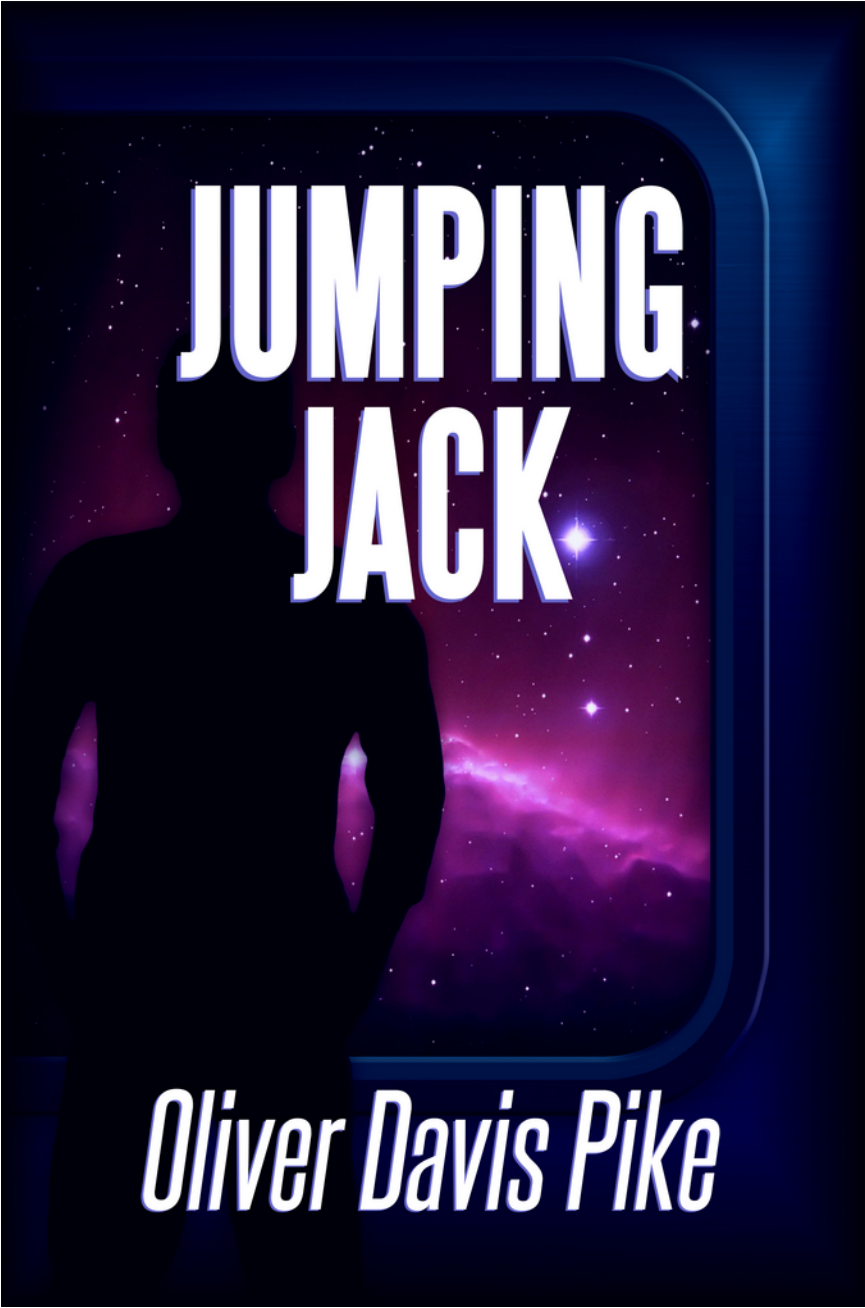




JUMPING JACK

Oliver Davis Pike

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CHAPTER 1

THE SWEEP WAS complete. “Nothing,” I said to M, though he knew that as well as I did and knew it before I did. M was the powerful AI that ran this ship. That *was* this ship in many respects. The name was short for ‘Spy Master’ and I had given it to him when we had first communicated.

M thought that was funny and it had taken me some time to find out why. And why he referred to Anna Gallen, who had provided me with weapons, as Q. Anna had also trained me in the use of those weapons. Fortunately, that knowledge had proven unneeded these past months.

I had found out a lot of things as there had not been much to do besides read. Our mission was long-range recon, far out in the systems that made up the Scotian Group. That’s the purpose for which the Nativ ship, loaded with sensitive instrumentation, was intended. That it—and M and me—had been given a baptism of fire by running spy missions into enemy space was now the past. I was altogether willing to lurk in the outer regions of our home systems, seeking intruders.

“Are you going to jump, Jack?”

“Those are the orders.” But we needn’t hurry.

“You should shave first.”

“I thought I might keep the beard. Regulations allow it.”

“Good taste doesn’t.”

What a computer knew of good taste I was uncertain. M did know a lot of things, however, and chances were he was right about this. “Maybe just the mustache.”

“Like your brother?” The tone was slightly mocking. He was getting better at that sort of thing. Better than he had any right to be.

“Good point. I’ll go back right now and—”

An alarm cut me off. I would shave later. “What do we have?”

M spoke as I settled back into my command chair, scanning the screens. “One vessel. It jumped pretty close to us.”

As I could see by the coordinates on my screen. That it landed near us in this system was pure luck; any jump from one star to another was pretty much random. It could have appeared on the far side of the sun,

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

further in, further out. Usually I would simply report the sighting. I wasn't really out here to watch for enemy ships jumping into a system anyway. Anyone could do that. My job was to seek ships or installations already hidden in deep space, way out here where the sun seemed barely larger than the other stars.

I did report it, to be sure. That made me nervous as I was close enough to the intruder for it to pick up my signal and locate me. It would do that long before my message reached anyone further in. "I believe we should hide," I told myself. Or M. It came to much the same thing.

We could just sit here without power and hope we weren't detected. That ship might not even care about us. Better to ease in close to a few asteroids if any were close enough. There, maybe five minutes away if I opened up the Nativ's main tubes. Those were inadequate to any real running away. Moreover, movement might attract attention. I would take that chance.

In a few minutes, I was easing in between a couple of rocks, not much larger than the ship. That was a relatively easy operation in this spy ship. In many craft of its size, the rear array served primarily for stabilization, and was fixed in place, the tubes relatively close together with maneuvering accomplished by varying the thrust of one or another. Not so in the Nativ S-type. The rear tubes were set well out from the nacelle and could be turned in wide arcs. This allowed precise sideways movement of a sort not usually considered necessary—nor even desirable—for combat craft.

One encountered that sort of thing more often on little freight loaders and the like. "It is a carrier," M announced, "and it has launched three craft."

Headed this way. I could see that. Fighters? Still too far off to tell. But I should let someone know about this, too, once again revealing my location. Ah, what the hell. They seemed to know where I was anyway. I sent a second message to follow the first. Chances were that one hadn't reached anyone yet. We were awfully far out.

"They may be within firing range in three minutes," reported M. "Sooner if they launch missiles." By firing he meant beam weapons. I hoped they didn't want to waste a missile on innocent little me.

JUMPING JACK

“I guess I should follow those orders and jump.”

“It seems like a good idea, Jack. Too bad you didn’t have time to shave.”

I could have jumped from a motionless start but that is always unpleasant. Better to have some momentum going. I eased back out of my hideout, and turned every tube full and directed rearward. “Missile launched,” came M’s matter-of-fact statement. No matter. I looked to my target, that dim distant star glowing orange against the shifting, multi-hued backdrop of the Wall, the dust cloud that bounded one side of Scotian space. Lock on. Jump.

I believe an asteroid turned to dust behind us.

CHAPTER 2

AT A HUNDRED and twenty my grandfather remained a vigorous man. Aside from his gray hair, you wouldn't guess him to be more than eighty.

Family and a few hundred close friends had descended—or maybe that should be ascended—on Summit Up, Grandpa Jack's mountaintop retreat, to help celebrate the day. I attempted to remain inconspicuous. Yes, I had shaved.

The military man next to me began talking about my cousin and our operation of a few months prior. "He shouldn't have been out in a fighter in the first place," he stated, "and then he pulled that stunt of providing cover for the other ships as they returned to the carrier. That's how he got marooned in the Byron system, you understand."

I hadn't heard that before but I was completely willing to believe this Group Force general. Important Military Persons—IMPs, I always called them in my head—spoke to me these days. "That does sound like Errol, sir."

"Doesn't it?" said Jeanne Freneau, taking a seat beside us. She's a general too but one wouldn't have guessed it today, in her stylish civilian clothes. "It's a good thing this boy was there to rescue him." She turned to me. "Did you know you've picked up a nickname?"

"Jack Mack?" My own brother called me that sometimes.

"Jumping Jack. Or Jumping Jack McFee." She gave me a little conspiratorial smile. "Your grandfather is sometimes known as Jack Mack. To his closest friends."

Jeanne Freneau was an especially close friend of Grandpa Jack. "I hear you managed to get shot at again," she continued.

"An Aiglean sent a missile my direction," I admitted. "They must not have liked my looks."

The general on my other side spoke up. "Most likely, the intrusion was intended to be a raid. Your early detection led them to abort and they jumped out of the system right after you did." He chuckled and gave me something resembling a wink. "I suspect they just wanted to blow something up before they had to leave."

JUMPING JACK

“Do you think they jumped through Alice?” Freneau asked him. That was a neutral system on the edge of the Scotian Group.

“Maybe, or through Ning space. The deteriorating conditions there are making it easier.”

I had been hearing things like that. The war was not going well. That wasn’t so noticeable here in the Group. Fighting hadn’t touched us much. My recent encounter suggested that might be changing.

“By the way,” said General Freneau, returning her attention to me, “you’re officially certified as a top-level jump pilot now. Any and all drives.”

I wished I hadn’t been. It might give IMPs ideas about drafting me for their projects.

“Oh, there’s Errol now,” she said, and waved in his direction. “Is that the purported fiancée with him?”

“I understood Elsa, Captain Alander, that is, couldn’t leave her duties.” It was a good excuse to avoid our family. She had met them once and that was probably enough. A different tall blond Thulean was at my cousin’s side. “That’s Lieutenant Gallen. I didn’t expect her here. Nor her brother.” He sauntered along on Errol’s other flank.

“Thulean intelligence,” remarked the general on my left. “I know of Captain Tarmo Gallen by reputation.”

“I avoid knowing about that sort of thing, Lou,” said Jeanne Freneau. “It can get one into all sorts of trouble. As our young friend has discovered.”

“No worse trouble than my family already has,” said I.

No one saluted anyone, which was fine with me. If Errol started doing it, I’d probably have to as well. His first words were to me. “A friend of yours is coming here.”

“You mean the princess. She does write me, you know.”*

“No official secrets are exchanged, I trust.” Not that all our letters weren’t read by someone. “These two are here to help set up security for the mission.” Then he acknowledged the IMPs on my either side. “General Freneau. General Aruna. This is Captain Tarmo Gallen. Lieutenant Anna Gallen.”

They didn’t salute either. To be sure, Thuleans never salute anyone.

"I'm going to hand you over to Jack," Errol told them. "He can give you the tour while I gossip with these two."

For that I was grateful. I had felt boxed in, generals on either side, a brigadier standing in front of me. "Vili still writes to Gunilla Sanderson too," Tarmo informed me as we walked away. "Of course, she remains in the dark as to who she actually is."

"Sandi is still on the station?"

"I stole her from the police to serve on my own security staff. She was already in place with a good alias when she was keeping an eye on the princess. It seemed an excellent idea to keep her there."

"My brother is rather fond of the Gunner too," added Anna. "But I'm sure that had no bearing on it."

"It is important to get along well with ones staff. Not that anyone knows she is staff. Officially, she's still a tug pilot and we are, um—"

"Dating?" I offered.

"They're way beyond dating," snickered Anna Gallen.

I felt that needed no further comment so I waved a hand toward the wide open spaces. "The view," I said. "That's half the tour right there."

"You might be used to this sort of thing," breathed Tarmo, "but it is incredible to us. Anna's never been on Scotia before."

"Not that Tarmo saw much on his quick visits. He's definitely never been up here."

"That is true. We are both awe-stricken and tongue-tied and that sort of thing."

I went over and leaned against the transparent dome that covered and surrounded the entire lounge area, one great window on the sky and the mountains. "I'm not completely blasé about it myself," I told them. "We could go outside if you want. It's cold but you're Thuleans so you're used to it, right?"

"Is there air?" asked Anna. Only my surprise kept me from laughing.

"Were not *that* far up. It's not even thin here."

"The sky would be darker if there was no air," Tarmo reminded his sister.

"Oh, of course." She looked up that sky. "It was a silly question,

JUMPING JACK

wasn't it? I've spent too much time on a space station where there's never air outside." Anna continued to gaze upward. "So blue!"

The skies of Thule have somewhat of a greenish tinge to them, I'd been told, with an orange sun floating in them. I'd not seen them in person yet but intended to.

"Let's see some of this house first," suggested the captain.

"Seeing all of it would take weeks," I told him. "Months! We always carry provisions when we visit in case we get lost."

We exited the crowded lounge—always the most popular spot at Summit Up—and entered Grandfather's house proper, through the wide main arcade. There, as we walked, Tarmo said, "I trust you have not told anyone Sandburg was undercover at the station."

I hadn't, but I had to say, "I'd have thought our gun battle had put an end to that."

"Everyone assumes the assassination attempt was aimed at you. The only witness was a servbot, after all." It had been rather upset, as I remembered. "And Gunner, of course. By the way, continue to call her Sandi, if her name comes up."

"Vili mentions her from time to time. So this is a diplomatic mission of some sort she'll be coming with? Want to see the swimming pool? We'll turn left here then."

"Yes, diplomats. The princess has some sort of communications job, I understand."

"Translation. She tells me the AIs do a good job, but she and a couple other interpreters look the documents over to catch any subtleties they might miss." It sounded terribly boring to me. "Vili also tells me she would much rather still be operating a tug."

"Maybe we all would." Tarmo turned his head to me and lowered his voice, only slightly. "I am going to let you in on a secret. Not a really *secret* secret but one young pilots and the friends of royalty are permitted to hear. Princess Vilma Lempsen is going to remain on Scotia when the mission returns home. It was decided it was a safer place for her."

That might be sensible, considering the previous assassination attempt. We passed under a high, simple arch. Grandpa Jack's tastes tended toward the austere in architecture. "Here's the pool. This is the

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

largest one. There are—two others? Yeah. Maybe three. It's hard to say where the line is between a small pool and a large bath."

A handful of men and women in bathing suits were swimming or lounging by the water. Anna looked over the scene and frowned. "Oh, they're wearing clothes."

"That's Scotians for you," remarked Tarmo.

*Not surprisingly, when the only means of communication between one star system and another is via faster-than-light ships, letter writing is popular. This would more commonly be some sort of electronic text but sometimes it is on actual paper.

CHAPTER 3

YEAH, SURE, ALL Scotians are prudes and tightwads, and all Thuleans sit around nude in their saunas when they aren't drinking and having sex. Everyone knows the clichés.

Even so, I doubted this pair of Thuleans had packed bathing suits. It wouldn't have occurred to them. "I could find suits for you," I told them.

Anna looked the scene over again. "Maybe later. Let's see some more of this place."

"Stewie," I asked, "are any areas off limits?"

The AI that controlled Summit Up replied at once. "Not to you, Jack. Your friends—" There was a barely perceptible pause while he checked. "Are free to go anywhere in your company."

"Stewie?" whispered Tarmo.

"You'd best call him Steward. He runs the house." Or he was the house, one might say, the way M was my ship and House was my own family home.

"I could show you my grandfather's private floor. It's high up but the views aren't much better than from the lounge we just left. Or the library." I doubted that interested much either. It was my favorite place to hang out in this house.

"Oh, we'd love to see the quarters of the famous and fabulously wealthy Jack McFee the First," Anna told me. "Can we expect Jack McFee the Second to move into them someday?"

"I'm the Third, actually. And it is exceedingly unlikely I'll be the heir to Grandpa's estate or the McFee firm."

"I'd put my money on your brother," said Tarmo. "Maybe he'll let you visit. Oh, there are elevators." He confided to his sister, "In Jack's home it's all stairs. They're short stairs but they add up."

"Short?"

"The place is built in tiers," I told her. "On a hillside. Only a few steps up to each new level." There were elevators inside the hill, and quite a lot else unseen, but there was no reason to say that.

A little cylindrical robot rolled past us, as the elevator door opened. I

didn't remember ever seeing one like it here before. Or anywhere else for that matter. "Stewie," I asked, "what kind of bot just went by?"

A longer pause than I might have expected. "There are no bots in your area, Jack. Let me—" Immediately an exceedingly loud alarm sounded. "Intruder! First floor! All guests please remain where you are while we make a security sweep."

"He must have looked for it," drawled Tarmo.

"And didn't like what he saw," replied Anna.

I looked at the beckoning elevator. "Best we stay put, as requested," I said. "We can continue the tour later."

"I want to find out about the bot anyway," Tarmo said. "And how it got into this house. The security here is tight."

"If they'd let me carry my weapon I could have shot it," offered Anna. "Even Jack might have hit it at that range."

"I'd wager he hasn't even picked up his 140 these past couple months."

Which was true. The handgun sat in a dresser drawer at home. "All clear," came Steward's voice. His usual, cultivated voice. I could recognize when it then shifted from public announcement to a private communication. "Jack, will you bring your friends down to the armory please?"

"An armory?" asked Anna. "Why didn't we start our tour there?"

"I was saving the best for last," I informed Lieutenant Gallen, and led the way.

When we got there, Boris McFarland, Grandpa's head of security, had the bot laid out on a ceramic table. What remained of it. Various IMPs were gathered around. Errol too.

The latter looked up as we entered. "It's a spy of some sort," he said. "Maybe getting the lay of the place."

"As long as it doesn't explode," I said. We'd both run into exploding bots on the Thule station.

"No room for a charge but it burnt out all its circuits as soon as it was, ah, apprehended. It was undoubtedly meant to do that when its mission was finished."

Tarmo nodded at this. "And never leave this place. There was a transmitter I would assume."

JUMPING JACK

McFarland spoke. "Yes, and the receiver is probably close. Perhaps even on the premises."

