboard,” I called out. “Next stop Scotian Central!”

Our party passed through the docking tube and settled down in the ship — for some reason, all crowded again into the control cabin. I let Sacky Baldwin take us out into space.

“I think I’ll skip passing through Bannock this time,” I told anyone listening.

“Direct to Scotia?” asked Freneau, turning to me from the command chair she had appropriated.

“Still not willing to try that with a Saldhana.” Not that I thought I couldn’t. “I’m going to attempt that red binary I’ve noticed before. Don’t know what it’s named.”

“Ochee,” the general informed me at once. That she knew didn’t surprise me. “No idea of the etymology.”

“We need M for that sort of information. But first we jump to that little dwarf we passed through on our way here.”

“I can take care of that. When we get a little further out.”

“Do you think it might be safer?” Anna whispered to me.

I whispered back. “If nothing more, it’s good to keep people guessing.”

She nodded agreement.

"There used to be a base at Ochee," Freneau informed us. "During the war. Only a listening post now."

"It was primarily a supply depot," Sacky added to this. "I'd say we have enough distance. Take my chair, Jack."

I did, but I was willing to let Jeanne Freneau make this jump. All of them if she wanted.

"Locked on," she said, mostly to herself.

If I hadn't popped on my own headband I might not have even known we jumped. "Smooth, General." I sent in our recognition signal and prepared for the next jump. Two rather low-mass dwarfs. Hard enough to target only one; two in proximity made it all the more difficult.

I got the ship pointed in more-or-less the direction I wanted — not at all necessary but it helps with targeting — and slowly accelerated. That one. At least the Saldhana was not objecting. "And go."

"Decent jump," admitted Freneau. "I haven't been here since before the war. It was off-limits for the school."

"I'd best inform the station here that we jumped in. No idea how close we might be to it."

"There should be charts." The general poked at the controls a bit before bringing up the proper one on our screens. "Oh, we're well away. I can't tell which star you targeted."

"That one." I pointed it out. We were just about as close to the other.

"You target their gravity, don't you?" asked Livi.

Freneau replied. "We can sense it when we wear our bands."

"Or the drive can," I said.

"Both. Were you thinking of learning how, Miss Radia?"

"Maybe. I have jumped with a Li Drive but I guess anyone can do that."

"Have Jack teach you. Anna won't mind."

A distinct 'humph' emanated from my fiancée's direction. "Better to ask Sacky's boyfriend." That got somewhat the same reception from Captain Baldwin.

"You'll sort it out," felt Freneau. "Anyway, the fact we target the

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gravity is why we're likely to end up closer to the sun, rather than further out."

"Not that the least precision is possible," I had to point out. I could have used my 'throwing a handful of sand' analogy but they might have heard it before.

"So where next?" asked Sacky.

"We could jump to that red dwarf there," I said. "That's the way we came. The orange sun off to its left is Bannock. And there —" I pointed out a point of yellow. "Is Scotia."

"There's not much beyond it, is there?" mused Anna.

"That's the Gulf. An area of empty space between our bubble and the closest stars. Too far to jump safely."

"That's an understatement," muttered Freneau. Then, louder, "You haven't thought of trying it, have you? That would be a good way to get a very small ship lost in a very large universe."

"Thought about it? Sure. I'd never attempt it." I contemplated that black expanse on the screen for a while. "I have looked that direction, linked up to a jump drive, and felt there was an unseen gravity source in that seemingly empty space. Maybe a brown dwarf."

"That's a blind jump I would be unwilling to attempt."

But I knew both of us sometimes felt the urge to jump toward uncharted space, beyond all we knew. Maybe all good jump pilots did. We're all crazy, you know.

"Your Gulf protects you just like your Wall, doesn't it? One on either side of you." Anna saw that right away. "And there's not much, um, up and down either, is there?"

"Up and down are as good as any other terms. It's even further to a star that might be targeted. On the other side of the Wall we have the Nevada systems and not much else close."

"It's all part of our bubble," said Freneau. "Someone will jump out into the unknown over there eventually. Right now it's more practical to follow along the thicker corridors of stars where each jump leads readily to the next. We have truly explored but the tiniest part of this galaxy. We haven't even managed to cross into another arm."

"There do exist potential bridge spots to cross over from the Orion into the Sagittarius Arm. It's too great a jump otherwise."

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“But humanity has yet to expand that far.”

“And probably not for a long time yet.”

I think it had turned into a bit of private conversation between Jeanne Freneau and me. Anna brought us out of it. “What’s that white point way over there? Right hand of the screen.”

“Alice,” the general told her. “The neutral gateway to that end of the Scotian Group.”

“John came from a world with a white star. But that is much further away, isn’t it?”

“It is. Somewhere on the other side of the Gulf.” In more ways than one, if one is prone to metaphors. “Let’s just get home.” I targeted Scotia. A moment later we were there.

“That was impulsive,” commented Freneau.

Yes, it was.

CHAPTER 12

WE HAD NO excuse to return to Dummit Downs. Errol had already ferried everyone there to our grandfather's estate, nestled in the northern mountains of Yang, above the Inner Ocean. Grandpa Jack's extensive vineyards lay between Summit Up and the coast.

If we could have found an excuse, Anna and I would surely have opted for a day or two — or three — more to ourselves at my parents' home.

For the moment, we found ourselves closeted with General Louis Aruna at Fundy Base. He held the device we had discovered, weighing it with hand and mind. "To be sure, we were more than suspicious about Douglas's airplane going down. This can't help but add to those suspicions." He passed it back to Anna. "I'll leave it to you to examine it at your leisure, not that you're likely to have much this coming week! And we will place surveillance on the ship, to see if anyone comes looking for it." He sighed and sank back in his well-upholstered chair. "It wouldn't have to be someone military."

Someone bribed, more than likely, was my thought. Someone who would know nothing.

Anna had a different thought. "It's a McFee vessel. Someone could have installed it at one of their facilities."

She was right. "It might have even been put there to spy on the regular crew, not us."

Anna frowned. "Not one of our standard devices. The company's, I mean. But it's possible."

"Well, look it over," said Aruna. "Especially, try to determine when it started recording. Maybe you'll know something by the time I arrive for your wedding."

I wasn't going to ask who invited him. Nor why Anna and I were the only ones invited to this meeting; even Aruna's fellow general had been excluded. Maybe he was just being cautious. Or suspicious.

That other general awaited us in the canteen, along with Baldwin and Radia. "All ready? The authorities have given the freighter a quick examination, in case you two missed anything, and given us the go-ahead. We'll leave it docked at Central Station, as originally planned."

“Where I am sure someone will keep an eye on it,” said Anna.

I was just as sure. “But it’s no longer our problem. Or not much longer. Let’s be on our way.”

First shuttling up to Fundy Station. No time to look in on M or see about getting those improved chairs installed. We hurried on to Central Station and an hour or so later all five crammed ourselves into Jeanne Freneau’s W-7 and were on our way to Summit Up.

On our way to our wedding. “Have you appropriated a suitable room for us?” I asked my bride-to-be.

Freneau snickered. “She sleeps on a cot in her armory, despite being offered her pick of the rooms.”

“And you maintain your private suite,” countered Anna.

“Private is the operative word there, my girl.”

I had to comment, whether I should have or not. “Thuleans, I fear, do not quite understand privacy.”

“If you mean we don’t have all your Scotian inhibitions, you’re very much right.” No inhibitions prevented a kiss at that moment. Well, yes, there could have been more to it if we we’d had more privacy.

“I’m sure Stewie has a room picked out for the two of you,” Freneau went on. “Do you think you might live at Summit Up eventually?”

“No, I’ll just visit Anna from time to time. If her job doesn’t keep her too busy.”

“You’ll have to make appointments,” she informed me. Then, “Elsa and Errol seem to have moved in.”

Sacky took her eyes away from the controls — we were letting her pilot again — and said, “They’re unsure where they want to live, long-term. Not at his parents’ place.”

She and my cousin were old friends. She had served under him in the war. In fact, she’d been his gunner; that is co-pilot and weapons manager. It shouldn’t be surprising that something of that old relationship remained.

“I’ve seen his parents’ home,” said Anna. “McFee House they call it, right? I wouldn’t want to stay there either.”

“The gardens are nice,” I asserted. “Not overwhelming, like a big estate.”

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Said Sacky, "I would think it's easier if you have a Housie or a Stewie to help."

"Or M." I let that idea sit there a moment before saying, "I have to admit I've considered moving him out of his ship some day in the future."

"When you're both ready to settle down. Forty or fifty years! Making my descent toward Summit Up."

Almost there. A moment of silence ensued; then, perhaps hesitantly, Livi Radia asked, "Errol and Elsa can afford a decent place of their own, can't they?"

"I'm sure they can," Freneau said at once.

To which I added, "Errol does have an allowance from the family, as well as officially being employed by the Concern in some capacity or another. He also collects royalties for some of his designs. And I assume someone pays him for his diplomatic jaunts."

"He's a consultant to Group Force as well. One could see that as a sort of pension." The general might be collecting her own pension soon. Retiring from duty.

"He has more coming in than me, anyway," I went on. "I'm quite impoverished and must live off the generosity of my relatives. Fortunately, I'll soon have a wife with an income."

"And here I once considered you husband material," said Livi.

I only smiled but I knew Miss Anjalivi Radia was in much the same position as me. She would not be in line to the family fortune. I should get Grandpa Jack to hire her as a lawyer once she graduated! That would really shake up our competitors.

But the general had an observation. "I think our Jack — or is that your Jack? — made the proper choice. You would always have been restless with Vili Lempsen, you know."

Maybe so. Maybe I had know that.

"And we would have lived separate lives," said Sacky.

"And we," Livi asserted, "would have fought a lot. Which might have been fun but not the best way to run a marriage."

"You sure dodged a lot of bullets," observed Anna.

"Until yours hit me."

There were unappreciative noises from our companions.

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“Coming in to land,” Sacky announced.

CHAPTER 13

“WE WERE ALL wrong,” reported Anna. “The device was slipped aboard at Bono.”

A surprise but not that much of one. “Which would suggest someone military. I wonder when and where they meant for it to be collected.”

“We’ll have to leave that up to Lou.” Meaning General Aruna. I was almost as reluctant to use his given name as Jeanne Freneau’s. “But,” she went on, “its data can be retrieved at a distance. Tarmo was familiar with the type. He said it was similar to the ones found at Dummit Downs.”

“A larger area to keep an eye on, then,” was the only comment I was willing to make. That did suggest — only suggest — these were the same conspirators we had dealt with before. “The death of Robert Douglas might have set things into motion. Raised suspicions about us.”

“About you, mostly,” felt Anna. “You were not close to the man.” That was more a statement than a question.

“He worked for my mother during the war. I understand he took over much of her job since.” I couldn’t say I disliked him but I did resent his pulling my strings on occasion.

But then, I resented my mom doing the same.

“You don’t have any excuse to hide from Elsa now,” I told her as we ambled down the hall from her office. It was pretty much empty, early on a Saturday morning.

“I’ll see if I can find one. I do have duties here, after all.”

“I’m sure Elsa sees our cooperation as a duty. Does she plan a Lutheran ceremony like hers and Errol’s?”

“I insisted it be Nezo, like my husband-to-be.”

“Not that I’m very observant,” I protested, though not seriously.

“More than I am. I mean, you pretty much believe in your Mazde-sian teachings and I know nothing about the church to which I supposedly belong.”

“Good enough,” I felt. “As long as my cousin Marie isn’t officiating.”

"It's some magus Jeanne knows. Christie, too." We boarded an elevator to take us down a floor. That's where the kitchens are; others could have robot room-service if they wished but we preferred eating with human beings. More of those worked at Summit Up than one might think at first glance.

"I hope she and Christie don't plan to serve as bridesmaids. They'd dwarf even you."

"Aren't bridesmaids supposed to be unmarried? I'll have to bring that up with her." Anna sighed. "I suppose I'll get involved despite myself. I hoped to just show up for the ceremony!"

She didn't fool me for a minute. I knew Anna was a romantic underneath. But she didn't like being the center of attention any more than I did.

And my spies — Livi and Sacky, that is — had assured me she took considerable care in choosing her wedding dress. They called it a gown, didn't they?

"We need to get a look at the guest list," I told her.

"Yes. As a matter of security, of course."

As good an excuse as any. We found a table to ourselves in the spacious cafeteria. Its high ceilings were a welcome change from those in the various military facilities I'd recently visited. Humans might eat here but servbots took care of feeding them. One rolled up to us. "Hot cocoa," said Anna. "And currant scones. Make those hot too." One needs be specific when communicating with robots.

"Coffee and whole-grain toast," I ordered. "No butter."

"Very well, sir." It prepared to scuttle off but I stopped it.

"Say, were you built in the shops here at Summit Up?"

"I was assembled here."

From parts manufactured elsewhere, no doubt. I dismissed it with a 'thank you.' Many estates and companies had their own workshops to turn out simpler utility bots. The McFees had never entered that market.

"One thing Lutherans and Nezos do have in common," I said to Anna, "is that we hold our services on Sunday. History says you copied us. The Catholics, too."

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"Because of the sun, right? Even I know that much. Or I've heard it from Christiana."

"Nezos are big on light. The sun pretty much epitomizes that."

"Or symbolizes it? Ah, food." Our plates were deposited on the ceramic tabletop.

"Something like that. Far back, before the Neo-Zoroastrian movement had spread across the worlds, its roots on Earth had been based on the duality of dark and light."

"I suppose I'll have to expect your history lectures from time to time."

"I thought those were what attracted you."

"They do make you quite irresistible. Dark and light isn't exactly what Nezos focus on now though, is it? They talk about existence and stuff."

"Existence versus nothingness. Light and darkness do make a useful metaphor for that, but even the vast dark depths of space aren't really empty. They too are part of existence." I almost didn't add, "A part I feel every time I jump from world to world."

"I bet Jeanne Freneau does too. You'd best not end up as crazy as her."

The general's affinity for the mystical side of both jumping and Nezo beliefs was well known. They might well merge into one entity in her mind.

I figured it was time to change the subject. "I trust you aren't going to stay up all night anymore. I missed you."

"I suppose I can find some time for you tonight."

"You're getting as bad as Gunner," I complained. "Your brother can take it, but I'm much more sensitive, you know."

"Oh, poor Jack!" But I suspect she took my words at least a little to heart. "We should get some martial arts practice in."

So she could beat me up physically as well as verbally? I wisely did not voice that question. "We could learn a new form of combat together. Couples do that sort of thing."

"I learned a bag-full of mixed arts on Thule. My trainers just called it *whee*."

No formal style of fighting. That did not surprise. "At my Corvan

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schools, they taught something named *peca*. It was as much gymnastics as it was fighting. And, of course, we had classes in fencing.”

“Oh, so that’s why you took to the knife so readily.” I wasn’t sure exactly how serious she was about it.

But I didn’t let that bother me. “Yes, I enjoyed sword work. The *peca*, not so much. Had I paid attention, you might not have been able to beat me up quite so badly.”

“You may believe that if you wish. You will have to show me some of this *peca* sometime. The sword-fighting doesn’t sound as useful.”

“You never can tell,” I told her, and drained the last of my coffee. “Right now we need to go engage in combat with Elsa. She’s called for a meeting at Five.”

“I wonder,” mused Anna, “if I could arrange for an emergency before then.”

CHAPTER 14

“YOU WILL WALK the bride to the front of the room, Arto,” said Elsa Alander-McFee. “Sacky and Livi will be right ahead of you.”

Those two definitely made better bridesmaids than the pair I had envisioned.

“And then I get to sit?”

“There will be a seat open for you right there.” She pointed at the front row of chairs. “The rest of you can pretty much just sit and watch.”

I had a question. “How come Anna gets two bridesmaids and I have only one best man?”

“Only one can be best,” Tarmo pointed out. “That, obviously, is me.”

“We could add a better man,” suggested Livi Radia.

“Or a good-enough one,” said Elsa. “After the magus goes through whatever words she has ready, the ring bearer will have to come forward so the bride and groom can exchange rings and vows.”

“Rings?” I hadn’t even thought of them.

“I picked them out,” Anna informed me. “You’ll like them.”

“Very plain,” said my mother. “David and I have to take off now for the funeral.”

Robert Douglas. I hadn’t thought of that either. And apparently no one thought I should be invited. Myself included.

But I did think to say, “Be careful.”

Mom gave a quick nod and they left.

Elsa’s job being completed, Jeanne Freneau took over. “Let’s all move out to the lounge and have a meal.”

The lounge area was the most impressive part of Summit Up, for many. Those didn’t know how many wonders were concealed inside the mountain. A great transparent dome covered it, giving a view of sky and mountains. Yes, impressive enough.

I doubted Grandpa Jack would join us. He’d have to make an appearance at the wedding. After all, the old man invited us to hold it here. Old, as in a hundred and — twenty-two now? Might be. Or going on it.

“Who is this ring bearer supposed to be?” I asked Elsa. “One of Monike’s kids? I wouldn’t trust the brats.”

Errol seemed to share my opinion of his niece and nephew. “Gunilla has been given the job. She’s going to wear her uniform to lend more authority to the role.”

“All of which was her idea,” said Elsa. “I guess she’ll be your better man.”

Who better than Tarmo’s wife? “Let’s find a table,” I suggested. We needed to catch up. Elsa was Anna’s oldest friend here. I’d met the both of them on my first visit to Thule Station. Had I not, she might not be married to Errol now.

And Errol? My cousin had been a bit of a mentor to the younger me. Or at least someone I’d admired and, admittedly, emulated at times.

“I believe,” said Errol, as we settled, “my father and step-mother were even more surprised by your choice of spouse than the rest of us. They had great hopes for you and Livi Radia. Or at least a certain Thulean princess.”

Anna snickered. “And they got a nobody.”

“At least they won’t feel threatened by you,” I said.

It was Elsa’s turn to snicker. “They will when they get to know her.”

“I was intimidated by them when we first met,” Anna admitted. “Or maybe not so much by them as by the way you and Vili were able to step out of my world and into theirs. I felt very stupid.”

“Just a matter of learning,” I assured her. As I had those couple of years ago.

“She has learned, as have I,” Elsa spoke. “Oh, the buffet bots have been sent out.”

Smallish bots were circulating with trays and bowls and such. Pretty much anything one wanted was likely to pass by eventually. Anna was not willing to wait and went in pursuit.

“Our grandfather,” said Errol, “likes Anna. I think your marriage moves you up another notch in his estimation.”

Elsa smirked. “Your relatives worry!”

That I doubted but was willing to play along. “I don’t know

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whether Grandpa Jack sees me as a potential head of the company or is just trying to keep the rest of you on your toes.”

“We may find out someday. For all we know he could have another seventy or eighty years in him. People do make it to two hundred, after all.”

“And in the meantime, we get on with the lives we want for ourselves,” stated Elsa. “I think I will chase after Anna and find something good.”

I leaned in and whispered to Errol, “Elsa’s mother isn’t coming, is she?”

He struggled to keep a straight face. “You are safe.”

Of course he knew about my encounter with the thane. Everyone did except maybe Vilma Lempsen. There was no reason to keep it from her, now, not that I intended to blab.

But I would like to sit and talk with her and her friends. My friends. I headed toward the table where they had congregated, snagging a bowl of raisin biscuits on my way. Kekies, Anna would call them.

“My greetings, fellow students,” I said, dropping into a chair.

“Not me,” Christie Torgerson informed me. “I just graduated. If you’d hurried back you could have attended the ceremony.”

“I had classes of my own to attend. Kekie?” I extended the bowl to her. She’d call them that too. She grabbed the bowl and passed it on. “So you’ll be heading back to Thule and your prince?”

“Right after your wedding. But I did promise to organize your grandfather’s library, you’ll recall. That gives me an excuse to come visit.”

“And you’re set to graduate at about the same time as me,” I said to Vili Lempsen. “Less than a year.”

“But you intend to go on to an advanced degree, don’t you?” she asked. “I’m going to hold off on that.”

Whether she meant a year or two, or indefinitely, I couldn’t tell.

Christie fixed her amazingly blue eyes on me. Yes, I know they were set a little close together but that never seemed to bother anyone. Certainly not anyone male. “Anna will have to address you as Doctor McFee.”

Vili looked around and spied Anna at a table with her family.

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“Perhaps I should not tell you this,” she confided, “but you may have to address her as Sir Anna. There are plans to name her a knight.”

“Mostly for her exploits the last time you visited Thule,” appended Christie.

“And well deserved,” I said. I suspected Tarmo would have a ‘sir’ before his name one of these days as well. “Any of those biscuits, left?”

“Sorry, said Sacky, holding up the empty bowl. She and Livi Radia had polished them off at the other end of the table.

CHAPTER 15

JITHA JONES ACCOMPANIED Mom and Dad on their return to Summit Up. A whole week before the wedding. I'd nothing against Jones but I didn't know if I'd want to put up with him that long.

Summit Up was big enough I could avoid him. But then I'd end avoiding all my friends too. No matter. Soon it would just be Anna and me, off to other worlds. Well, yes, M also.

"I fear some of us will be talking shop at your wedding," my mother warned me. Maybe it was an apology before the fact.

Dad said, "There will have to be talk about a replacement for Douglas."

"I am not about to resume any of my old duties but I am willing to advise."

"Me too," I told them.

The slightest of smiles crossed Mom's face. "Don't think we haven't considered you for the job."

Not seriously, I hoped. "Too much for me. Anna would have to help."

"If anyone can help you, my lad," said Dad, "it's the woman you're about to marry."

My mother expanded on this. "We have some hope for you, now."

The parents undoubtedly thought they were funny. But, also, they were probably right.

Later, Anna informed me, "They hold a Nezo service here on Sundays. Would it be all right to take a peek?"

This was news to me. "As far as I know. Where does this take place?"

"Outside, at noon."

"With the sun at its zenith. And just a few minutes away." Jeanne Freneau would tend toward that sort of symbolism. Any time of day was fine with most of us. "You know, our wedding is set for the most important day of the Mazdesian calendar, the winter solstice." Strictly speaking, it was the summer solstice here at Summit Up, but it was still the Yule. That was good enough for me.

"Maybe we should be outside, too!"

“Sound good to me,” I answered, without giving it a great deal of thought

“Oh, but Elsa has everything planned. I wouldn’t bother her with a last minute change.”

I resolved to do exactly that. It was our wedding, after all! We went out the doors of the lower lounge, which lay directly below the dome. This was the normal entry and reception center for Summit Up.

More people gathered than I expected. Mostly drawn from those who worked in the lower levels. I glimpsed Christie. That was easy as she stuck up higher than most. Did anything of this sort go on before Freneau had married Grandpa Jack? She seemed to be running things, and wore a white robe.

“Are you a magus?” Anna asked at once when she came over to us.

“A fire keeper. That’s similar to what you might call a deacon on Thule.”

Apparently able to run things in the absence of a priest. Not that there was much to run. It resembled a picnic more than a religious service. Talking and singing songs and, yes, snacks.

“Too much peace,” Anna whispered to me after a while. “Let’s go somewhere and fight.”

I did note she checked her com before saying this. Maybe she’d hoped for an emergency to come up. Her offices in the armory were on this reception level, the ground floor. Exercise rooms also existed nearby. There could be little doubt that she would have fitted one up for her use in the time she’d been here.

We were already in shorts — I appreciated the midsummer weather here, even if it was the Yule — so we were able to get right into it. Not vigorously, though. I don’t believe either of us felt ambitious at the moment.

We sparred for a few minutes.

“Jithal!”

I turned to see the lanky Corvan standing at the door, a man taller than me, darker than me, and with an occasional oddity of syntax that revealed neither Lingo nor English had been his native tongue. He wore loose smock and trousers, brightly colored.

“Steward told me where you were.”

BLIND JUMP

I'd have to have a word with Stewie.

"Those were moves from peca," he observed.

I'd been demonstrating them at Anna's request. "Such as I can remember. Did you have to suffer through peca class as a youngster too?"

He gave me a little bow. "I am a master of the art."

I might have known.

"But I come from a family of modest means and did not learn all the aristocratic arts you did. To a horseback duel with sabers I would not challenge you."

You'd better not. "As I remember, stick-fighting was part of the curriculum, with swords being implied."

"True enough. Still, I would not choose to fence with you."

"Except verbally."

"So indeed! You have improved in that art, Jack McFee."

"All right, before one of you is mortally wounded by a word, you must show me how this peca is supposed to be done." Anna sounded a little exasperated by the two of us.

The Corvan did demonstrate a handful of moves but we mostly gossiped until we needed to go our separate ways. On our way back to my room — our room? — I commented, "Jones resents me a little."

"Well, of course. You stole me from him!"

"Uh, sure. But I think it's more that he considers me a wealthy dilettante. Jitha surely sees himself as a self-made man."

"No one makes himself." She sounded quite certain.

"That's the Thulean in you speaking. You're an awfully egalitarian bunch."

She nodded. "I didn't understand that until I met you and your family. You have far more wealth and power than anyone on Thule. Even the royal family."

"Too much, maybe. Others beside Jitha resent that."

"But he's unlikely to attempt to assassinate you."

"Unless his government ordered it. Then I'd have to depend on you to protect me."

"You'd best just brush up on your peca instead."

CHAPTER 16

“BUT WHAT IF it rains?” asked Elsa.

“Then we can move in under the dome. We’re holding the reception there anyway, aren’t we?”

“That is true,” she admitted. “There will not be many guests anyway.”

“Few enough we could have done it at Dummit Downs,” I grumbled. The open deck there would have served perfectly well.

“And disappoint your grandfather? He likes you for some reason.”

“I don’t fight with him like your husband.”

“No, you just go your own detached way. I am hoping Anna grounds you some.”

“Already has.” I could recognize that. She provided balance as no one else might have. “Speaking of your husband, here he comes.”

“We attempt to take dinner together. So should you and Anna.”

“She’s making her rounds. We’ll meet in the employees’ cafeteria later.”

We sat in one of the small guest dining spaces a couple floors up. Some preferred them to eating in their own rooms. This area exhibited Jack McFee the Second’s taste for a rather austere classicism, with its white walls and unadorned arches.

“Miss Anna is exceedingly conscientious about her duties,” came Stewie’s voice. Steward was the AI that ran Summit Up, even more powerful than Housie back at Dummit Downs. Not quite as sophisticated about understanding human ways though, I’d always thought. Or that could just be his personality, if one is willing to use that word.

Stewie had a well-seasoned personality, a century and more in the making.

“Jack,” spoke Errol, giving me a nod before leaning down to kiss his wife and take a seat at her side. “Any interesting news?”

“He and Anna have decided to move their wedding outdoors.”

Errol cocked his head at me. “Sounds good.”

“It does,” admitted Elsa. “But I’m surprised Anna doesn’t consider it a security risk.”

“Don’t you dare mention that idea to her,” I warned.

BLIND JUMP

Errol ordered a meal from a servbot. "Are you having anything?" he asked, noting the lack of food or even dishes before me.

"He and Anna eat down in the cafeteria," his wife informed him.

"Arto likes to eat there too. Reminds him of home." Thuleans, in general, took communal meals.

"Ah, yes," murmured Elsa. "We should visit, Errol."

"We just got home."

"We haven't decided where that is yet."

I ignored that little problem of theirs. I can't spend all my time dispensing good advice. "I'd best be off. So it's set, afternoon of the Yule, right? I'll let Anna know." I got up and got out.

Anna took my news with only a nod. I guess she'd trusted me to get it right. "So we'll hang around here the next day. That'll be Sunday, right? You don't assign a day name to the Yule."

"Correct. Sunday, the First of January."

"And we get out of here on Monday."

"Unless you'd like a couple days at Dummit Downs first."

I could see she was considering that seriously. "No," she decided. "We'll just get on our way."

"And are we carrying you back to Thule?" I asked Arto, unobtrusively working on a plate of chicken and rice and vegetables across the table. Real chicken, unlike back home.

Anna jumped in at once with an answer, "Of course we are! It's on the way."