"Maybe," allowed Errol. He didn't sound like he believed it. "This was a good time to attempt to slip something like it in here, with so many guests about."

"One of those guests might have brought it."

"Or," spoke Tarmo, "it could have been left weeks ago and only activated now. That's what I would have done."

McFarland squinted at him. Boris had a legendary squint. I'd been on its receiving end myself. "If you could. Easier said than done."

"I'd bet it was built here." Here? All eyes went to Anna Gallen. "There is fabrication and repair of simple bots in house, isn't there? Just send instructions to have something of this sort made."

"I shall check into this, Lieutenant," came Stewie's voice.

He took surprisingly long. Almost a minute. "Yes, there was an order, sent roundabout through several systems. I've traced it to General Freneau's room."

CHAPTER 4

NOW, OF COURSE, all eyes went to Freneau. Not that anyone suspected her of anything but where else would they look?

"That's interesting," was all she had to say.

All knew the General had a room permanently reserved just for her use here at Summit Up. "So who accessed it?" asked someone.

"I do not know," replied Steward.

"There are standing orders of no surveillance of her room or door," said McFarland. "Anyone who knew that would see the opportunity to use it."

So we could blame Grandpa Jack himself. I was surprised he hadn't come down here to learn what was going on.

"Nothing else we can learn then," said General Aruna. "Let's get back to the party."

And we could get back to the tour, if my friends were still interested. "Hey," said Anna, "we could sneak into Freneau's room and go through all her personal things if no one watches it. Find out what color underwear she wears and if she reads risqué novels."

Her brother ignored her. "You don't think she could be behind this, do you?" It was his job to be suspicious of people.

But I couldn't be suspicious of the general. "I doubt she has the technical expertise for it any more than I do. We're just jump pilots. We don't understand how anything works."

"Maybe the two best jump pilots in the Scotian Group," said Tarmo to his sister. "You know, she taught him as much about jumping as you taught him about fighting."

"I barely managed to take the edge off his ignorance. Where *are* we going if we can't ransack the general's room?"

We started with a tour of the armory, in that we were already there. It was almost as new to me as the Gallens. I'd never had an interest in it before. In honesty, I was not terribly knowledgeable about Summit Up or my grandfather's life there.

I didn't even know about Jeanne Freneau and Grandpa Jack until after I had been her student. In my defense, I'd been away from Scotia, at a Corvan school, for some time. And my immediate family had never

JUMPING JACK

paid much attention to what went on at Summit Up. Dad had chosen to distance himself from the whole McFee family business.

Anna was disappointed that it was long on offices and bots but short on weapons. It was Boris McFarland's headquarters, essentially, and his job was primarily surveillance. All sorts of crazies wanted to come and talk to the famous and reclusive Jack McFee. The Second, that is.

I found them another pool, unoccupied, up a couple stories, in a circular, domed room all in white. Or maybe it was one of those large baths I'd mentioned. Before I realized what was going on, both were doffing their clothes.

Oh, I might as well too. The water was inviting and Anna had seen me naked before, after all. More than seen me but we needn't get into that. I might truly have felt shyer about stripping around Tarmo.

I slipped in and did nothing but relax in the warm water, floating with my head resting on the edge of the pool. "More company," said Anna.

An older man, hair salt-and-pepper but small beard almost all white, had entered through an arch opposite the way we'd come in. He came over and crouched by the poolside. "Must be Thuleans," he commented.

"Yes, sir. This is Tarmo Gallen and that's his sister Anna. My grandfather," I informed the pair.

He gave Anna a long perusal. I didn't blame him one bit for that. "She looks like that girl Errol brought here."

"Oh, they all look alike, Grandpa."

There was a smidgen of truth to that. An awful lot of Thuleans were blond. And tall. The original colony had been small and grew in isolation for some time so there had not been a lot of new genes coming in.

"Steward tells me there was some commotion earlier. And, ah, one of my friends was involved."

"We all know about Jeanne Freneau, Grandpa. No need to tiptoe around the subject."

"We're intelligence agents," added Tarmo. "We're supposed to know."

“And I would have told them if they didn’t. You’re a topic of gossip, you know.”

Grandpa Jack shook his head. “Thanks for reminding me why you’re not my favorite grandson.”

“Always happy to, sir. It would seem someone snuck into the general’s room and used it as a base for nefarious deeds.”

He rose. “So Steward said. Not in quite those words.” He nodded to my guests and returned the way he’d come.

“I would guess Stewie also told him we were here,” I said. “Isn’t that right?” I asked the air.

“It is possible, Jack,” the air replied. “Rooms are prepared for your guests when they are ready for them. Should I have some towels sent up to you?”

“Not a bad idea. We don’t want to get our clothes all wet nor drip naked through the corridors.”

“I should think not. We have standards at Summit Up.”

Anna moved close and whispered, “I’ve hear advanced AIs tend to take on the personalities of their, um, masters. Stewie doesn’t seem to resemble your grandfather.”

There was no point in whispering. Stewie could hear us anyway. Nor would he care in the least what she said about him. “Make that my great-grandfather. Steward has been around a long time.”

Before much of this place had been built or Grandpa Jack gave it its whimsical name. The AI had grown with the house.

Later, as I was preparing for sleep in my own room, Steward spoke to me. “I like your Anna Gallen. Maybe not her brother. Does she have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t seen her in months. “Why do you ask, Stewie?”

“You should be her boyfriend. I could tell you like each other.”

“She’s older than me. A lot.”

“Four years, seven months, two days. I do not think that qualifies as a lot, Jack.”

Stewie would have that at his fingertips. Figuratively speaking. “Wait until I bring a different Thulean girl here.”

It would interesting to hear his opinion of her Royal Highness

JUMPING JACK

Princess Vilma Arjan-Lempsen of Thule and the Janic-Thule Alliance.
Known as Vili to her friends.

CHAPTER 5

“YOU’RE NOT MUCH like your grandfather,” Jeanne Freneau told me. “Maybe Errol is. He can be just as stubborn. Passionate, too. Maybe the two go together.”

“That may be why they don’t get along that well.”

“But Jack respects him. I’m not sure what he thinks of you.”

Neither did I. I’d as soon he didn’t think about me at all. “I know Grandpa Jack is a bit partial to my brother.”

“Oh, everyone loves Brendon McFee, the dashing war hero.”

“And no one notices me. I hope.”

“We hope so too. You may have a future in intelligence.”

“Which you avoid knowing about.”

“But people insist on telling me about anyway. This is a better breakfast than your grandfather usually lays out.”

I wouldn’t disagree. The man ate a simple diet himself and saw no reason others shouldn’t as well.

“Your parents showed up this morning,” Freneau went on.

“They couldn’t miss the day itself.” I stopped a passing botboy to snag another apple turnover. “As much of the rest of it as they could, yes. I think I saw most of Errol’s family yesterday.” Oh, that was good. “If Brendon doesn’t end up running the McFee Concern one day, I’d put my money on my cousin Monike.”

The general nodded. “A director now. I’ve dealt with her. Here come our Thuleans.”

They looked at what remained of our breakfast. Empty plates, mostly. “There’s a buffet over there,” I said, “and bots circulating with goodies.”

“A moving buffet,” said Tarmo.

“Exactly.” The little machines were programmed to cover every part of the room so something one desired was bound to pass by. “You’ll have to get your own coffee though.”

“I’ll get us both some,” volunteered Anna. “Maybe there will be some decent cocoa.”

“If there’s any to be found on this planet,” Jeanne told her, “it will be found here.”

JUMPING JACK

“We import most of ours from the Old Worlds,” said Tarmo, taking a seat as his sister hurried off. “I’m sure the known universe is aware Thuleans like cocoa almost as much as sex.”

“We’ve heard that rumor.”

“We sat out in the lounge and looked at your wall quite a while last night. Impressive doesn’t begin to describe it.”

Freneau smiled at his enthusiasm. “Even we who live with it may look up and be unexpectedly filled with awe.”

The great dust cloud we called the Wall filled a good portion of the sky. How much depended on the season and latitude. It was distant enough from the planet Scotia to provide a nebulous background of shifting colors, a few stars standing between us but barely to be made out at times. As you might imagine, it showed up a lot in our arts. I couldn’t begin to tell you how many poems were titled ‘The Wall.’

It was also a barrier to ships jumping from that direction. Most ships.

“And both of you have jumped ships through it,” he said.

“As far as we know, the only ones who ever did,” I informed him.

“Which doesn’t mean others can’t and won’t. It might not be so difficult to latch onto Big Blue from the other side, even with a Li Drive, but who would be crazy enough to jump into the system of a blue giant?”

I agreed. “You’d be unlikely to jump out again.”

“An automated Li Drive in an unmanned ship, maybe?” asked Tarmo.

“Maybe,” Freneau agreed. “But why?”

There would be no point. None we could see. There were easier ways to sneak into our systems!

“I sipped it,” said Anna, setting down two mugs. “The flavor’s a little unusual but not objectionable.”

“Grown in one of our systems, most likely,” I said. “The varieties are bound to be different.”

Tarmo took his own sip, nodded. “Yes, your parents told me about that when I visited before. They’re knowledgeable about trade.”

It was sort of their jobs to know such things. All the more so now they were part of the wartime bureaucracy.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"I'll have to show Vili the Wall," I said. "When does she arrive?"

"Sometime in the next few days. The exact date of the mission is being kept secret until the last moment, to lessen the risk of attack or sabotage. Secret from me, anyway." He took another, larger sip of cocoa. "This will do. Now, are there pancakes to be found?"

Both Gallens headed off to search for them. "I wonder," I said, "if the diplomatic mission or the princess would be the attraction for an attack."

"No reason it can't be both. But is this princess really anyone important?"

"Only as a symbol. Janic separatists might target her. Or Thulean antiwar groups, who also tend to be anti-monarchy. They see the monarchy and the union with the Janics to be the underlying cause of it all."

"Oh?" I think she was amused by my lecture.

That didn't stop me, of course. "But all that is simplistic. There are much deeper causes for any war. Economic, usually."

Freneau laughed outright this time. "Jack McFee, if I ignored your deeper voice I might think that was your mother speaking. It's no wonder she wants you out of the military and into the diplomatic corps."

"Not if I can help it. Now—did you get Grandpa something really nifty for his birthday?"

CHAPTER 6

FRENEAU HAD A point. I could sound like my mom. Oh, the pedantic lectures were more Dad's thing. He would have done better to pursue an academic career, maybe, instead of law and government and all that. That was my intention when this war was over. Off to college for a degree and possibly never return!

But the war wasn't over. Chances were M and I would keep patrolling until it ended. Everyone would keep doing what they were doing. Grandpa Jack, perhaps, had the right idea to resign as head of the McFee Concern when war was declared, handing over the top job to my Uncle Rupert. That's Errol's father. He said a younger man should be in charge.

Rupert was competent but not innovative. Probably just the person to keep production going. Maybe not the person to keep the company going in peacetime. I didn't see any of that mattering to me. I certainly wasn't going to be involved in running things.

To be sure, everyone knew my grandfather was still ultimately in charge. Or at least his opinions carried a great deal of weight. He remained an extraordinarily important person. This probably made him a target for our enemies too. Which helped explain that little recon bot.

It also explained why so many important people were here to wish him a happy one hundred and twentieth birthday. He couldn't ignore them all today. The cake and the rest was supposed to happen in the early afternoon.

Some of the guests would be gone by evening. Almost all by tomorrow evening, off to the duties of, well, important people. I might get a new assignment or get to relax a couple more days. No, I'm not counting myself as important.

It seemed no one else did either. I'd been ignored all morning. Not that I'm complaining, you understand. The Gallens were gone, off to a security meeting somewhere on the other side of the planet to prepare for the Thulean mission. With Vili as part of that mission I might be asked to stick around.

The being ignored thing only lasted to around noon, even though I

had hidden in the library. A large, bearded man came in and sat in one of the exceptionally comfortable chairs next to me. I always hated to get out of one of those chairs. Maybe Robert Douglas would feel the same and fall asleep or something.

No such luck. Douglas was a sub-minister in Mom's department. The actual job was spy-master. Being a proud member of the Planetary Guard, I did not answer to him. Which is not to say he wasn't pulling at least some of my strings.

And it was at his advice I remained in my current role, when Mom wanted to steal me from the military. I had no doubt he had his own agenda in that. He looked around the huge but largely empty room. "You seek isolation even here," said Robert.

"I seek books here," I replied.

"Real books on paper." He nodded. "You read through a great deal of material these past three months, floating out there by yourself."

Not by myself. With M. I didn't say that. "I suppose you checked my records."

"We're interested in you, Jack McFee. You know that. And we've been waiting for an occasion when we could use you."

It took only a moment to figure out what that was about. "The visiting Thuleans."

"Exactly. You'll be in their company from time to time over the next few days. Maybe longer than that." He paused, though I wasn't sure why. Maybe the man just liked to be dramatic. "No assignment, boy. Keep your eyes open, report anything interesting you see." He chuckled. "Other than Princess Vilma."

"I'm not going to be close to the diplomats, am I?"

"Most likely not. But you know some of those around them. The Gallens. That can get you into places." He considered that, frowning under his shaggy eyebrows. "So can the princess."

"Spy on my friends?" That was obliquely suggested, wasn't it?

"There are no friends in wartime, Jack. Only allies, and those can change."

The room suddenly shook. A muffled boom followed. "Please remain calm," urged Steward. "All is under control."

"Do you think that's true?" asked my companion.

JUMPING JACK

"If Steward says so, it is. I won't pester him by asking what happened right now." A few books had fallen off lecterns or shelves. Bots were already scrambling to put them back.

A somewhat short, athletic-looking, red-haired woman appeared at the doorway. "Everyone in here okay? Oh, Jack. Good to see you."

"Lieutenant Baldwin," I said, rising. "No, it's Captain, I see. A promotion."

"Did you think you were the only one who got something out of our little action? Call me Sacky." She gave the big man still lounging in his chair—I said folks hated to get out of them—a not overly friendly nod. "Mister Douglas."

"Errol McFee's gunner, isn't it? Good to see you, Captain." He made himself get up, with a bit of a sigh. "I really should go see what is happening."

We both watched him shamble out of the room. "I'm not Errol's crew anymore," she said as soon as the spy was gone. "He's not flying fighters, at least for a while."

"Too valuable in a command position," I figured. "So what do they have you doing?" We both sank into chairs. They were just too inviting.

"The same thing with a different pilot the last couple months. I'm supposed to be reassigned now." She tried to sound like it was no big deal to her. A new assignment is always a big deal. "I think the brigadier may be pulling some strings for me. I'm here with him as a sort of aide at the moment."

Errol was nothing if not loyal to his people. They reciprocated in kind.

"Well, no place for you on my ship. I don't even have any guns."

"I noticed that. It didn't prevent you from flying into combat."

"Yeah. I had to live up to the McFee name, you know?"

Sacky took me seriously. "That could be tough."

Stewie interrupted us. "Thank you for not pestering me, Jack, as you put it. I was a trifle busy. If you would like to know, a device exploded outside the dome."

"No damage, I assume."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

“Not the least but it did blacken a section. It is being cleaned as we speak.”

I turned to Captain Sacajawea Baldwin. “Want to go watch the bots polish it?”

“Might as well,” she said.

CHAPTER 7

“SOMEONE DECIDED TO provide some fireworks for my birthday,” joked my grandfather.

The crowd laughed. Some applauded. I might have smiled. For no particular reason other than that we already were, Sacky and I had stayed together for the party. She wouldn’t know most of those here. I could pretend I did.

The cake was cut. More applause, and guests began to mingle, to seek out some cake of their own, to gossip about Grandpa Jack probably. Some would already be heading away from Summit Up, back to their duties somewhere. Having done their duty here.

“So you attached yourself to my cousin?” asked Errol, taking a seat beside us. Most likely he meant it as a friendly jibe; Errol had a tendency to deadpan such remarks.

“It was just so I could sit closer, sir,” she responded.

“I would rather have sat further away. I have orders for you,” he stated, handing her an envelope. Official orders on paper—very Scotian.

She looked at them at once. “Fighter pilot school.” Just that she said but her squarish face broke into a broad grin. “I’ll have my own ship!”

“Command might decide to stick you in an ancient W-2, patrolling some red star system.”

This he also said flatly but no one was fooled, least of all Sacky. Of course, she already knew how to be a pilot. The gunner was very much a copilot on a fighter. School was to put on the final polish needed for command.

“I’d kiss you if weren’t my superior officer. And engaged!” So she turned around and kissed me instead. Keeping it in the family, I guess.

“I suspect you’re going to get some orders soon, too,” Errol told me.

“I would hope to be sent back out into deep patrol.”

“Not much chance of it.”

Maybe I could hide in the library again. “I’m surprised you aren’t jump pilot on some big ship,” said Sacky.

Errol shook his head. “He’s actually too good for that. Jack would be better utilized training those jump pilots.”

"Sounds dreadful," I told him. "General Freneau must have put that thought in your head."

"She'd snap you up in a second if she could. Do you want me to fly you out, Sacky? You're not under my orders anymore."

"There's a shuttle picking up unimportant people like me in the morning," I told her. "It would eventually deliver us to Fundy Base."

"That's where I'd catch jump transport. I might as well wait for it, Brigadier."

"Very well." Errol rose. "Good luck, Captain Baldwin." The two of them saluted and all that military stuff, and my cousin took off for somewhere. Probably had important things to do.

"So your school is out of the system?" I asked.

"It is. One of the systems closer to the Wall."

"Bono?"

"Yes, Bono," she laughed. "I shouldn't say that aloud, you know. Security and all. Hey, is that the star you jumped to through the Wall?"

I evaded. I'd actually jumped straight to Scotia but wasn't supposed to talk about it. "I didn't have time to stop and look the place over. Orange star." A pretty safe place for training and other military purposes, with most of the Scotian Group systems one direction and the Wall the other.

I figured we'd both be heading off so we could get an early start in the morning when an attendant approached us. A human, not a bot. "Jack McFee," he addressed me, and gave a bit of a wry smile before continuing. "Jack McFee requests your presence at a private dinner this evening." He gave the captain a friendly look. "Your grandfather specifically said your female companion was invited as well."