Tarmo, at his father's side, told us, "Christie is heading home as well. Can you accommodate another passenger?"

I gave him my best scowl of disapproval. "The princess should be able to afford tickets for all of you."

"Jack likes to play the stingy Scotian sometimes," Anna confided to her father. "You'll learn not to take him seriously." She turned her attention to me. "You were calling about your ship earlier, weren't you? It went through the central coms."

No direct calling was permitted from within Summit Up. That had always been the policy here or at least as long as I could remember. "I was. The ship and M are ready to go right now." Except that I had also

requested those improved command chairs. That might take another day or three.

Grandpa Jack could foot the bill and consider it a wedding gift. The call did go out over Jeanne Freneau's private channel so no one was likely to question it.

"So you'll drop us off and head toward Earth," said Tarmo.

"More or less. There are places to visit along the way." Places where I could take time for a bit of research work. It wouldn't hurt to gather a little more data and visit the places I was writing about, even if my paper already existed as a rough draft. "Time permitting, we might be able to stop in at Thule on our way back."

We had all the time we might want, really. New Rome didn't mind how long I was gone and Grandpa Jack was giving his chief of security indefinite leave. But neither of us would enjoy being idle too long.

"We're jumping off on a new adventure," Anna said. "In more than one sense of the word."

"But not a blind jump."

"I heard Jeanne use that term. What's it mean?"

How to word it? A simple enough concept yet outside the experiences of these four.

"Though a jump pilot senses gravity wells when linked to a drive, the drive's brain overlays a visualization with the stars in all their color and contrast to aid homing in on a target. Or attempts to. Going without that visualization — or any clear target — is called a blind jump. Trying to reach an unseen brown dwarf somewhere in the depths of the Gulf would definitely be a blind jump."

"I think the two of us can see pretty clearly, Jack."

I hoped she was right.

CHAPTER 17

“GENERAL ARUNA IS coming in this morning. He should be here shortly.”

“Upper field or lower?” I asked. The one closer to Summit Up was mostly reserved for family.

“Regular shuttle to the lower one. His wife is with him.”

“He has another? Must be his third try.”

“Three strikes and he’s out.”

I had no idea what Anna meant by that. These were the sorts of moments when I needed M to explain things. “I should go down to greet him.”

“We should go down,” she countered. “Maybe he’ll know something about the listening device.”

Not that there was any hurry about finding out. “Maybe he’s brought a pricey wedding gift.”

“I thought Scotians gave inexpensive practical items on these occasions.”

“That is tradition,” I admitted, “but it will also be the Yule. The tunnels?”

“Fastest way.”

Most travel between Summit Up and the field was by a leisurely air car ride winding around the steep slope. But a shuttle running on tracks bulleted its way down through the mountain. Few knew it existed and those felt it should remain that way.

We emerged at the field before the general’s shuttle showed up. The space was somewhat larger than the one higher up, with a terminal and some outbuildings along one side. More facilities were concealed within the mountain. Tunnels — these ones not at all secret — carried this and that between field and residence. Basements and subbasements extended all the way down to here. Lots of storage, including some for the products of Grandpa Jack’s vineyards.

I’d have to take a leisurely ride through those some day. “That might be the shuttle,” I said, peering westward.

“It’s the only one expected,” Anna informed me. Of course she kept track of comings and goings. The ship grew larger, large enough for

visual recognition. An N-5, maybe the same one Aruna and I had traveled in before.

A pretty good sized cruiser, fully atmospheric, and powered with a pair of the ubiquitous small Corvanaut engines Group Supply manufactured during the war. I supposed they still did. It settled and a hatch slid open.

A woman, plump and of indeterminate age, emerged, followed by the general. I could describe him the same way. Behind them came Aruna's aide and pilot, Captain Marcus Caldwell. He'd been at the helm on that flight this past summer. The man remained standing in the doorway, maybe awaiting any last minute orders or just making sure they made it safely to the ground.

I'm not sure whether I or Anna shouted 'Down!' first but we were both loud.

The next thing I yelled was 'Left!' Meaning that was my target. Anna could go after the one on the right. Fortunately there were but two so no one had to call out 'In between!'

From the corner of my eye, I'd seen them approaching. Women, dressed in coveralls, seemingly no different from anyone else working here. But they didn't move like workers. They moved like assassins about to execute an ambush, to set their feet and fire. Plus, I could see the one allow herself, perhaps unconsciously, tense to draw her weapon. Sloppy.

My C-140 — the Thulean security forces had never asked me to return it — was in my hand at once. Anna's moves undoubtedly mirrored mine but my eyes were elsewhere. Her target went down before her weapon cleared concealment. Mine got her gun out but had no chance to aim it at anything but the ground.

Aruna's wife let out one shrill little squeak. Everything was over before she had time for more. I could see the couple had suffered no harm.

Captain Caldwell seemed all right too. "Is there anyone else with you, Marcus?" I called up to the pilot.

He only shook his head. Still recovering from the abrupt adrenaline jolt of the incident.

BLIND JUMP

I turned to Aruna. "You came without any security? That was ill-considered of you, General."

Anna snorted. "Down-right stupid."

His wife glared at her but Aruna laughed. "It was! I'm not used to being a target."

"They might well have taken me out too. I'm sure I wasn't expected but they'd have gone for the bonus kill, if offered."

"It's a good thing we weren't expected," said Anna. She walked over to look at our would-be assassins. "Decidedly dead," she announced.

"Better them than us," Louis Aruna said. "Allow me to introduce my wife, Nancy. We're newlyweds, too."

"Not really anymore," said Nancy. "It's been ten weeks now."

He put an arm around her. "Someone to grow old with."

"Better to have someone to stay young with," Anna told him. She was speaking her mind this morning. Maybe shooting something made her more confident. "Here come my security people. I'll have to teach them to be more attentive."

As she went over to confer, I said to Aruna, "You'll want to send the bodies to one of your facilities, I'd think. We could look at them here but they'd do a more thorough job." He nodded. "Oh, and they were carrying small beamers."

"Illegal but easy enough to get hold of," said one of the Summit Up security men.

"Might as well send those too."

"Agreed. Captain," Aruna called. "We're going to send everything back with you. Deliver it to Fundy. I'll call for them to be ready."

We left it all to the security detail and accompanied the Arunas to a waiting air car. Anna let me take the controls; she knows our respective talents.

As soon as we were settled and began the ascent, Aruna stated, "This was overt, unlike the presumed assassination of Robert Douglas. Either someone thinks they are in danger of discovery or they are prepared to make a move."

"But they were very amateurish," Anna told him. "Perhaps in too much of a hurry. Did you learn anything new about the listening device?"

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

“We did nab a robot at the station, attempting to unobtrusively retrieve data from the device they’d planted. Except it wasn’t there! The poor little thing was circling around, trying to fulfill its mission.”

“Poor little thing? You sound like Jack. Could it tell you anything?”

“Not a thing. It had no further orders other than to return to its regular duties.”

I chimed in. “I would think someone intended to access it in person later on.”

“So do I. Forewarned, now, so that is a dead end.”

“We sent you our own data from the device,” said Anna.

“And it leads me to theorize that meeting with me as soon as you returned to Scotia is what set them off. What aroused their suspicions and led them to plant the device at Bono.”

“And then we met again when we got back from there,” she pointed out.

We all recognized that might have had an impact. And that there was little more to be said about it. I asked, “Do you think they might have expected to melt into the tunnels, Anna? There certainly wasn’t a ship standing by.”

“I would think so. And I definitely need to find out how they infiltrated the staff.”

“A good excuse to avoid Elsa,” I told her.

CHAPTER 18

“TROUBLE DOES FOLLOW you about, boy,” said Grandpa Jack.

“In Jack’s defense, it followed me,” Aruna told him.

“Wasn’t it waiting here for you?” asked his wife.

Good point. My grandfather had invited us to a private dinner. Not in his tower atop Summit Up but a bigger room a couple floors down. Anna had grumbled about neglecting her duties, of course.

“How did you end up chasing spies, Lou?” he asked. I didn’t doubt that Jeanne Freneau had already provided most of the details.

“There wasn’t much use for a staff strategist after the war. I somewhat fell into this role but it does call for similar skills.” The general nodded in my direction. “Skills your grandson shares.”

“Yes, Errol told me you’d wanted to recruit him.”

Get in line, I thought. Right behind Mom. Some sort of chowder or bouillabaisse arrived. The seafood might or might not have come from our home planet but the crisp white wine surely originated in Grandpa Jack’s vineyards.

Incidentally, we were being served exclusively by robots. Some wealthy Scotians liked to show off by employing human servants but not my grandfather.

Aruna’s wrist-top com sang at him. “I left orders for the general’s calls to be sent through,” said Anna. Grandpa Jack made no comment; that was the sort of decision he hired her to make.

A few words, a few nods of the head, some peering at data, before Aruna closed the call. “A little information on our intruders,” he reported. “Both low-rank military and both on leave. We need to check who gave them leave but it will most likely prove irrelevant.”

“Security uniforms were found stashed in a closet close to the field,” reported Anna. “It seems they intended to change and attempt to slip away. They wouldn’t have gotten past me. I know every one on the force.”

As did Stewie, I was sure. But the landing field was outside his domain.

“Then how did they get in?” wondered Nancy Aruna.

“Probably delivering something. We don’t pay much attention to

those who come and go down there — as long as they stay down there.”

“You may need to,” I said, not that Anna didn’t recognize that fact. “The more important question is who informed them when the general was expected to arrive. Someone here? Someone on his staff?”

“Even on my staff,” said Jeanne Freneau. “Such as it is. Where’s the next course, Jack?”

The next course was delicious, as were those that followed. Eventually Anna and I found ourselves on an elevator down to our suite.

Anna broke a prolonged silence by asking, “What do we know about Aruna’s wife? I’m going to look into Nancy’s past.”

I didn’t see her as a mole but one never knows. “Check out Captain Caldwell while you’re at it. As long as we are investigating people close to the general.”

Steward’s voice came from the air. “I have records on both,” he informed us. “Would you like to see them?”

“Later, Stewie. Anna needs to learn to keep office hours.”

“Those are all twelve hours of the day.”

“Even Stewie needs half an hour of rest every day.”

“Strictly, Jack,” the AI said, “I could go four or five days without noticeable ill effect. It is best to put my downtime on a regular schedule.”

I knew in an emergency situation Steward could selectively shut down parts of his brain and keep going longer. Still, the lack of a full restoration period would eventually catch up with him. The same was true with M or House or pretty much any other advanced AI.

I reminded Anna, “In a week, you’ll be off elsewhere and won’t be able to keep office hours at all.”

“All the more reason to get as much done now as we can.”

We? I was entirely willing to leave all this to others. Ah, but I recognized Anna was taking the attack personally. “Very well. But then I am going to demand all your time.”

“And vice-versa!” I rather liked the fond smile she gave me. I also mistrusted it. “You know we’re two awfully independent people, Jack McFee. We’ll have to learn to work with that.”

BLIND JUMP

“Probably by keeping long office hours. Right now, we’re both off the clock,” The elevator doors slid open.

Steward chose to offer his opinion at that moment. He was known to do that. “If I may say so, the two of you remind me much of Jack’s grandparents when they were young.” One could guess at why he chose to make a dramatic pause at that point. They would never know if they were right. “Quite a long time ago.”

He could give an exact figure, of course.

“You sound downright nostalgic, Stewie,” said Anna. “Do you really think Jack is like his grandfather?”

“Oh, no, Miss Anna. I think you are.”

CHAPTER 19

“MY NEW ORDERS came through,” announced Sacky.

“You’ve been given command of a tug,” hazarded Livi Radia.

Princess Vili Lempson sniffed, “I used to be a tug pilot. Gunner too.”

“Thule Station couldn’t have operated without us,” claimed Gunner.

“Yes, I’m sure you were *very* important,” Sacky said. “I’ve been transferred to Fundy!”

“So you’re protecting Scotia now?” asked Livi.

I had to make a noise about that. “The Planetary Guard takes care of Scotia. We allow Group Force their little base on the moon.”

I probably shouldn’t have made that point when all the Scotian military at the table were from the Force. It’s not like I cared that much about my former service, either.

We’d just finished our wedding rehearsal and were relaxing in the domed lounge. Everyone this time. Everyone that was essential, that is, not the guests. Anna had given me a peck at the conclusion and hurried off to her job. We wouldn’t have to go through any of this again until the actual event.

Errol leaned in and whispered, “She can be close to Aleks now. The boy flew in early this morning.”

Boy? Older than me, I suspected. “Maybe another wedding coming?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised. He’s good for Sacky, though I still think you would have been better.”

“Feel free to tell Anna that.” I sipped some of my iced coffee and tuned out the room. “Stewie thinks I take after my Grandmother Reyna.”

“The genius? I suppose he’d know better than any of us.”

“Grandpa Jack refers to her as an artist. A brilliant artist.” Our grandfather’s first wife had passed before either of us was born. I’d always felt it best not ask about it. “He also credits her for the fact we turned out halfway decent.”

“You’re the artist among all his grandchildren.”

BLIND JUMP

“He said that too. Not brilliant, though!”

“Unless one considers jumping an art.”

Grandpa Jack had made just that assertion. Both Jeanne Freneau and I had been skeptical but maybe he had something. “I don’t know if my writing qualifies. Vili’s does.” I nodded toward the princess.

“It is popular, anyway. There are a number of highly intelligent people in this room,” he noted.

“Yourself included?”

“It would be false modesty to claim otherwise. But most of us focus on one subject. You’re the big-picture person.”

Sure, Errol. I’d never use so pretentious a label. “Jack of all trades?”

“You don’t need another nickname. All Grandpa Jack’s children and grandchildren are going to be here for the wedding, though I’m not sure why. Your brother is coming in later today.”

“I would assume someone invited them.” Anna had already accessed the guest list so I knew whom to expect. “What’s Brendon been up to?”

“Serving on one committee or another. He’s a member of the terraforming board now.”

“His new focus.”

“Uh-huh. I haven’t found mine since getting back.”

“You aren’t going to design ships anymore?”

“More talented people than I can do that. I’ve been invited to teach a class at the Academy. I just may while I think things through.”

We might need to ask Elsa’s opinion on all this. She remained outside, fussing with wedding details.

Inside, we were really a rather small group. We did not come close to filling this lounge area, much less the rest of Summit Up. Usually, the place was quite empty of guests. One could wander about the upper floors and not run into any humans at all. Grandpa Jack had his private ways down to the basements; he spent more time there on various projects than most realized.

“And you are going back to college after your honeymoon. Someone whispered to me you intend to neglect your new wife and work on an academic paper.”

I assumed he meant Anna. She knew all about it. “The paper is

mostly written but there are some small questions I'd like to answer. After which, of course, I'll have to rewrite it."

"Not too extensively, I hope."

"That depends on what answers I find. But," I added, "I may also be gathering some information on the situation with Aiglean and Ursan interests in the Old Worlds."

That got me a raised eyebrow. "At you mother's suggestion?"

"Yes, but there's no reason it couldn't be research for a future monograph."

Tarmo dropped into a chair beside us. "Talking shop?"

"This boy *lives* shop," claimed Errol.

The Thulean nodded wisely. Or attempted to. "I recognized that when I first met him. He gave me an analysis of the causes of the war."

"And I stick by it," I told them. "Wrote a paper on it too."

"I'd like to see it."

"Sure. The original file is here, plus a lot of notes I've made since toward expanding it into a book."

The two gave each other a look I chose not to interpret. What were those bots up to? "Hey, they're putting up the Yule tree. Who knows carols?"

CHAPTER 20

NIRA KNEW CAROLS. She could also, as I was already aware, play several instruments so I was not surprised. Nothing to do but relax and enjoy the season the next three or four days.

But I did play tour guide. Primarily for Arto but also for anyone else who wanted to tag along. That included Nancy Aruna, who'd never visited my grandfather's estate before. You may be assured I kept my eye on her, though I had no reason to suspect the woman — nor anyone else — of anything.

It fell to Anna to research her. Captain Caldwell, too. She may well have looked into other people of whom I was unaware.

"There is amazingly little information on Marcus Caldwell," she told me. "Suspiciously little."

"And too much on Nancy. She seems to be mixed up with half the important people in Halifax."

"Caldwell held back while the general walked into an ambush," she reminded me.

"I didn't see his wife standing very close to him."

"Perhaps they are both in on it! A conspiracy against poor Lou!"

At that point, it was a game to us. We did not particularly suspect either of anything, but were just talking things out in the dark of our bedroom.

"I think," Anna said, "it would be more useful to figure out why anyone would want to kill Lou."

"Not just him. Remember this started with Robert Douglas. We don't know whether that was already planned or if my arrival set it off early."

"But either way, it seems likely someone thought he had discovered something."

"And possibly shared it with the general. Or me." Aruna might not be the only target. Someone did put a surveillance device on me, after all.

"So," said Anna, "we need to find a common connection. Someone in the military to plant the device, of course, and to report on us. But maybe a bureaucrat who was closer to Douglas."

"Maybe. Probably, even. I'd like to run this by your brother tomorrow and see if he has any thoughts. Then talk to Aruna and maybe my mother." My parents had been among the most recent arrivals. "And now we can get some sleep."

"Not so fast, Jack McFee. This kind of talk has gotten me all aroused and you have to take care of that."

"Oh. Very well."

The next morning we did lay things out for Tarmo, over breakfast. "Your would-be attackers were not trained at all?" He did not look up from his fried potatoes. You can't keep a Thulean from eating Thulean cuisine.

"Not in assassination. They knew how to avoid surveillance. Stewie accessed the cameras down at the field for me but they revealed little."

"Which makes me believe it was an operation thrown together at the last moment," I said.

"With whatever members of their group were readily available," added Anna.

"Too bad you two rendered them quite dead. You have a way of doing that."

"Better them than us," Anna informed him.

"I suppose. I doubt we learn anything more before we all leave." Tarmo pushed things around on his plate and then stared at them for a moment. "None of this means much to me and I'm not sure it should to you. Your family is known for staying clear of politics, Jack."

"This isn't politics. Someone wants to overturn our whole way of life."

"Which is rather comfortable for you McFees."

"It is, but it's also a reasonably democratic system. I'll not claim democracy is morally superior to any other form of government but it does tend to be the most stable. It's self-healing, most of the time."

"Oh, you got him started," Anna told her brother.

"Always a hazard. But I don't have to live with him."

"For which we are both thankful," I said.

CHAPTER 21

“THEIR COMMANDER KNEW nothing,” stated Aruna. “She signed papers her aide put in front of her. Normal procedure for something like regular leave.”

“And the aide?” asked Mom.

“Given falsified information that the women were overdue for time off.”

“So nobody knows anything,” I said.

“That’s how it seems.” He suddenly turned my direction and snapped out, “You’re investigating my wife, aren’t you?”

I was too familiar with that sort of tactic to barely notice it. “We’re running checks on everyone present at the incident.”

“Jack!” I think my mother disapproved.

Aruna only nodded. “So would I. But I did thoroughly investigate Nancy before I married her.”

I didn’t doubt it. “Anna harbors some suspicions about your aide.”

“Even more thoroughly checked. And with me longer!”

That proved nothing about either of them. We both knew that but didn’t feel the need to say it.

“What about Robert’s crash?” asked Mom. “Has anything turned up there?”

All three of us knew Douglas had a fear of space flight and preferred to travel by airplane. We felt no need to mention that either, but the irony was not lost on us.

“Nothing conclusive. The plane disintegrated over the ocean, leaving little evidence. It can’t even be proved it wasn’t an accident.”

“And his itinerary was no secret.” I said this as if I knew it for certain. I was fairly confident.

“Surprisingly, the purpose was. No one had any idea why he was flying that day.”

“That changes things, I’d think,” I half-muttered.

“But his destination?” asked Mom. “There was a flight plan?”

“Nibi Base. He was going to meet me there.”

I had visited — only once — the military base across the waters of

Lake Nibi from Dundee. A secret conference had been the occasion then. It seemed Douglas had another one in mind.

And something else in mind, maybe. "He wanted to meet at a military installation rather than his ministry? That would suggest he was suspicious of someone there."

"Perhaps. I'm keeping his replacement somewhat at arm's length for now. His temporary replacement." Aruna gave out a bit of a chuckle. "This wedding gives me a fine excuse."

I could see that. The general could keep his finger on the pulse of the investigation while remaining inaccessible himself.

"You could be of use at the ministry, Jack," started my mother.

"No. Absolutely not."

She said no more. Aruna pretended to have heard nothing.

"I guess that's all," Mom said, coming to her feet. "You have plans today, Jack?"

"Swimming, right now. An upstairs pool where Thulean nudity won't shock the other guests."

Mom only shook her head and left. The general and I lingered in my suite.

Aruna looked me over for a few seconds. "Your family can't make you change your, um, plans, can they? Pull the purse strings tight or something of that sort?"

"Not as long as my grandfather is the one actually paying for most of it." I saw no need to mention I had income of my own these days, and stock in the McFee Concern. "The ship I use belongs to the company. New Rome doesn't charge tuition, even, though they appreciate the large donation Grandpa Jack sent them."

"I can imagine."

"That does not entitle me to better quarters. We're all stuck in the same tiny cells."

"And you're safe there?"

"Safe enough. I do carry a hideaway, even if the school disapproves. They needn't know about it."

"I would suspect you carry it right now."

I laughed and pulled out the tiny beamer. "A birthday gift this past

BLIND JUMP

year from Grandpa Jack. Something of an antique he carried a hundred years ago." When he was my age.

"I suspect there is much about your grandfather none of us know. I'll leave you to your naked friends now."

I decided not to tell him Nancy was invited to join us. Not that she couldn't if she wished. I passed down the corridors to the pool where Grandpa Jack had first met the Gallens, remembering to carry a towel this time. A somewhat larger one lay on the level of the main lounge. There were others about, too, though some might be better characterized as baths. I was not surprised to see Livi and Sacky had joined the Thulean contingent. No other Scotians splashed about.

That included Errol. I thought maybe he'd accompany his wife. All of us except Elsa — and of course, Arto — had shared this pool or that at Dummit Downs on one occasion or another. Or yet another.

I slipped in and told anyone who cared to listen, "Outdoor swimming should be pleasant here at this time of year. There are some rather nice lakes on the estate. And mostly only robots around to shock."

None of the Thuleans looked comfortable with the idea. Not because of any modesty, I felt, but because it would be simply too open for them. Unprotected, one could say. I'd done well to get Tarmo to ride horseback around Dummit Downs, but he'd already had off-planet experience, far from the underground cities of his home.

I'd no doubt Livi Radia and Sacky Baldwin would be willing. They were ever on the outlook for the next adventure. Sacky was the one to inform me now, "We almost abandoned you in favor of Yule Eve at the Radas' home."

"Yes, yours had better measure up," said Livi.

"How about it, Stewie? Do we have a Yule log ready to burn all night? The traditional buffet? Or has my grandfather changed into Ebenezer McFee?" I doubted any of them knew what that referred to. Well, yes, Vili Lempsen might. Or Miss Radia even.

That didn't matter. Steward would get it. "We would not have put up the tree, Jack, if we didn't intend to observe the other traditions."

"Then we can expect a visit from Father Yule?" asked Livi.

Sacky added to this with, "Maybe we can get Jack the Second to dress up as him."

“Arto better looks the part,” I told them.

“He doesn’t have a beard!”

“But he does have experience,” said Tarmo. “He played the role many times for Anna and me.”

I regretted Anna had chosen not to join us. She took her work far too seriously. It wouldn’t matter that much if someone was assassinated on her watch. Unless it was me!

But seriously, it did raise questions about our future together. We *would* lead somewhat separate lives the next couple years and were all right with that. Reasonably all right. I’m sure neither of us exactly liked it! But after that? When would that picture come into focus?

“Even if no one wishes to swim beneath the sun,” I announced, “I do intend to take a jaunt through the estate tomorrow morning. Anyone want to come along?”

“I can see it all laid out before me from the comfort of the lounge,” said Tarmo.

“There are stables down further,” I informed him.

He might have been tempted. A look from Gunner put an end to it. Deserting his wife on what amounted to a luxury vacation was not to be allowed.

“Your last chance to run off by yourself,” commented Livi.

“Or with a car full of girls,” added Sacky.

I could count on those two. “Show up at the reception area doors,” I told them all, “a little after dawn and we’ll see how big a vehicle we need.” I turned on my back and lazily stroked across the oval pool. I might have been embarrassed to do that, not so long ago.

CHAPTER 22

YES, ONE COULD see much of the estate from up here and the hazy blue of the ocean beyond. The stables I'd mentioned existed somewhere down there but one would have to ride a shuttle to them. An air car seemed more practical today.

I didn't know any of the horses, either. I'd ordered — with Anna's approval, to be sure — a security vehicle rather than one of the utility cars available to us. It would let me go faster and give me access to more places.

Five only this morning. Sacky and Livi, as expected, had been joined by Arto Gallen. A surprise came when Jitha Jones showed up. Someone had blabbed to him. What had he been up to the last few days? I'd scarcely seen him since Sunday and here it was Friday morn.

We'd all be kept busy tomorrow, I was sure. And the day after? Our wedding. Three rushed, fully-filled days before Anna and I set off.

I followed a winding pathway down the slopes. Not that the air car had to follow any roads, but it was polite to stick to them. "This is a police car, isn't it?" asked Sacky.

"In the broad sense," I agreed. "Should I run the siren?" There was undoubtedly a manual switch somewhere but I could simply tell it to turn on verbally.

"The flashing light too!" Livi at once demanded.

I briefly indulged the two. Alas, no weapons were left in the car for my use. Not that I wasn't carrying my C-140. And my beamer palm-gun. And a knife. Maybe two.

Jones had commandeered the place beside me; none objected, as the two young women wanted to share the rear seat and Arto did not seem to mind at all being with them. I wondered if he had a companion or even a wife back on Thule.

"What's with you and Anna having secret meetings with General Aruna?" asked Sacky.

"His mom, too," Livi noted.

They might or might not have heard about the attempt on Aruna's life. Not from Anna, despite being her friends, but rumor was likely to

have spread. "The death of Robert Douglas, for one thing," I said. They were already in the know about that.

Said Sacky, "This Douglas was someone important at the Ministry of Information, right? We met him at Dummit Downs."

I gave Jitha a look from the corner of my eye. No sense in holding anything back. He knew everything I did and undoubtedly more. "Diplomatic service, working under my mom during the war. He aided in coordinating the two departments. Her top henchman, essentially. He took over her post as sub-minister when she retired."

"So not directly connected to the official investigations of treason," mused Livi. What she knew of any official investigation I had no idea.

"But, like Aruna, he found himself at the center of them and was charged to carry on, independently."

"Especially within the government ministries," spoke Jitha. I had assumed something of the sort, not that anyone had said anything to me.

"And the general was handling the military side," I said. "Is handling the military side. These are in addition to what the police are doing." They led the primary investigation. They were the ones who had rounded up most of the conspirators.

"When I have my law degree I might want to get involved in that sort of work," said Livi.

"You must ask Anna to give you lessons in self-defense," Arto told her.

"It will be painful." I spoke from experience. "And suing people is more lucrative. These must be the highest vineyards."

I pulled over to address a robot. a squat little fellow on eight fat, treaded tires. "A fine looking bit of cultivation. Might I ask what variety of grapes these are?" One never went wrong complimenting a bot on its work. It was all that mattered to most of them.

"A sauvignon, sir. It is a type Master Jack developed himself." It paused a moment, processing something. "You are also Master Jack?"

"Your fame precedes you," commented Livi.

"You may call me simply Jack. There is only one master here."

"Very well, Simply Jack."

I decided to leave it at that and move on.

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"Are the horse stables near?" I asked the car.

"Two miles," it answered. She answered. Fairly obviously gendered female. "Set a course?"

Very direct. What one should expect from a no-nonsense security AI, I guess. "Do so." I was willing to let it drive for a few minutes.