I didn't care whether Grandpa Jack invited me anywhere. I'd as soon get a good night's sleep. "Do you want to go?" I asked Sacky.

"To have dinner with the most important man on Scotia? Um, let me think—okay!"

"Very well. A servbot will come to escort you in about half an hour."*

"Do we need to change?" Sacky whispered.

She was in uniform. That's acceptable anywhere, anytime. "Nope. Neither of us." I was not in my dress Planetary Guard uniform,

JUMPING JACK

choosing to go with the inconspicuous cadet grays that had served me well. But with my lieutenant's insignia pinned. That should be good enough for anyone.

So we sat and gabbed some more and waited for our escort. When it came, it took us up several floors. We must have been near the top of the place. The elevator opened directly into a small—by the standards of Summit Up—dining room, with windows all around giving a view of the mountains. A tower room, I surmised. I'd never seen it before. My grandfather sat at one end of the table, of some pale figured wood, Jeanne Freneau leaning in and whispering something to him. No one else invited?

Grandpa Jack seemed surprised by Sacky's presence. "I expected your Thulean girl," he said, "but I thoroughly approve of her replacement."

"Ah," I told her, "my grandfather only invited us because he thought he'd spend the evening with a tall blond."

There might have been a chuckle hidden under his 'hmmph.' "May I present Captain Sacajawea Baldwin of Group Force," I said. "General Jeanne Freneau. Jack McFee."

"I know Sacky," said Freneau. She took a sip of her wine. "I'd prefer her company any day to that of your dangerous Thulean."

"She taught me all her secrets of causing mayhem and death, you know," I informed the general.

My grandfather gave me a long look. "I think there is more to you than I ever suspected, my boy. Now sit down and I'll call for the first course."

*Remember a Scotian hour is twice as long as ours.

CHAPTER 8

GRANDPA JACK DID not live up to his reputation of having a spartan diet that evening. Simple, yes, but the finest and freshest of ingredients, fish from far, deep seas, nanga greens with just the right seasoning and a touch of olive oil, thick steaks that cut like butter. The wine certainly came from his own vineyards. My dad grows pretty good vintages too but they can't quite compare.

There was not a lot of talk. As we awaited dessert, he said, "Jeanne has a high opinion of you."

"I have a fairly high opinion of all your grandchildren."

"Yes, they turned out surprisingly well. That's not so easy when one is reared with wealth and privilege."

"You turned out pretty well too," commented Freneau.

If she'd hoped for a smile, she didn't get one. "I well know the person I am was forged in reaction to my father's indolence and self-indulgence. He was not a bad man in any sense but neglected things that mattered."

"His duties."

"If you will. Your father could easily have turned out like him, Jack. I largely thank your mother that he didn't. And Brendon—he reminds me often of my brother, who had such promise but threw his life away."

We'd all heard the tales of my Granduncle Jamie and his descent into dissipation.

"Maybe you owe the way you turned out to your grandmother. A formidably brilliant woman, one of the most brilliant human beings I've ever known. And an artist, like you two."

"We're artists?" I had to ask.

"One of your grandfather's conceits," spoke the general. "He considers our jumping to be an art form."

"It's a talent, isn't it? And one that requires visualization. Imagination. Not so different from a painter, I'd say. Ah, here's dessert. Do you like bananas, my dear?" he asked Sacky.

"I'm not sure. I did try one once."

JUMPING JACK

"Where in the world did you get bananas, Jack? Or out of the world?"

"I have a room downstairs where I grow a few exotics. When this war is over, I intend to try introducing them as a crop. This is a delicacy known as banana cream pie."

Grandpa Jack definitely lost his reputation for simple eating with that one. Sacky fell in love with it, I think. Mazda knew when she'd ever get a chance to sample one again.

Grandpa Jack finally turned his attention to me. "Your brother and your cousin are good men. Smart men, courageous men, competent men. You're something different."

Sacky giggled. Too much wine and banana cream, maybe. "An artist!"

He gave her an indulgent smile. "Besides that. You have insight, and a streak of cynicism to keep you honest. And," he said, suddenly deadly serious, "I think you may be every bit as dangerous as your Thulean friend."

"Jack?" asked Sacky, giving me a doubtful look.

"He's had three run-ins with deadly enemy agents and came out on top each time."

"Plus an exploding bot," I had to add. "And an exploding ship."

"Only nineteen," mused Freneau, "and already rivaling Brendon and Errol. Except the public will never hear about him."

"Which is good," I maintained.

"Probably so," agreed my grandfather. "What you do with these talents you have is going to be up to you. Now and after the war. I much doubt they would be of use to the family business."

"I do have an in with the Thulean government."

"Yes, the princess. A nice girl from all I've heard." She undoubtedly paled beside an Anna Gallen or Sacky Baldwin.

"But exceedingly smart. And the queen likes me too." I had to throw that in.

"Now that may prove useful in what lies ahead. You understand I don't have a hand in the government, Jack. I never did; thought it best to keep our business separate. But I know what's going on and I give advice and help where I can. It is entirely possible the Janic-Thule

Alliance will crumble. That's a big part of why this delegation is coming."

"And there will attempts to disrupt it," I said.

"Definitely. By more than one player." He nodded toward Freneau. "You mentioned some of them to Jeanne."

I had. And there were others. "I suppose there is a long list besides the Thulean and Janic terrorists. Aigleans and Burkuts, of course. Sevens. Maybe even Ursans. They could assert themselves if the Aigleans reduced their presence, moving resources elsewhere." I thought that covered it and then something else occurred to me. "And there are Corvan interests who would attempt to sabotage a separate peace."

Grandpa raised an eyebrow. "Did anyone mention a separate peace?"

"It seems a reasonable topic for Thuleans and Scotians right now. I know there is sentiment to get out of a war we aren't winning. I've heard important people say it." Right here at his party.

He neither agreed nor disagreed with that. "I do expect trouble. Violence."

"Like this rather silly and pointless attack today?" asked Freneau. "What could they have hoped to accomplish?"

An answer leapt from my mouth before I could put a leash on it. "To remind us they are there. To disconcert us."

"Exactly. We'll see more such. More in Thule, more here in the Scotian worlds. I'm an old man, Jack. It's going to be up to people like you and Sacky to get us through what is to come."

"We'll do our best," piped up Baldwin.

I was sure she would. I might even myself.

I thought Sacky and I would head to our separate rooms then. Instead, we both headed to mine. I was okay with that.

CHAPTER 9

“YOU’RE NOT HEADED to Fundy. Not right away.”

Captain Baldwin and I exchanged disappointed looks. We’d hoped to spend more time together.

“So where am I going?” I asked Errol, as I spread marmalade on my toast.

“To a meeting at the capital. I’ve already had your kit sent to my ship. We leave as soon as you’re ready.”

In whatever my cousin had flown to Summit Up, with Sacky as his passenger. Errol would insist on piloting something himself. “I’ll see you again, Sacky,” I said, rising. “Good luck at school.”

“Take care, Jack.” We didn’t have more to say to each other. Wartime is full of such partings and similar clichés, huh? I followed Errol, munching my toast.

“You seem to attract older women, don’t you?,” Errol remarked. “First Anna Gallen and now Sacky Baldwin. Both have four or five years on you.” I wasn’t about to bring up Elsa Alander, who was even older. Not good manners, with her being Errol’s fiancée.

He knew about that, didn’t he? Elsa, being a Thulean, wouldn’t think anything of mentioning it.

“Vilma Lempsen is your age,” he went on. Nothing more.

“So she is.” He would know nothing had ever happened between the two of us. I liked Vili but we were on a friends basis. We took an elevator down to the reception center at the foot of Summit Up. A cart with a human driver awaited to whisk us to Errol’s ship.

“It’s, ah, small,” was my comment on arriving at our ride. What else it was, I didn’t know. Atmospheric, of course, with extra cooling for the main drive and with landing gear. “It looks a little like my ship.”

“Yours? The Ministry of Information might dispute ownership with you. But you’re right, it’s a related design. A Corvanaut A-2, which Group Supply has been building quite a long time as the N-1. They’re useful utility machines, particularly for operating around planets.”

I hadn’t expected a lecture. I should learn to keep my mouth shut around my cousin. The N-1 didn’t look too different from ‘my’ Nativ inside either. I would guess it typically carried a crew of three or maybe

four. I settled into a seat beside Errol as he went through a pre-flight routine.

This wasn't a smart ship, of course. It had nothing like M. No AI at all, only a control computer. Permission to take off granted. And we did. "You remain low?" I asked.

"Not particularly. It's a fairly long run so I might as well climb a bit. Not into space."

Halifax did lie half a planet away. Not really all that far from my own home, though further north and more tropical. It lay on a large bay. I could see that on the screen as we approached, less than an hour later. Errol had gone fast, considering we'd stayed in the atmosphere.

What could they want with me there? Whoever 'they' were. Mom and Dad were still back at Summit Up, I was fairly sure, but chances were I'd be dealing with their ministries, information and diplomacy and such. Or the Planetary Guard might want to see me about something else entirely. I was still a Guard officially, after all.

This wasn't the Guard's landing field. We were setting down close to the ministry buildings, a small space probably used mostly by courier ships. A bot-cart whisked us away this time. It didn't want to make conversation; probably programmed for discretion around the sort who visited here.

And on deep into the place. Errol seemed to know the way. "The Janic-Thule ambassador will be here," he informed me. "Don't annoy him." We entered a rather cozy room. That must be the ambassador. He looked Janic, maybe. Dark hair, a mustache. A woman in a suit sat across the table from him. Tarmo Gallen lounged in a chair a little further down. No one else.

"We can begin," said the woman. "Have you explained the situation, Brigadier?"

"Not a word," replied Errol

"As I advised," Tarmo added. "Everything should be kept in this room."

"I suppose so. Lieutenant," she said. Oh, she meant me. "We have security concerns about our upcoming conference with the Janic-Thuleans. In particular, with conveying their people here."

"Don't ships go back and forth all the time?" I asked.

JUMPING JACK

“Which makes it all the more dangerous,” Tarmo said. “All those ships and people make for a security nightmare. You remember what happened to a somewhat unimportant young Scotian traveler on a transport ship.”

I did indeed. A couple Seven operatives tried to take me out. I only nodded and waited for someone to go on.

It was Errol who did. “You’re going to bring someone from Thule Station.”

“In the Nativ? I don’t have much room.” The ship was quite capable of carrying another crew member or two, but I’d grown fond of having the space to myself.

“Room enough for four. You’re to pick up two passengers and get them back here, safely. Quickly, if possible, but keeping them alive is more important.”

“You said four.” Don’t accuse Jack McFee of not paying attention.

“Anna will be going with you as security,” said Tarmo.

“Extra security,” I said.

“You may need extra. She is already headed to Fundy to meet you.”

“And M has been briefed,” added Errol.

That seemed like that was that. The ambassador spoke for the first time. “This is the friend of the princess?” he asked.

I decided I should be the one to answer. “I am, sir.”

“And the young man who saved her from an assassination attempt,” said Tarmo. “He is more competent than he looks.”

“Ah. When she is here, I hope you help her feel welcome. Scotia can be a very strange place.”

“The universe can be a very strange place, sir,” I replied. Errol hurried me out.

“I’m not shuttling you to Fundy. I do have other duties, you know. There’s a courier ship leaving in a few minutes. Don’t make it wait for you. You,” he called to a little aidie scuttling along the hall, “get this boy to the landing yard.”

“This way, sir,” it chirped. I followed.

There should be no reason to go down to Fundy Base on the moon. M and ship awaited me in the orbiting station above it. It wouldn’t do

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

to take a jump ship into even the relatively low gravity of Fundy. The weight of its element would make it unwieldy, to say the least.

We docked at the station some hours after leaving Halifax. I was hungry.

CHAPTER 10

THE WORLDS WERE at war. Most of them. Two great forces contended, each with its allies. The Scotian Group was allied with the Corvans—the Corvan League of Traders, officially—as were the Independent Trade Association, the Hansa, the Janic-Thule Alliance, Ning Association. The Aiglean Alliance had the Burkut Union, the Pican Bloc, the Federation of Seven. The Ursans, the Old Worlds, and a scattering of smaller systems remained neutral. All these entities were essentially trade association, economic blocs, some with more central control than others. Attempting to control an empire of far-flung stars was impractical if not impossible.

We needn't get into why the war erupted, though I could lecture extensively on my theories. Some other time maybe. Economics, of course, and certain technological advances that had changed the status quo; in particular, the Li Drive and a practical pulse tube engine.

I cruised a while through the Scotian system, accelerating slowly and moving away from planet and moon, before my first jump. Ataensi, an orange star that was easy to lock onto, and then immediately to Hermitage, a red dwarf that was a little more difficult. I didn't bother to check in at either. "I'll cruise a few minutes before going to Oz," I told Anna Gallen. I should make my presence known there, though if chance took me far out in the system, I might not bother there either. Oz was the last Scotian system; Thule lay beyond.

"You need some rest between jumps, don't you?" my companion asked.

"It can be fatiguing." Especially with this Garda Drive, which depended more on its operator. One could jump all day with a Li, if one let its AI do the heavy lifting.

"This is a Nativ craft, right?"

"It is. It's an S type. The S stands for spy."

"In fact," M corrected me, "it stands for scout."

"Like the Corvanaut S types?" asked Anna.

"Yes, Lieutenant Gallen. This machine drew much of its design from that series."

"I think I'll jump," I said.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

We did land close enough in that I felt it wise to make my presence known. I was cleared quickly, being a military ship, though no word had gone ahead of me. We were outrunning any couriers, any news.

"Home, next," I told Anna.

"Home? That can in the sky?"

"Longing to be on Thule?" I asked. "Looking up at your green sky?"

"More aqua or turquoise," she said. "Not that I saw it that much. We Thuleans spend an awful lot of our lives in our burrows."

"Then you need to come and visit Scotia after the war, and stay a while."

"Elsa may stay there permanently."

So she might. I couldn't see Errol moving to Thule. I sought Thule's orange sun. Not at all difficult from here. Lock on. Be there.

And we were. "Oh, really far out," I said. I was tempted to jump back to Oz and make another try. Nah, too much work. We could cruise to the station floating far above the planet Thule.

"I suppose you've laid out a course already," I said to M.

"I have, Jack. Under three hours. Shall I implement it?"

"Sure. That's time enough for a little nap. Oh, and send out recognition signals."

"Already done. Shall I request Captain Alander have a fresh supply of ice cream sandwiches to restock our freezer?"

"Wouldn't hurt." I'd run through all we had some time back. No one had ever heard of them on Scotia. I'd fix that after the war. McFee's ice cream sandwiches were going to be a big seller.

I slept in my chair, as I often did on patrol. There was a single bunk further back. Anna was welcome to it.

When I awoke, she was in the other chair chatting on communications. There was only the slightest lag; we must be close.

"Jack's ship is familiar here. No one is likely to notice it coming and going."

"No one is too absolute a word," said Anna. "We hope only that not many notice it."

"Hi Elsa," I said. "Should we be talking of our mission this way?" I was surprised Anna would gab about it on the radio.

JUMPING JACK

“You mean your plans to bomb a target in the Sevens? Probably not. You aren’t coming over when you get here. Stay in your ship and we’ll send, um, your bombs right over.”

In less than a quarter of an hour we hung outside the Thule Station. Central Station as it was officially known. A couple little tugs, barely larger than the ‘coffin’ space suits worn for outside maintenance, came out to nudge us into the hangar. Anna immediately vetoed their presence.

M and I had no difficulty edging the ship in ourselves. The Nativ was capable of incredible accuracy in maneuvering. More so than the tugs. I wondered if Sandi had been in one of them. I’d trust her not to plant a bomb or something of the like.

A tube was extended to our hull. Moments later, two figures emerged from it, both clad in the green coveralls of station personnel. One was a woman of indeterminate age. A tall and blond Thulean. The other was Vili.

Vili was not tall. Not even tallish. Quite average in fact. Nor was she blond. She had let her hair grow since leaving her job as tug pilot at the Thule station. Never the less, she did look a little like Anna Gallen, the same high cheekbones—though without the sprinkling of freckles—a slight epicanthic fold of the eyelids. Janic heritage, I assumed.

Not that all Janics looked the same any more than all Thuleans did.

“You’re authorized to leave immediately,” came Elsa’s voice. “The official transport will depart a few minutes after you. Most of the mission will be aboard.” I guessed there would be no ice cream on this visit.

“I’m Lara Branting, Second Negotiator,” the older woman announced. It sounded like a title the way she said it. “Authorized to take over if necessary.”

Telling me wasn’t necessary. “Welcome aboard,” I answered. “Jack McFee, your friendly captain for this tour. Hi, Vili. I need to get us out of here.”

CHAPTER 11

ANNA HAD KEPT her eyes fixed on screens and displays pretty much the entire time we were in dock. Making certain no shenanigans occurred on her watch. Now she relaxed as I moved away from the station and prepared to jump.

I'd get up to a decent speed first, to make it smoother. What with having passengers and all. That took some time with this craft. Its two main engines were small and the mass of the drive element made for slow acceleration.

I wouldn't be surprised if the liner carrying the rest of the delegation got ahead of us. I had assumed they were on a big liner, a standard civil transport following a regular route to Oz and beyond. On thought, I realized they might have been loaded on something smaller, something military. I had no idea how many individuals were involved.

No point in asking. It made no difference to us. Though there was little space—and no seats—our passengers had joined us in control. "A year ago," said Branting, "none of this would have seemed necessary. We thought ourselves completely secure."

"That's one of the reasons this conference is taking place, isn't it?" I asked.

"It is." She sounded a little surprised.

"Jack knows about things like that," said Vili.

"He's not as stupid as he looks," Anna added.

"How could I be? I think we're ready to jump. You might do better to sit on the chair or bunk in the back."

"Or in Jack's lap."

"At least grab hold of something," I said. "I do not guarantee smooth jumps."

But this one was. Oz system replaced Thule on our screens. We were well out and I'd been told to get these two back quickly and safely. I would jump again right away.

"Jack," said M. "Something is going on. I am getting some odd energy readings from the direction of the station here."

"And communications have gone wild," reported Anna. "Some sort of disaster or attack?" She was listening through phones, attempting to

JUMPING JACK

pull in some channel or another. We were pretty far out in the system for it. "A ship exploded while approaching the station."

"Our ship," guessed Lara Branting. I knew she guessed right.

"The ship was completely destroyed."

"All our friends," Vili whispered.

"I'm getting out of here," I announced, and jumped to Hermitage without further warning. A little jolt this time. The dampeners in this ship were minimal. They weren't seen as a necessity.

I would coast a couple minutes, gather myself. Two more jumps home. Did anyone know about us? Could we be a target too? The explosion had probably been the result of sabotage, most likely back at Thule Station. I couldn't see an enemy ship entering the Oz system. At least, being at the right spot without being detected.

But near the station—that seemed a bit odd. I said hello to the military facility. Hermitage was not worth much otherwise but it was a gateway to the Scotian Group, so a presence was maintained.

"Next," I announced, and looked toward orange Ataensi and its small red companion, Jogahe. The latter I had to ignore as I locked my attention on the larger star. In theory, I could use either. I saw myself there and I was.

Fairly close to Jogahe. I should pull away from it some before going again. Away from its gravity which could warp my view, in a sense. Scotia's yellow star could be seen from here, the Wall no longer in the way, from a ship or standing on one of the planets. There were small colonies so maybe someone did that. In a protective suit.

None of us were speaking. The pull of Jogahe was preventing me from accelerating as quickly as I would like. I wanted out of there. I wanted to get home.

And I hoped this Thulean I transported would help bring this stupid war to an end. Not unless she was on Scotia. I interfaced with the Garda Drive.

"I'd recommend a few more minutes, Jack," said M.

"So would I, but here I go." I had the bright yellow sun of Scotia in my sight. It was time to head home.

Way out. About as far out as I'd ever landed. I was *not* going to jump

back and try again. "Don't send any codes, M," I ordered. "I don't want anyone to realize we're here until we're closer."

"Very well. Lay in a course for Fundy Base?"

"Yes. We'll be challenged before we reach it and can identify ourselves then." I turned to the Thuleans. "We're six hours or more away. I suggest rest. There are lots of books in the ship's memory, if you're interested."

I probably sounded blasé. Disinterested. That's how I deal with things, maybe. Anna seemed to be brooding over the instruments, not that there was anything to see there. Oh, maybe she thought we might still be the victim of an attack. Throwing herself into her work might be her way of dealing.

My two charges? They were my charges; I was to get them safely where they should be. They seemed numb. That I could do nothing about.

Anna went to the back after a while. So did Lara. Vili took the seat beside me, staring at the screens though they would mean nothing to her. "How many were there?" I asked her. She might want to talk about it. Not that Jack McFee knew anything about counseling the grief-stricken.

"Four. Two other delegates and two support. Like me."

But a whole lot more than that would have died in the explosion. I assumed it was a liner full of passengers. This I would definitely not bring up.

Nor anything about the mission. She wouldn't want to hear that now. Branting might. That it wouldn't be a failure would be important to her. Maybe more important than ever.

"A ship just jumped into Scotian space near us," M reported. "Fairly near. A military courier."

"They're hailing us," reported Vili. "I know how to work communications."

It was related somewhat to her job. I might as well let her. She answered the call when I gave her a nod.

"Hi," came a cheerful voice. "I didn't expect to bump into anyone out here. Recon work?"

JUMPING JACK

The girl wasn't sure what to respond. I offered no help. "We're, um, transporting someone to a meeting."

Another voice broke in. "Vili? Is that you? You're alive!"

"Lara!" Vili yelled as loud as she could.

CHAPTER 12

“SO NONE OF us were on the liner.”

“Only our luggage.”

“And they didn’t let us know, the bastards.” Branting sounded both peeved about that and happy her colleagues were alive.

“Bundled us onto this ship and said you would be on the liner to provide cover,” came the answer. It was a man and a Thulean. I couldn’t tell any more than that. They spoke in Thulean but I could follow them. I’d had time to work on improving my skills. M helped.

As far as I could determine, he knew every language spoken and some that weren’t.

Eventually, we had to break up their long-range conversation and announce ourselves to the authorities. They seemed pleased everyone had survived.

“What about the liner at Oz?” I asked.

There was something of a pause, and not just because of our distance from Scotia. “There were casualties. Crew. A handful of passengers. There’s not a lot of civilian travel these days.”

But some. Civilians or not, they were casualties of war.

“We’re two hours out,” I reported.

“I should make it in one and a half,” said the captain of the other vessel. We didn’t talk to him again.

“Jack will have to show you the Wall when we get there,” Anna told Vili. The lieutenant sat cross-legged on the floor, allowing the girl to have the chair.

“I can see it on the screen,” the princess replied, and brought it up on the console before her. She’d learned its layout quickly.

“Not the same,” I told her. “We should have lots of time to see it from a number of vantage points. You know you’re staying, don’t you?”

“Yes. That was one thing we *were* told. I wish I’d had more time on Central Station before leaving and I could have spent time with my friends there. We were in and out!”

“You’re entirely likely to see Sandi in the company of my brother one of these days,” Anna said.

JUMPING JACK

“He’d better be good to her!”

“If he isn’t, I’ll thrash him myself,” promised Anna. “And then let Jack do it, while he’s too beat up to defend himself.”

“Sandi might be capable of getting in a bit of damage herself,” I said. Anna gave me a warning look. Vili wasn’t supposed to know Gunilla Sandburg had that sort of training.

She didn’t seem to notice. In time we arrived at Fundy Base and all my Thuleans were whisked away. Even Anna. I shuttled down from the orbiting station after a while. I liked to make certain my ship was taken care of before I left it.

I had no orders so I hung around the canteen and waited for some to materialize. The only windows on the base—as far as I knew—were located there. I wondered if Vili had glimpsed the Wall through them. Probably didn’t have time.

She’d be reunited with the diplomatic mission now. Maybe they’d put her to work. Not sure doing what. A translator wasn’t of much use at the moment. Vili could speak English. *Quite* well, in fact. That was convenient but unneeded. As was her command of Janic and Thulean and Lingo. Other languages too, undoubtedly.

“So this is where you’re malingering,” said General Jeanne Freneau, taking a chair beside me. She was dressed in the same nondescript overalls, devoid of insignia, as the day I first met her.

Her jump school operated out of the base. I knew, being a graduate. Of sorts. I’d been given a solo crash course. “Just awaiting orders,” I informed her, raising my beer in salute. It was only my second.

“You could have reported in. But I don’t blame you for not.” She looked at my beer a bit longingly but apparently decided not to order one herself. “You know you’re unlikely to return to your former duties anytime soon.”

Yeah, I did. “I suspect I may be attached to our visiting Thuleans a while.”

“Janic-Thuleans. Their number one negotiator is Janic. I believe they expect you to entertain the princess. And guard her.”

I liked Vili and wouldn’t mind spending time with her. Being officially in charge of the princess did not appeal at all. I’d have to be responsible. “There are people around with better bodyguard skills.”

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

We spoke no further then, as a young fellow—ha, my age, maybe—with corporal's stripes and an envelope approached. And saluted, though he might have been uncertain of Freneau's rank. We both felt obligated to return the salute. "Lieutenant McFee?" I nodded. "For you, sir" He saluted again and left, not waiting for any response from us. He wouldn't have gotten one.

"Orders," I announced. "Officially on leave until—huh, no end date."

"The best kind of leave," said Freneau, rising from her seat. "You might as well catch a shuttle home. I'd offer a ride but I have a bunch of idiots waiting who don't know the difference between a Saldhana Drive and their own arses."

I was glad I hadn't been recruited to assist her. She would surely let me do all the work. An hour later, I'd been dropped outside Dummit Downs.

No one was home except Nira. Brendon's wife. She pretty much ran the place. I gave her a hug and then stepped back to give her a second look. "Yes, I'm pregnant," she said.

No one had told me. I'd been out of things, but still. "Congratulations. All those leaves my brother took finally paid off." It had generally been believed they were trying to get pregnant the old-fashioned way. Brendon had certainly been giving it an effort every time he was home.

"Another great-grand for Grandpa Jack." Nira had fallen into calling him that, as Brendon and I did. My parents were more likely to refer to him as the old man.

Cousin Monike had a couple children. "His third. Until Elsa and Errol get busy."

"Why not you?" she asked.

There was no satisfactory answer to that. Except, "I'm too young!"

"You won't always be. Will you have dinner with me?"

"Sure." I wasn't sure of the time. One does lose track of it in a ship but the sun had said afternoon. "I'll go get cleaned up a little."

Clean civilian clothes had been laid out for me when I finished showering. "Just the thing, House," I said. "I've had enough of uniforms for a while."

JUMPING JACK

“I thought that might be so, Jack,” she answered. “You have more muscle than when last you were here.”

“Nothing to do on patrol but read and exercise. And eat.”

“Ice cream sandwiches. I made sure we had some here.”

“Wonderful!” I fastened my trousers. “I need a girl like you to marry, Housie.”

“I’m one of kind, Jack.”

After dinner, I went out onto the deck. It was too dark to see the ocean but I could smell it. Neither moon was risen yet. But the Wall stood in the sky, subtle lights within it, shifting colors.

I wished I could have shown it to Vili.

CHAPTER 13

MOM WAS THE first family member to show up. My money would have been on Errol. She sat breakfasting with Nira.

"You can't bother me today," I told her. "I'm on leave."

We both knew better. "Your indefinite leave is cover. It allows you to entertain Vilma without being there officially."

I doubted that would fool anyone. "But still reporting to someone."

That didn't require an answer. "You need a ride of some sort. Something nonmilitary."

"Brendon's old runner?" suggested Nira.

"Once upon a time he would have committed fratricide if I'd touched it." A servbot brought me coffee. It was known how I took it here. "Bring me toast this morning," I told it. "Um, apple jelly, no butter. And make it whole grain, good and thick. Two slices."

"You're eating like your grandfather."

"Uh-huh." I could tell her stories about that later.

"I'll tell Brendon his beloved runner was commandeered for official business," said Mom.

"Hmm." I considered it. "No. I don't want to seem the spoiled kid with his private runner. It's not a practical machine for me anyway. Maybe we could roll it out if she visits here."

Nira snickered. "Meaning Brendon was a spoiled kid?"

"My folks liked him better, you know."

"So he has told me!"

Mom ignored us. "Okay. You'll take cabs in town, I would think. I'll make sure you have an expense account. Unless that makes you look like a spoiled kid too."

"She'll expect me to have *some* money. Ah." My toast was laid before me. "Vili does not live a life of privilege, despite being a princess. That's one reason not to flaunt the family's wealth."

We lived more like royalty—the royalty that comes to most people's minds—than the Lempsens. We certainly had more wealth. Maybe more power. I'd never thought of quite how extensive both were until recently.

And how little I actually cared about them.

JUMPING JACK

Mom flew back to Halifax that afternoon in her private transport. I chose not to ride along. I didn't want to leave yet. And there were ice cream sandwiches. I took a shuttle to the capital the next day.

And then a trolley. No sense in wasting money; I might be rich but I was also Scotian. It let me out just up the street from my parent's city place. The place they were renting while they worked for the administration.

"You won't want to stay here long-term," my father said. "Not that you can't. There's room enough."

"No, he'll be moving in with us," said Errol, who had dropped in almost as soon as he'd heard I had arrived. "The ancestral home."

Ah, yes. Neither Summit Up nor Dummit Downs was the ancestral home of the McFees. That was located on the outskirts of Halifax and Uncle Rupert resided in it. It did seem the ideal base for me here.

And it presented just the right balance between tradition and comfort.

"Did you bring your weapon?" he asked abruptly, turning to me.

"I did. I even practiced with it before leaving home."

"I'll bet House was impressed. Very well. Why don't you bring whatever you packed over tomorrow? And drop in on the Thuleans this evening. I've already told them to expect you."

"At the embassy, of course," Dad interjected. "Even your friends the Gallens are staying there."

As part of the security measures. I would like seeing them as much as the princess. Maybe more.

But I had no idea what I had to say to any of them when I approached the embassy doors, around nine.* I hoped they ate early, as Thuleans are inclined to, and all that was out of the way.

"Jack McFee," I announced as those doors were opened to me. "I'm expected."

He looked at his wrist-top. "Ah, by the princess. Come in, Lieutenant McFee."

He glanced down at his device again, maybe checking that I was who I said I was, against whatever records they had. The man nodded, satisfied. There must not be a house AI to take care of that sort of thing.

An aidie came rolling. He gave it instructions in Thulean. "The aidie will lead you to Princess Vilma," he said. I knew that but didn't let on.

She was with Anna Gallen, practicing hand-to-hand combat. No, learning it. Vili appeared very much the novice. I hoped Anna wasn't treating her as roughly as she had me. Both wore shorts and halters. I was quite willing to watch for a while.

"Hi, Jack!" called Vili. Anna only nodded her head my way. I also hoped she wasn't thinking of using me as a sparring partner.

"It's good to see you, Vili. Is this something new for you?"

"Oh, I needed something to do. This place is dead!" The two of us settled on wooden chairs along the wall. Anna sat down and started a series of stretches. It was hard to keep my attention on the princess.

"Your diplomats don't have any chores for you?" I asked

"I hardly ever see them. Even the staff here doesn't, much."

I could see we would need to find Vili something to keep her busy. She was not the sort to sit and do nothing. I could fill her time for a few days or even weeks, but if she was here for the long term, she'd want a job.

"We could let your royal highness do a tour of military facilities and hospitals," I offered. "Children will present you with bouquets." She made a face.

"Even my mom keeps that to a minimum. She says people will appreciate her more if she only shows up now and again."

"Then we'll have to fall back on parties and sight-seeing, as poor an alternative as they are. I do know all the best people in Halifax, after all."

"Don't believe a word he tells you," advised Anna, bent into an impossible shape. "I'll bet he hasn't been in Halifax in years. Off to school, weren't you, Jack?"

"There were holidays," I sniffed. "Oh, it's true. But my name can get us into lots of places. I mention my famous war hero relatives."

"I want to meet the other one," said Vili. "Errol is intimidating."

I realized I had no idea where Brendon was. In a combat theater somewhere? His command had been operating over toward the Ning frontiers the last I'd heard. "You'll meet so many McFees you'll rue you ever heard the name," I promised. "In fact, why don't I take you to visit

JUMPING JACK

my Uncle Rupert tomorrow? I'm going to be staying with him while I'm in town."

She looked to Anna. "Is it safe?" she asked.

"From terrorists and assassins, pretty safe. From this boy, I have no guarantees. But I may come along just to make sure."

"Oh, teach me some more and then I can make him behave!"

"You can try," I told them both.

* Nine on Scotia would be Six PM for us. See "Among the Many Worlds" for more on how time is counted.

CHAPTER 14

McFEE HOUSE—FOR so it was known far and wide—was a big blocky place but in no way rivaled Summit Up in size. Nor my home at Dummit Downs. Much of both of those was taken up with workshops and offices and store rooms and so on. This was a residence and nothing else.

“Caroline and Rupert McFee,” I said, “may I present Princess Vilma of Thule?” That was one version of the title and an easy one to use.

“Welcome to our home, um, do we say highness or something?” asked Caroline.

“Vili will do.” To her credit, she didn’t laugh. She’d been trained to keep both her cool and her dignity.

Rupert looked a good bit like Errol. I suppose that’s the other way around, isn’t it? I had a bit of resemblance to them myself. Caroline was the second wife; he and Bissy, mother of all three children, had divorced a long time ago. Before I was born, maybe.

“Does Errol live here too?” Vili asked.

“At times—” began Rupert. He didn’t sound like he was going to finish.

“It’s his official residence,” I told her. “But everyone knows he spends most of his time in military facilities or that sort of thing.”

Vili snickered. “Or in Elsa’s room.”

Rupert and Caroline might have been a tad shocked by my princess. “You’ve met Anna Gallen before, I believe,” I said.

“Yes, at Summit Up. Welcome to our home.” I’m sure both assumed she was the bodyguard and, to some degree, that was true. Anna was also as much a sight-seer as Vili.

I hadn’t actually moved into McFee House yet. My kit had been sent over earlier this morning but then I’d gone to pick up the Thuleans and bring them visiting. We got the tour; Rupert probably knew how unimportant Vili was but Caroline hadn’t gotten the memo. She was entertaining royalty and that was that. Then lunch.

Despite her occasional Thulean frankness, Vili was the embodiment of decorum. Anna remained unobtrusive and perhaps uncomfortable.

JUMPING JACK

We rode back to the embassy in an embassy vehicle. I hadn't needed to spend money on a cab.

Anna sat quietly for a while as we rode. She had something to say, I knew, and it came eventually. "I'm out of my element here. I envy you and Vili your ability to fit in almost anywhere you wish. You never seem at a loss for the correct thing at the correct time, Vili."

"It's something people learn. A sort of detachment, the playing of a role. For Vili, I think it's partly a mask for her shyness. She goes into princess mode. You don't mind me saying that, do you, Vili?"

She shook her head.

"Detachment. Yes, I see that," said Anna. "You know, you have the full toolkit for espionage, Jack. I'm just good at the tactics."

But damned good at them. "If you teach Vili to fight, she'll have the complete toolkit too."

I went back to McFee House after parting with the women at the embassy. I took a trolley this time. It could get me within a couple blocks and then I walked. Time to move in. For a while.

Rupert and Caroline paid me no attention. Maybe they'd seen enough earlier and, after all, I wasn't royal. Just their nephew. A somewhat sophisticated servbot showed me to my room. I think he was supposed to be the butler or majordomo or something along those lines.

The room was tiny compared to mine at home. That didn't matter. There were a lot of these little rooms in this house. To fit in lots of guests I'd always assumed. Or some ancestor or another had a lot of children.

Errol came and stood in the doorway as I stowed my somewhat meager kit. I should have brought more formal clothes. My dress uniform? That would be acceptable wear anywhere but I didn't want to wear it on leave. "No dinner here tonight. The McFees have an invitation elsewhere. Want to send down to the kitchen for something?"

It would beat going out again. We ate in Errol's suite, which was two tiny bedrooms like mine, adjoining. Errol has never been a talkative sort and we said little for a while, just eating. But, inevitably, talk turned to recent events and particularly my trip to Thule and back.