"Have you taught Sacky to ride yet, Livi?"

"She refuses, but she's shown herself willing to feed my horses apples and stroke their noses."

"That's a start. We'll just see what my grandfather has here."

"Working horses, I would suspect. To get people around his fields."

"Most likely." Grandpa Jack, so far as I knew, had never been much of a rider.

Unlike our stables at Dummit Downs, these proved to be entirely above ground. Barns, probably housing much more than horses.

Including a fairly surprising number of humans. They'd apparently been give a heads-up about who we were. The robots too.

Arto wrinkled his nose as we strolled in. Ah, the smell of a barn on a warm midsummer day! "Draft horses!" squealed Livi Radia. I didn't think I'd ever seen her quite so excited. "I didn't know there were any on Scotia."

Neither did I. I'd seen them on other worlds. She must have, as well. "Master McFee brought them here recently. And myself," spoke an older man with filthy coveralls and a Corvan accent. "Said he it was necessary to get his grandson's approval."

Eyes turned to me. "I am sure that means Brendon, what with him being on the terraforming council." Which kept watch on such things. But a horse is a horse, isn't it? There were plenty of those already.

Jones exchanged a few words with the hostler in a language none of my companions were likely to have understood. He might or might not have known I did. Well, maybe Radia could get some of it. She had spent time at Corvan schools too.

But teaching at said schools was invariably in Lingo. One had to go outside to pick up the native dialects. Or choose to purposely study them. I'd done a bit of both. How else was one to speak to the local girls?

"I am afraid we are boring the others," I told Livi. "What say we go

find one of those lakes?" The car would surely know the way. I asked as we settled again in our seats.

"Three lakes are near," she informed us. "Within twenty minutes travel."

"Which is good for swimming?" Sacky asked, leaning over my shoulder. That was not necessary.

"I do not swim," she informed her.

"Good for humans to swim in," I said.

It took a few seconds to produce an answer, probably by querying a database somewhere. "Clean water, then. Shall I take you?"

"Go ahead." I pulled up a map on my com, though I could probably get a larger one on the car's screens. "We seem to be heading toward a little river," I told the others. "But if you prefer we could go see the ocean instead."

"Isn't it cold here?" asked Jitha.

"Quite. Even at this time of year."

No one seemed interested in going that way. I allowed the car to carry us on. "Say, Livi, is this one of the cars your family manufactures?"

"I don't think so. Hey car, who made you?"

"I am from the Hovath factory on Bannock."

Arto said, "I have seen Hovaths on more than one world. They use thrust tubes from your company, Miss Radia."

"Not my company! I keep my distance from it."

"As Jack attempted with the McFee Concern. That has not completely worked out for you, has it?" asked Jitha Jones.

I felt like demonstrating my peca moves on the smug Corvan. "This must be it," I announced.

"It's beautiful," whispered Sacky.

That it was. A gorge, a widening of a stream to create a placid, sky-reflecting pool. I wondered if it was natural or shaped by man. "It might be deep," I hazarded.

"We don't have to go in," said Livi. Who then giggled. "With or without clothes."

There was a gravel beach of sorts to wander. There were overhanging trees. Plenty of soil here, on a planet where that was generally

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still sparse. “And all ours,” I said, as we climbed out of our vehicle and started toward the lake.

I spoke too soon. From the trees came two figures. I was sure I glimpsed two more, circling about to our right, away from the water.

There were weapons in their hands.

CHAPTER 23

LET US BE thankful for intelligent security cars. Our greeting party surely did not expect it to lurch forward, lights flashing, siren wailing.

Their first mistake had been assuming it was an ordinary utility vehicle. Their second was mistaking me for an ordinary victim. I passed my C-140 immediately to Sacky. She was military so she would know how to handle it. My other companions might or might not and this was not the time to find out.

Of course, I was the target. “Keep out of the way,” I hissed at the others. The car would have sent out an alert, though any aid might be at a considerable distance. “If necessary, get in the car and run for it.” Was it too late for me to attempt that?

Jitha pulled out a hideaway weapon as small as the one cradled in my left hand. My right hand? I had flicked open my primary knife and held it ready there. Though it might not be very effective against guns.

And these assailants held guns. Most likely something that made minimal noise. Maybe beamers, maybe muffled projectile weapons. I’d learn soon enough. Either way, they were likely to move close before opening fire.

But they continued to move forward, holding off longer than expected. “They want to take you alive,” Jitha half-whispered to me. “Myself too, perhaps.”

To learn what I knew. They would be quite disappointed. I had no doubt, however, they would kill if capture proved impractical.

“Orders?” asked the car.

“Give us cover!” I called out. It would be unwise to expose ourselves by attempting to climb in. The car used its maneuvering tubes to tilt itself to one side, providing a larger shield. I didn’t have time to be surprised, much less amazed.

We might be able to climb in after all. Shots rang out. All right, they didn’t exactly ring. They were muffled to a soft ‘pop.’ Sacky shot back. Her shots made a bit more noise but didn’t hit anyone.

There was no perfect cover with enemy pairs approaching at ninety degrees to each other. So why risk remaining? “Everyone in!” I ordered. “Give us cover, Sacky.”

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I attempted to do the same, sending a brief beam toward those approaching from the side. Much too far away to be lethal but it might delay them a few seconds. And in a few seconds, the beamer should be able to fully recharge.

Jitha took a shot too, before clambering in behind Arto and Livi. Sacky released another round even as she climbed aboard. I was not far behind. "Up," I told the car.

We shot up at once, the car leveling itself as it rose. Its altitude would not be limited in the fashion of a normal utility air car. In theory, it could take us all the way into space! "Anyone hit?"

Apparently not. The four had come together below us and were still shooting. I had no doubts our ride was sufficiently armored to make that ineffective. "We need to turn things around and capture them," I said.

"I would think they have a car of their own near," said Livi.

She was most certainly right. Not one as capable in most respects as our security vehicle but just possibly faster.

"Raise the roof?" asked our car.

That would give us complete protection but we couldn't shoot back. "Not yet. Want to keep shooting, Sacky?"

As answer, she poked her head up and sent a couple more rounds toward those below. One fell; the others decided to run.

We, of course, pursued. "Feel free to join in, Jones," Sacky invited.

"My little gun is not so suited to such battles."

"It's the sort Corvans carry in bad neighborhoods." I knew from experience. They were popular in some quarters of Corvan society, including adventuresome schoolboys. "I would think your government could provide you with something better, Jitha."

"You know we have no government, Jack."

Sure, Jitha. Whatever you call it. I took us down a little. Much further and we'd make too good targets of ourselves. Ahead of us, I could see the goal of our pursuers-turned-pursued, an enclosed cargo car, partially hidden among rounded boulders. With the proper codes it would have had no difficulty entering the area.

One or another of them would turn and take a shot at us now and

again. I didn't feel it was worth the risk to shoot back. Which I'm sure was what they wanted.

"We could just let them escape," I told my little crew. "Security might or might not pick them up." Or even park ourselves above them so they couldn't take off. That felt a bit too risky.

"We have one of them," Sacky piped up. "She looked like she was still alive."

I thought to turn around and pick up the wounded individual right then and let the others take off. The sure thing, that would be.

Anna would probably even approve. She would also understand what I did do. That was to dive on our assailants and scatter them. "Cover me, Sacky!" I called out, leaping from our car.

"Me too!" came Jitha's voice. Arto, I was certain, was sensible enough to stay put. Livi I was not so certain of.

I had propelled myself onto the nearest body before a gun could be put into play. As the man I hit staggered and fell, I could see another bringing his weapon to bear on me. My knife left my hand and ended up in his thigh. Not the best of throws, though it might have saved my life.

My backup knife was in my hand as quickly as I could manage. The weather was too warm to have it up a long sleeve so I had to reach further. And, of course, my beamer was in my other hand.

I heard shots behind me but didn't turn to see what was going on. The man I had tackled was on his feet and facing me with his own knife — somewhat larger than mine. I could just shoot him, put a neat little hole in his forehead with the beam weapon. No, only if necessary.

And I did want to take him alive, after all. 'Military' was my immediate thought when he lunged into his first attack. It was a different way to fight with a knife; not a worse way but not as suited to the current situation. He would have followed the thrust with his body but I wasn't there. I slashed his arm as I slipped past. He gave the trickle of blood a dismissive glance. Then his eyes went past me. "I surrender." The knife dropped to the ground. Captain Sacky Baldwin had a bead on him with my C-140.

"The fourth one ran off," reported Sacky. "I couldn't bring myself

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to shoot him in the back.” She giggled. “Jitha demonstrated his martial arts on him first.”

“But I am afraid I had to shoot the first one you knifed. A large gun he pointed at me.”

“On the ground,” I ordered the man I’d just fought. “Keep him covered, Sacky.”

I went over to the other man. The body I should say. Jones had his little gun in hand. “Thirty bore?” I asked.

He nodded. “Sufficient this time.”

That it was. A couple shots in the chest. These attackers had worn no armor. In fact, all they wore were plain overalls, identical to those of Aruna’s would-be assassins.

“Should we check on the other one?” called Livi from the car. “She’s still lying back there.”

“We saw her move,” Arto added.

“Then let’s see,” I said, climbing in. “I believe these two can manage without me.”

“We didn’t need you at all,” claimed Baldwin.

The woman was sitting up as we approached. Her gun was in her hand. Did she intend to fight?

A moment later she put a projectile through her own head.

CHAPTER 24

"I WOULD NOT surprised if she was the leader of this group," I said "Maybe our prisoner can tell us more."

Anna and I were looking over the intruders' air car. It was a very ordinary delivery vehicle but with a larger, more powerful engine stuffed in. It could indeed have run from our security car.

"Certainly a believer in her cause," she answered. "We should have all their identities shortly, except for the one who ran. He's eluded my people so far."

"We could call in help." I sounded lukewarm about it, I am sure. Anna probably felt much the same. "Or Livi and I could borrow horses and ride him down."

She ignored that suggestion. "Someone knew you had mentioned the lakes."

"But how did they know we would end up at this one?"

"Could have tracked you once you were in the area, and saw what direction you were headed."

"If we weren't in a security car I could accept that explanation."

Anna didn't need long to digest that. "It would have to be done by someone on my force. Only we would know where all our cars were."

"Could you listen in on them too?"

She only nodded.

"Someone in security could also have known the time of Aruna's arrival."

"That lets Nancy off the hook."

Not necessarily, I said only to myself.

"We have to get this cleared up before we leave," she announced. "I am not going to leave Summit Up with a compromised security force."

"So we postpone the wedding?" I did manage to keep a straight face, not that it mattered.

"Not on your life, Mister McFee. Let's get back."

One prisoner. A hireling, maybe, and not in on any details. "Do you know where your comrade was headed?" Anna asked him.

He shook his head. "Only the sergeant knew the orders."

I cocked my head at the fellow. Not overly large but sinewy and fit.

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He held himself erect; not defiant, just with the sense of an inner confidence in himself and his companions.

A confidence we might have shaken just a bit. "Former military, aren't you? A Ranger?"

"Yes, sir." He sounded a bit cautious about admitting it.

"My dad was a Ranger. You should have retired quietly like he did."

"And what is there for us since the war? No real jobs for those like me unless we emigrate off-planet."

I wondered if he was seduced by the promise of a reward or by Scotia-first rhetoric. A mix, maybe. I turned away. Nothing to learn.

"Take him up to the compound," Anna ordered. "Someone else might want to talk to him."

We watched a couple of her security walk him to a waiting car. "I want to thank your air car," I told her. "She was of great assistance. Does she have a name?"

"We don't do that here."

"You should," I assured her. "It helps them form a solid identity."

"I'll take it under official advisement. Papa! You have had an exciting day!"

Her father was leaning against our nameless car. "I wish I'd had a weapon so I could help," he said. "I can't have people kidnapping your future husband."

"You know guns, Arto?" I asked him.

"No, but I have found alternate uses for wrenches at times in my career."

I didn't doubt it. Life could be rough among miners.

"I'll ride up with you," said Anna. "My people can finish up here. Sam! Take that car they came in to the barns." Turning back to us, she said, "Someone will look at it eventually, I'm sure. Military or police or something of that sort."

"The custom work could lead somewhere." I settled at the controls. "Car, do you like the name Alice?"

"Alice?"

"Master Jack thinks you should have a name."

"I have never met Master Jack."

"She means me."

"I thought you were Simply Jack."

I heard snickers from the back seat. "Better than Simple Jack, I guess. Alice is my mother's name. I think it would suit you. She is quite non-nonsense."

"Very well."

Anna sighed. "I suppose we'll have to name the others now."

We wound our way back up to my grandfather's residence. We had missed lunch and I was in a hurry to remedy that. There was little talk for a while.

Then Arto asked, "Why did those men wish to take you, Jack? For ransom, maybe?"

Jitha answered before I got the chance. "Oh, no, they would have killed him after filling him with drugs and questioning him."

He needn't have sounded so much like he enjoyed the idea. Not that he did; he was just poking at me again.

"That's probably so," I admitted. "Chances are they wouldn't have harmed the rest of you, though one never knows."

"I'm not letting any of you out of my sight again," declared Anna.

"That will be awkward on our wedding night." The quip went over well with the back seat. Not so much with Anna.

She spent much of the trip on com, getting an investigation started. "I've asked Tarmo to take charge," she told us. "I don't know who to trust among my own people." That obviously bothered her.

More than it would me. "Don't neglect Steward. He sees pretty much everything but doesn't always recognize what is important."

"You know much of AIs," remarked Jitha Jones. "Yet you choose another field of study."

"I'll write the definitive study on their history one of these days," I informed him. It might even happen. "And will you turn your attention back to anthropology?"

"Who is to say I haven't?"

Anna only shook her head, before returning her attention to her com.

"The fourth man remains at large," she reported. "The other three have been identified as all former military."

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“No surprise there. I doubt the one we captured will have any useful information.”

“But he will be questioned. Not by us.”

“Anna,” asked her father, “what will become of such a man? Surely they do not execute people on Scotia.” He sounded a tad uncertain.

“They do not,” she answered. “Prison?” This was directed at me.

“Most likely. Or he might be given the option of emigrating. He committed no great crime nor did he kill anyone.”

“Treason is no great crime?” wondered Jones.

“A traitor is just someone on the losing side of a political struggle,” I answered.

“So cynical!”

Anna asked, “And you are an idealist, Mister Jones?”

“I would have to know how Jack defines that before answering.”

“A person on the winning side!” piped up Livi Radia. I was willing to leave it at that.

CHAPTER 25

IT PROVED UNNECESSARY to search through records and surveillance. The culprit had already announced herself to Tarmo and was waiting for us in the armory. She was a tall woman, red-haired. I'd seen her around in uniform.

"Zasha?" asked Anna. She half-turned to me to explain. "Zasha Walter, my second here."

"You would have figured it out," Walter said. She nodded in my direction. "He would have. Maybe not you, Gallen."

Her eyes went to the door as my grandfather entered. "Why, Zasha?" he simply asked.

"I should have had McFarland's position. Instead you brought in an outsider. A *foreigner*."

"The disgruntled employee. Yes." Grandpa Jack pondered that a moment. "The perfect recruit for this sort of thing."

"One that had a personal reason for disliking foreigners," I said. Though she might well have already.

"Knocking you off would have been a splendid way of getting back at me and Anna, don't you think? Why Miss Gallen would probably have left and her job would have been open again."

I suspected our nonchalance made our comrades somewhat uncomfortable. "So what's to be done with Miss Walter?"

"Missus," she muttered, barely audibly.

"Nothing to do but turn her over to the police. She might be willing to name some names. Ah, general." Aruna had just hurried in. "Meet the woman who facilitated your near-assassination."

"Helped facilitate," I said. "We can be sure others were involved." Possibly at Summit Up. But the important ones would be elsewhere.

"I'll depend on you to find someone to run things while you're gone," Grandpa Jack told Anna, and left as unceremoniously as he had entered. Aruna followed him, without having said a word.

"And we needn't postpone our honeymoon now," I reminded her.

"If your grandfather had any sense he'd put you in charge of security," came her curt reply. "Get her ready for transport," she ordered an underling. "And then I want to look over all the records of this affair."

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I felt it best to leave her to it. Being busy was what she needed at the moment. Tarmo accompanied me.

“Anna feels she’s made a mess of things,” he stated, though I knew it for conjecture. “And that she risked your life.”

“That I can do quite well on my own,” I assured him. “Let’s go have a beer. And then I think I’ll retire to the library.” The best place for some peace, as well as plenty of books to distract me. I wondered if Christie still hoped to catalog them all.

Anna came late to our room that night. I was already abed and probably had slept some, though I’d been tossing and fidgeting some. Still coming down from the turmoil of the day.

As she slid into bed, I decided to make a preemptive strike. So to speak. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

She raised herself on one elbow to look at me. I didn’t care for that frown. “Don’t give me that, Jack McFee. I know you love me but I also know you are the sort that could go on with your life. I’m not sure I could.”

“Jitha would be glad to console you.”

For that, she hit me. Hard. “Be serious, Jack! No matter how much it hurts.”

“Not as much as you slugging me, I think.”

“Oh, Jack.” She started sobbing. I’d never seen my Thulean warrior do that before.

There was nothing to do but hold her.

CHAPTER 26

"I'M THANKFUL FOR my life having been given some direction," said Livi. "I was just coasting along. A bit like you, I suppose, except you seemed to enjoy it. I was terribly bored and angry about it all."

"You seemed to be living a full life." Enough so to be a bit of a celebrity. "Lots of friends, as I recall."

"Shallow acquaintances. Passersby in my life. Your Thuleans and Sacky were such an improvement on my old circle."

Most of those new friends were here at this Yule Eve celebration. Pretty much everyone had shown up, even Grandpa Jack and Jeanne Freneau, as well as much of Summit Up's staff. Sometimes in years past they had been the only guests.

"Now it looks like Sacky may be following you and Anna into matrimony," she went on.

"Maybe not soon. She's really focused on her military career."

"I haven't found that kind of focus."

"I've avoided it myself."

"That's because things come so easy to you."

"Some things," was all I was willing to admit. "Rene Stuart seems to be making his way toward us." Toward me, most likely.

Stuart was tall and ruggedly handsome, in a clichéd way. I chose to think Vili Lempsen's readers pictured me somewhat like that in their minds.

"Who is he? He's kind of nice to look at."

"Anna's new second. He'll be running things when we head off-planet." He'd reached us now. "Have a seat, Rene. Livi would like to get to know you better."

She shot me a look akin to those I occasionally got from Anna.

"On duty, Jack. Just wanted to fill you in on the latest news." He did sit down.

"When you get back to the armory tell your boss I demand she join us and not hide anymore."

"Um, certainly." I had my doubts of that happening. "The individuals who attacked you have been traced back to a dead end. If anyone knew anything, it was the one who shot herself."

BLIND JUMP

Not surprising. "How about the car?"

"The police found where the custom work was done. They're still following that up. That's all they're willing to share."

"I'll have to get General Aruna to apply some pressure," I said.

"No you don't," Livi warned. "You and Anna are going to be far away and not concerned with any of this."

"My fiancée's friends scold me almost as much as she does," I let Stuart know. "Any news of the escapee?"

"None. We're guessing he made it to transport somewhere." He got up, nodded to the both of us, mumbling, "Pleased to meet you, miss," before hurrying off.

"I really might like to get to know him better," mused Livi.

Stewie chose to break into our conversation. "Perhaps you'd like to meet his boyfriend too."

He managed to sound quite innocuous. I wasn't fooled. I can't speak for Livi.

"Here come some of those new friends you were gushing about," I informed her.

The Thulean princesses had wandered over. "What are you two gossiping about?" asked Vili Lempsen.

"Maybe planning to elope and leave poor Anna waiting at the altar," was Christie's conjecture.

"I wouldn't put it past them."

"Livi was telling me how she used to be an angry cynic."

"Whereas Jack enjoys playing at cynic," Miss Radia shot back.

"She's figured him out, hasn't she?" Vili asked her companion.

"In part, maybe." Christiana was more inclined to give things solid thought than to move on to the next witticism. Being tall, attractive, and married to the likely next king of Thule, she needn't exhibit her brains at all. They were there, none the less.

She completely changed the subject for us. "Where's Gunner? We need her to sing Thulean carols with us. Anna too."

"Is that enough voices to constitute a choir?" I asked.

"If not, we can draft Tarmo."

"And Arto," I reminded her.

"Oh, yes. That's definitely a choir."

"If anyone can get Anna to join the party it would be her father and brother. I'm going to find them."

Which wasn't difficult. They were near the food. I explained their mission to them and we set off for the armory. "Not now," Anna insisted when we located her. We were likewise insistent.

She turned from the array of screens that were holding her attention. "We've detected someone or something out there near the walls. With it moving among the rocks, motion and heat sensors can only pick it up intermittently. It could be a loose farm animal," she admitted.

"No one can get through anyway, right? Including animals."

"Any security can be breached." Anna stared at her screens again. "It seemed to move around an awful lot, showing up more places than I would think possible. So probably an animal, randomly wandering."

"Someone will go out and look?" wondered Arto.

"On Yule Eve? I'm low on bodies as it is. I'm not sending anyone to blunder about in the dark."

"Then we'll go. You with me, Tarmo?"

"Ready for action." Anna gave us both a rather disapproving look.

"I'll go with them," offered Rene.

"All right. Be careful and remain in contact."

I considered asking if we could borrow Alice. Maybe not that useful in rough, steep terrain. "Do we have air cycles?"

"I'll have them waiting at the doors. And don't let Sacky get on one!"

My entire arsenal was secreted about me in one place or another. I'd taken to carrying it ever since we found that surveillance device. That put me on alert. I assumed Tarmo was armed.

The three of us headed out. I grabbed a plate of Yuletide biscuits as I passed back under the dome. Might as well fortify ourselves for the mission! Down a level and outside the reception lounge, the cycles were waiting, as promised — small air cars with room for no more than two riders. We each had one to ourself.

We left the com to Rene Stuart. I could talk to Anna anytime. He peered at the device he held. "There might have been a blip up, hmm, that way," he said, pointing. We followed him into the dusk.

BLIND JUMP

Heavy shadow. To be sure, this was midsummer here at a fairly northerly latitude, so day lingered, but no more than a smudge of light remained on the western sky, over the ocean. I was beginning to think this had been ill-advised. An ambush would be all too easy.

Did someone move over there? I could call it imagination but it was safer to be safe! I slowly approached to investigate when Rene called out, "Here. I've found our intruder!" This was followed by a laugh.

I turned back and cruised over. A horse. Skittish. It did not like our cycles at all. I slid off mine and slowly approached. "Hey, boy," I called softly. I could see it had once been a boy. "Finished checking out the neighborhood? I'll bet you're hungry, huh? I have biscuits." I held one out.

He went through the rest of them pretty quickly and then allowed me to climb onto his back. "I'll ride him to the top," I told my companions. "Let me get a head start so you don't spook him." My air cycle could follow on its own.

Stuart called in his report and the two came along behind. In a few minutes we were outside the main doors again. On the spot where I would become a married man in less than twelve hours.

A couple of attendants came out to us. "There is a small stable facility on this level," said Rene. "Intended for day visitors. He can stay there until someone comes to take him home." He thought on that a moment. "That might take a while on a holiday."

"Well, then we'll just have to make this fine fellow comfortable." I dropped to the ground and followed the pair toward an arched entry, leading my mount with my hand on his neck. He wore neither saddle nor halter. There was no way I would abandon this horse until I was certain it would be well cared for.

It's what I would do at home, after all.

CHAPTER 27

MORNING! I SHOULD go check under the tree and see what Father Yule brought me. Or get a cup of coffee. Anna slept on. She'd been staying up late far too much and I wasn't about to roust her out early today.

She needed to look fresh for our wedding this afternoon, after all.

Down to the cafeteria I went, for that coffee and a bit of pastry, and then wandered out into the open air. Out onto the reception area where I would marry Anna later today. A low stone wall ran along the western side of this plaza, with buildings across from it and ways tunneling into the mountain behind them. Ahead, the upper landing field and shuttle terminal. All this lay in the shadow of the peaks at this time of morning.

Security was posted, as usual. If one wished to break into Summit Up this would be the easiest spot. Not easy, just easiest. Stewie knew what was going on here at all times. Except when he took his brief daily nap and then there were backups on the job. The doors opened only to those who were known and authorized.

The other ways in would be through the tunnels and those were even more closely guarded. Yes, Mike Gordon had used them to escape with a hostage — Vili Lempsen — more than a year ago. He'd had plenty of time working undercover here to learn how to circumvent surveillance and security.

I had also snagged an apple while inside, now tucked into a pocket. It might even have been grown here, or in the neighborhood. Apples did ripen this early. Some of them. This particular apple was intended for the new friend I'd made last night. Danny was his name. It had been easy to find it in the records.

That he had been reported missing made it even easier. The stable was just inside, a small space not really intended for overnight stays. "Hi there, Danny," I greeted the chestnut gelding.

There weren't any chestnuts grown on Scotia, were there? None that I'd seen. I'd have to ask my brother about that. It didn't make much sense as the name of a color when the nuts themselves were unknown.

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Danny whinnied a greeting in return. "No biscuits this morning, my man," I told him. "But this might do." He also whinnied in approval of the fruit.

The stable seemed deserted. I decided to give him a grooming. It could steady both our nerves and he'd received only essential cleaning up last night. "Lonesome, Danny? I should ride you into my wedding," I told him, running a brush along his back. "That would make a definite impression. Would you like to be the center of attention?"

Danny suddenly snorted, shying away from something and causing me to stagger back a couple feet when he bumped me. Something whistled by, rather too close to my head. I glimpsed a figure slipping into one of the stalls. A figure holding a firearm.

It took no real thought for me to realize this was our missing fourth man. Then I had other thoughts to occupy me. My own C-140 was in my hand, the gun Anna had talked me into using somewhat against my will. The favored weapon of Thulean security.

"You've missed your one chance," I called to him. "You know this place will be full of security shortly."

"But I can remove you first!" he shouted back. A fanatic, I assumed, valuing his cause over his life. I tend to avoid causes unless absolutely necessary.

An alarm blared. My attacker took another shot and bolted. Maybe he decided his cause could wait until another day. Straight out the passage way to open air, he went. I could have shot him, maybe, or at least at him. As good a weapon as the C-140 is, it was never intended for long range firing. It's an indoor gun with a relatively large bore and low velocity, ideal for knocking an enemy down in a ship or space station without putting holes through the walls.

He would go over the wall, I was sure, and I would be a fool if I followed him. Let security hunt for him? Sure, that's what I should have done. I know that. Instead, I opened the door to Danny's stall, climbed aboard, and pursued on horseback. I saw him vault the wall, not bothering to take one of the stairways, as I emerged into daylight.

I glimpsed security running after the man. They would not shoot without authorization and were too far away to catch him readily now.

Was Danny a jumper? Time to find out! We took the wall with ease, landing on the level area beyond. I slipped around a bit but kept my seat. From there the way sloped, ever more steeply. My quarry was running ahead of us. Much further and he'd be sliding and my advantage would be gone.

And the rocks were close at hand. There was no way I would follow him into those, either on Danny or afoot. I urged my mount forward and launched myself when close. Not so easy to do without a saddle and stirrups — I could have just as readily slid off and fallen on my face. Or worse.

But I did, whether by luck or skill, land on my fugitive. Down the hill we rolled, struggling as much to hang onto each other as to cause any damage. This was a trained soldier, an elite one, even, skilled in combat and probably stronger than me. But he hadn't been trained by Anna Gallen!

I got an arm under one of his legs, and shifted my weight atop my opponent, making a human sled of him. We skidded now rather than tumbled, with me preventing him from putting on any brakes. A rock took care of that. He was shaken but rose to his feet, drawing his weapon. My beamer was already in my hand; I straightened my arm, the slender 'barrel' protruding between the fingers, and squeezed. Down he went as the beam passed through his torso.