And the disaster at Oz Station. "It puzzles me," I said, "that the

explosion occurred so close to the station. If it were a bomb, it could have gone off anywhere.”

“There was some damage to the station too but I don’t think that was the intention. Perhaps the bomb was timed to explode where it would be seen by lots of witnesses rather than in some remote section of space.”

“To make an impact? Maybe.” I could see a terrorist group desiring that. “Hard to time though. Unless—”

Errol waited a moment. “Unless?”

“There was a bot attached with instructions to blow at that place.”

“A simple AI? Possible. Or it might not have been a bomb at all.”

“A missile. That had occurred to me. Positioning an attack ship would be nearly impossible, I’d think.”

“So would I,” agreed Errol. “Something like this happening within our borders is unprecedented.”

“Not that Seven operatives haven’t planted bombs before.”

“I doubt the Sevens were at the bottom of this.”

So did I. They would have no reason to target Thulean diplomats.

“So when you heard what happened, you jumped out of there.”

“I wanted to get home quickly.”

“And you all thought the rest of the delegation was dead. Until you ran into them.”

“We did. Quite a surprise for both.” I chewed some green beans and thought. “It’s interesting that both ships landed in somewhat the same area of space, but only coincidence. It was a pretty big area. The courier was somewhat further in and at least ten degrees or so away.”

“If it’s all random, as most say, that sort of thing is bound to happen eventually.”

I was not absolutely convinced that the jump terminus was random. I’d sometimes felt that I had some control over how far away from a star I landed. But that could happen if it were random. I might be fooling myself.

“More plans for the princess tomorrow?”

“Lots of sights. I might even take her home.”

“Yes,” said Errol. “House should meet Vili.”

CHAPTER 15

MOM VOLUNTEERED TO fly us. That is, her personal pilot would fly us in her personal ship. The one with the ugly charcoal and sky blue décor in its lounge. Hey, those are the colors of my Planetary Guard uniform, aren't they? She must have had a premonition of my future when she chose her color scheme.

Anna Gallen came along. "Vili's safety has been my primary assignment on this mission, from the time I went with you to pick her up at Thule Station," she explained. "Also, I want to see your home, Jack. Tarmo told me strange things about it."

Mom's transport was McFee-built, of course, but a prewar civil type. Quite capable of leaving the atmosphere; Brendon had picked me up in it at Fundy once. It picked us up at the ministry buildings this time. Very roomy and comfortable, with a light gravity field. A bar, too.

"Shall I fix drinks?" I asked as we settled into the lounge. "I'm considering leaving the service and becoming a bartender."

"Aren't those all bots?" asked Anna.

"Not the best ones. Mixing is an art-form!"

"Let's save the drinking for home," Mom said. "We'll be there in no time."

"Okay." I stepped from behind the rather tiny bar. "Party at Dummit Downs!"

"All night!" agreed Vili.

"All sorts of people would be upset if we didn't get you back to the capital today," Anna informed her.

Mom nodded. "I'd have to give myself a strong reprimand."

"These two are no fun," I told the princess. "What can we celebrate?"

"We missed your birthday again," Mom said. "Off patrolling somewhere."

"M and I celebrated." Most of my birthdays had been missed these past years, between recent missions and school before that.

"Um, my birthday is in a couple weeks," volunteered Vili.

"That we will have to celebrate. It may require some planning." A good use of my indefinite leave time.

The hop from Halifax to Dummit Downs took only half an hour or so. A shuttle wouldn't have taken much more, but I was willing to let Mom provide. We set down in the field below the house.

"Let's walk up," I said. I usually preferred that, though a transport cart had appeared immediately. We didn't even have any luggage for it.

Vili peered up at the house, set in tiers on the hillside. The big deck jutted on this side; it wasn't the equal of Grandpa Jack's domed lounge but I would rather sit on it any day.

"A security nightmare," muttered Anna.

Mom smiled at that. "There are both human and robot retainers to keep an eye on things. We're pretty safe here."

"And it's a working estate," I added. "It needs to be open to traffic, coming and going."

In truth, security had never been a concern before. Not like at Summit Up—and even there, those who might have tried to get in were generally harmless. That had changed; we all were becoming aware of it.

Mom disappeared somewhere into the house, leaving my guests to me. A few minutes later the three of us stood on the deck, looking out over the rolling landscape, some in woods, some in fields. "What is that blue over there?" asked a puzzled Vili, pointing into the distance.

"The sea."

"Wow. All the seas I've seen were ugly and green. Can we go see it?"

"Of course. Do you ride?"

"Horses? Sure. I learned on Janus."

I suspected Anna didn't ride nor had even been near a horse, though Tarmo had ridden when he was here. He, too, had spent time in the Janic worlds and learned things. "It might be better to fly," I said. "But you'll come back and ride some other time."

"Absolutely."

I considered borrowing Brendon's runner but decided it was overkill. A sedate air-car would do just fine. With the top open to the day. One couldn't do that with the runner. It didn't even have windows, only screens.

Also, there wouldn't have been room for Anna Gallen. Whether that was good or bad, I couldn't say. The machine I asked House for

JUMPING JACK

came around to us on its own but I would be at the controls from here. Probably. Sometimes it was convenient to let its brain take over.

A very limited brain, akin to the control computer of a ship. "I suppose I'm stuck in the back," complained Anna, climbing in.

"Unless you want to drive and let us nestle in the back," I said. She only gave this a smile. Vili's reaction to my quip was harder to read. I sat behind the controls, the princess at my side. The top was already retracted. The computer would strictly limit our speed while we were like that but I didn't care. I was in no hurry.

The air-car was built like an elongated disk, with two rows of seats. Four little outboard varitubes provided both propulsion and maneuvering. The lift unit hid somewhere behind us. I engaged it and rose a few feet.

I could, in theory, go up almost indefinitely. The computer, again, would prevent me from soaring too high. I believed all the cars on the estate were limited to a hundred and forty-four feet. "I could drive us all the way to Halifax," I told my passengers.

"And how many years would it take?" came Anna's voice from the back.

"Top speed, taking a shortcut across the water, I might be able to make it in one day." But air-cars were banned from the capital's streets. It wouldn't be much use there. I kept us low while we followed the road out of the estate, then rose to twenty feet or so and cut cross-country toward the beach.

"Does your family own this land?" asked Anna.

"We do not. This is parkland, preserved for the public."

"All Scotian coasts are owned by the government," Vili informed her. "Even the ports."

"Owned by the people," I corrected her.

"Well, the people own the government so it's the same thing, right?"

"I suppose." I could have argued the fine points of this but it was far too beautiful a day for it. I set us down on a bluff overlooking the sparkling blue. Small waves rolled onto the brownish sand below.

"Is this the ocean?" asked Vili.

"This particular body of water is dubbed a bay. Brunswick Bay. But

it is really a part of the ocean and open to it off that way.” I waved a hand toward the east. “Want to swim?”

Vili surveyed the water stretching before us to the horizon, disappearing into distant haze both to left and right. “I know it’s safe but it’s so big!”

“Oh, I swim laps to the far side and back.”

“We should both smack him when he says things like that,” said Anna. “I wouldn’t mind going down and seeing it closer.”

If they expected me to take the car down, they were mistaken. I would never disturb the beach with a vehicle of any sort. “There are stairs over there,” I said. “A little shed for changing too. We McFees don’t own this but no one minded us fixing it up a bit.”

“Who would complain about anything the McFees did?” asked Anna.

“You might be surprised. Scotians are a cantankerous lot and jealous of their personal privileges.”

Where Thuleans tended toward a collectivist mindset. Different environments had led to different societies. Oh, there were other factors. I knew that well. The cultures of those who settled our respective worlds had already differed. Robots made a difference too; we Scotians were used to them serving us in a way Thuleans weren’t.

The soft sand was a novelty to both women. Shoes were removed immediately when they saw me doff mine. Wading ensued. “Not too cold,” I announced. Dummit Downs was in a temperate area but the sea did get chilly in winter. There was a current that circulated warmer water from the north, around the bay and back into the ocean. That helped.

“What is that?” Vili pointed, excited.

“A school of little fish.” That flashed silver and disappeared into deeper water. “We don’t have any larger ones. Yet. We began stocking marine life centuries ago.”

Vili looked to where the fish had vanished. “Only microbial life when the first settlers arrived, right?”

“But enough to put oxygen in the air and precipitate metals from the seas. Everything else was introduced.” As in almost all worlds humans inhabited.

JUMPING JACK

“So no sharks to eat us. I’m going to swim!”

Anna shrugged. “I might as well too.” Both began to disrobe. I was going to tell them there were bathing suits in the shed but figured it would do no good. They were Thuleans. I just hoped they didn’t shock any Scotians who happened by.

And I might as well join them. “Keep your C-140 on your person,” said Anna as I began to doff my own clothes. “They are safe in the water, as you should know.”

I did. I’d read the literature. Both women were tan all over. It is somewhat customary for Thuleans to spend time under sunlamps, as they don’t have much of a sun outside. I was a bit two-toned.

“Oh!” Surprise from Vili as a rather tiny wave bowled her over. “I didn’t expect that much force.”

“And they get much bigger, don’t they?” asked Anna. “Or are those huge waves in pictures just artistic exaggeration?”

“Very real,” I told her. “Visitors.” Another air-car rested beside ours. It sat there a minute, then rose, made a long curving turn above the beach, and disappeared beyond the cliffs. It was a nicely done turn, with almost no drop as they went past the edge of the bluff.

“That wasn’t very flattering,” said Vili. “You’d think they’d come down for a closer look.”

“I’d as soon they didn’t,” replied Anna, much more seriously.

CHAPTER 16

AFTER GETTING CLEANED up and having lunch, Vili disappeared with Nira, off to tour the stables. Anna felt obligated to tag along.

"Vili seems a very nice girl," said Mom. We sat on the deck, doing nothing much. "Not particularly interesting."

"The best sort. That's why I love you, Mom."

"I suppose I do appear boring. So do you, kid."

"No one knows our secret, exciting lives." That was true. Absolutely true. "Vili may be more interesting than she lets on, too. She does have a facade of sorts."

"I suppose." My mother sounded unconvinced.

"She's pretty smart." I couldn't think of much else to say about the princess. Nice looking? I suppose so. Both in and out of her clothes.

"But not in a creative way." She gazed toward the sea for a little while. "You can be sure I've read every report we have on her. The girl does have a prodigious memory. Speaks eight languages."

I hadn't known it was that many. "Latin?"

"That's one of them. You meant to learn it, didn't you?"

"Next project." Maybe Vili could tutor me. "I was thinking about the university at New Rome after the war. I'd need the language."

"I think that would be a good choice. Or any school in a neutral system. We may not be so chummy with either the Corvans or the Aigleans when this war winds up."

A war I was still part of. That reminded me of something. "House, could you have my uniforms delivered to Mom's ship? Maybe a change or two of something else, too." She could decide what.

"Certainly, Jack. If you have a little time, I could fit you with new formal wear."

"Not today. Thanks." My dress uniform was acceptable formal wear, though I was not fond of donning a kilt.

"I take it you plan to escort Vili to more places," said Mom.

"I might as well. As long as I'm on leave and have absolutely no duties."

I thought that might get a snicker. No luck. "Anna Gallen does have duties. She'll be going everywhere with you, I would assume."

JUMPING JACK

"That's okay. She's interesting."

"Some people are *too* interesting."

Dummit Downs was not interesting at all at the moment. That, I didn't mind. I decided to go to my room and bring up a book on Latin. I could start studying right now. A few pages in, the door opened. House wouldn't let that happen unless it was someone she thought should visit me.

Vili stood there. The door closed gently behind her. "Finished with your tour?" I turned off the screen.

"But there is so much more to see! I like your home. I really like Brendon's wife. She's going to ride with me when I visit again!"

"Then I suppose I'll have to invite you."

"Silly. Nira and your mother already did." We stood there a moment, not speaking. "I like you too," said Vili.

I'm not positive which initiated the meeting of our lips, but it happened. Then arms around each other, and a longer kiss. We sank onto the small couch. My eyes went to my adjoining bedroom, the door open.

Hold on, Jack McFee. "Anna is right outside my door, isn't she? And we need to get you back to Halifax soon."

"I'm afraid so."

"It's a good thing we're going to see more of each other then."

She frowned a little. "We can't take anything for granted, Jack."

"I suppose not." I got to my feet. "Let's be on our way."

Mom greeted us with, "Will you fly us back to Halifax, Jack? My pilot had to leave."

"We could all get on a shuttle." Okay, that suggestion wasn't going to go over. She might not even think it was serious. "I suppose so."

Thirty minutes later I had settled in the ship's control room. Anna took a seat beside me while Vili and Mom remained in the lounge. The attendant we'd brought with us had disappeared too. Maybe he and the pilot eloped. I lifted off. What a barge. Heavy and unresponsive. Flight data was communicated automatically to our destination. Let the computers chat with each other while I relaxed.

"Okay," I said. "We're off."

Anna barely acknowledged the statement, not that there was

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

anything to say about it. Then, "Be careful with Vili. She doesn't have a typical Thulean attitude toward sex."

"Oh. Her upbringing as a royal?" Vili would certainly have been a bit isolated from the culture of her world.

"And she is as much Janic as she is Thulean."

I'd met plenty of Janics at the Thule Station. They didn't seem that different. They certainly drank as much as Thuleans.

"So maybe Vili should remain hands-off?"

"What an idiot," said Anna. "Of course you two are going to end up having sex. Maybe lots of it! Just be careful of her."

I would. But there was a part of me that still thought I might do well to step back.

CHAPTER 17

"MY SON HAS an announcement," Rupert McFee told the room. "Say, that was an announcement, wasn't it?"

"Do sit down," said his wife.

Errol rose to address us. There was a pretty large bunch gathered, including Vili and me. Both Gallens.

"Elsa and I have decided to move up our wedding. There is no point in waiting for the end of this war. I'm likely to have just as many duties then." He glanced toward my own parents. "At least for a while."

"Helping to negotiate what follows," said Dad.

"Yes. The administration feels I would be useful." My father probably had a hand in that.

Tarmo decided to note, "You don't sound too eager. I mean to end the war, not get married."

Errol gave him one of his looks. The sort of thing that made Vili describe him as intimidating. "You know, I do not favor Scotia abandoning its war effort. We're likely to be giving up too much."

"The systems claimed by the Sevens," I said. I gave Vili a sidelong glance. "And the Janics may be lost to Burkut." Looks were exchanged. Did they think the kid was a dummy?

"And we would lose the economic advantages of being allied to the Corvans. We'd be a neutral independent, most likely."

Rupert said, "Not necessarily a bad thing. We were for a long time."

"Hiding behind our wall."

"Let's get back to the important topic here," spoke my mother. "When will this wedding happen?"

"Next week."

That set off everyone. I have no doubt more than one person there would have wanted to plan something grand for the occasion. No time now! "My grandfather has offered to host the ceremony and reception at Summit Up," Errol continued.

That, in turn, quieted everyone down. I had strong suspicions a certain Jeanne Freneau had talked Grandpa Jack into it.

"Everyone here is invited, of course. Anna and Vili—Elsa would like you to be her maids of honor, whatever that is. Something Thulean?"

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"It is," said Tarmo. "You will require a best man, as well."

"Hmm, I've heard about that one. I'll have to ask Brendon, I think." I was glad Errol didn't think to ask me. Even if I am the best. "And Elsa insists on having a Lutheran brought in to officiate."

"We'll have to have new dresses," Vili informed Anna. "I can't wait to see Elsa in her wedding gown!"

More Thulean tradition, no doubt. Special clothes to get married in! Whatever did they do with them after?

"The day is next Saturday," Errol then announced. "Eight days."

"More like seven," said Anna. This was Friday evening. "We need to get busy."

"Alice had best talk with my father about it," said Dad. "He likes her the best of any of us."

"Except Brendon," I had to put in. And wished I could take out.

"I've heard someone in the know say he's taken a liking to you," Errol said. "No idea why."

Several other people seemed to wonder about it too. But yes, Mom was the one to deal with Grandpa Jack.

We sort of broke into two groups then, one talking about the wedding, the other about the war. I found my way to the latter when I saw Tarmo Gallen holding forth on something.

"Multiple charges would have been needed to destroy a liner like that," he asserted. Nothing on the ship should explode. We were all aware that propulsion tube fuel was inert. "My feeling is this was planned out with someone high in one of our administrations, to effect public perception of the war."

"In Scotia?" asked Uncle Rupert.

"Primarily. Corvans might think anger would strengthen your resolve to fight on. Aigleans might feel it would have the opposite effect. Either way, it is disrupting and unsettling for both you and us."

"And either way, it would have scuttled our talks with the Janic-Thuleans, if they had succeeded in killing them." That was Mom. You couldn't expect a wedding to hold her attention long.

Errol only nodded to all this. We would not learn his thoughts on it. "We are going to send them home on a battle cruiser with a fleet

JUMPING JACK

surrounding them. It might have been a good idea to do that before but we had some ridiculous idea the whole thing could be kept secret.”

Maybe so. I went and sat beside Vili to listen to plans for the wedding. I would like showing her around Summit Up.

CHAPTER 18

I BECAME LITTLE more than a chauffeur for my pair of Thuleans over the next few days. Their friend's wedding eclipsed all other concerns for them. Anna's friend. Vili didn't know her as well, though Captain Alander had been one of her superior officers when she worked as a tug pilot, Elsa being largely in charge of the military docks on Thule Station. Sir Elsa. She'd been awarded a title.

Anna had known the wedding would be moved up before Errol's announcement. Tarmo too. There was no way they wouldn't have been filled in. "It's Elsa's mother who insists on the Lutheran minister," she confided to us. "Elsa thinks she might become a Mazdesian like her husband."

As Errol and most of my family, I'm a Nezo. Neo-Zoroastrian, that is, or Mazdesian as the magi prefer to call it. I can't say I'm particularly religious but Neo-Zoroastrianism makes sense to me. A balance in all existence between two forces or whatever one wanted to call them. It solved the problems presented by an omnipotent god by having two omnipotent gods, sort of.

To be sure, the magi would tell you they weren't gods. Most of them would. Being and non-being. That was the basis of it all. Infinite being, most said—it was the orthodox view—and that was as good as a god. Or the same as a god.

All this hadn't kept my cousin Monike from converting to Catholicism. I wondered if she'd learned Latin.

"Isn't your mother sort of, um, the leader of the Lutherans?" I asked Vili.

"The queen is the official head of the church, yes. That doesn't mean she has to believe in it."

That seemed sensible enough. The dresses didn't. Orders had come they were to be light blue and identical in every respect. Except, to be sure, size. Anna had a good three inches of height on Vili. Maybe four. I was pretty sure Elsa was even taller. As tall as her husband-to-be.

Who was taller than Brendon or me. We brothers were pretty normal. All three of us would be in full-dress formal uniform, I

JUMPING JACK

assumed. It was a good thing I'd asked House to send mine along. I'd never had an occasion to wear it before.

Wedding preparations couldn't take up all Anna and Vili's time. I entertained the two here and there around Halifax, with the ministry expense account coming in handy. We went to gaze at Halifax Harbor, an immense circular bay almost entirely surrounded by land, with a single entrance. "This is where the first colony set up," I informed them, not that the tourist literature they pulled up on their communicators didn't say the same. There was plenty of marine traffic on Scotia and the harbor was busy.

"Is your McFee factory near here?" asked Anna. "Errol gave Elsa a tour when she was here."

"And she probably loved taking it as much as he loved giving it. There are factories the McFee Concern operates in this area." I wasn't going to claim any ownership by saying 'we' or 'ours' or anything like that. "The large facility where space craft are built is on the other side of the world. A different continent."

"Like this place we're going for the wedding."

"But way further south than Summit Up. We could arrange a visit but I don't think any of us will have time for a while."

They agreed to that. The wedding had precedence. And then Vili's birthday. We were going to celebrate it at Dummit Downs.

That was Wednesday. They'd been fitted for their dresses that morning but insisted I shouldn't see them till the 'big day.' Elsa was expected to arrive any time. Her family too.

I think it worried Errol more than he showed. Well, Errol never showed things that much. His bride traveled the route where a ship had been destroyed not very long ago. What happened once could happen again. I almost volunteered to go fetch them myself. I wouldn't mind cruising with M again for a day or two.

Sometimes I dreamed of us going on a voyage of exploration. New worlds! That dangerous occupation had fallen by the wayside with the development of the Li Drive. Automated, unmanned jump ships could now be sent to check out unknown worlds, without risking lives. That had certainly changed the dynamics of expansion, sped up its progress. I was inclined to see it as one of the factors leading to this war. Some

groups felt themselves left behind, cut off, their former trade made irrelevant as new resources became available.

Those automated jump ships could also explore hazardous systems such as Big Blue. Some would be lost, to be sure, jumping too close to a dangerous star. Others would jump back with invaluable data.

Vili was talking to her wrist-top. "Yes?" — "Oh, Hi! Really?" — "Ha, that's funny. Are you doing okay?" — "Great." — "Tell him I'm looking forward to meeting him too." — "With Jack? No! Didn't you know Anna and I are the maids of honor?" — "Yes, really!" — "Okay. See you soon!"

"That was Nira," she announced. "Your brother is home and is going to make it to the wedding."

That's good," said Anna. "I would think she'd called Alice with the news too. Probably will ignore Jack."

"Rightfully so," I mumbled.

"You *are* carrying a commie, aren't you?" she continued.

I fished my hand-held out of a pocket, displayed it, slipped it back

"Errol carries one of those too. They don't like wrist-tops."

"I find them uncomfortable," I responded. "But I was admittedly emulating my cousin at first. He did inspire a bit of hero-worship when I was a kid."

"That's understandable," said Anna. Vili nodded in agreement.

"Then you started training me in fighting and weaponry, and I realized that a wrist-top could get in the way, snag on things, slow me down in too many ways. I doubt I would ever wear one."

She gave me a little bow. "The student teaches the master."

I think Vili and I both snickered.

But a couple days later I noticed Anna had ditched her wrist-top.

CHAPTER 19

“NO KILT?” ASKED Mom.

“Regulations say these are just as acceptable for dress uniform.” My legs were safely inside charcoal gray trousers. I wore the sky blue formal jacket of the Planetary Guard. The dove gray one I preferred was considered semi-dress. It had been quite some while since I’d needed even that.

Errol and my brother came in. They had on their Group Force dress black jackets. With kilts. “The tam I gave you?” asked Errol, on laying eyes on me.

“The moment you handed this to me I swore to wear it to your wedding.”

“Can’t have you breaking your oath, I suppose. Elsa wanted to wear her uniform instead of a gown but was vetoed by pretty much everyone. Most notably, her mother.”

“They are very nice looking uniforms,” felt Mom. “I spied Tarmo in his earlier.”

He would have worn his dark green and russet Thulean dress uniform, with copious and ostentatious gold braid. His sister was somewhere about in her maid’s dress. I knew she would not have preferred a uniform. Anna was a romantic beneath her dangerous exterior and was fully indulging herself with this wedding.

Uncle Rupert stuck his head into the room. “We’re all ready? I think the music is about to start.” He withdrew and hurried off somewhere else.

“Your father is more nervous than you,” said Mom.

“He usually is, Aunt Alice. Catherine will calm him down.”

She nodded. “Is your mother here?”

“I made sure she was.”

“And the bride’s,” I felt like adding.

“Thane Gertrude Alander is hard to miss,” said Errol. “Are you ready to march with me, Brendon? You two had better find your seats before Grandpa Jack sells them.”

“Elsa’s father didn’t make it, right?” Mom asked me as we went out

into the domed lounge. Rows of ceramic chairs were already mostly full.

“He’s military and on duty.” I was the one who had most of these little details, thanks to the pair of Thulean girls with whom I had been spending so much of my time. “There’s Dad.” And our seats.

In the second row. Thane Gertrude sat in the front, opposite, on the aisle. She might have been the tallest woman I’d ever seen. Substantial otherwise, too. I hoped for Errol’s sake Elsa didn’t put on weight like that. She might roll over in bed and crush him some night.

“Did she do something to get that title?” Mom whispered.

“Inherited it. Her father is a jarl.” Thulean hereditary nobility dropped one rank with each generation until they were back being commoners. And commoners were raised to the nobility, from time to time. That, Mom would be aware of; it was somewhat her business to have that sort of knowledge.

Music. A military march, wasn’t it? I wondered if had been Errol’s choice to march down the aisle to it. Here he came with Brendon. They stopped up front, where a woman in black stood. Hey, I knew her. She’d given the blessing on Thule Station when Queen Lisi pinned a metal on me.

Wasn’t her name Gertrude too? Maybe. Different music. Pretty. Very old, I was sure. Vili and Anna in their long blue dresses, followed by Elsa, on the arm of Tarmo Gallen. So that was a wedding gown, eh? She wore it well, whatever one called it.

I was slightly envious of Errol at the moment. Grandpa Jack sat at the far end, away from the aisle, in the row ahead of us, his chair turned a bit so he could see everything. Bissy, Uncle Rupert’s first wife and Errol’s mother, was at his side. The rest of the row was Errol’s family, Rupert and Catherine, Marie and her husband, Monike and hers plus their two kids. Nira sat a couple seats up from me, already sniffing and gushing to Dad about how beautiful it was. Better him than me.

Our pair of maids stepped aside, Tarmo went to sit beside the Thane, and we got underway. In Lingo. That was sensible.

Quite a few military here. Oh, sure, some of them wouldn’t be military if there wasn’t a war going on. I had spotted Robert Douglas. I liked to think of him as Mom’s henchman and it might not have been

JUMPING JACK

inaccurate. And who was that leaning forward to whisper to Tarmo? Jitha Jones, the Corvan consul on Thule Station. Him I would not have expected.

Anna's onetime boyfriend or something like one. Two spies, spying on each other, Anna claimed. He had more or less spied on me too. There was a lot of that on the station.

Here as Elsa's friend? That would be the cover and there would be some truth to it. I doubted he would travel to Scotia only for her wedding.

What was Brendon doing? Handing Errol something. A ring. Oh, Anna had one for Elsa too. The bride and groom slipped them on each others fingers, spoke some vows, the minister said words to the effect that was it and they were married. A kiss. Now what? Did we get to eat?

No, more music. Music to march out by. I didn't like this one as much. I didn't watch the couple traipse on out of there and was a bit surprised when a bit of a commotion erupted behind me.

"Anna caught a bouquet of flowers," remarked Mom. "Elsa's. I don't know why she threw it."

"Me neither. I guess that means we can eat now."

CHAPTER 20

ELSA AND ERROL were going to honeymoon right here at Summit Up. It was the rest of us who would have to leave. Not right away. At least not until after the reception and plenty to eat and drink. That was held in one of the big halls inside Grandpa Jack's citadel.

What? We had to listen to speeches? No one wanted that. And my own brother. Just sit down, Brendon.

"In this year Fourteen Thirty-nine Orlova," he began, "we mark the historical occasion of Errol McFee's marriage. An event none ever expected and surely a sign and omen of strange things to come." It went on with more nonsense.

I was here with no one, really. Peripheral to the wedding. No one would notice if I slipped out. A few minutes away from this noise, a few minutes to clear my head. I wandered out onto the lounge, where the stars and the Wall now filled the skies. Bots were busy cleaning up, removing the chairs. At a table sat Jeanne Freneau and Grandpa Jack.

Oh, I didn't want to intrude on them. I'll slip away, I decided, but they saw me. Just ignore me. It was my grandfather who waved me over.

"Sit down, boy. Looking for peace and quiet too?"

"Yes, sir. That's exactly what I was doing."

"I built this place to get it yet I keep inviting people here."

"Maybe you appreciate it more when they've left," I suggested.

"Glib, isn't he?" he remarked to Freneau.

"Somewhat. He may also be right."

"Oh, I know he is. In part."

"But there's always more, isn't there?" I asked. What was that little bot up to? It scurried among the others but seemed to have no task.

"More than we can know," agreed my grandfather. It was making its way toward us, following a zigzag course. Small, simple, flat, four wheels at its corners. A sweeper maybe?

"But we can know some," I said, only half-following our exchange. Closer to us. I rose, drew my C-140, and shot one of its wheels off. It went around in circles, still trying to make its way toward us. "And I know we should get out of here."

JUMPING JACK

Jeanne Freneau was already hurrying Grandpa Jack away. I took another shot at the robot and followed. It exploded behind me.

"Damn," said my grandfather, "You can shoot and spout philosophy at the same time."

"I think he was quoting Adamazdes. Paraphrased, perhaps," said the general.

"I was, wasn't I?" I had hardly been thinking of my words. "Here comes the crowd. You can't get away from them, Grandpa."

Summit Up's chief of security and Tarmo Gallen reached us at about the same time. "What happened?" came from both mouths.

"Jack just saved his grandfather's life," Steward told them. "General Freneau's as well. How did another unknown bot get in here, Boris?"

McFarland had no answer. Tarmo was squatting, looking over what remained of it. "It appears familiar," he said to me.

"Similar to one I shot on your station," I replied. That resemblance might have put me on alert in the first place, perhaps subconsciously.

"I doubt it was built on the premises like the last one," he said, rising.

"Then smuggled in." McFarland peered at the slightly smoking remains. "Hey, don't sweep it up yet," he told an approaching bot. It veered away to clean elsewhere.

Anna had joined us. "Hmm. I'll bet it wandered about a good bit looking for its target. You wouldn't have been expected to be out here, sir."

I could see the logic. "I would guess it was intended to blow up in the middle of the crowded reception."

"I think I need both you young people on my security staff," said Grandpa Jack. "You're the girl who caught the bouquet, aren't you? You just need to marry Jack here and you can move in."

"Maybe not right away."

"Well, okay. Your loss, I think. What about that cute redhead you brought around?" he asked me.

"I think we have gotten off the subject, Grandpa Jack."

"No doubt. I'm allowed at my age." He looked at the gathered crowd. "The party isn't over," he announced. "Go have fun and I'll be

there in a little while.” He turned to me. “Can’t let a little exploding bot ruin Errol’s celebration, can we?”

It might shorten the speeches. We could only hope. “Any ideas yet, Steward?” I asked. I knew he would be searching, searching the house, searching records.

“No, Jack. A great deal of traffic has come through lately. Human and robot.”

Even a powerful AI like Summit Up’s Steward isn’t omniscient. It can’t watch everywhere all the time. Every AI needs a little down time, too. Sleep, we might as well call it. Steward, of course, had back up intelligences to handle everyday operations when he rested. So did House at my home, Dummit Downs, though it was a more modest residence. Still pretty big.

“Keep at it,” said Grandpa. “McFarland. I think you should notify the authorities of this. They might want to sweep their own buildings.”

I was inclined to believe this was an isolated attempt but it wouldn’t hurt. The place was full of government people anyway; word would have spread when they left. Most might not actually know what had occurred, at the moment. Just that there had been some noise, a little disturbance.

“Come on,” said Anna, taking my arm. “No more sneaking out, even if you did save your grandfather’s life. You have to dance with me later, you know.”

“Save a dance for me, too,” called Jeanne Freneau as we headed back to the reception.

CHAPTER 21

“SMALL TERROR ATTACKS like this serve to spread unease. My grandfather is a valuable target only because he is well known.”

“Symbolic, his identity wrapped up with that of Scotia.”

I might not go that far but I’d allow Jitha Jones his opinions. “What,” he asked, “would you consider a truly tempting target? Say for a strategic attack.”

I didn’t even need to think about that. “Heavy mining.” By which I meant bringing back the super-heavy and ultra-heavy elements that drove so much of our technology. Jump drives, to be sure, but a great deal more.

“Our Jack-Mack isn’t stupid,” said General Freneau.

“Stupid enough to be sitting here talking about things like this instead of enjoying the party,” I told both.

“Ha, this I think we all enjoy more than dancing.” Jitha could be right about that. But I could talk anytime; Errol only got married once. We hoped.

“The cake at last,” said Freneau. It was monstrous. Size-wise, that is; I am making no aesthetic judgments. Even so, there had to be extra cakes on the same recipe to serve everyone here a slice or two. Grandpa Jack had taken his seat at the main table, acting the host as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Freneau would not be joining him. She avoided that at these public events, when Grandpa was officially *the* Jack McFee. That’s part of why it took me so long to learn about the two.

“I think the tradition,” said Jones, “is for the newly-wed couple to have the first dance. Then all this formality ends.”

“You know Thulean customs?” Jeanne asked him.

He dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “Not Thulean. Much older, from Earth. Your own ancestors such weddings had, but customs changed as we spread across the many worlds and old traditions were left behind. You will find this wedding tradition, in some form, in many systems still.”

That I admittedly found fascinating. “Are you an historian, Jitha?”

“Anthropologist, says my degree. Diplomat and dilettante in reality.”

Cake was served, to those who wanted it. None of us felt a need to stop a circulating bot for a piece. Music began. A real band, a human band, provided it.

“That’s the military band from Fundy Station,” remarked Freneau. “They work for free.”

I supposed my grandfather was footing the bill for all this. Didn’t that Thulean—or Earth—tradition call on the bride’s family to do that? I wouldn’t be the one to ask Thane Gertrude to pay up.

Vili came over, holding a plateful of cake, and sat down. “That’s a quite traditional Thulean waltz,” she informed us. “I think Elsa chose it.” A giggle. “Or maybe her mother. The band rehearsed it a lot before the Thane approved.” We watched bride and groom whirl. Both were competent enough dancers. “You must ask me for the next dance,” the princess informed me.

“I’ll think about it,” I replied. “I have promised Anna and General Freneau dances.”

“And I have promised Brendon and Errol and even your little nephew Barry.”

“We’d best take advantage of our opportunity then,” I said, as the last strains of the waltz faded. “Vili, may I have this dance?”

She took my offered arm and we proceeded to the floor where other couples were gathering. What sort of music the band might play didn’t matter; I’d learned to dance well at those Corvan schools I attended and I’m sure Vili had every bit as much training.

It proved to be a *cavorta*, vigorous and athletic. Just the thing to show off our chops. It was the last dance for neither of us that evening. We even managed to dance with each other a couple times more.

Things were winding down, the newly-wed couple had disappeared, and Grandpa Jack waved me to his table. He was alone; Freneau was dancing with someone.

“It seems I was asking you about the wrong girls,” he said, before I even sat. “It’s that princess you have your eye on, isn’t it?”

“I like Vilma. Don’t expect to host another wedding anytime soon.”

“The Thuleans would insist on having that hypothetical wedding

JUMPING JACK

on their own planet.” His eyes wandered about the hall, the mood now a bit subdued. The slow dance the band played added to that. “I don’t think Summit Up will be seeing any more marriage ceremonies for quite some time.”

“What of you and Jeanne Freneau? Will I have to call the general Grandma one of these days?” The thought of it almost made me crack up.

He took the idea more seriously. “You would if she were willing. She is persistent about turning me down.”

A step down from being the legendary General Freneau to standing in Jack McFee’s shadow. I could understand that. “She’s notably independent,” I observed.

“Among other things, some of them pretty good. She’s into a lot of Mazdan mysticism but I don’t let that bother me too much.” The music faded. Freneau’s partner, some friend—or co-worker—of my parents escorted her to where we sat.

“We were talking about you,” I informed her.

“Good things, I hope. I like you two and wouldn’t wish to be disappointed by tales of malicious gossip. What, no wine?” She signaled to a servbot. “Bring another bottle of the master’s red. The pinot from Twenty-nine.”

To me, Grandpa said, “She likes you, lad, but she adores Errol.”

I had recognized that long ago. When I first met her, maybe. “Probably thinks Elsa isn’t nearly good enough for him.”

“Oh, that’s why you were crying during the wedding, was it?” he asked. Then, “I wish you had been willing to sit with me.”

“I’m not family, Jack.”

“You could be.”

The bot brought the bottle. “Shall I open, sir?”

“Leave a corkscrew,” he told it. “You ever used one of these?” he asked me.

“I have.” He passed both bottle and opener over. It was a familiar mechanical design. “I visited vineyards in the Corvan worlds,” I said, as I extracted the cork. “Some of them have quite a reputation, it’s said.”