Dead? Not yet. That depended on someone else now. Danny came up and nuzzled me. "Good job," I told him, as we watched several security running down the hill.

I hoped they hadn't awakened Anna. Rene Stuart was among them. "Get him up to the infirmary," he ordered, and shook his head. I don't think he expected the man to survive. I wasn't so sure. A beamer somewhat cauterizes the wounds it makes. Of course a hit on a vital spot would kill someone every bit as dead as a pellet.

"I would think he slipped in behind us last night," I remarked to Stuart. "Blended with the crowd on the patio and then hid in the stable." He might even have been one of the coverall-clad individuals who led the way in.

"I sounds plausible," he was willing to admit.

"It does, doesn't it? I have to finish grooming Danny here and then

BLIND JUMP

I'm supposed to attend some sort of event with your boss. I guess I need to get groomed myself!"

If he caught the pun, Rene wasn't willing to show it.

CHAPTER 28

I WAITED JUST outside the doors to the lower lounge. Inside, on this level and the one above, robots were still cleaning up after the celebration of last night and that of the Yule morning. We'd mess it up again shortly.

The weather had turned out decent, and cool enough as afternoon slipped toward evening. Tarmo and Gunner came out in full dress Thulean uniforms, green and russet with rather too much gold braid.

"I know you didn't have those uniforms with you on my ship."

"Easy enough to have them made up for us at Dummit Downs. All the patterns are on file."

Neither my brother nor cousin had shown up in military garb, even if both were officially reserve officers. As was I. The only thing reserved about me at this wedding would be my formal attire, in my preferred gray.

Elsa sat at the far right end of the first row, perched on the front of her seat and ready to go into action, if need arose. At the other end of the row, by the aisle, an empty seat awaited Arto Gallen. Christie and Vili were finding seats in that row too.

Grandpa Jack took his favored spot at the left end, with Jeanne at his side. My parents sat by the aisle, opposite Arto's spot, with my brother and family beside them. I hoped Durga would make some noise at a solemn moment. Other relatives and guests filled in behind on both sides. Hmm, Errol decided to join the Gallen family and sit by his wife.

Aleks Martín came through the doors and looked about, uncertain. "Not sure which side?" I asked him.

"Um, no. Sacky's part of the bridal party, right?"

"So she is," said Tarmo.

To which I added, "Not that it makes any difference at all." Just to confuse the boy some. There I go calling him a boy again.

He slipped into a seat on the right side, as unobtrusively as possible. "Nervous around us, isn't he?" asked Tarmo.

"Might feel like an outsider. He's not really connected to any of us." Being Freneau's protege didn't mean much. Nor did whatever relationship he had with Sacky.

BLIND JUMP

There was the magus, sort of a pudgy little guy, in his white robes. Time for Tarmo and me to go up front. We didn't get any music going up the aisle. Wasn't that a bit unfair? Anna and the bridesmaids would get some sort of march when they appeared. The two of us took our places to the left of the magus. Or right, from his viewpoint.

"You managed to pull a pretty good crowd," whispered Tarmo.

"Anna is popular with the household," I whispered back. Summit Up personnel did fill a fair number the back seats, behind those who made some claim to having been invited. Family. More of those had turned out than I'd expected. Maybe they were curious as to who would be foolish enough to marry me.

Why people like General Aruna and Jitha Jones chose to attend, I'd no idea. I considered neither an actual friend. True, I had few enough of those; one of the best stood now at my side.

Music swelled. Recorded, though there were would be a band at the reception. "I've never heard that before," I remarked.

"Elsa chose it. A contemporary Thulean composer who calls herself Terhenetar."

Fitting, I supposed, for another Thulean to come marching up the aisle. First, Livi and Sacky in matching dresses of pale cyan. They didn't match much otherwise, aside from both being on the shorter side. Then Anna on Arto's arm.

At that moment even I wondered why she would be foolish enough to marry me. My beautiful, dangerous bride. I also wondered where she had hidden her sidearm in that flowing white gown. She carried one, of course, as did I.

But with any luck there would be no shooting during the ceremony.

Her father handed Anna off to me and went to his seat. Tarmo backed off a bit. Still had a role to play. The magus spoke to the crowd, spoke to us. Spoke to the universe, too, as witness. Then, "Bring the wedding rings forward."

Gunner got her own music to march forward to. I recognized it as Sibelius. Before her she carried a plain wooden box. Tarmo stepped forward to open it and pass us each a ring. The couple retired then, settling down in the front row next to the bridesmaids.

The whole thing was awfully fanciful for me but I well knew Anna

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was eating it up. The magus spoke some more, we made appropriate answers, we slipped rings on each others fingers, and we were married.

So what music had Elsa planned for our recessional? The same old traditional piece used at her and Errol's wedding. And, once again, the bride's flowers were thrown as we reached the doors. I didn't see who they hit.

Hmm, Anna had caught the bouquet Elsa had tossed, hadn't she? I might ask somebody what that was all about sometime.

"Can you dance in that thing?" I whispered. I'm a reasonably decent dancer if only because I'd had plenty of lessons. Anna, not so much.

"Vili has been giving me lessons," she confided. "And Elsa promised something slow."

Not so long ago she'd been the one giving Princess Vilma lessons in self-defense. There's probably a lesson in that too, but I've no idea what it is.

So we had the first dance, as expected, and things settled down to a fairly normal party. Nothing nearly so extravagant as Errol and Elsa's wedding held here a couple years ago, nor that of Jeanne Freneau and Grandpa Jack. And the household was invited this time. Anna and I just might have slipped out a little early.

CHAPTER 29

"THIS IS SONdra Jeffers," announced Louis Aruna. "A sub-minister at the diplomatic office."

"Douglas's replacement," I conjectured.

"Temporarily," she stated. "I was his second at the department." Jeffers was small and tidy where her late boss had been large and typically disheveled.

"I think my mom wanted to give me your job," I told her. Yes, my mother was there. That was not unexpected. What was unexpected was the presence of Jitha Jones.

All four ignored my quip. "We felt you should have a briefing before you left," said Aruna.

So they'd barged into my room and upset my preparations for departing Summit Up. I asked, "Should Anna hear any of this?"

Anna was giving last minute instruction to her security staff and had left me to deal with the presents, both Yule and wedding. Most could be stored here for now. I had hoped for us to get away tomorrow without this sort of interruption.

"You can do a competent job of briefing Missus McFee," the general felt.

"That's Missus Anna Gallen-McFee," I let all of them know. "We're following Thulean custom." As did Elsa and Errol.

"So we must call you Mister Jack McFee-Gallen?" asked Jones.

"At least when Anna's around. So what do you have to say to me that can't wait six weeks or so?" I had no firm plans as to how long our honeymoon trip would last.

Aruna took the lead. "It seems the man you shot will survive. He was identified as a former ranger, like the others, but perhaps a bit more in the know. He refuses to talk, of course."

"We can undoubtedly get permission to use drugs," said Jeffers.

"You do not sound eager to do so," Jitha remarked.

"It remains a violation of his person," Aruna said. "Even when necessary. Do not you Corvans take a similar view?"

"What is considered necessary varies from system to system within

our League of Traders. That, I think, is the way throughout the worlds of man."

Save in those groups with more central control, such as the Picans or Ursans. This was no time to start a lecture on the subject.

"None of that matters much to you at the moment," broke in Mom. "What does matter is that he had orders to assassinate you if their kidnapping attempt failed. This means your life may very well still be in danger."

But why? I suppose that question could be read on my face.

"You may have blundered into some of it but you've been in the middle of much that has happened recently," Aruna told me. "Then there are your connections. To your family, to the government, even to Thulean security."

Jones concurred. "You seem a threat on paper. There are those convinced you are a top Scotian agent." He seemed amused by the idea, but revealed nothing more of his feelings. "So our Corvan intelligence tells me."

"By the Ursans and Aigleans," added Jeffers.

"Mostly," he agreed. "But even our own service is uncertain about the boy."

Said Mom, "It was those Ursans and Aigleans that gave support to the sedition going on in our group."

"Burkuts and Sevens too," Jeffers pointed out. "But those operations were during wartime. Which is not to say they don't still have intelligence programs here."

Jones smiled at this. "I believe we could both name a few individuals involved in them. Greatly do I doubt any have aims on Jack's life."

"Ursan mercenaries have been hired before," I pointed out. Like those that caused John Barbosa's death.

"Probably with the knowledge of those in charge," Aruna said. "Their leadership is unlikely to sanction that sort of thing now."

But rogue agents would remain, willing to take anyone's money. Nothing could be done about that. "So, essentially, I should just be careful," I said. I could have added, 'as before.'

"Even when far away. It is likely our conspirators will lose interest in you once you leave Scotia but one should take nothing for granted."

BLIND JUMP

The general was certainly right about that. "Anything else I should know about the investigations? Or that you are willing to share, I should probably say."

Sondra Jeffers spoke. "Only conjectures."

"Mostly conjectures," amended my mom.

"True. We find little things that point one way or another. Someone in my department is surely involved." She gave Aruna a quick look. "I'm not sure everyone trusts me."

"There are only three people in this room I fully trust," the general replied. "Including me. Jitha here would tell us not to trust him."

Jones nodded graciously. "Indeed, sir."

"And our McFees," Jeffers finished for him. "Understandable."

"I feel a bit more trust of my own staff since the discovery of the mole here at Summit Up," Aruna continued. "Which is not to say conspirators do not remain in the military. Perhaps fairly far up."

"And in the government," stated Mom. "Possibly even in the senate."

"They may assert themselves more openly in the political arena now," I offered. "With the war becoming a fading memory."

"Ah, you're sounding like your father," Mom said, "though more succinct. And the two of you may well be right. Just be careful while you're gone, both of Anna and yourself."

"I may depend on Anna to be the careful one. I'm terribly irresponsible, as you know. Right now I have to decide what to do with these presents."

"Be irresponsible," suggested Jitha.

Stewie broke into our conversation. "It is quite safe to leave them in your room, Jack. No one would bother them."

"Procrastinate, eh? As good a plan as any." I wondered if Anna would choose to live in this suite when we returned and I headed off again to New Rome. Maybe she'd go back to sleeping in the armory. Whatever, it would be temporary. There would be a lot of temporary for a couple years to come.

And then? Too far off to decide anything. Right now, our honeymoon was the only thing I had planned.

CHAPTER 30

“NEITHER YOUR BROTHER nor cousin offered you a ride to Fundy?” General Jeanne Freneau shook her head. “I would but my personal transport is too small for such a crowd.”

There were more than a few of us, true. Definitely too many to cram into her W-7. Anna and me, Tarmo, Gunner, and Arto, as originally planned — the group that would go on to Thule from Fundy Base. Christiana had been added to this.

Then Sacky and Aleks decided to travel with us, as both were posted to Fundy. Most of our other friends and family members would be aboard commercial flights to one destination or another.

“I’ll miss you so!” sobbed Christie, hugging Vili goodbye.

“Silly girl, I’ll be there on break in a few weeks.”

But it would never be the same. They would never share an apartment again and take classes together. An end to one stage in both their lives. As smart as Vili was, Christie might have more clearly understood this.

Then Vili was gone, on the shuttle down to Summit Up’s main landing field and then another to a commercial field some miles distant to catch a flight back to Halifax. Livi, too, both of them returning to the university. And all of us heading different directions, in more than one sense.

“Your ship is arriving, Jack,” announced Steward. “It will need an hour or more to handle cargo.”

“No hurry then,” I told my companions. “We can ride down to the field later, unless you want to watch loading and unloading.” I thought on that for a moment. “Make that unloading and loading.”

We would be riding on a McFee delivery ship, making a regular stop here at Summit Up. This sort of less than luxurious travel was nothing new to me. I’d been riding these ships since I was a little kid.

No, not by myself. Errol was the first to take me for a trip on one. He liked ships. I just liked to go places. One could ride about forever on one company cargo ship or another. Until my parents sent me off to a Corvan school.

Going places. I stood by the wall, gazing westward. “When we get

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back,” I informed Anna, “I am going to go down to the stables and ride Danny before heading to New Rome.”

“You know,” she said, not very loudly, “you can stay here. No one is making you go back for an advanced degree.”

Only me. Yes, I could get along quite well with the education I had, fit into the diplomatic or bureaucratic career my parents had planned for me. Or do nothing at all, should I choose. Right now I chose only to nod an acknowledgment to my wife. Time enough to make decisions later on.

Enough introspection. “There’s the shuttle returning. Time to ride down to the field,” I announced.

The McFee Concern freight hauler sitting at one side of the field was not nearly as large as the one we had commandeered for our trip to Bono. No jump capability, of course — it was intended to travel around the system, venturing perhaps out to Blue, at most. Robots were loading cargo as we approached the craft. It probably had a crew of three or four. A couple of those were watching the proceedings without any great interest.

“More cargo,” said one to the other as we approached.

I recognized the pilot. “Young Jack! It’s been years since we hauled you anywhere.” His eyes swept across my friends. “And you’ve a wife now, I hear.”

He might have been attempting to guess which woman fit the job description. Any one of them probably appeared too good for me. “This is Anna,” I said. I put my arm around her to emphasize the point she was mine. All mine!

“Oh, the security chief,” said the other. Navigator, I decided. “Good choice.”

“For me, anyway. Much longer?”

“Give us half an hour,” the pilot replied. “Our supercargo would have a better idea but she’s busy getting things squared away.”

“We keep out of her way,” added the navigator.

“So shall we,” I told him.

Anna might not have been inclined to do so. “We should sweep the ship before leaving.”

“Who would be interested in a bunch of Thuleans?” I asked her.

Gunner jumped in with the answer. "It's you she's concerned about, idiot."

"And we do include a member of the royal family," said Anna.

These days, no one had a reason to target one of the Thulean royals. To be sure, some people don't need reasons. "We can't let anyone threaten Christiana," I agreed.

"Looks like we're finishing up," said the pilot. Graham, that was his name. I'd never known his given name nor would have I used it when last I encountered the man.

"We may need to add a few minutes to your time here," I warned him. "Some security precautions."

He sighed. "And there will be more at Fundy. There always are when it's added to our route."

Infrequently, I suspected. Most of the base's supplies would come by military ships.

The supercargo came sauntering over. She seemed a bit younger than her crew-mates. "All ready, Skipper. Had to make sure the items for Fundy went in last."

"We're holding off for a security check first," he informed her. "You might want to give Missus McFee here the tour."

"Sure enough. McFee?" She gave me a squint. "Hey, you're the one in the book, aren't you?" she asked, before turning to Anna. "Were you too?"

"Her name was changed to Frida for it," I informed her. Anna shot me the kind of look that used to scare me. Well, all right, maybe they still do.

"Wow. You were as much of a hero as he was. And now you're married."

"So we are."

The two went off to look things over. Tarmo sidled over to say, "You know she'll want to talk to Anna all the way there."

"Better your sister than me. She'll be nicer to her."

We entered the carrier to find a couple rows of slightly shabby seats ready for us. They must carry McFee personnel here and there on occasion. Anna came and took a place — not beside me — and we were off.

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“This feels familiar to me,” Arto told us. “Often have I traveled in such ships to a job off-planet.”

“Did the end of the war have an effect on your employment?” I asked him. “The loss of the Janics must have changed things.”

He nodded slowly. “That is so. I worked more in their systems than in our own. But new jobs have opened up in the Sevens, now we are friendly again.”

“In other words,” stated Tarmo, “a good Thulean engineer will always find a place.”

The trip proved uneventful. Murmured conversation. I might have dozed off. Then we were at Fundy Base, docking at the station, not on the surface of the moon. The ship was guided into an enclosed hangar for unloading and we left it behind.

Left it behind for my W-6 and M and the beginning of a new journey.

CHAPTER 31

THE NEW COMMAND chairs had been installed. Ah, that felt good. “I think we’re both ready to be on our way, M.”

“All three of us,” the AI corrected me. “We must include Anna from now on.”

“Thoughtful of you. You didn’t pick that up from me. Let’s send our codes and request permission to shove off.”

Tarmo had said M was a reflection of me. That was both true and not. The AI already had a personality at our first encounter but it was as that of a child, to make a not quite accurate analogy. Not fully formed.

For some reason, M bonded with me almost immediately. Not with Errol, who had first piloted the ship in which he was installed. He had refused to even speak with my cousin. I feel that way about Errol occasionally.

A few minutes later we were pulling away from Fundy Station and gradually accelerating. I’d jump when we had more speed and distance. First to Ataensi, an orange star visible on my screen, though its red dwarf companion was not. I would be able to sense both when I donned my headband and interfaced with the jump drive.

Five passengers remained, Sacky and Aleks having left us. Soon only one passenger and the opportunity to set the beauty of this vast universe before Anna. Of existence itself. No, she’d never see it quite the way I did. I knew that. It was a bond I shared with Jeanne Freneau. Perhaps all jump pilots felt something of it.

“Time for our first jump,” I announced. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

A minute or so later, Tarmo joined me, settling into the other new chair. “We’re at Ataensi?”

“We are. I’ll hop on over to Hermitage as soon as I’ve caught my breath.” Not that so simple a jump took much out of me. The next would be harder, targeting a dim red dwarf. “Then on to Oz, I suppose.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Suppose?”

Now that Oz was part of the Sevens, ships no longer jumped directly between Scotian space and Thule. That didn’t mean they couldn’t.

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"I'm fairly sure I could target Thule from Hermitage and bypass Oz, but there's no sense in making that risky a jump."

"Not with us aboard! I hope you don't intend to put my sister at risk, Jack."

"Not by my jumping," I promised. I couldn't speak to other dangers that might come along.

I might even be able to jump to Janus from here. I'd come from Avignon via Janus. Maybe I'd try an alternate route going the other direction. Or on the way back. Or even when I headed to college again! I was avoiding making much in the way of plans.

"Targeting Hermitage," I announced. "And we're there, folks. Thanks for flying McFee!"

"You should start up a commercial line," said Tarmo. "Your brother and cousin were both making noise about the idea but neither seemed willing to jump in."

"Things always sound good until one realizes how much drudgery will be involved. I'm going to take a few minutes before heading to Oz."

"There should be no problems passing through the system."

"If we land at any distance, I'll just send our codes as a polite way of letting them know we dropped by, and jump out again immediately. We can be on our way before any transmission reaches a station or planet."

"But maybe not a patrolling ship."

"They can be a nuisance," I admitted. It wasn't terribly long since I'd been making such patrols.

On went my headband. From Hermitage one could peek, so to speak, out of the Scotian Group, into more accessible space. A relatively massive star was the closest gravity source. I knew that to be Oz's yellow sun, fairly comparable to that of Scotia. That dimmer point over there would be Thule and off to the side was Janus. Both orange suns. The trinary system of Trinity lay the other direction; it was a Seven world too, now.

I did manage to do an in and out at Oz, sending our identifiers and jumping immediately toward Thule. "Pretty close," I commented as we popped into the system. "On the right side of the sun, anyway." I sent

in our codes and a request to dock at Thule Station. It took a few minutes for a reply to get back to us.

That reply directed us to use the military docks. Unexpected but not in any way concerning.

"Who's in charge now?" I asked Tarmo. "I know Tumen left when the Janics pulled out."

"Colonel Lindgren. I barely know her, being posted to the planet these days."

Maybe she could tell us why we were being directed to the military side of the station. If we spoke to her, which seemed unlikely. I'd deliver my passengers, maybe have a beer with them in the canteen, and then Anna and I would be off.

Somewhat later, control at Thule Station called to ask, "Do you mind using an open dock? All the enclosed ones are taken at the moment."

"As long as I don't have to moor outside the docks altogether," I replied. "The last time I did that, my ship was blown up."

"No worry, Mister McFee. That was the incident where you saved Captain Alander, wasn't it? That's a bit of a legendary story here."

"Nice to be remembered. What are my docking coordinates?"

"Being sent."

I'd try to take it in on my own as much as possible. This ship had a lot of mass for tugs to move around. More than my old Nativ, while having less fine maneuvering ability.

"We're going to dock shortly," I announced. I assumed everyone was still in the lounge and paying attention. One of these screens could undoubtedly show them to me. I might ask M about it sometime.

"And then you and my sister will be alone," commented Tarmo. "Whatever will you find to talk about all the way to Earth and back?"

"Not about you, you may be assured." I decided to give him a reasonably serious answer after that. "I'm not that good at conversation. I think you know that. I tend to lecture or talk about myself."

"A lecture for every system you visit." The Thulean shook his head. "Poor Anna."

"They can be quite fascinating. Here we go." Between M and me

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and two or three little tugs, we got the ship into its berth, and a docking tube was extended to our entry lock.

Thule Station. Almost home for me, at one time. More importantly, the place I'd met Anna Gallen.

I joined my friends and crossed over to it.

CHAPTER 32

A SCREEN INSIDE displayed the various ships docked in this area. I'd never had much opportunity to view my ship's exterior, not that it was particularly interesting. The W-6 had the common tubular — more or less — shape of space craft, especially those that were fitted with jump elements, a filament of super-heavy matter mounted along their center line. Ships without jump capability could be pretty much any shape but if they were intended to go at all fast they should have some streamlining. Even in 'empty' space, drag increased with speed.

The twin main engines sat well back and reasonably close to the fuselage. Typical also of the W series, the four rear maneuvering tubes were placed wider than the norm. Four more of the same sort were installed at the front, about three-quarters of the way up. I'm sure I have mentioned sometime they were all more powerful than the norm. That only partly offset the mass of the jump drive.

Little made it stand out from the other ships here. That was to the good.

"So who's this coming?" wondered Anna. A uniformed man was hurrying our direction. Most personnel here went about in green coveralls.

"No one I recognize," her brother answered. "You were stationed here more recently than me."

A youngster, even compared to me. He looked us over quickly and gave a self-satisfied nod. We were all accounted for, apparently. "Welcome back to Thule. Princess Christiana, the queen sends her greeting." He turned to my wife. "Anna Gallen-McFee, Lisi also greets you and invites you and your friends to the royal residence."

I thought I knew what this was about. So did Christie, of course. It was going to be both a nuisance and an honor. "Accept," I whispered, but loud enough everyone could hear me.

"Um, yes, we accept the queen's, um, gracious invitation," she managed to mumble.

"Excellent. A shuttle should be ready to take you to the planet."

We followed him down one the station's metal-walled corridors. They all looked the same to me but people somehow found their way

BLIND JUMP

around. Our ride was military and close by. The times I'd gone down to Thule before, I'd had to take the regularly scheduled commercial shuttle. "I don't recognize the type," I admitted, on glimpsing it on a screen. "D-6 next to it." That type was too small to carry all of us.

"I thought you avoided knowing about those sorts of things," said Anna.

"That's history, not engineering," I explained.

"Jack intends to give you history lectures all the way to Earth," Tarmo informed her.

To which Gunner added, "And back."

I figured we'd find a few other things to do. We proceeded down a docking tube to enter the shuttle.

Arto had patiently followed our lead so far. "Does anyone know what's going on?" he wondered.

"The queen wants to know why I married your daughter instead of hers," I told him.

Anna was willing to run with it. "It is true," she said, "that everyone thought he would end up with Vili." Herself included. Myself included, for that matter.

Arto looked more than a little skeptical. "Or she might be giving someone an award," I went on. "I'm certainly due for another medal or two."

"As is Anna," Gunner reminded us. Christie just looked smug.

And my wife became suddenly pensive. "Am I even a Thulean anymore?"

"Unless you formally renounce your rights," I told her. I had checked on that, you can be sure. The same went for me in regards to Scotia. "In fact, I seem to be a Thulean now, as well."

"And what of the dozen children we plan to have?"

"If they're blond they'll have to be Thuleans," I decided. We settled into seats and were shortly on our way. The trip proved uninteresting. Down to a port — it might have been one of those I'd landed at before — and onto a large enclosed air car. The royal family's own, I guessed, from the less than ostentatious crown painted near its nose.

As much of the Thulean population, the royals lived in one of the underground cities. Those had provided the most practical way of life

for the first settlers. Now it was part of their culture. Into a tunnel we descended. I could see lots of uniforms along the way.

Gunner might have sighed. She made some sort of noise anyway. "Back to work," she said. "I may be in your detail now you're here, Christie."

I was a little surprised to hear the princess tell her friend, "That would be a waste of your talents. I'm fairly certain we'll see you in a higher post."

"You and Tarmo are going to turn into fat bureaucrats," I informed her.

Arto appeared to approve of the thought. "It is good to see all my children well settled," spoke he. "That includes you now, Jack."

"But he's not going to get fat," Anna let her father know.

"Nor be a bureaucrat!" No matter what machinations my mom might have moving.

Anna frowned. Her job at Summit Up had halfway turned her into one. I wondered if she had been happier in her armory on Thule Station, training and equipping the staff.

But I could see she'd become moody, dejected even, working as an instructor later, on the planet. She might have felt her life had become pointless, and was ready to run off to a new world and start over. Tempted to, anyway. I don't know if she would have followed through. Fortunately, I didn't need to find out.

Gunner chose to play tour guide, as she served in the queen's security. "The royal family lives much like everyone else on Thule," she said. "Except with more office space. There will be guest rooms available for you."

Tarmo took it up. "Some of the diplomats are housed nearby. Others prefer to keep more distance. The government offices are mostly separate."

I knew decentralization was the rule on Thule.

"Here we are," announced our young officer, as we pulled up at the mouth of a corridor. "There are rooms nearby designated for your use. An aidie will show you to them. And I am to deliver this to Captain Gallen."

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"That is Missus Gallen-McFee," she informed him, taking the proffered folded paper. "I am no longer in the military."

We bunched around Anna as she casually perused the white page. "A list of honors. Oh. I see I am to be knighted." She glared at me from beneath lowered brows. "You knew about this," she accused.

"I suspected. Vili told me something of the sort was in the works."

A small aidie bot rolled up. "Please follow," it requested, and spun around to proceed up the hall.

"Tarmo and I shall stay in my own quarters here," said Gunner. "You may share them if you wish, Arto."

"Best I see what the queen has to offer first," he responded. Sensible fellow, Arto.

Two spaces were made available to us, much like any others on Thule; Arto chose to use one, Anna and I the other. Christiana, of course, had her own rooms here. Her husband might even be in them, waiting for her. A pilot during the war, I had no idea what Nils Lempsen did now. Maybe just prince stuff — public appearances and such.

Anna and I would save any appearances for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 33

ANNA HAD ORDERED breakfast be delivered. She knew the ins and outs of Thulean apartment living far better than I. It was to be assumed there were nearby cafeterias where one could take a meal. Maybe the royal family ate at them.

But I was entirely willing to let a bot bring some rolls and coffee. Our table unfolded from the floor in the middle of the tiny — by Scotian standards — living room. The bedroom had proven even tinier. The whole suite was scarce larger than the rooms in which I had slept back at Dummit Downs.

“Mid-morning, says the announcement,” Anna told me. “I guess I should dress up some.”

“Too bad you didn’t pack your wedding gown.”

She continued without acknowledging my contribution. “It was simpler when I could wear my uniform.” Arto had joined us. I suspected he had already visited the cafeteria. He’d been an early riser in the brief time I’d known him.

An aidie would undoubtedly be dispatched to fetch us.

Wrong. Gunner was sent to fetch us. “I’m back on duty already,” she announced. “We’ll see if Christiana is right about me being promoted.”

“What of Tarmo?” asked Arto.

“He naturally felt the need to check in with his office, but he intends to stay with us until you head off. New job, right?”

“Yes, out among Olaf’s moons.”

Saint Olaf I knew to be one of the gas giants in the Thule system. Don’t ask to name the others nor the order in which they are arranged.

The relatively large, diffusely lighted room we entered might be called the throne room except no thrones were to be found. A raised dais performed pretty much the same function. A meeting hall or conference room I’d call it anywhere else. It had a strong resemblance to the space in which Gunner and Tarmo had wed. For all I knew, it could be the same one.