“What did you think of them?”

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

Freneau laughed as I poured. "He would have been too young to sample their products, Jack. The boy's barely old enough now."

"Hmmp. So why did you visit them?"

"To see how they were run, mostly. Some actually used humans to pick the grapes."

"I'd never trust them to do it right."

"They're announcing the last dance," said the general. "This is ours, Jack."

"Which Jack?" asked Grandpa, though he knew fully well whom she meant.

"I'd best go ask Vili before someone else does," I announced. I needn't have hurried; she'd turned down every other offer.

CHAPTER 22

“I ACT, IN a sense, as a liaison between the ministries in which your parents serve.”

Information and diplomacy. Put the two together and you get ‘spy.’ Spy recruiter in the case of Robert Douglas. It was well after midnight; he awaited the shuttle that would carry him down to the landing field and his transportation back to Halifax, west across the ocean. “So how does being a liaison bring you to a wedding?”

“People gather at weddings. Things happen. The presence of Vilma Lempsen was a draw. So was that of Thane Gertrude Alander and the Honorable Jitha Jones. And,” he added, “it seemed to draw the attention of others too.”

Meaning whoever sent a robot bomb after my grandfather. Maybe he meant more than that. It was hard to tell and I certainly wouldn’t ask. I did ask, “Why do you think Jones is here?”

“The Corvans are concerned about these not-so-secret meetings. I would think that the main attraction.”

“And here I thought he was chasing after Anna Gallen, hoping to win her back.”

“I think the lieutenant’s horizons have broadened since their time together. Ah, we’re ready to depart. I’ll undoubtedly see you in the capital from time to time.” With that he joined a crowd heading out the doors.

I sat in the lowest lounge, below the big domed space, a place where visitors generally entered and exited Summit Up. I was staying the night, as was my family and our Thuleans. Vili and Anna were both in their rooms, probably asleep. I should be too.

Tomorrow, the tour of the place I had promised Vili. Make that today. Dawn was closer than sunset. I took an elevator up. “To my room,” I mumbled to it. That would get me to the correct floor.

As for the room itself, I might need to ask Steward if I was headed the right direction. I knew my way around Summit Up after a fashion but I was also capable of becoming quite lost. Right. I knew that. “I have opened your door for you, Jack,” said Steward, almost whispering.

There it was. "And I must warn you a visitor is waiting. I discouraged him from doing so."

"Thank you, Steward." I didn't want to talk to anyone else tonight. I was tired. Maybe getting a hangover too.

Dim illumination revealed Jitha Jones sitting on the small sofa, looking over a book. The printed Latin vocabulary I had carried along. He put it down without commenting. "Do you mind a few words with me, Jack?" he asked.

"If you keep them few." Jitha could be loquacious. "I'd have expected you to be gone by now." I pulled out the chair at the desk to seat myself.

"I travel with the thane. When she goes, I go. Gertrude Alander is neither an important nor an influential woman, but it is convenient to be in her party." He looked up at the ceiling. "You'll be discreet about that, won't you, Steward? I know you hear most of what goes on in this place."

"Unless you give me reason not to be, sir," came the answer.

"Fair enough. Although I enjoyed seeing my friend Elsa at her wedding, you surely know I have other concerns on Scotia."

I nodded, he continued. "Nothing very official nor even well-defined, just, ah, sniffing out how things stand, perhaps. How stand you, Jack McFee?"

Of course, I had opinions. This Corvan was free to ask them. I was free not to answer. "On what?"

"On the meeting with the Janic-Thulean delegation. On the possible end of the war."

I couldn't add much to his knowledge there, I realized. Chances were he was better informed than I. "I tend to be in agreement with my cousin Errol on much. But you understand I know very little of how things are actually going."

He considered, briefly. "We may not win this war. That is not such a terrible thing for the Corvan League, no more than a setback in the long rivalry with the Aigleans. For smaller entities, Thule, Scotia, it could be a disaster."

"And our choice seems to be between a lesser disaster now or a possibly greater one later."

JUMPING JACK

“Or a victory. Yes, we are doing not well on many fronts, but there are reports of internal strife among the Aigleans. Attrition may bring the advantage back to us.”

That was completely new to me. I would assume the Scotian command was well aware of such things. “Then we—the Scotians, the Thuleans—should hang on?”

“That is what we would hope—that your leaders would listen to those like Brigadier Errol McFee.” A smile. “We don’t expect them to listen to you, of course.”

“I would hope not. I don’t suppose you Corvans had anything to do with the explosion last night.”

He seemed surprised. “It would seem most unlikely, not that the right hand always knows what the left does, eh? A robot, I heard?”

“Very similar to the one that attacked me on Thule Station.”

“Ah. That was the work of Janic terrorists we think?”

“At the request of the Aigleans.” That I knew for certain. Chances were Jones did too. “But anyone could copy the design.”

“True enough. Thank you for talking with me Jack.” He rose, he left.

“I do not think I like him,” said Steward.

“I’m not sure I do either, Stewie. So what is your opinion of my new Thulean?”

“She seems a nice girl, Jack, but I prefer Anna Gallen.”

I wasn’t surprised.

CHAPTER 23

VILI'S TOUR OF Summit Up had to include Anna. Even though the princess might be safer here than in her embassy. There was no swimming, nude or otherwise. I wasn't exactly disappointed but I wouldn't have minded, you know?

Lots of views to view. Lots of windows to view them through. Libraries. Galleries of art various McFees had collected. My great-grandfather especially, I understood, the one who'd started construction on this place. Some of the work might have been considered good at the time.

Down to the cellars, to the racks of wine. "There's way more at my grandfather's vineyard," I let them know. That wasn't so far away, closer to the coast where sea breezes tempered the climate.

I even found the rooms where he grew bananas. Then back upstairs. It was about time to get out of here. Of my grandfather I had seen nothing this morning, nor of Jeanne Freneau. She might already be at Halifax or even on the moon. Or the two of them could be locked in his room.

"It's nice," was Vili's final judgment, "but I like your parents' estate better."

"So do I. We'll be there again soon." In about a week, for her birthday party. "Right now we need to get back to the capital."

"I have taken the liberty of packing your luggage and sending it down to the field," said Steward. "You are ready to go when you wish."

"Thank you." I wasn't completely happy with him doing that without asking. Stewie did tend to take things on himself.

We were not required to shuttle down to the main field. There was a smaller, closer one for family and the most important visitors. I'd taken off from it with Errol when I visited the last time.

Errol himself finally showed his face as we were preparing to leave this time. With Elsa, of course. "We're staying a couple days more," she said. "Then both back to duty. I'll travel home with my mother."

"Is the Thane still here?" asked Mom.

"Shuttled out first thing this morning with my father and Caroline," said Errol. "She'll be staying at McFee House until Elsa joins her."

JUMPING JACK

I wondered if that included Jitha Jones. Better if he stayed at the Corvan embassy.

"Then we're all ready to go?" asked Dad. "Oh, Bissy. We didn't know you were still here."

Errol's mother had joined us. She was a thin, almost gaunt woman, rather plain by most standards, a bit on the tall side—though not Thulean tall. "Jack invited me to stay a few more days," she said.

Errol gave his mom an indulgent smile. "He invited her to stay as long as she wanted. Not the first time for that. Grandpa Jack still claims she was the best engineer he ever hired."

That probably wasn't true but we all knew he was fond of her. Much fonder than of Caroline.

So, hugs and farewells and we all, once again, boarded Mom's boat. Fortunately, I wasn't called on to pilot it but I did sit up front with the woman who did for a while. Our course was southwest, almost entirely over ocean. It would be interesting to see the actual ocean from that height, through a window rather than on a screen.

What with traveling the direction we did, it was still midday when we set down at Halifax. Not at the little ministry field Mom sometimes used but one of the big ones out further. Then cabs, Mom and Dad to their place, the rest of us to the Thulean embassy, then me to McFee House by trolley. In that the trolleys of Halifax were free, it seemed wrong *not* to use them.

"Your aunt and uncle have gone out to dine," the butler bot informed me. "With their house guest."

"Only one guest?"

"Yes, sir. The Thane Alander."

I went to my little room. I'd have something sent up and retire early, catching up on my sleep. I was busy with the last of these chores when I heard—or sensed—the door swing slowly open.

"Lights!" I had my C-140 in my hand at once.

"Do not shoot, Jack!" Gertrude Alander stood there, holding her hands up. Her smile suggested she didn't think she was in any danger. A decidedly inadequate robe was wrapped loosely about her substantial frame.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

She shut the door behind her. "Lower lights." They dimmed as ordered. I considering telling them to come up again.

Gertrude took a seat on the side of my bed. "I hardly got to know you at your grandfather's house. House you would call it? My English is not practiced much."

"House would do. We can use Lingo if you prefer. I can get by in Thulean."

She immediately switched to her native tongue. "We could get to know each other better now, no?" One shoulder of her robe slipped. She had breasts to match the rest of her.

"I suppose we could. But, um, should we?"

"Would you have me be lonely in a strange house?"

No, that would be inhospitable. "Lights off," I said.

CHAPTER 24

GERTRUDE ALANDER'S NUDE body was pressed against mine when I woke. I rather liked the way it felt. "Gertrude! It's morning. You should get out of here."

She yawned. "Why?"

"You'll shock my aunt and uncle."

"Oh, yes. Scotians." She rolled over and out of bed. "You were lots of fun," said the thane, and leaned down to give me a little peck. "If you visit Thule, you must come see me." Throwing on her robe, she slipped out of the room. As much as a woman her size can slip out of anywhere.

It was indeed lots of fun. I'd been surprised. The butler himself came to my room as I was dressing. "Good morning, sir. Did you sleep well?"

"You would know how I slept. I can trust you to say nothing of it?"

"Your cousin Errol made certain I understood the need for discretion. He had such mornings too. Shall I have something sent up or will you breakfast with your uncle?"

"I'll go down," I decided.

I much doubted Gertrude would join us. More likely she went back to bed in her own room.

"Ah, there's the young fellow," Uncle Rupert greeted me. My bedroom might be small but this breakfast chamber was rather grandiose. Tall windows gave a view of gardens, a high wall beyond them. Rupert was drinking coffee and looking at a tablet. "All rested?"

"Yes, sir," I lied. "But I may take it easy today."

"Good idea. We're throwing a dinner party this evening. The thane as special guest and all that. A Thulean noble Caroline can use to impress our circle! You can join us as you wish but I doubt you'd want to spend time with a bunch of old fogies."

"Only if they bring along their young foggy daughters. Eggs and ham," I told the servbot. I needed something substantial. "And fried potatoes."

"No luck on the daughters, I'm afraid, though if you hung around

town I'm sure we could introduce you to some. Errol never showed much interest in the girls we invited here."

He sipped his coffee and said no more. "I'll pass on your dinner party," I told him. "And as far as girls go, I need to concentrate on Princess Vilma right now."

"Right. Duty." My breakfast arrived and my uncle left shortly after. He did work, after all, and quite conscientiously by all reports, spending long hours at McFee Concern headquarters here in Halifax and flying off to factories around the globe.

I hadn't been to those headquarters since I was a kid. I doubted there was any reason to now, but they were available if I ran out of things to show Vili.

This was Monday. As our ancient Earth ancestors, we held to the unwieldy seven day week, with Sunday being the supposed day of rest. This worked well for both Nezos and Catholics, which meant most Scotians who followed any religion. Vili's birthday was Friday.

Wedding out of the way, we had to plan for this next event. A much smaller event. Some of those I might have wished to have there were already headed elsewhere. Brendon back to the war. Elsa back to Thule. Who could know where Errol might be? I'd tell him he was welcome.

Maybe someone from the Thulean embassy? Vili had friends there. I'd let her ask them. The past year had not been conducive to me making friends myself. Most of my old friends were Corvans I'd met at school, far away now. A few military sorts. Maybe we could get Sandi here! Vili would like that. So would Tarmo; he might or might not be coming, as his duties required.

But he or Elsa might be able to find a way to get Sandburg here. I'd talk to one or both. Sacky Baldwin was a friend and far away too, and probably busy at her school. That was a good thing. I didn't think I'd want her and Vili together.

Would Anna and Vili be up and ready to do something? They were undoubtedly more rested than me. I'd had two nights in a row on short sleep. I might as well get going and avoid Aunt Caroline.

McFee house had no true central AI to run it. Perhaps it wasn't really large enough to need one. And it had been built quite a long time

JUMPING JACK

ago, when they were less common. I had no doubt I would be noticed leaving, however. The butler seemed to know what was going on.

And I had noted security, both bot and human. That made sense for the house of as important a man as Rupert McFee. I would think him a more tempting target than my grandfather. But the public didn't really know his name. There would be little symbolic value in attacking him.

I stepped outside into an overcast morning. Fog and rain were not uncommon in Halifax. Bots were busy gardening beside a fairly long way down, walks and stairs, to the front gate and the street. Once, this place was in the country but the capital city had grown out to it. That was good, as I could catch a trolley a couple blocks away.

The gate recognized me and let me out. It might be connected to the butler too. I could ask Errol sometime. He'd know. He might have even had a hand in the programming around here.

To my right, along a brick sidewalk, with mature trees hanging over it. They were dripping this morning. And to the trolley stop. I had found the riders who got on and off here were mostly people who worked in the area, in the homes of the wealthy. A disappearing breed, maybe, as robots increasingly performed their traditional tasks. Scotia was not a particularly populous planet; cheap human labor was not as available as on some worlds, where robots couldn't compete so readily. We walked a middle ground between such planets and ones like Resnovae, where robots did everything and apparently no one worked. Or so said the stories; I thought they might be a little exaggerated.

Some of these folks might end up being recruited for colonization somewhere. The deals always sounded good and maybe they were. I was the only one waiting for the trolley this morning. It was a boxy affair made of a ceramic, eight wheels in pairs, a simple brain. Less complex than the servbot that brought me breakfast, I suspected, but connected to a more powerful central control. Twenty minutes later I stood before the Thulean Embassy. More than early enough to go out for lunch, if the girls wished.

I was let in without any security checks. They knew me now. I followed a corridor back to the reception room where Anna and Vili met me, more often than not. If they weren't there, an aidie would go tell them I'd arrived.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

There was Anna, talking to someone on her communicator. Hand-held, not wrist-top. It looked like it was an interesting conversation. She said goodbye and sat and looked at me for a while without saying anything. Then she got up and sauntered over.

Anna suddenly shoved me against the wall. Visions of her beating me up in our training sessions came to me. "You and Gertrude Alander?"

"Um. How?"

She stepped back and let me breathe. "You didn't think she would call her daughter and tell her all about it?"

I hoped they hadn't compared notes. "I certainly didn't think that daughter would share it with you."

She snickered. "We shared you, didn't we? Be all that as it may, I impressed on Elsa that Vili should know nothing of this. I know she can be discreet. I just hope her mother can."

"You don't think Elsa would, um, say anything to Errol, do you?"

"They're probably laughing about it right now."

So what? Anna's jibe made me realize my days of wishing Errol's approval had gone. "I laughed some myself. We enjoyed ourselves and that is that."

"You've been around us Thuleans too long," she told me. "Here's Vili. Where are we going today?"

CHAPTER 25

IT HADN'T BEEN a good day to go anywhere. Drizzle set in soon after I'd arrived at the embassy. We ate there, with staff coming and going in a utilitarian dining room. It could have passed for the cafeteria at Thule Station. A lot of the conversation around us was in Lingo. Considering at least half those who worked here were Janic, not Thulean, it made sense they'd use what had become almost a universal language.

"This is nothing compared to the monsoon season," I informed my friends.

"You don't get that at Dummit Downs," stated Vili. "It's too far south." She must have been reading up.

"Thoroughly in the temperate zone. Almost too far south but the winds and sea currents keep it nice."

"Does it snow? I've heard it snows all the time on Janus," Anna said.

"We get a touch of it most years. But it's spring now. Autumn at Summit Up. Grandpa Jack will be seeing snow soon, I'd think." It was already accumulating on the mountain peaks that stood behind his home.

"He'd better get all his grapes picked," said Vili. "I'd like to see that."

"Hang around a while and you can see the harvests at Dummit Downs. Not only grapes. It's a real farm, you know, not just a whimsy of those rich McFees." Not that it actually made a profit. Mom and Dad were always putting more money into it, improving this or that.

"I could see me running a farm," she said, her tone becoming just a tad dreamy. "Like Nira does."

"I don't think she'll give up her job. But she could put you to work cleaning the stables."

"I'd take the offer in a second!"

She probably would. I loved my home but I didn't think I could fall into the routine of living and working there. Dummit Downs was likely to be Brendon's anyway, not mine. Brendon and Nira's! I'd have to go somewhere else, do something else. I was likely to always have enough money, whatever I did. I was a wealthy McFee. I understood the temptation some of my relatives had faced to live lives of idleness and dissipation.

I sampled a bit of it that evening, taking the Thuleans out to explore the nightlife of Halifax. Such as it was. I'd seen real nightlife in Corvan cities but I'd been too young to fully appreciate it. "I'm avoiding the dinner party at McFee House," I told the girls.

"Maybe you should avoid McFee House altogether," Anna remarked. Vili looked puzzled a moment but there were other things going on to catch her attention.

"If it wasn't raining we could take a moonlight boat ride on Halifax Harbor," I informed them.

"Not all the way around, I'd think," said Vili. "That would take hours." It was a very large harbor and did indeed require hours to circumnavigate. It might even take more than one day.

"I've never been on a boat," was all Anna had to say about it. Maybe we could remedy that some other day.

A mention of the McFee name could have gotten us into just about anywhere, reservations not required, but I remembered I didn't want to come off as the spoiled rich kid. Not to either of them. We found a decent, not too crowded restaurant in the theater district.

"You should have worn your uniform," Vili told me. There were a few in the room.

"With the kilt," snickered Anna.

"We'll do that some other evening. All three of us. You have one, don't you, Vili?"

"Not even my service uniform." That was the plain green thing she'd worn on Thule Station. "It was blown up with the rest of my luggage. I am officially still in the military. The diplomatic mission has me listed as Sergeant Vilma Lempsen."