Probably not. I’d come to recognize that there was a certain sameness to Thulean rooms. There was Christie. No husband. All strangers

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the rest of them. Some I suspected were not Thuleans. Tarmo slipped in, taking a look around before joining us.

"A few reporters," he noted, "though it's not a very newsworthy event. That's the Ursan ambassador, isn't it, Gunner?"

"She was interested for some reason." Gunner didn't show much interest herself.

"Maybe," I conjectured, "because my wife is being honored for killing some of her operatives."

"That was mostly you," muttered said wife.

"A family effort. We complete each other!"

Only Arto chuckled at that. I decided I liked my father-in-law.

"Will those receiving honors today please move to the front?" someone requested. I couldn't see who. "It will help things move along for all of us."

She sounded almost apologetic for asking. For living in so regimented a society, Thuleans are astonishingly unregimented personally. I've sure I've mentioned before that the military refuses to salute anyone. That's pretty common knowledge throughout the galaxy. The little part we inhabit, that is.

I think that's what I liked most about them. That and giving me Anna. It's not that we Scotians are fond of authority either, you understand, but our social structure requires a bit of it.

Seven of them, including Anna, made a rough fringe at the front of the small gathering. I saw Queen Lisi enter from one side. She did not step up onto the dais but stood before it, as the mistress of ceremonies read off names. The first was a knight being elevated to thane; the remainder, as Anna, commoners being knighted.

"Anna Gallen-McFee!"

She stepped forward. "Anna Gallen-McFee, esteemed citizen," spoke the queen, "for courage and service, I confer upon you the rank and title of Knight of Thule, with all the privileges attendant. Wear your knighthood well, Sir Anna."

And Anna stepped back. That's all there was to it. If I were inclined to criticize Thuleans, their lack of a sense of theater would be near the top of my list.

Each honoree had their turn and then Lisi simply stepped into the

crowd and began greeting those attending. In the background came the announcement, "A reception will be held in the adjoining room. All are invited."

I assumed that meant food so I headed that direction, only to be cut off by a stocky woman in a sober uniform-like suit. A dusky blue, it was. There are planets with skies that color. I wouldn't want to live on one of them.

Tarmo, taking his father's arm, dropped back. Anna did not; I suspect she went into bodyguard mode.

"Our congratulations, Sir Anna," said the woman, "and congratulations to both of you on your marriage. I am Tani James, the Ursan ambassador here."

I acknowledged her with, "We thank you, Madame Ambassador," and a rather formal nod. Despite their claims otherwise, Ursans tend to be fond of their titles.

"You are most welcome. You go on your honeymoon, now?"

"And nothing but our honeymoon," I stated. She could make what she wanted of that.

It got a surprisingly broad smile. Yet James then felt it needful to say, "We are not entirely sure what to make of you, Jack McFee, nor of how your family might be involved. There are those in our administration who wonder if you might be working for the Romans."

The church? "I must admit that almost makes sense."

"You would be aware of their objections to our union with Boethius."

Their annexation, she meant. I knew enough not to say that aloud, even if I answered to no one.

That does not mean I wasn't tempted. "I suspect my instructors on Avignon would not approve of me neglecting my studies."

"Be certain not to neglect your wife either," she advised as we slowly made our way into the adjoining room. "Things have shifted," she said. "During the war some unofficial collaboration with the Aigleans and their allies took place. Now our goals and theirs no longer align. The Ursan League certainly has no quarrel with you or your Scotian Group."

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I might have a quarrel with them, but that was personal. "I do not in anyway represent Scotia, madame."

She nodded to these words but I sensed she saw them only as words. Her stock in trade, the means to her end, and undoubtedly other clichéd metaphors. "Others from our Ursan League may contact you. Or they may not. I am not always kept informed of such things. I must make my rounds now. The best of luck to the both of you."

With that she turned away to speak with others. Anna whispered, frowning, "Are the Ursans and Aigleans enemies now?"

"Rivals. They have their eyes on the same prizes along their borders."

"The only Ursans I've known have tried to kill us." She glanced toward the ambassador. "Tani James would not hesitate to order it."

"Fortunately for us, she has no reason. The Aigleans still might." And certain Scotian traitors who had been their allies.

"Oh. When I remember Father John was an Aiglean, I find it hard to hate them. I think the queen is coming to talk with us." She nudged my ribs a little too hard with her elbow. "Probably going to scold you for being fickle and marrying me instead of her daughter."

In truth, the last time I had spoken with Lisi she hadn't been optimistic about Vili and me. Maybe I hadn't been myself.

Unlike the woman at my side, the queen's appearance did not announce 'Thulean.' She was as much an average human as I was. But better dressed.

"Your highness," I greeted her.

"Hi, Jack. Anna, I hope you are being nice to this boy."

My wife grinned. "As much as he deserves."

"Oh, poor Jack. I might ask after my daughter but Gunilla and Christiana have already provided more than enough details."

"Those three have a tight bond," I observed.

"Yes. I expect Vilma and Gunilla to rise together. My daughter might be offered a diplomatic role when she completes her education."

And Gunner would go along for the ride. "If she isn't too busy writing popular books," I said. The girl was becoming famous in her own right. She might even give her brother real competition for the crown, when it came time to choose a new monarch.

"There is that," Lisi admitted. "And she writes to me about possibly furthering her education. Doctor Vilma Lempsen — she is, of course, competing with you."

"Someone needs to," felt Anna.

"But not from close up. You would have been too much for her, Jack, had you remained together. Not intentionally, of course."

My wife agreed. "He needs someone who can fight back."

Physically and mentally. Anna and I could adjourn to an exercise room, beat on each other, and come out as much in love as ever. And she was entirely willing to tell me when I was being an idiot. It happens now and again.

Vili was, by most measures, brilliant, but unwilling to discuss ideas, much less debate them. Maybe her training had something to do with that. Royals are taught not to take sides.

"I do trust both of you will remain Vili's friends," said the queen. "She will no longer have Christiana with her on Scotia."

"Jack's grandfather would always make her welcome. Elsa is staying there too, for now."

"But I'll be off to New Rome again," I reminded them both. "Probably for years yet."

"Oh. Maybe I should wish for friends for you, Anna."

"As do I," I said. "She works too hard."

"Someone has to!" She gave us a moment to chuckle at that before adding, "In truth, Jack's sister-in-law has become my best friend on Scotia."

"The one with the baby? You two must get busy so he has a cousin to play with."

"We shall take it under advisement, your highness," I replied.

"Ha, perhaps you are the one destined for a diplomatic career, Jack McFee-Gallen."

"His worst nightmare." Anna knew me.

"Yet I saw Tani James waylay you right after the ceremony."

I gave Anna a sidelong look. She pretended not to notice. "We felt it would be best to listen to what she had to say."

"No doubt." Nor was there any doubt that the queen had noticed

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our silent exchange. "Tani has been here a while. We sometimes play cards. She is competent and knows better than to cheat."

Anna volunteered, "Neither of us cares much for games."

True enough, but no reason to tell anyone. It did get a faint smile from Lisi. "I am not at all surprised. But I am sure you both know you were playing one with the ambassador."

"Is there anything more we should know of our opposing player?" I asked.

"Not much. She draws little attention to herself. Her husband comes and goes, and draws even less attention. He is, of course, a spy."

CHAPTER 34

THE LARGE RECEPTION area and lounge, with its surrounding second tier of stores and offices, remained mostly unchanged. Those who passed through were different. Sevens and Burkuts. They wouldn't have been seen here during the war. I'm too young to know about the time before then. Maybe this was just a return to the way things had been.

Fewer Scotians, perhaps, and definitely fewer Janics. To be sure, Janus was now part of the Burkut Union.

Anna and I had returned to Thule Station by commercial shuttle. Gunner and Tarmo were back to their respective duties, Arto off to his new position. I assume Christie found something to do, as well. We'd had a farewell party, small and low-key last night. Just the two of us now, ready to get going — at last — on our honeymoon trip.

We intended to only pass through here on our way to the military sector and our ship. M would be waiting. That would make three of us, wouldn't it? I was willing to count him, except when we wanted some privacy.

"That man is watching us," whispered Anna.

I sneaked a look. Paolo Hill. I did not know whether to use his name or to even acknowledge his existence. He might be undercover here. "I know him. A Scotian agent." I assumed he worked for the Ministry of Information. There was no particular reason for that assumption. "Let's stop in the cafe over there for a beer."

"We could get it free in the military canteen."

"You're getting as cheap as me," I informed her. "I want to give him a chance to make contact." If he wished. If not, no matter.

The man did slide in opposite us a minute later. "How should I introduce you?" I asked him.

"Paolo will do. Anonymity is no longer an option for me, at least not here or at Oz. Officially, I am a diplomatic courier but no one is fooled by that."

"So most will think little of two Scotians having a drink."

"If you order one," Anna pointed out.

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Which he did, from the table com, before saying, "There are other Scotians on this station and not all are necessarily on our side."

Like the ones I'd dealt with only a few days ago. "I would think those are our main concern now, not Aigleans or Ursans."

Hill nodded to this. A servbot rolled up with his beer and he paused for a sip. He set it on the metal table and seemed to ponder it a moment. "At the moment, the Aigleans are, if not friendly, at least peaceful."

"If only because they are dealing with their own internal turmoil."

"The Ursans have been aggressively expansionist since the closing days of the war, but that does seem to be waning. They may have simply picked all the low-hanging fruit."

"But again, they have no particular interest in us." Neither the Scotian Group nor, I hoped, me personally.

Anna nudged me, nodding toward a man approaching us, tallish with graying hair. A dark compact woman was half a step behind. "Might I join you?" he asked.

Our Scotian agent did little more than glance at him. "You may as well, Adrik."

From his accent, Ursan, though his Lingo proved impeccable. He took a seat, his companion slipping in beside him. "Adrik Moldovan," he introduced himself. "And my aide, Kiska Mur. My wife told me you would be passing through, Mister and Missus McFee."

Wife? "He means the ambassador, I think," Anna informed me.

Of course. It was good my wife could help me see the obvious. My mind was forever throwing up too many possibilities.

The Ursan fished a pipe from his pocket. "May I smoke?"

Smoking was pretty much unknown on Scotia or anywhere in the Group. I'd seen Janics with pipes on Thule Station, but not Thuleans. I would think some might have picked up the habit.

But it had not been uncommon on some Corvan worlds. Tobacco, hemp, a few other herbs. I couldn't see the appeal.

"I'd rather you didn't," Anna told him. She sounded pretty firm about it. I noticed a twitch of a smile come and go on Mur's face.

He slipped the pipe back into his pocket and got immediately to it. "We wish to offer our apology for recent unfortunate events, Jack

McFee. We have and had no reason to desire your death. In fact, orders to abort their mission had been sent to the agents on Thule."

I noted he said 'the' agents, not 'our.' "But they didn't receive them in time."

"It is so. Often a problem with covert operations. More so in that we were not directing it."

But aware of what was going on. Paolo broke in. "And what of your operations with the Scotian conspirators?"

"Never really our show. We provided support to the Aigleans and that is at an end. We prefer a stable Scotia."

As, I imagined, did the Aigleans. Now. "You may be certain," I told him, "that I continue to hold both Ursans and Aigleans responsible, though I've no idea which individuals to blame. It is the Scotian traitors I want to see pay." All of those were guilty.

Of what? Mostly of killing my friend. That was personal. I know I can be detached when it comes to political questions. I recognize I do not feel a great deal of loyalty to Scotia, as an abstract idea. Individuals, real humans, are another matter.

Moldovan, if a typical — or stereotypical — Ursan probably had the opposite mindset. Yet he let me know, "The Aigleans have a more intimate knowledge of who has been involved in that than we do. They do not share intelligence with us nor we with them."

"And," said Paolo, "they might feel it expedient to knock off a few lower level conspirators to prevent any connection to their activities. It would prove an embarrassment to the current leadership."

"On a fairly low level," agreed Adrik.

"Indeed. There are more important matters demanding their attention."

"So don't go thinking you're important," Anna warned me.

"Only to you, I hope."

"Hmmpf."

Moldovan went on. "We do know the names of some conspirators in your Scotian government. Others, we suspect."

"And they have already handed a few names over to me," said Paolo.

"It seemed to our advantage to reveal some identities. We assume he

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has sent them along.” He shot a quick look at the agent. “We may have more later.”

This was all interesting but I did not know why it was being shared with me. “Do I have any part in this?”

Hill did not answer until he’d gathered up his thoughts a bit. “You might have done better to ignore me and go along to your ship. An open meeting with known Scotian and Ursan agents may trigger another attempt on your life. Yet, we thought it best you know what is going on.”

“And the boy has proper clearance?” asked Kiska Mur. They were the first words she had contributed.

“Maybe not officially but he’s been in the loop from the beginning. In fact, the loop apparently began with him.”

With the blowing up of my ship outside this station. The first evidence of saboteurs within our forces.

“Also,” continued Paolo, “I understand he was being seriously considered for the job I’m after.”

“Jeffers’s old position? Not on your life.”

He sobered. “It’s your life that concerns us at the moment.”

“It is so,” agreed Moldovan. “The main threat to Jack will be Scotians but they could hire assassins from anywhere, Ursans included.”

“Maybe you should lend him Kiska.”

Paolo joked, I was sure, but I felt obligate to object. “I don’t think my wife would approve.”

Anna snickered. “Don’t be silly, Jack. I’m the one she’d try to seduce.”

Mur’s smirk told me she was right.

“Oh. Well, she’d be in the way regardless.”

CHAPTER 35

"I WONDER IF either of our suspects was on that list of names," said Anna. She sat beside me in the other command chair as I prepared for departure from Thule Station. A few letters that had caught up with us rested in her lap, unopened.

"Caldwell and Nancy Aruna? They seemed less likely after Zasha Walter was found out."

"But not completely cleared. Oh, this one's from Vili." She tapped the seam with her fingertip to open it. "Hmm. The usual stuff. Back to her studies and so on. Something about an historical event. That's for you, of course. Ah, Livi Radia invited her to move into her apartment, now that Christie is gone."

"And she accepted?"

"So it seems. They're good enough friends."

"But not close."

"No. I doubt that will change, don't you?"

"No telling. All set, M?"

"Awaiting authorization, Jack." A pause so brief to be hardly noticeable. "The tugs all seem to be busy at the moment."

I could take the W-6 out on my own but decided not to upset anyone.

"Livi's family are competitors of yours, right?"

"Radia Associates competes with the McFee Concern. Admittedly, both companies are largely controlled by the families for which they are named."

"That's kind of a roundabout way of repeating what I said."

"I suppose. There are plenty of other competitors out there. We don't run Scotia, after all."

She thought on that only a moment. "It sometimes looks that way."

"One reason we don't get involved in politics."

"Openly," amended M.

"We should let you run things, M," said Anna. "I'm sure you'd do a better job. You and House."

"The king and queen. There are the tugs." A few minutes later we'd been nudged away from the station and I began a gradual acceleration.

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“The Radas,” I said, returning to our discussion, “have long been competitors of the McFees. Not on the same level but important enough. Group Supply sends contracts their way so we McFees don’t get too full of ourselves.”

“And has it worked?”

“Not yet.” I’d slipped on my headband. “There’s a very dim red star over that way.” I pointed it out on the screen. Much enhanced or she wouldn’t have been able to see it. “I became a bit famous for making that jump. And back again. Coming this way is easier.”

“You are not going to attempt it now, are you, Jack?” asked M.

“Nope. We’re going through Janus.” Its orange sun was relatively easy to target from here. “You spent time in the system, didn’t you, Anna?”

“Only for a few days, while coming and going from Jaak. I visited both planets.”

Janus got its name from the fact two planets suited to human life revolved around the orange sun, planets of similar mass and composition. The conceit is they look inward and outward. Janus itself is the slightly larger and further out planet. Colder than Scotia but with plenty of water, not to mention snow. The inner planet is named Verna and is a little warmer — the equatorial regions are a bit too hot for human habitation and generally dry deserts.

“We won’t be going to Jaak, nor to Varra. I’ve never been in either.” These were two sparsely inhabited systems that had been part of the Jannic group. Now Burkut, but still not suitable for much but a bit of mining.

Anna, I knew, had undergone military training on Jaak. “You didn’t accompany the combined fleet that assembled at Jaak and Varra, did you?” she asked me.

“Only as far as Thule. Ready to jump.” I focused on the orange star and took us there.

I sent in our codes and jumped again.

“Where are we now?” asked Anna.

“Another Burkut system. We work along the border of Burkut and Aiglean space for a few jumps. I’ll rest a little first.”

“And when can we take a real rest?”

“Resnovae should do. We could even visit the planet if you’d like.”

“Tarmo visited there as part of a Janic delegation. He said the people never work and everything is done by robots.”

“Maybe a bit of an exaggeration. I do intend to visit to do some research someday.”

“Best we avoid it now and prevent you from being tempted. We should be learning more about each other on this trip.”

“Should I write a paper?”

“I don’t think you could present it to the priests at your university.”

Good point. “I’m ready for another jump or two. Sometimes I think about just jumping at random, further and further from known space.”

“Isn’t that what our ancestors did?”

“Pretty much.” I locked onto our destination. Go. “But with bigger ships.”

“We’d make a awfully small colony.”

“Yes, I’d want several more women along. Codes sent. Let’s go again.”

A few jumps and a few rests later, we were at Resnovae’s yellow sun. We stayed there a while. One might even say our honeymoon truly began then. M discreetly gave us our privacy.

But we had to get moving again sometime. No matter how much we were enjoying ourselves, we would eventually get bored. “From here we will be entering the Old Worlds, those closest to Earth,” I told my wife..

“The ones where humans first settled. They’re nonaligned, right?”

“At present. A network of systems in a loose economic union with the Aigleans existed before the war. When fighting began, many questioned that connection and formed an alliance of neutral systems, the Horus Federation.” I noted the look Anna gave me. “I’ve slipped into lecturer mode again, haven’t I?”

“Now and then will be permitted. I’ve heard of Horus. Is it on this itinerary you planned, Jack?”

Without her input. A mild, implied admonishment and one I knew I deserved. “We could add it, if you’re interested. It would be somewhat beyond Earth.”

“Should I be interested?”

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"Less so than me and I have no great desire to visit. Too many historians have written about it and the first wars fought in space."

"So straight on to Earth and then we turn around. That's fine with me. Earth is part of their Federation?"

"Sort of. Earth and all the outposts and stations near it are maintained by a coalition of the Old Worlds."

"Like a park."

"As good a way to put it as any. A tourist attraction too, for those who can afford to travel that far."

"It's central to everything, isn't it?"

"Not exactly. M, can you pull up a map of inhabited space for us?" There it was. "More of an oblong than a sphere, and Earth is closer to the one side."

Anna took it in and commented, "The inner side. Like Thule and Scotia."

"They're even closer to the inner edge of the Orion Arm. We've primarily been traveling laterally through it."

"I've never thought much about the universe beyond our own systems. There's an awful lot out there."

Without anyone asking, M pulled back the view to reveal the entire galaxy. Our tiny jellybean of inhabited systems almost disappeared. "And galaxies beyond," I murmured, "and beyond them."

"But not infinite. That's what Jeanne told me."

"Supposedly not, yet unfathomably vast." I wondered if Freneau had mentioned the concept of infinite universes existing. I wasn't going to. "Bring it back in, M, will you? To just the old worlds."

There were plenty enough of those. I pointed out a yellow sun, somewhat near our position. "That's where I go to school. We can stop there if we want. Maybe on the way back."

"Maybe," Anna allowed. "I can understand you wanting to show me off."

"I do that everywhere we go."

She shook her head. "Again? You have to stop sounding like your cousin."

"Women always seemed to like it when Errol said things like that."

"But I already like you. Most of the time."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

“Very well. Only insults from here out. That bluish star is Sirius. I promised John Barbosa I’d visit it.”

“Then we’ll have to. It seems quite close to Earth.”

“It is. Sirius was an important early step on mankind’s journey outward. Especially as a source of super-heavy elements.”

Anna pondered the tiny blue dot for a few seconds. “Don’t expect me to read the paper you write about it.”

“And here I intended to dedicate it to you.”

“Dedicate it to John instead.”

Yes. I would.

CHAPTER 36

“THERE IS A corridor of compressed space-time around the ship, created by gravitational forces, that of our jump element interacting with that of our targeted star,” I explained to Anna. “Or maybe there isn’t but no one has come up with a better explanation. More important is how we control it. How we target a star and jump to it. The explanations for that are every bit as sketchy.”

“Real helpful, Jack.”

“Yes, isn’t it? What we do know is that some people have a talent for visualizing the jump. We’re just born with it, like a gift for art or music.”

“So it doesn’t take any brains.”

“Not to jump, I guess. Jumping safely would be another matter. We do have to make judgment calls.” I slipped on my headband and began scanning for our next destination. “Which is why it’s a good idea to have a pilot even with a Li Drive.”

“But not necessary.”

“No, it’s not. The possibility always remains that a Li Drive’s brain will lock onto the wrong sun and jump in some unexpected direction. Perhaps even into unknown space. AIs just do that sort of thing sometimes. No offense intended, M!”

“You said nothing I do not already know, Jack.”

“That’s what we saw happen to Mike Gordon’s ship, isn’t it?” asked Anna.

“So it seems, but that was a unique circumstance.” I looked to my chosen target and went to it. “Landed far out. This should be a good place to sit and rest a few minutes.”

“Whatever you need.” She knew I was mostly talking to myself, anyway. “I know you’re right about AIs. Sooner or later a robot will do something we consider incredibly stupid but apparently makes sense to them. That’s why they’re not trustworthy for military applications.”

“Except for very narrow combat tasks, such as mobile mines.” Those I’d had experience with. Too much experience.

“And they do not have an instinct to survive in the sense we do. Survival is only important as a means to fulfill their purpose.”

"This is a side of you I haven't seen before, Anna."

She shrugged. "Just practical knowledge."

It was a good thing one of us was practical. "I could jump to Avignon from here but I think I'll bypass it. If any mail followed us it might be there when we make our way back."

"More likely they'd hold it at Thule."

Unless it were too important to wait. I had let Tarmo know that. Hill, too.

"I've never been further than here," I admitted.

"Aren't people pretty much the same everywhere?"

"Oh, they all have two heads where we're going."

"That sounds interesting. As long as both of them speak Lingo we'll be all right."

"Or one can translate for the other."

M broke in. "You are joking, aren't you? I am used to your silliness, Jack, but when Anna joins in it confuses me a little."

"Really? I'm sorry about that. Just remember she can be every bit as silly as me."

"Well, maybe not quite," she added. "I'll try to a sober counterbalance to my husband. You still like me, don't you?"

"Certainly, Anna."

"M and I have similar tastes," I claimed. "Of course, he was going to like you."

"Though not at once," the AI informed her. "I'd had hopes for Jack and Elsa Alander."

"M admired her engineering skills. As, apparently, did Errol."

"That's a much better match," felt Anna.

"And a lot more obvious than the two of us. Though Stewie was taken with you at once."

"Good old Steward. We do get along well." She found her way back to the subject of our trip. "But they do speak Lingo where we're going, don't they?"

"They speak Lingo everywhere." Almost everywhere. No point in qualifying it. "Thanks, in part, to robots. Pretty much all robots have it as their default language."

M corrected me on that. "Default human language."

BLIND JUMP

"You all talk numbers to each other when we aren't paying attention, don't you?" asked Anna.

"Something like that," he admitted.

"I wonder if one can talk dirty in numbers," I mused.

"You might be surprised."

I decided to leave that line of inquiry where it was. "There are planets where English or Latin or some other tongue is the local standard. I believe there's less of that in the old worlds."

"They have very mixed populations," said M. "As I am sure you know, Jack."

"I think I've read it sometime. It's not quite my area of expertise." I studied the screen before me. "We're getting close. I need to decide on my approach. Through Kentori, maybe?"

"Alpha Kentori," came M's correction.

"So it is. If I want to visit Sirius, Alpha Kentori would be a bit out of the way. I can jump directly to Earth from Sirius."

"Or vice-versa?" asked Anna. "Why not visit it on the way back?"

"No reason at all. It would make more sense." I pointed out another dot on the screen. "That yellow star over there is Tau Ceti. Definitely out of our way."

"And not inhabited," M pointed out.

"Except by miners. Full of asteroids always banging into each other."

I'm not sure Anna quite bought that. "Lots of little red ones," She noted.

"And we'll be jumping through some of those systems on our way."

I might as well get moving again. I picked one. "Here we go."

CHAPTER 37

“JUMPING DIRECTLY INTO the Earth system is prohibited,” the voice on the com told us. “You must board a commercial flight from Barney.” She sounded bored. It would be a message frequently repeated.

But it had been a good idea to ask about the procedure for visiting the birthplace of mankind. We had landed near the red dwarf commonly called Proxie. It orbits the other two suns of Kentori so far out as to be easy to target. Some posit the star is not part of the same system at all.

“So we jump to this Barney next?” Anna asked.

“There’s not much point in sitting here. None of the planets are habitable nor said to be worth visiting.” As was typical with red dwarf systems. “We could stop at the station, though. There’s a sort of museum there, I understand.”

“A better one exists in the Alpha system,” M let us know.

“The first system anyone ever jumped to, right?”

“On purpose,” I replied. “Alpha Kentori was the first successful targeted jump to another star. There are other systems close to Earth but they are red dwarfs and harder to lock onto.”

That would have been with the Orlova Drive, the inaugural working jump drive. Working in the sense that it could be aimed rather than making random, blind jumps. “I would like to jump into the system, just to say I’d done it.”

“And have one up on Jeanne Freneau! Let’s do it.”

Alpha Kentori was almost too close, with its two relatively massive stars. A Li Drive might have balked at the jump, maybe defaulting to Barney or one of the other dwarfs in the neighborhood. I could go roundabout that way too, if I wanted.

“I’ll target the orange one,” I muttered. Yes, to myself. There was no guarantee I’d land closer to it than the larger yellow sun.

Which was hard to ignore. It pulled me toward it, mentally, and perhaps it pulled the drive element too. I concentrated, I jumped. Not bad. Pretty far out from both stars.

BLIND JUMP

"There are no colonies here, either," I told Anna. "The two suns revolving around each other create unstable planetary conditions."

"But bases and miners and all that. Your Horus Federation maintains a presence here."

"You've been reading."

"Thanks to M." She gestured toward the screen before her. "He brought it up without me even asking."

He was learning to anticipate Anna's needs, but not drawing attention to it. "So where is this museum?"

"On a moon revolving around a gas giant revolving around the yellow sun. It's part of a mining facility."

"Sounds like something Elsa and Errol would visit."

Both of us smiled at that thought. "We'd have to shuttle to it, wouldn't we? I'd just as soon skip that."

"Me too," I admitted. "We can cruise a little and then take the jump to Barney. I really should announce us." I sent in our identification codes. If anyone objected to our presence I'd just jump out.

"Why are there two stars anyway?" Anna asked. "Or is it three?"

M was first to answer. "It is believed most binaries do not form naturally but are captured stars."

"And," I said, "it can be debated whether this is a binary or trinary."

"If Proxima is part of the system it requires half a million years to revolve around the other two stars," said M.

"I don't think we'll wait for it! People have been here for, hmm, fourteen hundred and forty-one years, right?"

"Give or take a few years, depending on which planet one lives on. We count the first jump as the year One Orlova."

"I did not pay very good attention in class when I was a little girl," Anna proclaimed.

I had no problem believing that. And I was not going to say so.

"They found no place to colonize here. I'd imagine that was a disappointment."

"But there were more stars, and more stars after those."

"And they went looking for them. None of the other close stars had habitable planets either. Or I should say, planets that could be colonized. Outposts were established and that sort of thing." My screen

took my attention. "There seems to be an asteroid field ahead on this course. Maybe a belt. I don't know how the gravity of a second star impacts those as it moves nearer and farther away."

"I could show you an analysis," offered M. He was probably joking.

A thought came to me. Undoubtedly an ill-advised thought. "Maybe we could take one home with us."

Anna laughed outright. "Like your grandfather's rock?"

"Exactly. We have a small tractor beam, don't we, M?"

"Yes, Jack." He sounded wary. As often was so, I had no idea whether he actually 'felt' that way or it was a programmed response. Just as often I realized it made no difference.

A tractor beam is simply a focused gravity field. It can't be focused over any great distance, of course, but it can pull relatively close objects toward one. Preferably objects with far less mass than ones ship. Otherwise, the ship would move toward the object!

"Just something nugget sized." I began a scan of the space immediately around the W-6.

"If we visited the museum they'd be likely to let you just pick one up," observed Anna.

"What's the fun of that?"

"Yes, let's have an adventure. Even if we'll be hunted as pirates the rest of our lives."

I hoped we weren't confusing M again. "There's a likely pebble. Can we lock on that, M?"

"Reeling it in, Jack." A moment's pause. "Now inside one of the storage pods."

"So lets get out of here before the cops get wise to us. Off to Barney with our ill-gotten goods!"

I targeted the red dwarf and jumped.

CHAPTER 38

A FULL TOURIST complex existed at Barney. Hotels, regular flights to Earth, a shuttle service to the station orbiting a small, rocky, nearly airless planet. The station itself was not for habitation. Not nearly large enough. We would be passing through it, both coming and going.

"The fees look reasonable," M told me as we were nudged up to a dock. "The facility is operated more as a public service than a business."

We found our way to a crowded terminal. Most of these people had come in on big liners, and most were from the Old Worlds. "Can't we just board a ship to Earth without shuttling down to the planet?" I asked someone who seemed to be in charge.

She shook her head. "Processing and orientation are required before you can go." The woman sounded decidedly disinterested. She might make that explanation frequently. Then she gave Anna and me a looking over and softened a tad. "You'd do well to take a hotel room when you get down there and spend some time in the museum."

I wouldn't mind seeing the museum. Or a comfortable room. We had no reason to hurry, after all. We thanked her and got in line for a shuttle.

Soon we were passing through another terminal, the one on the planet. The gravity was natural and not strong. Less even than on our ship, I thought.

More lines awaited us. And forms to fill out. Eventually, a man in a reddish-brown uniform got to us. "It's unusual for a small private ship like yours to show up," he told us. "Most of our travelers come in by liner. It's not a problem except for room reservations."

"We could always go back up and sleep on our ship," I offered. Or just wait here in this reception area. I was fairly sure some did that.

He waved a hand. "No need, no need. Scotians, eh?" He peered at our newly filled-in papers and then at me. "You're the kid in that book."

It had followed me even here. "I'm in it too!" Anna told him. "My name was changed to protect my innocence. Isn't that how the line goes, Jack?"

"Close enough," I felt.

“But it doesn’t make much sense.”

“I’ll explain it later. So, is there a room available or should we just get on the next ship to Earth?”

“Those are also booked in advance, sir. You’d have to wait until tomorrow.”

“You should have just jumped in yourself,” Anna told me.

“You wouldn’t be permitted to dock.” He gave us a bit of a lopsided smile. “Unless you had a reservation.”

“I wonder if your grandfather had to go through this.” To the clerk — or whatever his title was — she said, “He visited here a century ago.”

“Before my time. Here we go. I have a room for you and — a flight out at noon tomorrow. You must show up an hour early for a lecture or you won’t be allowed to board.”

“I thank you.” I wondered if tipping was expected. It went much against my Scotian ways. And they didn’t even know what it was where Anna came from.

The directions and key to our room were on Anna’s com. I trusted her to guide us. “That much glass makes me nervous,” I said. Floor-to-ceiling windows bounded one side of the reception area. “It is a great view, though.”

The sun was a tiny red beacon in a sky of greenish-black. Jagged hills cast sharp shadows, all tinged by the ruddy light. Some of the brighter stars showed through. That might be Earth’s sun over there. Or maybe Kentori? “Is Jaak much like that?”

“Wetter. Lots of ice and snow. On nice days we had sleet. And we *never* saw the sun.”

“Then warmer outside than this place, if only because it has more of an atmosphere. The sign says there’s a cafeteria over that way.” I nodded toward it. I had my doubts about room service here.

For that matter, I wondered how much robot labor was employed. I’d seen fewer units than the norm. Far fewer. In fact, only New Rome was more devoid of robot activity.

Chronic overpopulation had plagued the Old Worlds in the past. They still might have too many humans vying for jobs to make robot labor a good economic choice. Something else to investigate. Probably not by me.

BLIND JUMP

“Let’s check the room first,” she said. Gravity tubes had been the choice here, rather than elevators. I don’t much like them but they make some sense in a low-gravity environment. We floated up three floors.

Clutching our own luggage, I might add. No useful little robots had emerged, eager to carry the bags.

“Adequate,” felt Anna, on surveying the room. “Better than those tiny sleeping compartments on your ship.”

“If you feel crowded, remember there are two of them.” I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. Maybe even before they did. “Sorry. This trip is not turning out the way I wanted it to.”

“Grumpy Jack.” She shook her head with mock seriousness. “I knew I’d see that side of you sooner or later.”

“Maybe it’s just the inside. I’ll tuck it back in. That is a decently sized bed, isn’t it? Test it or find something to eat first?”

Anna sat down and peered at her com. She’d taken to using a hand-held a while back, just as I do, rather than a wrist-top. My excuse has been it’s less likely to catch on things but maybe it was just the grumpy side of me surfacing again.

“We can have something sent up,” she announced. “Pretty limited selection.”

“I’d just as soon observe our fellow tourists.”

“And see if they have two heads?”

“That’s certainly something I could write a paper on.” We headed back toward the lift tubes.

“People haven’t really changed much since they left Earth, have they?” she asked. “Evolved.”

“Maybe because they keep mixing and remixing. Like us.”

That wouldn’t last forever. Humans would spread further and at least some populations would become more isolated. We’d been at it less than a millennium and a half since leaving our birthplace. Give us a million years!

A million years. Mankind could spread across the entire galaxy in that time. Who knows, we might even run into other intelligent beings out there.

Service proved to be buffet style. Quite probably the same stuff we

could have had sent up to us. But without the service charge! Anna and I filled trays and found seats at one of the long tables. Made of some molded organic, I thought.

“Not really that many people here,” commented Anna. “It looks crowded because the spaces are small.”

She could give me a pretty good estimate of how many were in the room. My mind doesn’t work that way. Anna’s considered opinion was it doesn’t work at all, after I attempted to play chess with her.

“It would appear fashion is as much the same everywhere as people are,” I observed.

“For the same reason.”

True enough. People got around, news got around. We were still essentially one culture with minor local variations. We were still interconnected. And everyone here seemed to converse in Lingo. I could pick a voice out now and again from the cacophony; accents varied, to be sure, but not that much. I suspected most of these folk had spoken the language from birth.

But visitors like us, visitors from farther away, sat here and there. English had been my first language, Thulean Anna’s. Corvans, Aigleans, Ning — I had no way of knowing all their origins, nor did it much matter. Unless they were assassins seeking us! Unlikely but always possible. Anna would be aware of that too.

“You stand out a little,” I told her. I picked up a forkful of something. “I wonder what this is?”

“Probably grown in a vat like a lot of Thulean food is.” She gave a look around. “No one would give you a second look anywhere.”

“Our Scotian ancestors came from all over, even if the first ones hailed from Canadia. Some of my looks probably come from my Grandma Jun. Jun Peng before she married.”

“The one that shaped House’s personality. Tarmo told me about that.”

“Uh-huh. I never really knew her. And her husband, my Grandfather Marley, had divorced her and emigrated long before I was born.”

“Like my birth father.” She thought on that briefly. Maybe feeling a connection to Mom. “The liner to Earth is small. It carries about sixty passengers at a time to the system.”

BLIND JUMP

“You have that on your com?” I pulled out my own, though I tend to ignore it when I can. “Yes, and delivers them to a station circling the planet Mars.” I looked up at her. “That’s supposed to be a lot like Blue in the Scotian system.” Anna was familiar with Blue.

“And then regular shuttles to Earth itself. But we have to stay in the hotel on Mars.”

I wouldn’t mind catching a sunrise on mankind’s birthplace. Or a sunset. That would work just as well. “We’ll see how that goes. Back to the room?”

“You mean you don’t want to sit here and gossip with our fellow tourists?”

“Let’s avoid that as long as we can.”

CHAPTER 39

SOME MIGHT CALL the little museum on Barney disappointing. Touring it beat sitting and waiting. It was heavier on pictures than on physical artifacts. I scanned quite a bit of the displays. They might come in handy someday.

Then our orientation lecture. Mostly do and don'ts when we got to the Earth system. One of them was not to pick up anything. I didn't think I'd turn in Grandpa Jack.

"Barney," said our lecturer, "or, originally, Barney's Star, became a chosen point to jump off into space in the early days of exploration. It has served almost from the time of the very first jumps."

Easier to work with than Kentori, I would think. Someone asked, "How about during the wars?"

When they said 'wars' here they generally meant the ones that devastated Earth and several of the early colonies. People actually lobbed atomic weapons at enemy planets. A habitable planet is far too valuable for that kind of thing.

But humanity has a great capacity for going mad and harming itself. "Barney was largely left out of any action," she told the crowd. "It had little strategic value and none as a colony."

We went on a while and then were herded to a shuttle, to carry us back up to the station. To transfer to a liner. At last, on the way to Earth.

"I'm surprised you aren't up front checking out the jump drive," remarked Anna. Not that I wouldn't have been, were it permitted.

We settled into thinly padded seats in the crowded cabin. They were that same brownish-red as the crews' uniforms. "I wouldn't be surprised to see a Ceña. There are plenty still in use in older ships."

"You know how to operate one, of course."

"Freneau made certain of that. I can run all the drives currently in use. I would love to get my hands on a working Orlova."

"None left?"

"Only nonworking units in museums. They actually used a graphic interface. None of this direct linkage."

BLIND JUMP

“But they still needed someone who could visualize their target, didn’t they?”

“Very much so.”

“We are now jumping to the Sol system,” came an announcement. It crackled a little.

I’ll admit the jump was smooth. The pilot probably made the same one frequently. A large screen at the front of the cabin brought up our location. “We are near the gas planet known as Saturn,” we were informed. “It will take a few hours to reach Mars. Refreshments will be served.”

With the random ‘luck of the jump’ that would be necessary at least some times. A ringed orb appeared onscreen. Maybe the Saturn they’d mentioned.

It was followed by a recorded play. Not at all a new one. I’d seen it as a kid in the Corvan worlds. But the voices had been dubbed in with new accents. The old ones would have sounded something like Jitha Jones. I dozed off. Anna might have too. At last we pulled up to Mars Station, a pretty large installation orbiting the reddish planet.

Not comparable to those at Scotia or Oz or even Thule, admittedly. Little commercial traffic would come through here. This station existed primarily for us tourists.

“Hotel rooms are available both on the station and on the planet,” were the last words to come over the speakers as we exited.

“It’s like twice as expensive to spend the night up here. Even compared to the most costly hotel on Mars,” Anna told me, having looked it up on her com.

“You know we can afford any of them,” I reminded her, “no matter how much it goes against our natures.” I hoped one or another of my expense accounts actually would cover it. Otherwise it would have to come out of Anna’s salary. “I’d prefer the surface.”

“Me too, but we’ll have to come back up to take a shuttle to Earth.”

“All the more reason to go down to Mars and look at what’s there. The full experience!”

“And you can pick up a rock.”

We hurried through the terminal to catch the next shuttle down. No glass here to look through but screens did show Mars and Sol and

Earth, though it was just a blueish dot. A few centuries ago the planet was in such bad shape it was a brownish dot.

John had reminded me Earth had been the first terraformed planet, its environment altered by those who lived there even before humanity had ever ventured into space. Now it was being terraformed all over again, the ravages being repaired. That I wanted to see. And write about, if possible.

But the museums and libraries were on Mars. The information was there. Earth was likely to be nothing more than a guided tour.

"When I am Doctor McFee," I half-whispered to Anna, "I shall come back here and truly study Earth. For now, this is our honeymoon." And I wouldn't be allowed access as an unknown student, anyway.

"Let's hope no one tries to kill us and ruins it. If they want to when you come back, that's all right."

I ignored the joke. What I hoped was a joke. "I assume you are being as watchful as ever."

"Someone has to be."

All right, Anna. I think I was seeing her grumpy side now. A night in a luxury hotel might improve both our moods. I'd already seen to booking a room. It should be ready when we arrived on the planet.

The most expensive one? No, though not the cheapest either. But it was close to the museum. We entered the shuttle and were on our way to Mars. The first planet mankind ever colonized.

Second only to Earth in how long we'd lived there. Little ships had found their way through the emptiness to it, well before the jump drive was perfected or even theorized.

When the stars were still beyond our reach.

CHAPTER 40

“I BELIEVE THOSE are the largest windmills I’ve ever seen.” We stood there a moment, watching the huge vanes slowly rotate.

“I’m surprised to see any windmill here. With the thin atmosphere, I wouldn’t think there is sufficient wind.”

“People work with what they have,” said Anna.

Indeed they did. “Windmills are often among the first structures erected on a newly colonized planet. Plenty stand on Scotia. So many we barely notice them.”

“I know they’re on Thule too even if I didn’t get outside much to see them.”

“Well, these ones need to go into my notes. I’ve pretty much decided to write a brief history of terraforming.”

“That’s a tribute to John Barbosa too, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is.” The late priest’s area of study. He would have been off to put it into practice on a new world if — well, just if.

Anna and I stood at the edge of the town — it could probably be called a town — gazing out across the empty rust-colored landscape. The distant sun, newly risen, climbed a golden sky, creating a scene capable of holding our attention for a minute or two. No sort of suits were required outdoors, though it was chilly enough to bundle up a bit. We did wear respirators for a little extra oxygen. Hotels and shops lined the streets behind us. Also casinos. We’d been told they helped finance the operation.

And I had picked up a rock.

“Time to go,” my wife decided. The port area lay off to our — hmm, that would be south. Easy to amble over to the terminal, board an Earth-bound ship, and move on to the next leg of our trip. Fortunately, Earth and Mars weren’t on opposite sides of the sun at the moment. That would have added days, even in a fast ship. Looking at the one we intended to board, I doubted it qualified as fast.

Big varitube engines sprouted from a boxy aft section. Very out of date. McFee could sell them something better. Why the fuel economy would pay for it in no time! Best leave sales to someone else, Jack. But it wouldn’t hurt to mention it when I got home. Anna and I boarded

and were directed to a tiny cabin, intended for both travel and sleep. I had yet to see a single robot aboard.

It was a fairly large ship. Too large to land on and take off from a planet with Earth's gravity. We'd be switching to another station and riding a shuttle again. Maybe I could bring up some information about the station on my com.

Which didn't work. Apparently, not allowed to connect here. Or maybe nothing to connect to. I couldn't even reach Anna and she was sitting right beside me.

"We could be kidnapped and unable to call for help," I let her know.

"Carried off to serve as slave labor. That must be why they limit access to Earth."

"Oh, poor Anna. They'll make you toil in the mines. Some wealthy woman will want me as her sex slave, of course."

"I hope she can get her money back. There is a dining area somewhere on this ship. We may have to wander blindly till we blunder into it."

"Or follow the signs on the walls." We did, we ate. We also discovered a ship intercom, even if our personal units didn't work. Not that we had any use for it.

A couple days later our ship locked up to the Earth station. Or, to be precise, Luna Station. It revolved around the planet's rather large moon. Maybe as big as Fundy. If my com worked I could ask.

Our ancestors would have peered up at it from the planet and wondered. For millennia, hundreds of millennia, it remained unknown, unreachable. Now I lived on a far-off planet where a similar moon sailed the skies. Yes, true, Scotia has two moons. Allow me my poetic moments.

As the debarked passengers assembled in the terminal, a man stepped up to a podium to address us. "Four shuttles will carry you to a one day tour of Earth. We will get you to the surface in time to see the sunrise and not leave until the sun has set."

"We do get out in the air, don't we?" someone called.

"If you wish. The air is breathable but still too many toxins for long term exposure."

Another voice rose. "There's radiation, too."

BLIND JUMP

“Minimal now. Those who wish to remain in the shuttles may do so but the full experience includes a bit of walking around.”

I decided to speak up myself. “So we won’t get to see the moon?”

The fellow had to check some device before answering. “One should be able to glimpse it through the windows before we lift off. It’s far from full but it is rising early.”

That would have to do. We hadn’t long to wait before boarding. There seemed to be no order as to who used which shuttle. First come, first served, apparently. “That woman over there is sticking close to us,” whispered Anna.

“She might just want a look at the famous Jumping Jack. Or am I better known as Jack Mack?”

“You’ll be known as dead if you aren’t careful.”

More than one group might be wanting to keep an eye on us. Some more friendly than others. None would be likely to attempt an assassination on a crowded shuttle traveling through space. The suspect woman did not take a seat near us. I almost wondered if Anna was imagining things.

No, not Anna. I knew better than that. My best guess would be an Aiglean agent watching for us to make contact with someone. She’d be disappointed; Anna and I were making contact only with each other.

“I think there’s another,” whispered my wife. “They’re eyeing each other.”

“Want to bet where they come from? An Aiglean and and Ursan maybe?”

“Or a Corvan or even someone from Scotia.”

“Or the Sevens. They did try to kill me once or twice.”

“But they’re friendly now, aren’t they? You McFees are even doing business with them.”

I didn’t know that. Anna would hear things at Summit Up. I couldn’t pick out her second suspect. The shuttle was only as roomy as it need be. No windows, not that I expected any. The cabin screen only showed Earth, growing gradually larger. It was night in the hemisphere we were approaching so little could be seen. Almost no lights appeared on that black disk.

No one lived permanently on Earth. Not yet. Humans could return

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some day. Animals too. Some of those had been reintroduced already. The planet had never become completely lifeless but it was definitely blighted.

We set down in a dark field, all four shuttles, and the doors to Earth were opened. A subdued orange glow on the horizon announced the coming of a new day.

CHAPTER 41

A SERIES OF observation domes existed for us to visit, bubbles like that over Grandpa Jack's lounge at Summit Up. But smaller. Those who feared Earth's slightly poisonous environment remained inside them. The less cautious went outside. I did not intend to be the least cautious on this visit, perhaps the only visit I would ever make to mankind's birthplace.

There were lectures, to which I paid no attention. I could have given better ones. Maybe I'd make Anna listen to one or two of them later.

"They have insects," she remarked. "Biting insects. Why would they introduce those?"

"They might well be survivors of old populations. Not everything was wiped out."

I did wonder what they bit when most of the animals were gone. We were loaded up and moved along a distance to another group of domes. This one was by the water. Some ocean or another. Waves. It looked fit for swimming. I must get into the sea at Dummit Downs. I missed it.

No birds. Not seabirds, not songbirds. Maybe they had the bats Livi said we should introduce on Scotia. They could eat Anna's biting insects.

I'd figured out our second spy by now, a man. Dark, but that needn't necessarily be natural. Both of them realized we had spotted them. Both pretended we hadn't.

We flew on to a low mountain range. A mix of scrub and conifers covered the hillsides. Here and there great scars of rock and earth appeared. Reminders of the wars that had been fought over this world, on this world.

And in time, we circled back to our first landing field. The sun was sinking, the sky growing darker. I got out to walk on Earth one last time. I didn't need to look for a rock. I'd slipped one into my gear back by the beach.

I doubted anyone would spot it. No more than they had my handgun or beamer or either of my knives. There wasn't much security here. No need, I would think.

"Our shadows are still, um, shadowing us," I mentioned to Anna.

“Junior agents on a routine surveillance job,” she conjectured. “But each may now suspect the other of being here to make contact with us.”

“Everyone into the shuttle,” came the announcement. “Our day on Earth had come to its close, folks.”

It had. It was growing dark and over there — a crescent moon. Time to get back to Mars. Time to begin the journey home. I put my arm around Anna and kissed her before we climbed aboard.

No rest at the station. All of us tourists were again bundled into the liner that brought us and headed back towards Mars. I suppose it took about the same amount of time as coming. I slept through a lot of it.

Indeed, all our fellow travelers seemed more subdued. But I did hear some complaints when we went to the dining hall. “I expected to see some ruins,” we heard, and, “Where were the graveyards? There’s ’sposed to be lots of graves on Earth.”

Good questions. I might have asked them myself, at least if I were in historian mode. I think they wanted to show us the Earth reborn, not the corpse from which it was springing.

“There are ruins on Mars,” someone said. “Regular tours go out to them.”

Of our pair of spies, I saw neither. They might have been too busy watching each other. Another transfer to a shuttle and we were soon back in our Martian hotel room.

“I know you’re going to want to explore the museum and spend time on research and even visit those ruins,” stated Anna. “That’s all good with me. Everyone told me to expect it.”

I would have told her so myself. “So are you going to stay in town and lose all our money in the casinos?”

“Only idiots gamble, Jack.” If we were going to be serious about it, that was something on which we both agreed. Of course, that made some of our friends idiots. “I’ll tag along with you if you promise to go to at least a few interesting places.”

“The trip to the ruins might be. At least we’d get out and see a little of the planet.”

“Ruins of what, anyway?”

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“Early settlements, I understand. Some of them destroyed in those long ago wars, some deserted as failures.”

“It’s not a good place to live,” she asserted. “Too much radiation, for one thing.”

“Thanks to thin atmosphere and low magnetic field. It makes Mars inhospitable long-term, Colonies need some sort of shielding, even today when it has been inhabited for millennia.”

Anna nodded to this. “There’s a magnetic shield over this town. That was in the tourist literature.”

I hadn’t read it but had assumed something of the sort. “And the air is insufficient and there’s little free water. These facts didn’t prevent early settlers from making an attempt at permanent colonies. There was no alternative. Not yet.”

“Once they had the jump drive all that changed. The bottle was uncorked!”

“That it was. None of the systems near Earth were any more attractive as places to settle but attempts were made. There were even starts at terraforming here and there.”

She gave me a knowing smile. “You’d like to get a look at some of them, wouldn’t you?”

“Not on this trip.” Probably not. “Most were abandoned. It was always easier to go looking for a more suitable system.”

“Like yours.”

“Or even yours. Thule is a perfectly good place for humans to live.”

“My world is Scotia now. Your people like to claim it’s what Earth once was.”

“Not yet. We’re working on it.” I might have hesitated a moment before addressing the rest of her statement. “You do consider Scotia home now?”

“Maybe more than you do, Jumping Jack McFee.”

The next day I devoted to the museum and research. I could have taken more information home were M handy. All I had was my pocket com and some storage strips. “That’s enough of that,” I informed Anna on returning to our room. She had abandoned me at some point and wandered about the shops and casinos. Without spending any money, I might add. They hate seeing her sort come in.

"I booked us for the ruins tomorrow," she told me. "Then head home?"

"But we won't hurry." I still intended to stop at Sirius and Avignon. There would be no point to bringing that up now. "Let's hit the buffet." It wasn't good but it was included in the cost of the room.

Some of the food was surely vat-grown, locally. Where the fresh vegetables originated I couldn't say. For certain, no truck gardens existed on Mars. I didn't think Earth was being cultivated yet. There was no reason it couldn't be, though, was there? Once it was, meals were likely to improve here.

But then, the tourist industry might move to Earth. No telling what the Horus authorities had planned. If anything.

"Oh, there's our male stalker," whispered Anna as we filled our plates. "He looks Corvan, doesn't he?"

"No one looks Corvan. Or I should say they don't all look like our friend Jitha."

"Sure, loads of different cultures and all that. I'm going to go ask him." She walked straight to his table and put her plate down. I had no real choice but to follow.

"Are you taking the tour with us tomorrow?" she asked.

To the young man's credit — and he was most definitely young — he was not rattled. I suppose he'd known we'd spotted him some days ago. "That I am, Missus Gallen-McFee. My job is to keep an eye on the two of you."

"For some unnamed parties."

That brought a smile to the dark hawk-nosed face. Yes, I've seen real hawks. "I'm permitted to tell you I'm Horus if an occasion such as this arises. We were informed someone was already watching you so it was decided I should join her."

"An Aiglean?" I asked.

"Possibly. I'm here partly for your protection, which I doubt you need. We're also simply curious."

I admitted, "There are those who suspect I'm working for the Romans."

He shrugged. "No one here seems to think so. Who knows what

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new theories may be formulated now we've been seen to make contact?"

When he had said 'possibly' an Aiglean, he may have been keeping intelligence to himself or he may simply not have known. It didn't matter. "They'll theorize a new alliance between Horus and Scotia."

"And Thule," Anna added. "These shrimp aren't bad. As good as at home."

The unnamed agent raised his glass to her. "If you are representative of Thulean women," he said, "I welcome such an alliance."

Anna sighed. "Men everywhere are idiots," she let us know, and resumed her meal.

CHAPTER 42

SURE ENOUGH, BOTH agents boarded the shuttle with us the next morning. They ignored us, they ignored each other. Why the Horus man felt a need, I didn't know. His counterpart had seen us share a meal.

We didn't expect the ruins to be far from the town and port. The ruins we were to visit; there would be others scattered around the planet.

"Chances are," I confided to Anna, "they maintain these ones a bit for the tourist trade."

She nodded knowingly. "Can't have their ruins too ruined. There might be complaints."

This shuttle was essentially a large air car, rolling along a few feet above the sandy surface. The sand was disrupted only by the passage of the car through the air, as thrust tube energy dissipates completely a few inches behind the units. Just don't put your head up against their business end.

"Much of this settlement was constructed underground," our guide was telling us.

"Sensible," felt my underground-dwelling wife.

"You will wish to keep close if you take the tour through the buried village," he continued. "We don't want to lose any of you to the freezing Martian night."

That brought mixed reactions. Good advice, even if offered half-jokingly.

On arrival, we filed out of the vehicle, respirators in place. Lots of open rolling land around us, in shades of sienna and ocher. "No need to worry about a sniper," I remarked. "Nor a small rocket." As encountered on Thule.

"It would be difficult to get one to the surface. Or any long-distance weapon." That sounded good until she felt it needful to add, "But there are always ways."

Not that either of us expected any danger. Surveillance, yes. That was not too surprising.

A water reclamation plant, intended to draw moisture from the thin

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air. Chances are it had worked but that wasn't enough to keep the place going. "How old is it?" I asked our guide.

"Somewhere around twelve hundred years. Most of this complex was built about then and gradually abandoned over the next few centuries."

"Why?" came the inevitable question from our group.

"It couldn't compete with the new worlds being discovered."

And still can't, Mars would never be a fit place to live. But robots would do fine here. When Earth had recovered, it might become the same sort of industrial center Blue was, back in the Scotian system. Give it a couple more centuries.

I didn't bother to say all that to anyone nor even to record it. I did begin gathering pictures of the spot. With Anna in them when I could. A half-buried greenhouse, its arched transparent roof long since gone. Buildings that would have housed machinery of some sort. All that gone or deteriorated to the point of being unrecognizable.

The living spaces lay beneath the surface. Their story was very much on the surface. No secrets, no mysteries — an economically unsustainable venture failed. It was all rather mundane, really. We viewed bunk rooms, kitchens, storage spaces.

"Not even a decent exercise room," noted Anna.

"Maybe they went outside for that."

"Maybe. We don't do that on Thule." She gave yet another living space a sour look. "I would guess it's like this on any new world. It must be a hard life."

"It comes with its own rewards, I suppose." None that I'd want, but I could respect those who chose to become colonists.

We emerged into the largest open space we'd seen so far. The relatively high ceilings were still well underground. "Meetings and communal dining took place here," our guide told us. We spread out into something of an arc. "It was the center of the colony. The scientific and engineering sections were this direction, if you will follow me."

Those might be more interesting. "That man is moving closer," hissed Anna. "He's been working toward us for a while."

A tall fellow with a dark beard and bright vacation-worthy clothes. I had noticed his movements but hadn't been concerned. Not yet. He

could just be curious about us. He could want my autograph. It might just be coincidental. Then I noticed our female shadow also moving our direction. She was drawing a weapon.

My gun might have been in my hand even sooner than Anna's. I think the approaching man distracted her for a split second from this new danger. I started to raise my weapon toward our spy only to have Anna bat it down and yank me toward her. The pop-pop of a gun echoed through the room. The tall man fell, his own gun skittering across the sandy floor.

"Oh," I said.

By then, our Horus agent was at our side. He immediately flashed credentials to our tour guide. "I'll take care of this," he announced. "I recommend you get these people back to the shuttle."

"End of tour, folks," the guide announced. "Let's be on our way."

"At least we saw one interesting thing," someone remarked.

Our shooter was bending over our, um, other shooter. "No one I can find in my data," she announced, rising. "Any identification he carries would be forged."

"An autopsy might reveal his origin. Let me call this in." The young man reported to someone on his com before ambling over to look at the dead man. He rummaged through his clothes, pulling out nearly as many weapons as I carry, a com, a few papers in a thin wallet. "His identification lists him as a Seven." He looked up at Anna and me. "Your part of the galaxy."

"It could even be true," I replied.

"More likely Aiglean," said the woman who'd killed him.

"Which you are not," I said. "An Aiglean agent would have looked the other way so I would guess you are one of Moldovan's people."

"I have nothing to say to that," she calmly stated. "You will find all my papers in order." That was addressed to our representative of the local law.

"Moldovan?" he wondered.

"Ursan intelligence, sent to keep a eye on us," Anna informed him.

"Uh-huh." He gave her a rather long look. "I doubt anyone in my organization will wish to detain you. But you should leave at once." He turned to Anna and me. "As should you."

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"You won't get the chance to break the bank at the casino," I told my wife.

"You can buy the casino," she reminded me.

"Running it would be too much work. We'll be on our way and say farewell to our friendly Horusans. Or is that Horusians?"

"Horusics," said the agent.

I should have thought of that. Just like the people of Janus are Janics. An ordinary air car, marked with the name of one of the casinos, came to pick us up shortly. Including the unnamed Ursan. I'm sure some name was on her identification papers but that hardly counts, does it?

We arrived to be greeted by another Horusic official. "Give us a couple hours to give you final clearance. Just in case some difficulty comes up." He appeared as anxious to avoid that as we were. "We have booked seats for you on the next shuttle to the station."

"Do you think our Ursan will be traveling with us as far as Barney?" asked Anna, as we headed to our room.

"It would seem likely." Though jump ships from other systems might come and go at the Mars station. "No further, though. It will be good to be back with M and head wherever we choose."

"Within reason. We should go home sometime. To Scotia." That seemed to bring another thought. "I would guess our would-be attacker was another Scotian ex-military. Just from the way he held himself."

Anna was better at spotting those sort of tell-tales. "He certainly wasn't a trained assassin," she continued.

"Someone on Scotia still sees me as a danger."

"Or it could be about those names Hill and Moldovan mentioned. Neither the Scotian conspirators nor the Aigleans would like them made public."

"Not that we know any of them. This is our room, isn't it? They need some aides here to help folks find their way around!"

We were packed and ready to leave half an hour later. And no difficulties had come up.

CHAPTER 43

“WE PART HERE,” said the Ursan.

She to report to her superiors, we to board my ship — our ship, I should say, though M’s bond was primarily with me. We stood in the terminal of the space station at Barney.

“We thank you for your assistance on Mars,” Anna said.

The woman gave this only a nod of acknowledgment. “My job. I suspect you could have handled it, Captain Gallen.”

“And not my husband? He’s deadlier than he looks.”

“She trained me,” I had to add.

“I’ll take your word for it.” With that, we headed in different directions.

Anna observed, “You’ve really been in training of some sort all your life.”

“I suppose. Here’s our docking corridor.”

We expected no trouble here, not that we didn’t remain vigilant. Stations do make it easier to fade into a crowd. Most assassins would still consider them too risky. Our man on Mars had picked a good spot. How he intended to escape I couldn’t guess.

So I mentioned it to Anna.

“Accomplices, maybe?” she hazarded.

“Maybe. Or bribery of locals to look the other way.”

There had been no real customs check, just a quick scan and orders to move us along. My rocks were safe. M greeted us on entering the ship.

“I hope you enjoyed your time on Mars. Sirius next?”

I threw my bags across the lounge area. They almost landed on the couch. “And then a leisurely cruise home.”

“All systems are in order,” M reported. “No known mechanical problems.”

I turned to Anna and told her, “That’s his way of reminding me I have been running twenty pulse tubes between the main drives and maneuvering units, and one could always go bad.”

“Or more than one,” the AI reminded me. Yes, I’ve had whole engines go out on me.

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"I doubt there's been that much wear and tear, M. For that matter, one of the generators could go out. Or both."

"There are two?" asked my wife.

"One for the jump drive, one for everything else. Though either can fill in for the other if anything goes wrong."

M elaborated. "And if both go out there are batteries to keep us going a while."

"Which are continuously recharged from the engines. We can limp home even with some serious damage." The most serious scenario I could come up with would be loss of the jump drive in an uninhabited system. I wouldn't mention that.

Nor even think of it.

"Earth and Mars were interesting but I'm glad we're done with them," said Anna. "Or I'm done. You're free to come back without me."

"I've seen enough of Horusic functionaries and their uniforms for a while. What an ugly color."

"Maroon," M informed us. "To me, one color seems every bit as good as another, though I understand human emotional responses to them, in a theoretical sense. I do see colors you can not, you know."

"I should know. I'll admit I've never thought about it, M."

"Higher or lower in the spectrum?" Anna inquired.

"Both. Shall we send out a request to launch, Jack?"

"Might as well." Anna and I settled in the command chairs. "We have a load of data to transfer, M. Both from Mars and Earth. I'll be kept busy sorting it out. Mostly after our trip."

"I'll scan your storage strips. Yours too, Anna?"

"Might as well, M. Thanks. I checked our coordinates on Earth with my com as we went along, but without a map they didn't mean much to me. Except we were in the planet's northern temperate zone."

M at once brought up a map. Outdated I would think, but it sufficed to show us the area we'd visited. One by one, Anna's coordinates lit up on it. "You toured the western coast of the Atlantic Ocean," he told us. "Somewhat south of Canadia, Jack, and even further from other regions I've heard you mention."

"Carolina? I knew a girl named that once."

“You would,” commented Anna. “We’re being called.”

I almost said ‘hailed’ in correction but thought better of it. A few exchanges with the station controllers and we were being nudged away from our berth. I took my time about accelerating into empty space.

“That’s our target,” I said, bringing it up on the main screen. “There’s another bright blue star over there called Procyon. It’s almost as short a jump.”

“Are they like Big Blue in your Scotian Group?”

“Sirius is not quite a blue giant like Big Blue. It’s considered more a white sun but still has a definite bluish tinge. It is exceedingly bright.”

And a fairly easy jump from Barney. Its mass makes it easy to target, whether one aims for the big star or its companion dwarf. Sirius B is one of the most massive white dwarfs known. That is where the serious mining for ultra-heavy elements began that fueled mankind’s expansion outward.

Such as it is. The galaxy is exceedingly large.

“There is a museum there too,” I told anyone who was listening. Meaning Anna.

“I’m not surprised.”

“It is also still being actively mined. I really would like to stay a couple days and get a good look.”

“Will that be permitted?”

“Ah, well, I did send letters ahead as a representative of the McFee Concern. We should be welcome.”

Anna might have been thinking of hitting me. Instead, she said something unexpected. “I think we do need to get back to Scotia soon. Things are happening and we seem to be part of them.”

I had to acknowledge the truth of that. “But there’s no immediate emergency. We’ll get home soon enough without rushing it.” I slipped on my headband and targeted that massive gravity well. “Here we go.”

CHAPTER 44

SIRIUS IS A pretty young system. Three hundred million years at most. It was originally composed of two bright bluish stars, but the one consumed all its hydrogen, became a red giant, and finally collapsed into a dwarf.

It is to be assumed the other will eventually. We didn't intend to be around for it.

"Not much in the way of planets, huh?" asked Anna.

"Just a few barren rocks and a lot of asteroids in odd orbits."

"And some larger objects orbiting very far out," M said.

I had targeted the dwarf but we landed in an ambiguous position between it and Sirius A. We cruised toward the system headquarters — and museum — located on a planetoid revolving around B. I had no intentions of getting nearer to A. Sirius could be a dangerous system to jump into. I knew better than to downplay that for Anna.

"But worth it?" said Anna, "I know these systems are a source of ultra-massive elements. You've talked about it often enough!"

"Very much worth it. The white dwarfs of Procyon and Sirius played a big role in getting us humans out into the universe."

"Your Big Blue doesn't have a companion, does it?"

"There is a brown dwarf way out, isn't there, M?" I asked.

"So there is, Jack. Some consider them a binary system."

That was academic. "No humans have actually visited the system. Only recently did it become possible to send unmanned ships with Li Drives."

"Too dangerous, then?"

"As are neutron stars. There's one of those at a considerable distance from here. A lot closer is a solo white dwarf they call Manny. It's been the scene of mining too."

Anna seemed to give that a moment's thought. I know she didn't hesitate to bring up her onetime boyfriend. "Jitha told me you'd talked about them. You claimed the mining facilities for ultra-heavies should be the number one target for strategic attacks."

"I still would. But white dwarfs are not terribly uncommon. We have one in the Scotian Group."

"That's fortunate. No such luck for Thule."

"Nor even the Janic-Thule union," I pointed out. "Which may be part of why it failed. Scotia would be hard put to survive as a separate economic entity without it."

Anna laughed, probably with good reason. "It's nice to sit in on your lectures occasionally, Mister McFee."

As I enjoyed having her there to listen to them.

We had a fairly long trip in to the mining settlement and eventually ran out of things to talk about. Sirius-related things. I spent some time sorting through my images and data, and even making notes toward a paper or two. I spent more time with Anna, which was considerably more pleasant.

"You need a target range in here," she informed me, during a break.

"Or even an exercise room. Just not enough space." Though we had been exercising fairly vigorously.

"I could put on a vacuum suit and go outside to shoot at passing asteroids."

"Or use our beam cannon. I've never tested it."

That got her attention. "You have armament?"

"A smallish beamer pops up somewhere along our fore-section. It's as much a tool as a weapon." There was some truth to that. A beam could have all sorts of utility. It could also be used for defense.

Yes, yes, offense too. "We probably shouldn't try to control it from this sleeping chamber."

Anna obviously concurred as she was already slipping into her overalls. She didn't have to be in *that* much hurry to leave.

"M," she called out, "where's the best place to control the beam cannon from?"

"The second chair in the control cabin would be the traditional position for a gunner," he replied. "It can be operated from anywhere, however."

Anna soon filled just that position. I settled beside her. "We didn't have any weaponry on our previous ship," I said, "but we were also quite slow."

"A sitting duck," M elaborated. "Though I admittedly have never seen one."

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“They have them at Dummit Downs,” said Anna. “Swimming ones, too. Now let’s see the controls.”

There seemed to be no ships or installations anywhere near so we allowed Anna to take a few potshots at chunks of rock. I did hope that bothered no one in this system. Nor that they even noticed it, for that matter.

As any beam weapon, it was relatively short-ranged. That is, its force diminished with distance. The beam itself traveled on pretty much forever, I assumed, broadening and dispersing.

Sometime around twelve hours later we reached the central facility at Sirius B, a modular station among the asteroids. Their mass was low enough we could dock directly. Surprisingly few ships shared the dockage with us.

When the woman assigned as our tour guide explained, I understood why. “We try to at least partially refine our ultra-heavies in this system. Chunks of any size can’t be loaded onto ships, obviously, so normally an engine and a jump drive are fitted to them and the whole thing jumped away.”

I decided not to ask to where. It didn’t matter much. “I would think Li Drives make that easier.”

“And then some. No one liked being a jump pilot attached to a rock.”

Their control cabin would probably be mounted as far distant from the element as possible. Still, its gravity would be formidable. Yet any such ‘chunk’ was likely to be rather small in dimensions. The element in my ship was an exceptionally slender filament arranged along its fore-aft axis. A spider web. And yes, I have seen spiders and their webs on more than one planet.

So we remained a couple days, visited the museum on its dwarf planet, pretended to have interest in the business. Neither of us got particularly close to the mining itself. I doubt we would have been permitted if we asked. The museum had plenty of pictures of it.

“I think it’s time to point our ship homeward,” I told Anna.

“And we were having such fun.”

“Behave and I’ll let you shoot some more rocks.”

“We need pirates to knock out of the sky.”

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

Hmm, pirates. “I wouldn’t be surprised if some of that went on around here.”

“It *is* awfully valuable stuff.”

“But I’m not going to carry another rock home.”

CHAPTER 45

“SO WE MADE it, John,” I said, and reached up to brush my fingertips across the Christopher medal. Anna had brought up my last two bottles of Avignon beer, saved for this occasion, and we toasted to the big blue star on our screen.

“To Sirius.”

“And to Father John Barbosa.”

We were gradually accelerating, preparing for the first jump toward home. “It’s simplest to jump back through Kentori,” I said, “and then this system with an orange star and a couple dim red dwarfs.” I pointed it out. “More dwarfs after that and on to Avignon.”

“Do not try to jump too often, Jack,” warned M. “You seem to be in a hurry.”

“I’ll make him rest,” Anna promised. “Or at least not jump right away.”

“And I shall need to give you your privacy, I would guess.”

He guessed right on both subjects. I was in a hurry. I felt an urgency I couldn’t justify with facts but I knew would continue to eat at me.

I targeted Kentori — the big yellow star, not Proxie — and jumped to it. No need for an hello. I jumped again.

We followed a different route than we had coming, having bypassed Avignon then. Rest an hour. Jump a couple times again.

“A little closer to Scotia,” I announced, and swiveled to face my wife. “Are you happy there, Anna? Are you all right with what you’re doing?”

“I’d rather have you there, but I do like the job. I’m in charge, after all!” She was pensive for a few seconds, staring at the controls before her. “Gunner told me I could get a position on Thule anytime, if I wished. Or even head of security at one of our embassies.”

“You should be at least an ambassador,” I told her.

“I may have to settle for being the wife of one.”

“What a horrible thought. I’d rather be your head of security.”

“I’m not sure I could trust you even to remember to lock the doors.”

“That’s why we have underlings. Not to remember to lock up but to blame when we forget.”

"That makes perfect sense. And you don't mean a word of it."

"Maybe I am cut out for a diplomatic career. Am I permitted to jump again?"

"Just once. Then a long rest."

So we went. Later we went again and yet again, until we jumped to the yellow sun of Avignon. We landed in pretty good position and I piloted us toward the station orbiting the planet.

"I suppose you will soon be parking me here for another semester," remarked M.

"Would you rather be at Fundy? I can always take a liner back to college."

The AI didn't have the skills for this game. Housie could give him lessons. "You must promise to come up and visit some times," he said.

"Certainly. We'll only stay a day or two now. Do you wish to go down, Anna, or keep poor M company?"

She chose to admonish me rather than answer. "Don't be mean."

"Neither of you is any good at making me feel guilty," I informed them. "That's because I'm so good at doing it myself."

"I hope you've gotten over some of your guilt about John," Anna said, more softly.

"Some. I mostly want to see if there are any letters for us here. We could come and go quickly."

"No, sir, McFee. I want a tour of this university now. Um, there are women students, aren't there?"

"More than men, I suspect. Alas, the priests force us to sleep in separate dormitories."

"Good for them."

I could have told her she was picking up Scotian ways. Safer not to.

We docked at the station. I was known here and few questions were asked. Soon we dropped toward the planet on a half-filled shuttle.

"It looks a lot like Scotia," remarked Anna, viewing Avignon on the cabin screen. "Big blue oceans."

"Avignon is even more earth-like than Scotia. They've been at it longer."

"All the work of the Roman church, right?"

"That it is. The church was one organization that remained more or

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less organized during the early chaotic days of expansion. It played a major role in colonization and in the developing technology of terraforming. This system was something of a showcase for that. When war devastated Earth, the papacy shifted its headquarters here. Nova Roma. That's the city. The planet was renamed Avignon."

She might or might not have known the reason for that. "So the pope lives here?"

"She does. I've met her at functions. As most of the popes, she came from some planet or another in the Old Worlds." I resisted the urge to look it up. I'd lectured enough. "I could probably get us an invitation to the palace."

"Not now. Maybe when I come for your graduation. I have to show for that, you know."

"And again when I receive my doctorate," I reminded her.

"I'll believe that when I see it. We have bets going as whether you'll follow through."

I wouldn't ask with whom though I could come up with suspects.

A taxi air car carried us from the landing field toward the towers of the university. The next time I saw that view I would be returning to classes.

CHAPTER 46

“MY WIFE, SIR Anna Gallen-McFee.”

Bert Fam was not a cleric but one of the many layperson employees at the university. His official title was verger. His actual job was handling the mail. Lots of letters followed students here.

“I believe I have messages for both of you.” He scrolled down the screen before him. “All on paper, nothing recorded. Hmm, hmm. Ah.” Bert slipped off his high stool to retrieve a letter from a pigeon hole. “One for you, Sir Anna.”

“From Tarmo,” she reported, not bothering to open it then. Fam returned to his screen.

“And one for you, Jack.” The message he handed me bore Paolo Hill’s name. “There is a note here that Cardinal Bekiri wishes to see you as soon as you arrive. Which is now, young man.”

The president of the New Rome university? “Then we’ll head for his office. Could you let them know we’re coming?” It isn’t good to drop in unannounced, even if asked for.

We walked out into the cobblestone courtyard. Ahead lay the stairs to the observation deck where Father John Barbosa and I had looked toward Sirius, not so long ago. We took a left.

Anna opened her letter as we walked. “Not much of interest,” she reported. “Gossip about our friends. Your Paolo Hill has been promoted back to Scotia. He’ll be the second to Sondra Jeffers, who is now officially the deputy minister.”

Replacing Robert Douglas. At least that meant no one would be trying to recruit me for either position. For a while, anyway.

Hill’s letter to me might have much the same news. I broke the seal and perused it. Yes, he mentioned his promotion — though not the exact position — and said he was on his way from Thule at once. That was followed by grimmer news. “Some of the names on the list Paolo forwarded have been assassinated. Officially, died under suspicious circumstances, most of them.”

“But they know better now.”

“I would hope so.” Never underestimate the collective stupidity of bureaucracy. “The others have been taken into custody.” I folded the

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paper and slipped it into a pocket. "Someone knew who was named. I'd as soon be left out of the loop."

"Oh, in a few days we'll be home and everyone will be eager to give you a full briefing." She snickered. "Especially your mom."

"I could drop you at Fundy Station and turn right around to come back here." It was almost going to be like that, anyway. A couple days at home before resuming my studies.

Everyone knew where the cardinal's offices were to be found, on the second floor of the palace. We called it the palace; officially, it was the Saint Joseph Cupertino Administrative Center. The place was done up in some revival or another of the Romanesque style. I'd never interacted with Bekiri before. Only glimpsed him at ceremonies and functions.

But he seemed to know me. I can not say whether that was a good or bad thing. The tall, spare, middle-aged man at once told me, "A letter came addressed to the university, ostensibly from Princess Christiana of Thule. When I opened it, I found another letter and a note politely requesting we deliver it to Jack McFee." He handed it to me without more ceremony. "I am sure it is of great importance. Feel free to open it at once."

I did and found yet another note and letter within. The note was from Tarmo.

Jack, it read, this letter came enclosed in private mail to Gunner, with Vili as the supposed sender. Apparently, your people did not trust diplomatic channels. The request was that we send it along to Avignon, under a different name. Christie seemed a good choice for that.

We are getting strange news from Scotia. It seems our friend Paolo was attacked. I'm told he survived but is laid up. Chances are that's a little more up to date information than in the enclosed letter. Take care of yourself and my sister. Or tell her to take care of you! Tarmo.

I held the other letter. "I think, your grace," I said, "I should look this over elsewhere. We thank you for this favor."

He only held up a hand. "I am willing to put trust in you, Jack McFee. You as well, Sir Anna. I say, are you in fact the Frida in Vilma Lempsen's book?"

"I am afraid so, sir." She gave me a quick sidelong look. Maybe she wasn't certain 'sir' was the proper title.

"Ah." He nodded with some sort of private satisfaction. "I would have invited the two of you to dinner but I strongly suspect you will be hurrying away again. You must come by when you are again a student, Jack."

"I shall, your grace," I promised and got us out there as quickly and gracefully as I could. Fortunately, the cardinal did not offer his blessing. He would have known neither of us was Catholic.

In fact, he probably knew quite a bit about us. Bekiri didn't just run the university, but was active in governing the church. In that the school played a leading role in colonization efforts, that should not be a surprise.

I seated myself on the nearest bench when we reached the courtyard again. Out in the open where I — we, I should say — could keep an eye on our surroundings.

The letter was signed by Sondra Jeffers but I strongly suspected it was written by committee. The attack on Hill — that was mentioned but not his condition. The assassination of some of the Scotian traitors. Supposed traitors, the letter said. Assassinated by whom? Not even conjecture on that.

But orders would have come from the Aigleans. Of that I had no doubt, and Anna concurred. "Possibly Ursan mercenaries," she felt.

"Or even Sevens. They sent those after me during the war." I had no doubt some were at loose ends now and willing to kill for pay. "But I suspect they may be handling this directly."

"Jitha might know."

Or at least his Corvan superiors. That hardly mattered to us. Then came the big news. The Ursans had a second list, naming higher-placed conspirators.

Hill has told us a second list of names will be forthcoming but it has not yet made its way to us. We hope to see it before more assassinations occur and we lose any possible connections to those at the top, the message read. We think it likely a copy will find its way to you, if only as a sort of fail-safe.

"Let's hope not," said Anna. I thoroughly agreed.

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Keep your eyes open and be cautious, it concluded.

"So we have no reason to hurry away from here," I said. In fact, the longer we lingered, the more likely it would be the secret list showed up. Despite what I might have said, half-jokingly, I did want to make sure it reached Scotia.

Anna surely recognized all that as well but did not address it. "You can give me the tour then. I want to see this tiny cell you claim to sleep in."

"It's larger than that luggage compartment we stuff ourselves into on the ship," I admitted. Which I rarely used when I was by myself.

The chapel was the obvious place to begin. It was close and the bells were ringing in its tall tower for one service or another. Chapel might suggest it was small, which it was not. Smaller than the nearby cathedral in Nova Roma, yes, but it still could hold the entire student body. Hmm, most of it, anyway.

"So ornate," was Anna's only comment. Thulean architecture is utilitarian by anyone's standards.

On through some of the classrooms and lecture halls, a peek at the dormitories, some friendly exchanges with both students and instructors. Not my advisor, Monsignor Schwarz. I'd have to spend too much time with him, too soon. "There are labs," I informed my wife. "Terraforming, in particular, with plants and animals."

"I can visit the facility at Brunswick if I want to see that sort of thing. Your brother would jump at the chance to give me the tour."

"Brendon would turn Dummit Downs itself into a lab, given the chance. Would you like to tour the city tomorrow? We could get an hotel room."

"And not share your cell?" Before I could come up with an answer, she said, "It says something, Jack, that you can be comfortable both there and at Summit Up. This place helps me understand you and your family."

"Unfortunately, some see only what is wrong."

"Equally unfortunate is that they want to kill you. This seems a very well guarded planet. I suppose that's needful with the pope living here."

And all the central authority of the church, as powerful in its way as

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the great associations. "As you are fond of reminding me, any security can be breached. But a hotel room should be safe."

"I'd as soon be on our way."

So would I. We summoned a cab.

CHAPTER 47

AVIGNON STATION LOOMED ahead. There were larger facilities of its sort to be found in other systems. Many that were smaller too. That didn't matter much. We intended to pass through, to soon be on my ship and headed home.

My ship. I really should remember to call it our ship. Mine and Anna's. Mine and M's for that matter. Ignore the fact that it actually belonged to the McFee Concern.

The first person I spied on entering was Kiska Mur. "There are enemy agents here," she stated, without further greeting. "Aigleans or hired by Aigleans."

"Not only Aigleans," noted Anna.

The Ursan chose to take it as a serious remark. "You do not trust me and that is sensible. Let us go sit somewhere and I shall explain myself."

Why not? We followed her into the small cafe that served those coming and going. "I assume you have a list of names," I said, as we took seats. Our table was close to a wall, where we could keep something of an eye on the entrances. Including the service door.

Beers were brought to us, good Avignon beers. A human handed them around, not a robot, though I have glimpsed a few of those at their duties here on the occasions I have passed through.

"You assume correctly," answered Mur. "We had intended to deliver our intelligence through Paolo Hill or his organization, and send it separately to you, in case it didn't get through otherwise."

I was the backup plan, apparently. "A letter to the university? That might have worked every bit as well as showing up."

"It might, had not the attempt been made on Hill's life. It was felt then it might be best it did not go through official channels at all. So here I am to deliver it in person." Mur frowned. "Your Romans would not allow me to go down to the planet."

"Nor would they permit any assassins," I pointed out.

"Not intentionally. I must await you here and hope it be so."

"Then you have the list on you?" asked Anna.

"And will hand it over." She gave a look around. "Not here. At your ship?"

“Good enough,” I felt. I had to drain the last of that good beer before rising. Mur had barely touched hers. I was a little surprised she was even allowed to remain on the station. The church was not at all big on Ursans at the moment. Unless some diplomatic back-channel — and maybe the mention of my name — had played a part.

Were any of the people in this room enemies? This would be the time to make a move. Following us would be too obvious.

“Anyone seem suspicious to you?” I whispered to Anna. Of course, they wouldn’t actually look dangerous but she was good at picking up on such things.

“Maybe the man over by the bar.”

I’d noted him too. A small, dark fellow, well groomed and tailored. Nothing about him suggested his origin. That in itself was perhaps suspicious.

He ignored us as we left. That didn’t mean he stayed put. The Ursan followed us toward our dockage.

She peered at her com and flatly stated, “He follows us.”

Anna showed only momentary surprise. “You have linked into the cameras?”

“Only as far as the door. There are none in these corridors.”

“Some prize their privacy,” I told her.

“Some prize it too much.”

As any Ursan might claim. It was a pretty good trick to intercept the camera feed. This Kiska Mur knew her stuff. And undoubtedly had better equipment than we did.

Now we’d have to keep an eye open for the man behind us. And those who might well lurk ahead. He could have been no more than a decoy. There might even be no threat at all.

This was, however, a obvious place to intercept me, though I could have readily bypassed the Avignon system, as I did going the opposite way. It still seemed odd to me that I had ever been a target. On Scotia. On Mars. Here.

Yet I was, apparently on the suspicion I knew more than I did. Or even carried that list. “They will attempt to take one or more of us out quickly,” I said. “It would be their only chance with three reasonably competent opponents.”

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"They might back off altogether," Anna added to this. "I don't think they expected you, Mur."

"Yet they will attack," the Ursan replied. She seemed certain.

"I wouldn't," I told her.

"I realize that, Jack McFee. They are unlikely to be as prudent as you or your wife. This turn is where we shall be in danger."

The last one before our docking tube. Fire could come from the left or right or both, if the enemy agents didn't concern themselves too much about hitting each other. Kiska hugged the one wall, Anna and I the other.

We didn't quite forget someone might be behind but we were a bit distracted. It was almost disappointing when no danger materialized at the corner. Best we hurry up the corridor and get into the ship.

A figure stepped out of a docking tube in front of us, leveling a weapon. Only one. I pivoted around. Two more rushing from the rear. Then someone stepped out of the hallway we had just exited and fired at them. A suppressed weapon. I could barely hear its pop. One would-be assassin went down.

A somewhat louder discharge had come from behind me. And a quieter one. I turned to see Anna and Kiska both lowering their weapons and a body sprawled beyond them.

Our unknown friend took another shot at the other two, as one assisted the other — the one he had hit — stumble away. I believe he purposely missed.

But had he not acted, I might not have been able to respond quickly enough to their attack. I am sure the assassin who had stepped out in front of us was a distraction so they could surprise us from the rear.

He walked over to look at the dead attacker. "I think it best maybe to leave no bodies lying about," was his only remark. He gave us a little bow, turned, and disappeared into the side corridor from which he had come.

"Corvan," I guessed.

"I would think so," agreed Mur. "And he is right. We should get the body onto your ship."

Good idea. It could go out the lock somewhere in space. Not in this system. I decided to let the women take charge of all that and went at

once to the control cabin. The sooner I requested a departure, the better.

"I won't ask you about the body," said M. "Not yet. Is the woman staying with us?"

"I'll have to ask." No telling what plans Kiska Mur might have.

I received permission to take off and let M run through the necessary procedures and checks. Then I walked back to check on the others. The body had been left in the lock. No sense in bringing it in further.

"Definitely not a Scotian this time," Anna reported.

"Nor Ursan, I think," said Kiska. "An Aiglean intelligence operative, not a mercenary."

"Are you going back into the station?" I asked her. "You are welcome to come with us."

She mulled on that a moment. "It would upset the authorities here. They will wonder how I vanished." A smile of sorts. "And my luggage didn't." She handed me a folded paper. "I shall entrust this to you and go. Perhaps we shall see each other at Thule."

"Perhaps," I agreed.

"The tugs are ready to move us," came M's announcement.

"Then I must move too," Kiska said and slipped out through the lock.

A few minutes later we were accelerating away from Avignon Station.

CHAPTER 48

THERE WAS NO hurry and I tended to be polite in the Avignon system. Best not to upset anyone by jumping too close.

Anna had taken the chair beside me. "Have you looked at the list yet?" she asked.

"I am not sure I will. M, what is that behind us?"

"A small cruiser, Jack, similar in size to our own. Similar mass, as well, indicating a jump drive."

"They should know better than to get too close then." Not that it actually mattered much but it was a tad reckless. Impolite, too. I gave my wife a sidelong glance. "Whatever are you up to, dear?"

"Being prepared." She had brought up the weapon controls. Obviously, Anna had been thinking further ahead than me. I'm more commonly the one to see the worst-case scenario.

So I slipped on my headband to prepare to jump. Where?

"Got it," murmured Anna.

I had no idea what she 'got' but I jumped right then. Not to the star I would normally choose heading home from this system. I should not use any of those while carrying this information back to Scotia.

"They can't follow us, right?" asked my wife.

"Even if they guessed what system I jumped into, they could land anywhere in it. Probably not anywhere near us. Did you shoot them?"

"I shot a missile they launched. I suspect they were a bit surprised." She gave me enigmatic glance. "I don't think you ever called me 'dear' before."

"Haven't I? I think I'll jump again right away"

"You haven't. You might have said 'my dear' but that's not at all the same."

"I suppose not." I picked a target and jumped us. "We can take a short rest."

"But still hurry home."

"Yes. I'll avoid Resnovae now and take a more roundabout route. I might be expected there."

"An ambush?"

"I could jump in and out too quickly for anything of that sort. But I'd as soon no one know where we are."

"Until we reach Thule. You have to pass through there, don't you?"

"I could detour through Nevada and come into the Scotian Group from the other end."

She gave me an all-too-knowing smirk. "Or jump through the Wall?"

Anna knew about all that, of course. "I wouldn't risk it except in an emergency." And I wouldn't risk Anna.

Thule could be problematic. Oz too, for that matter. Or any other world on the only route home. Scotia itself could harbor an enemy desperate enough to attempt an attack.

"Between gunfights at the station and shooting at ships, I may have worn out my good will at Avignon," I said. I wasn't overly serious about it.

"I'm not going to have you underfoot at home, Jack McFee. You'll just have to apologize to the pope or whomever. Speaking of gunfights, wouldn't this be a good time to jettison our body?"

It was. We attended to that, first, closing the door to the lock and flushing it into space. As soon as it was open again, the little cleaner-bot — the only robot aboard — went right to work to remove any evidence. I grabbed an ice cream sandwich as a snack, and was ready for a couple more jumps, or maybe three. I'd want a longer rest after that; neither of us had slept for a while. The route M and I had come up with skirted and zigzagged through the edges of Aiglean and Seven space. Those seemed unlikely systems for anyone to watch.

Again, there wasn't much danger going by a more expected path. I just wanted to keep our movement as secret as possible and be able to jump into Scotia unexpectedly. Or maybe into Thule. That was undecided. I'd ask Anna's opinion.

No need right now. I made my jumps and chose to catch a nap right there in my chair. Anna was again in the other seat when I woke.

The list. I still carried it. Wouldn't it be wise if Anna had a copy, just in case? But that would make it twice as likely to be captured. Of course, Ursan intelligence retained a copy. That might become irrelevant. "I assume," I said to her, "neither Aigleans nor Scotian traitors

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knew just who is named on the list. The latter would wish to prevent the list from going through. The Aigleans might have other wishes.”

Anna nodded. “They would surely prefer to assassinate anyone the Ursans had knowledge of.”

“I think we should take a look.” Without waiting for a response I opened the papers. Three sheets. I laid them out before me and stared at them a moment or two. They were blank.

Apparently so was my face. Enough so to make Anna laugh. “Can you read them, M?” she asked.

“I can. The letters are too tiny for your eyes, Jack. There seem to be both names and corroborating evidence.”

I turned to Anna. “I would guess you’ve seen this sort of thing before.” It was new to me.

“Not in the wild, but I’ve heard of it. It’s all in your memory now, M?”

“It is. Would you like to hear it?”

“No,” I said at once. “We have no reason to know any of it.” I toyed with the idea of telling M to forget it. Maybe after printing out another copy. But no, I would never ask that sort of thing of him. His memory, his brain, was his own. It was not for me to meddle with it.

“So it wouldn’t do for the Aigleans to know who was on the list,” I mused. “Not that they couldn’t make some good guesses. They might just go after anyone they’re worried about. Anyone who might reveal those higher up.”

“That would take a lot of effort and a lot of people on the ground.”

“The conspirators might unwittingly help them. They do seem to have some organization still.”

“Who continue to be a danger to you.”

To you too, Anna. I was not going to say that aloud. “Anyway, they are likely to believe I have the list now. I’m sure they were uncertain before.”

“Since our encounter with Kiska Mur. Not that anyone saw anything passed,” Anna pointed out.

“But they probably expected something to be passed sooner or later. They must have known some of their intelligence had been leaked.”

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“Or stolen. Either way, the Ursans got their hands on it. But I can’t see why they want to pass it on to you Scotians.”

“Things are shifting. Alliances. Governments, such as they are. I think the Ursans are trying to mend fences.”

Anna looked skeptical. “Or reputations.”

“Or maybe they just want to hurt the Aigleans. I should get us on the way again.” I donned my headband and targeted the next star.

CHAPTER 49

"THIS IS SYSTEM 2746," I announced. The red binary stood central on our screen. "As far as I am aware, it's deserted now."

She knew the name. It's in Vili's book but Anna had been right there and knew about it firsthand. Any gaps, her friend Elsa could have filled in, having built some of the equipment I used to discover the jump-mine being tested there.

"I could take a few jumps from here to Janus and then attempt a direct one to Oz. Or Thule, which would be a safer jump."

"Or you could take the long jump to Thule from here," said Anna. "I know what's on your mind, Mister Jumping Jack."

"It would get us home sooner." Maybe safer, too.

"And you've done it before. More than once."

"True. It's harder the opposite direction. That little orange dot over there is your sun."

She gave it a casual look. "Will we stop?"

That had been on my mind too. "It may depend on how close we land. If we're way out or on the opposite side of the sun, it might be simpler to jump onward."

"Rather than taking hours to reach the station."

"Or days. If anyone else with weapons is waiting, we would be vulnerable."

They would have to be close to us though. That was somewhat unlikely. Possible, but unlikely.

M broke in. "Jack, I sensed another ship but then it was gone. No, there it is again."

"The mine is still here," I realized at once. Unbelievable, after all this time. I at once targeted Thule's orange sun. Our ship was jolted even as I jumped.

"Position!"

"Four hours out from Thule Station," reported M. "It would be less but we lost one of our mains. Some bulkheads were breached but have been closed off."

"A beam weapon," said Anna.

“Yes. A powerful one.” It wasn’t the first time it had taken a shot at me.

“I thought the mine was gone. That it would run out of power or something.”

“So did everyone else. It may have had some sort of hibernation mode it went into after a time, when no new targets appeared. I suppose no one visited and triggered it since the base was destroyed.”

“Or if they did, they might have been attacked and never had the chance to report it.”

An unknown deathtrap, these three years since? It did seem possible. More than possible. “The Aigleans could even have purposely left it as a sort of farewell message when they evacuated the system,” I said.

That did sound doubtful. I suspect they were in too much disarray to even think of such things. To be honest, we weren’t even sure there had been survivors. “So, I can try to jump crippled or limp into Thule Station.”

“How many times will this make?” Anna tried to make it sound like a jibe but we were both a little too shook up still for that. Humor could wait until we caught our breath.

“Three. But no Elsa to patch us up this time. Any ships near, M?”

“One is heading directly this way. I identify it as the one we encountered at Avignon.”

It must have headed directly here on the chance of intercepting us. A slime chance but one that worked out this time. “No choice but to jump,” I announced. I slipped on my band. The yellow star of Oz — there. I jumped.

“They will certainly follow us here,” I told Anna. “They are far less certain to land anywhere close.”

“But they know where you will be jumping next. And the two times after. Their luck might improve.” She brought up her weapon controls.

“I should have brought Sacky Baldwin along,” I commented. “That sort of thing is her specialty.”

“You had your chance with her, husband mine.”

“And chose wisely.”

“Both of you. You’re jumping again?”

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"Might as well hurry, though there is no sign of our pursuer. Right, M?"

"Not yet, Jack."

"They could have other ships waiting ahead," Anna pointed out.

I could do quick in and out jumps all the way to Scotia. It shouldn't take too much out of me. Or if we landed in a spot I deemed safe, I could rest a little. We'd see.

"Oz is calling," M reported.

"Too bad." I jumped to Hermitage, "Close in. No need to send codes, M. We're not staying." I leaped to the orange sun of Ataensi. I might have slumped a little then.

"Fatigue?" asked Anna.

"Some. Ah, we're way out. I think we can sit here a few minutes. One of the engines is out completely, M?"

"It is no longer attached to the ship. There may also be some damage to the rear maneuvering tubes but they seem good for now."

As long as they didn't fall off too. "We'll need some work done when we get home."

"Larger engines?" He sounded a little too eager.

"We'll see. Any sign of hostiles?"

"None that I can identify as such. There is quite a bit of traffic."

That fact made me uncomfortable. "On to Scotia," I said. I hadn't even removed my headband. "Were this ship in better shape I might attempt multiple jumps to get us close to Fundy. Or were I in better shape."

Back and forth until the 'luck of the jump' gave me a favorable position. And I wouldn't have to jump back here. There were other stars, other systems, I could use, once I was inside the Scotian Group. I homed in on the yellow sun of my home world and jumped to it.

Not good. Maybe I *should* give it another try.

Anna gave the screen a short perusal. "Wow. we're pretty far out, aren't we?"

"We are. It might be safer here if we choose to sit a while." No one could track us, after all. We were only another ship and, out here, likely to be taken for an asteroid.

Asteroids. We could creep along, pretending to be another rock, and

try to attract no attention. "Set us a spiral course in, will you? Slow acceleration to quarter-speed."

A few minutes later, M reported, "Ship on our outward beam, Jack. A freighter."

I took the controls myself now and set an intercept course. Still slow. Yes, there it was, a big, slow ship, probably hauling ore. There might be a crew, it might be automatic. I didn't hail it until our paths nearly coincided.

"Don't see many ships like yours out here," said the man on the radio. "Don't see much of anyone."

"We've had a bit of an accident," I told him. Sort of true, wasn't it? "Lost an engine. Mind if we stay close to you all the way in, just in case?"

"Go right ahead. We're heading for Blue with a delivery for the McFee refinery there. Hey, you're a McFee ship, aren't you? I just noticed your registration."

"We are. Thanks." I moved in as close as was safe. That was pretty close as long as I stayed away from the business end of its engines. Those were plasma, not thrust tubes like ours, and a lot more dangerous to be behind!

"We're unlikely to be detected if we stick close," I said. "But it's going to take a while."

"I'm going to stand by the weapons anyway," declared Anna.

Plasma drives are mostly seen these days on big freighters that remain in one system and have no need for speed. They can be operated quite economically and can be quite a bit larger than the biggest jump ships.

Many ships in the early days of exploration and expansion used the drives. Despite their drawbacks they were the best choice at the time for interstellar travel. In fact, prior to the development of the first jump drive, attempts were made to send ships with plasma drives, powered by fusion reactors, through space to other systems. It does not seem any of these colony ships, which might have taken centuries to reach even the closest stars, were successful.

Anna or I gabbed intermittently with the freighter's crew. Both of them. Not much need for humans on a ship of that sort. They did

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figure out I was someone important in the company but I didn't give them my name. They didn't press me.

And they didn't report us when I asked them not to. It took a couple days to reach Blue. I called Fundy at once and asked for an escort home.

Anna did not get to use her cannon again.

CHAPTER 50

A PAIR OF N-6 fighters came for us. I was not surprised that Captain Sacajawea Baldwin was one of the escort pilots. "Someone sure had it out for you," came her greeting over the com. "Or for M. Make any new enemies, Emsie?"

"Not until they shot at me."

"I shot back," reported Anna.

"We need bigger guns too," M felt.

"You're going back to Fundy with us?" I asked. "Do those buses have the range?"

"Hey, don't insult them just because they aren't built by McFee. They'll do fine, Jack, and they are kind of buses but they sure pack a lot of firepower!"

"Too bad there's nothing to shoot at," I commiserated.

"Yeah, we need some pirates. Your father went and wiped them all out."

"He and the rest of Group Force." Decades before either of us was born, the last pirate bases in the Scotian Group had been destroyed. Yes, my father was a Ranger during those operations. The little piracy that remained consisted of quick jumps into a system in hopes of landing near a target. It didn't seem very lucrative.

"We're going to be slow with only one engine," I warned her.

"You're always slow. We could shuttle you back and let someone else take the ship in."

I think both M and I were offended by that.

"We should get our intelligence back as soon as possible. Do you need a break or can we go right now?"

"I have a gunner to relieve me. Undock and we'll go."

Sacky had been a gunner herself not long ago, for my cousin Errol. Weapons officer and copilot. One half of the customary light fighter crew.

Though N-6s barely qualified as 'light.' Blue and Scotia stood reasonably close to each other at the moment. The trip should not take too long. I have no doubt Sacky's little squadron could do it in about a third the time. Off we set.

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“Do you want to make any bets on who’s on the list?” I asked Anna as we cruised along. “Are you still suspicious of Caldwell?”

“Not very. Not Nancy Aruna either.”

She might not show up even if she were involved in some fashion, being neither military nor government. I didn’t suspect her anyway; not really.

“I’d put money on at least one senator,” I said.

“How about local governments in other systems?”

“Always possible. But all this ‘Scotia first’ nonsense doesn’t seem suited to them. They mostly want *less* Scotia in their affairs.”

“They do elect the senators.”

“Every inhabited system has at least one.” But Scotia, with its greater population, did dominate. “Much government is through ministries and bureaucrats. I have learned this is true pretty much everywhere mankind has settled in the universe.”

Anna spent a thoughtful moment. “Then some of the leaders of the conspiracy might be entrenched in that bureaucracy.”

“Almost certainly.” We both thought on that. Or at least we didn’t say anything for a while. “That can bring us back to Jeffers as a suspect, can’t it?”

“She shouldn’t get first look at the list,” Anna stated.

“Perhaps not. I’ll tell Aruna that. I do think Paolo Hill can be trusted to look at it, if he’s recovered sufficiently.”

She seemed to find that reasonable. “Our democracy is much more direct on Thule,” she commented.

“As I know. I think that was one factor in the split with the Janics.”

“Hey over there,” came Sacky’s voice. “There’s a ship approaching. Looks like it intends to intercept. Can you see anything more than us, M?”

“It is a Planetary Guard patrol fighter. A McFee W-9,” the AI told her.

I knew W-9s and had ridden on courier variants. This would be equipped as a heavy fighter. Missiles and guns and beam weapons. Likely to be as fast as the N-6s — depending on what engines were fitted — if not quite as maneuverable. “I don’t like this,” I let Sacky know. And whoever piloted the other N-6.

True, it could be but another escort. Sent by whom? Not General Aruna or anyone else I particularly trusted.

To Anna I said, "If I could be certain of a secure channel, I'd send the list to General Aruna right now." For just a second I considered doing it anyway. "But I trust no one, not even in his office. M, if we are prevented from proceeding to Fundy, do transmit it to Aruna."

"I will, Jack. The ship is still headed directly toward us."

"Hmm, if you find it necessary, send it to our escorts as well." The approaching ship slowed and veered away slightly. "I don't think they were expecting Sacky and friends."

"Sent directly by Aruna, I'd bet," said Anna. She was again at the weapon control. Our little beamer was quite inadequate for any sort of fight.

"Attention, crew of MC ship," came over the com. "You are to accompany us to base." I noted he didn't specify what base.

"On whose orders?" The man asking was probably the pilot of the other N-6. I didn't know whether he or Baldwin was in command.

There was a pause. Maybe they were attempting to think up some name. "Guard Command." That was safe. It named no one in particular. "This vessel is suspected of piracy."

That brought laughter from more than one ship. "The Radias might accuse the McFees of that but no one else," Sacky let him know.

"We have our orders," came a curt reply. "Stand down, Groupies."

"Only one ship," I noted to Anna. Off-com, of course. "They don't seem to take us too seriously."

"Without our escort they wouldn't have needed to. And more might attract too much attention and be too hard to explain."

Or it was as much they could scramble on short notice. This was a rogue ship, after all, not one on truly official business. "They might well have orders to destroy us if things go wrong, but whoever sent them wants the list of names."

The Group Force fighters had moved into a position to shield us, though it would cramp their maneuvering. That W-9 would have to come through them. Would it try? That might depend on whether its commander was only an underling or someone high in the conspiracy. Someone desperate to stop us.

BLIND JUMP

Anna was aiming her beam cannon their way. It seemed unlikely to be needed. The W-9 slowly edged away. "They are likely to dog us home," came Sacky's chipper announcement. "I'd expect them to launch at attack before we get there."

The other pilot said, "Someone at Blue must have sent word about you."

"It's hard to know who to trust," I admitted.

"But we trust you," added Anna. "Unless Sacky decides to bump me off and steal my husband."

"Oh, Aleks and I are engaged."

"My congratulations," M said. "I like Aleks Martín."

"Good to hear it, M! Too bad I can't invite you to the wedding."

"Our shadow is gaining slightly on us," spoke a voice I hadn't heard before. One of the gunners, undoubtedly.

"May attempt a long range missile shot. At any one of us. What do you think, Nath?"

"I'll drop back a bit," replied the pilot. "That might keep him honest."

"I could jump out of here, you know," I informed the both of them.

"Do so if necessary," Sacky told me. "And at your discretion."

But it would be best to get this intelligence to Fundy now. Any delay could only make things worse. We'd dawdled far too long as it was.

Also, I didn't completely trust the damaged W-6 to hold up through multiple jumps. "The worst scenario," I told everyone, "is that they call backup."

That might or might not be possible. I had no idea what resources they could draw on.

"Can you go any faster?" asked Nath.

Again, I had doubts about structural strength. "Let's do an acceleration, M," I said. "Slow and careful."

"Slow is the only way it can be," he told me. "And stopping is not going to be easy."

"We'll worry about that when we have to."

CHAPTER 51

WE COULD HAVE called for backup too, couldn't we? Maybe not if we wanted to keep our secrecy. It didn't look like our tail was going to get any assistance either. Not before we reached the crowded space around Fundy and Scotia.

If they were going to attack, it would be soon. "That Guard officer over there might be conflicted about this whole operation. He could back off," I said to Anna.

"I suppose. Chances are he's too deep in their organization for that."

I trusted Anna's expertise in such matters. Her brother's too. I was perhaps a bit inclined to get too imaginative.

Which can prove useful in other circumstances. At this point, it was almost certain he would make us his target. Perhaps he'd sent coded communications somewhere, asked for orders. No telling. But it was too late to try to capture us.

Our Scotian sun was looming larger, yellow and friendly. We were already decelerating and could be at Fundy in an hour, home not so long after. Me and Anna. M, too. Couldn't forget the ship would need some serious work. "I suspect I'll have to leave you at Fundy when I go back to my studies, M."

"Then Anna will have to visit me."

"I'll tell everyone to drop by."

"Elsa would be welcome. She could leave Errol at home."

"They're closing the gap," came Sacky's warning. "They're going to make a run at us."

"Shall I do the same to them, Captain?" asked Nath. So Sacky was in charge.

"No. Maintain formation." Then she commanded, "Veer off, Planetary ship!"

It didn't. "Fire at will, Nath. You too, Anna."

I'm sure she did. M and I were attempting some rather ineffectual evasive maneuvers.

"You're making it hard to aim," complained my wife.

"They are too far away," M informed her. "Your beam will be ineffective at this range."

BLIND JUMP

She may have cursed under her breath. In Thulean.

It would require but one missile to take us out. M would let me know if one was fired and I would instantly jump. I had my headband on and a star targeted.

Maybe I should just go anyway. "You got him, Baldwin!"

"Yeah. Remember he was one of us."

"Right. I doubt anyone survived. Shall I check?"

"Uh-huh. Follow as you deem proper."

I had the W-9 on my screen now. A direct missile hit, I would assume. The mangled craft continued to coast forward.

"Let's get back on course, Jack McFee," Sacky called. "No need to wiggle anymore."

"She let Nath get their attention, didn't she?" asked Anna. "And then took her shot."

I reconstructed events in my head. "So it would seem. I was focusing on other things." I'd stay hooked up to the drive a little longer. Best to be safe.

Nath — Lieutenant James Nath, that is — caught up to us shortly. "Might be survivors, Sacky," he reported. "Someone turned on a beacon."

"We'll mention that when we get to Fundy," she replied. "Then we need to get this McFee into the base and to General Aruna."

"I'll have to moor at the station, remember," I told her. She could land on the Fundy surface, if needed. The moon's gravity was low and the W-6s didn't carry massive jump elements.

"Right, Jack. There is a shuttle waiting to ferry you down."

"I could dock myself," offered M.

"You could," I admitted, "but you need to be guarded. You carry information too."

"I'll call for that," Sacky promised.

Nath remained at the station, floating outside in his fighter in case any danger approached from that direction. That did seem unlikely to me. Sacky accompanied us to the shuttle, leaving her gunner with the guards at the W-6's dock. My cousin Errol was at the controls of the shuttle.

"Aruna asked me to come help out," he told us. Errol and Aruna

went back some, working together during the war. One making plans, the other carrying them out.

"This seems to have been a rather roundabout way of getting your information here," he remarked.

"Yet one thing led to another and so it went."

"I believe I've heard that excuse from you before." He brought us to the surface and to a docking tube. One guard had accompanied us, a formidable looking woman with sergeant's insignia.

"Your mother is here," he said, as we hurried up a hallway. "Lou thought she was one person he could definitely trust, and one who knew the ins and outs of the information ministry. Hill, as you suggested."

"How is he?"

"Mending well. And the prime minister finishes a very short list of trustworthy people."

"Buey." She'd held the office last time I'd checked. That had been a while.

"Yes. The attack —"

"Hold!" I'm not sure whether Anna or the sergeant said it first, but both said it. Well, it's possible one or the other said, "Halt!" And both fired at some target up the corridor.

"Another ambush," I muttered, primarily to myself. It was to be expected the opposition would make one last try. I had my sidearm in my hand at once.

Sacky was just a little slower at pulling out a weapon. Not the clunky military-issue handgun but something considerably sleeker. I wondered if my wife had something to do with that.

That left Errol weaponless. He had not been prepared. I slipped him my little hideaway beamer. "I see what you mean about one thing leading to another," he commented.

Our sergeant yelled at the hidden gunmen up the corridor. "If you are soldiers, cease this action at once. We report directly to General Aruna."

There seemed to be a brief buzz of discussion. "You're assassins," someone called to us.

BLIND JUMP

"No." I could just barely hear another voice raised. "That's Peggy Novak. She wouldn't do nothing like that."

"And this is Jack McFee with me," Novak went on. "You know he's no assassin."

One man came out, dressed in a military jumpsuit, and peered at me. "It's Jumping Jack, sure enough," he called to his comrades. He turned back to us. "But our captain said you were coming to murder the general."

"More like the other way around," I told them. "Your officers are the ones plotting. Let's get to his offices and you'll see the truth of it."

"Good enough," responded one. "But you go first."

"Half ahead of us, half behind," said Sergeant Peggy Novak. That seemed to everyone's satisfaction. Almost everyone. I still didn't trust every one of them and knew one might put a slug in my back.

But we rushed on to the general, to blunder into another gun fight. More of a standoff, really, with two forces covering each other. Neither group knew quite what to make of us when we arrived. That was all right because I couldn't make anything of them. Who was on our side?

That was quickly answered when a man in a captain's uniform shot at us. Three or four of us shot back. Even Errol. The soldier collapsed. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded Novak in best drill sergeant voice.

Most stood there, looking bewildered. A handful took off running. The ones who understood what was actually going on, I guessed. A couple from our group did the same.

"Let them go," I advised. "We'll round up who's responsible soon enough." I looked around. "Is anyone hurt?"

"I'll take charge of that, sir," said the sergeant. "You need to get in to the general."

Who opened his door at that moment, perhaps recognizing the danger was over. "Get in here, Jack, and let's get a look at this list of yours. It had better be worth all this bother."

My sentiments exactly.

CHAPTER 52

“THESE B SERIES engines use more ceramic construction,” Errol informed me. Whether I wanted to know it or not. “A distinct improvement over the series A, which was pretty much a direct copy of Boethian designs.”

I had heard the company — probably Errol’s father — had decided it prudent to pay them a royalty. “As long as the ship can be fixed up, I’m fine with any engines you slap on it.”

“M might feel differently. We’re considering the weapons upgrade he wanted.”

I cared even less about that. “You’ll be as good as new when I get back,” I told M. Three or four months. A shuttle waited to carry me to a liner and away.

Anna added, “He has to return before our child is born.”

“It’s a good thing I gave you your privacy,” was M’s only comment.

“You may have heard Senator Capulong resigned,” said Errol, as we left the ship and strolled into the hallways of Fundy Station. “She was one of the leaders. It was felt best to keep it quiet rather than charge her.”

“I’ve heard of several arrests. Some of them names I recognized.”

“Yes, some from the list, some named by those on the list. But I fear their movement survives. It may still have a role to play.”

“Didn’t Jeffers resign too?” asked Anna. “Was she involved?”

“Her private secretary was.”

“The source of more than one leak, I would guess,” I said. And a person who had put Anna and me in danger.

“Jeffers felt it best to step away, so Paolo is now in charge.”

“I won’t press you for names. And neither will Anna, right?”

She nodded but her heart wasn’t in it. “Was Captain Caldwell on the list?” she asked.

“Clean as can be. As is the general’s wife. Nancy is related to some important people who were involved but there is not the least evidence she knew anything.”

“Good thing we didn’t make any bets,” my wife told me.

“Or we’d owe ourselves money. And so the honeymoon ends, dear.”

BLIND JUMP

“You said it again!”

“And as long as we live.”

AFTERWORD

So we end the fourth Jack Mack novel and complete something of an arc. Will more stories of Jack McFee — and, of course, Anna — follow? Most assuredly, but they shall now have to find new adventures. Yes, and M, too.