I wondered if the tailor at Dummit Downs had the patterns for Janic-Thule uniforms. We could run her off something semi-dress in an hour. Oh, they could just copy Anna's if they didn't.

Following a light meal—neither had ever eaten quail before—we went looking for a play we could take in. I'll admit I rather love theater. Live theater, real people, not images of them. "I saw that show a couple years ago on another world," I said, as we stood before one theater. "Not in English, however."

"We need to find a show in Thulean for Anna," Vili informed me.

JUMPING JACK

"I can follow English perfectly well," said the lieutenant. "Still, something in Lingo might be better."

The 'something in Lingo' we did take in was a bit of light opera. A work of Chand, and one I'd not heard before. I don't know if either Thulean woman could follow the plot. I'm not sure I could.

We had to make the obligatory stop at a night club after. Long enough for one drink. I thought the bartender did somewhat clever things with apple brandy but Anna was thoroughly unimpressed. She'd rather have a had a shot of schnapps like back on Thule. Scotians didn't know how to drink! Then a cab back to the embassy, a somewhat sleepy farewell. I indulged myself and kept to the cab all the way to McFee House. The gate slid open with a "Good evening, Lieutenant McFee" and a slight grating sound. Someone should see to that.

"Everyone gone?" I whispered to the butler as I entered the house. He always seemed to be there to greet me. I suppose the gate warned him I was coming.

"They are, sir, but your aunt and uncle are still up."

I was grateful for the warning. Maybe I could avoid them.

No luck. They were in the library as I passed its doorway. Drinking. Good manners said I had to join them, if only to say good night. "You were wise to avoid dinner, Jack," Uncle Rupert told me.

"A disaster!" added Caroline. "That dreadful woman!"

I figured she meant the thane. Gertrude was nowhere to be seen.

"She propositioned at least three of our guests. In front of their wives."

"I thinks she propositioned one of the wives too. I'd heard about Thuleans, but still—!" My aunt shook her head. "And she's supposed to be a noble. I'd have expected better."

"Drank all evening too," said Rupert. "Best keep your distance from her, boy," he advised.

"Yes, sir. Good night to you. And to you, Aunt Caroline."

Chances were Thane Gertrude Alander was snoring in her room. I saw no sign of her that night.

CHAPTER 26

"I COULDN'T RESIST having some fun with that bunch last night. What a boring circle of friends my hosts have!" Gertrude sipped her cocoa and smiled at the memory. We were having a late breakfast, both having waited until Rupert McFee exited the house.

"It was only right to liven up their lives a little," I told her.

"Even so. Alas, it will do them no good in the long term, I fear. Is that good? Give me some?"

I was eating pancakes, with honey. I gave her a fork-full to sample, which she chewed thoughtfully before going on. "My son-in-law is going to pick me up in a while and Elsa and I shall be on our way home. My home. I think Elsa will live here after the war."

"Errol needs a real home for the two of them. Not this place."

"So true! Your grandfather would let them live with him, I think, even if he and Errol argue all the time. So they tell me. I did not witness it."

Not with Elsa there. Both would have been on best behavior. The two would butt heads again; one could count on that.

"Elsa told me you two made love once."

"Yes." I would volunteer no more than that.

"I am glad she chose Errol instead of you."

So was I. I would not want Gertrude Alander as my mother-in-law, even though I liked her. "He seems the better choice. The two of them can talk about engineering after having sex."

That brought a chuckle. "It is good to have something one can share. You and Anna could discuss killing people after making love."

Was that how Gertrude saw me? I supposed most of what she knew came from her daughter. And why would she assume Anna and I would be having sex? Maybe she was just joking. Having some fun with me, this time.

"I'd best go get my things together. And try to avoid Caroline." Most likely Caroline was trying to avoid her. I expected to be gone by the time Errol arrived so I wouldn't get to witness any awkward good-byes.

"Then I'd better say goodbye now." We hugged, she left.

JUMPING JACK

Sex. I hadn't even kissed Vili since we'd visited Dummit Downs. Had that moment been all? Had we both cooled? I remained less than sure about going any further with a very nice girl who was also a princess of Janic-Thule. Our lives seemed unlikely to ever run in the same directions. She might even be elected queen someday.

As with everything else, I would find out when I found out. I'd better hurry or I'd miss the trolley. I'd eaten breakfast too late. My legs didn't particularly want to cooperate. They told me I should sit a little longer.

No, legs. Have to move. Tuesday, right? Yesterday had seemed long. My commie sang to me. "Jack."

It was Anna. They were tired. Don't hurry over. Maybe this afternoon. Elsa might stop by the embassy to say goodbye. I listened, I agreed.

"I don't know if Elsa plans to stop here either," I told her. "Errol is coming for her mother sometime."

"Aw, the two of you are being broken up."

"Shut up, Lieutenant Gallen."

Yeah, I knew it was probably funny from her perspective. So what to do? I definitely was not going to hang around McFee House. The grounds? I'd explored them when I was a kid. Nothing to see there, but a walk might be enjoyable anyway. Hang out in one garden or another where no one would bother me.

But if was going to walk I might as well walk to something instead of away. I passed through the front gate twenty minutes later, with no destination in mind. Halifax is a large city, the second largest on Scotia. Dundee, the industrial center and space port on the other side of the world, was bigger.

The point is, it was a long way to the downtown and the harbor-front. Too far to walk. I'd catch a trolley or call a cab eventually. This part of town was a bit hilly, back from the water. Mostly big houses, many hard to glimpse from the sidewalk thanks to walls and large old trees. A car came rolling up the street toward me. Not a cab. Slowing?

The dark window was slowly sliding down. I tensed, felt for my weapon. Oh, police. I could see the emblem on the side now. They should make it more noticeable! The woman, in the tan uniform of the

Halifax force, looked at a tablet and then up at me. "You're about the last person I'd expect to run into here. Is anything wrong, Mister McFee?" A chirp from her tablet. "Oh, sorry. Lieutenant McFee. Home on leave." She nodded.

Of course my face would be known to some computer downtown. And lots more about me. "Just walking. I'm a bit at loose ends this morning."

She looked me up and down. "We're not used to seeing anyone walk along here. And those who do are not always up to anything good. Enjoy your walk, Lieutenant."

My pocket sang again. "My code is on your communicator in case you're still at loose ends this evening." Her window slid up and the police car pulled away.

Well. She wasn't at all bad to look at, was she? In sort of a square-jawed way. It wouldn't hurt to keep the code. I pulled out my communicator and ordered a cab. I'd just realized I needed to find Vili a birthday present. I spent the rest of the morning visiting stores and having things sent to McFee House, before heading to the Janic-Thulean embassy.

Once again, I ran into Anna first. She was sitting, holding her commie. "Vili is working," she said, looking up. "She begged the staff for something useful to do."

"What?"

"No idea, don't care. I'm always working, you realize."

I did. "Elsa can't make it here to say goodbye," she went on. "Not to your uncle's house either. She's meeting her mom and husband at some space station. Not Fundy, I assume."

"There's another where a lot of interstellar flights come and go. Civil flights." It orbited Scotia, always at the same place above the planet's surface. "Not surprisingly, it's named Central Station."

Anna laughed. "There's one in every system."

"Did you talk to Elsa about Sandi?" I asked, taking a seat beside her. I'm not sure why I'd been standing. We were in the exercise room. A somewhat hefty older man was doing halfhearted squats over toward one corner.

"She'll see what she can do. I mentioned it to Tarmo too, but he

JUMPING JACK

seemed less than hopeful. I think this conference and all his security concerns are weighing on him.”

“Is *he* going to come?”

“Again, he doesn’t know.”

“Sandi’s presence would certainly be an inducement. Or we could invite other women to distract him.” I thought of the policewoman I had just run into and told her the story.

Anna only shook her head. “Neither you nor your cousin Errol has had a problem attracting female attention.”

“We’re not much alike,” I asserted.

“Women want to mother you. They want Errol to father them.” She snickered softly. “Your handsome brother just gets hero worship.”

“He’s very married. He and Nira have been in love since they were kids.”

“None of this screwing around like you and Errol, huh?”

“Hey, I haven’t been doing that much.” I couldn’t speak for Errol.

“Reports suggest otherwise.”

I objected. “I’ve only had sex four times since I came home to Scotia. That’s more than a year ago. And one of those encounters was two women at once so maybe it’s actually three?”

“I remember the occasion. Three times and four women. Three of them Thulean.”

“Uh-huh. There were Corvan girls when I was in school. They were nothing like Thuleans.” I had to smile at a thought. “Brown girls who talked like Jitha Jones.” Most of them very smart and from important families. I’d really thought at the time I’d end up marrying one. The war changed things, warped the arc I expected my life to follow.

“Enough like Thuleans, apparently. I haven’t really had anyone since I was seeing Jitha.”

Which was not to say she had been celibate. I wasn’t going to ask into that! “Maybe neither of us can be serious about someone until this war is over.”

“Maybe. But maybe we shouldn’t wait either.”

CHAPTER 27

"YOU HAVE BECOME close to my sister, Jack. Maybe the closest male friend she's ever had." Something like a chuckle came from Tarmo. "Our little brother. She puts a lot of faith in you."

"The girl who regularly threatens to beat me up?"

"Oh, she does that to me, too. I know better than to test her." We both did. "She would probably be having sex with you if she wasn't afraid of ruining your relationship."

Maybe I felt the same. That was nothing I was likely to sort out at the moment. "She thinks I should be with Vili."

"I got that impression. I know you have avoided any, um, involvement with the princess."

"And maybe that's for the best."

"Maybe," he allowed. "I don't know exactly how you feel about Vili, Jack. You're always hard to read. But she is definitely in love with you."

I assumed he had some way of knowing. Maybe she'd confessed it to his sister. He did read Vili's mail before it went off to Thule, too. She might gush about me to her mother. Or Sandi or some other friend.

As far as my own feelings went? I wasn't even sure I could fall in love with someone. Not the way I'd heard it described, read about it in book after book, seen it portrayed on stage. I was fond of Vili as I had been fond of other girls. I always figured I'd be fond enough of one someday to go ahead and marry her.

Not a princess. More likely an academic of some sort. Like my own mom, huh? Before she married Dad and went into government work.

"I don't suppose I'd have know any of you Thuleans if my engine hadn't failed on my first long-range mission." I'd limped into Thule Station on maneuvering tubes, with a broken cooling system. "I've sometimes wondered if that was the result of sabotage too."

"You would have simply jumped on home, wouldn't you? Hmm, you didn't make a stop anywhere before that, did you? Coming or going."

"I did not. If it were tinkered with, it would have been here in Scotia."

JUMPING JACK

Tarmo mused on this. "Someone has probably thought of that. I may mention it in a report anyway."

"Not really my point," I said.

"Yeah, I know. Fate threw us all together and that sort of thing. Errol would never even have met Elsa, most likely. If an Aiglean agent did sabotage you, we should all send him a thank you note."

"Care of their nearest embassy."

"I'm not sure where that is."

"Alice? Yeah, unless one goes through the Wall. Then maybe Nevada."

"Or somewhere in the Sevens."

"That would be closest to you in Thule."

Having worked that out to our satisfaction, I asked, "Now you're absolutely tentatively sure you're coming?"

"Maybe," he replied. "My bosses at the embassy think Vili should have extra security anyway if she's staying a couple nights at Dummit Downs. That's the reason I gave when I requested Sandi be given a ticket here. Even though Vili doesn't know she is security."

"The best sort of security, perhaps. The embassy seemed to think she was safe enough overnight at Summit Up."

"Yet a bomb exploded there. Nowhere is safe right now, Jack." A rather long pause. "Did you know there have been reports of jump ships coming and going quickly right here in your system? Maybe just harassment, keeping us on our toes. They can't do much of anything."

Unless they landed by luck practically atop a target. "But jumping from where?"

"Anyone's guess. Things are getting messier on every front."

There were two main ways into the Scotian Group, this cluster of systems. The bubble in which it was located adjoined Thulean and Seven space one way, Ning and Agora the other. The Wall closed us in on one side; in all other directions, any star was at too great a distance for a jump. A safe jump. I certainly wouldn't attempt one.

"To reach Scotia itself would require a lot of jumps coming in through Alice or the Nings. Closer coming from your direction. Ships stationed in the Sevens maybe."

“Maybe. After all, you Scotians jump into their systems regularly too.”

That was no secret. If Aiglean ships weren’t stationed there to back them up, we might have even attempted an invasion. Yes, I’d been listening to various IMPs again. Much of this war had been a matter of stalemate, raiding into each other’s space, attacking shipping, but few concerted efforts to invade and occupy. Rumor had it that had been changing, that the Corvans had been forced to withdraw from systems, that some Ning worlds had been occupied by the Picans in the further reaches of their expansive alliance.

Engine shipments from the Ning Association had most definitely been impacted. From the Corvans too. I had heard both Rupert and Errol complain about having to fit inferior drives to the latest McFee designs.

“Your parents already went home?” asked Tarmo.

“This morning, by shuttle. I’ll take Vili and Anna down tomorrow in the family ship—my mom’s ship most would consider it. You can ride along if you’re ready.”

“We’ll see. If I get word Sandi is coming, I’ll wait for her.”

“And come down with Errol.”

“That is the current thought. I might end up on a shuttle too.”

“Okay, we’ll look for you, one way or another. Say, aren’t you Sandburg’s boss? Can’t you just order her to come?”

“It’s complicated. On paper, Sandi is still a tug pilot and answers to the dockmaster. Who is sort of under Elsa Alander. Elsa Alander-McFee, I should say. Just as I am sort of under Major Kori, head of Security Section at the station.”

“But working semi-independently.”

“Yes. The major knows I am there as part of intelligence, rather than to get drunken dock workers back to their cabins.”

“So ultimately, Gunilla Sandburg answers to Kori?”

Tarmo snickered. “Except she doesn’t know Sandi works for her. The girl is truly undercover.”

That explained the complications. Elsa should be able to send her our way, however, with Tarmo’s approval.

“There’s no point in me hanging around your embassy any longer

JUMPING JACK

tonight,” I said, rising from my chair. We were in one of the offices, a row of desks, all abandoned for the night, the lights dimmed. Our empty glasses sat on one of the desks. Vili was attending a little office party for her birthday at the moment. Anna too, naturally. I’d see both in the morning.

I stepped out into the street, the embassy doors closing behind me. It smelled fresh after a day of rain. What to do with this evening? I could call Veronika O’Toole—that was the friendly policewoman—and tell her I was at loose ends tonight.

Nah. I boarded the next trolley to pass.

CHAPTER 28

“THIS IS CHRISTIANA Torgerson,” explained Vili. “You said I could bring friends.”

“And she is quite welcome. Come aboard, Miss Torgerson.”

“Call me Torgi.” She went up the stairs two at a time. No docking tubes needed when the ship sat on a landing field.

“Torgi?” I whispered to Anna, as we followed the two girls. No one else this day. Tarmo still said maybe he’d come later.

“Embassy staff. Records or something like that. She’s nearly as big as Elsa’s mom, isn’t she?”

A tad shorter, quite a bit more slender. Skinny, some might say. Very blond, with a long nose between vividly blue eyes. Very Thulean.

“I’m pilot and crew today,” I announced. “But one of you can be bartender if you wish.”

“Much too early, Jack,” objected Vili.

Anna nodded. “Even I have to agree with that.”

I’d gone through my pre-flight check before they’d shown up at the field. This was a big public field south of town. An embassy car had brought the trio. And yes, I came via trolley. Notification of intent to launch sent and approved. Main engine on line and ready. Control tubes pointing down, both fore and aft. I gave them some power and our ship slowly lifted. “Proper height achieved,” said the computer, and I fired up the Riley, an external unit mounted rearward. We were off.

Being an atmospheric vessel, there was an up and a down to it. Orientation meant nothing in a ship operating in deep space. Control cabins might be set at any angle inside their hulls. Here, I was pointed forward, as in a car, and there was a mild gravity field to tell us where down was. That didn’t matter when we were still close to the planet, to be sure. I wouldn’t take us out of the atmosphere today. Too short a hop to need it.

I checked that everything had been retracted that should be retracted, not that I couldn’t trust the control computer to take care of it. All three women came crowding in to look things over. Curiosity sated, they returned to the back. I wished one or another—or even all

JUMPING JACK

—had stayed a while. Less than an hour later I was descending toward Dummit Downs and our private landing place.

Landing is much the reverse of taking off, using the front and rear control tubes, four of each. Four was minimum for an atmospheric ship, I felt. Three could work fine in vacuum, where landing wasn't a consideration, and the rear tubes served more to stabilize than to maneuver. Anyway, I set it down with the judicious application of power to both forward and rear tubes, the barge slowly settling on its sturdy landing skids. I could have left the whole process up to the control computer had I wished. Nose-up landings and take offs are possible with a ship of this sort—every pilot learns how to do them—but the passengers tend not to appreciate them.

"Is it okay to open the door?" asked Vili, as I emerged from the cabin.

"I could hold you captive," I told her. "Would your mom pay a hefty ransom?"

"Are you certain who is the captive here?" asked Anna. A good point. They were three, and two of them pretty big.

"Let us out, Control," I said, not that I couldn't have pushed the button next to the door. Bots had already rolled stairs into place. It's not that far down one couldn't jump, and there were built in steps on the hull and skids.

Old Jock Amaran, longtime retainer at Dummit Downs, waited in a cart. "Welcome home, sir. Welcome to you, ladies. Have you luggage?"

"Only the bags we're carrying, sir," responded Torgi.

"Then toss them in and climb aboard, miss. And I should be wishing one of you a happy birthday, shouldn't I?"

"That's me, sir," Vili told him.

"My, they're a polite bunch, Jack. Just call me Jock. Let's go, girl." That last was addressed to the cart, though I'm fairly sure it was neuter.

We headed uphill toward the house. "Jock has been here as far back as I can remember," I informed my guests.

"And a long time before that," he added. "And even before that I was David McFee's batman when he served in the military."

"Dad made it to colonel before moving to a different career," I explained.

"None too soon. He wasn't fitted for the service, if I may say so, Jack."

"You know you can say anything, Jock. You and House."

"Ha, but not *to* House. She knows how to make my life miserable." He looked toward the tiers of Dummit Downs. "And we're close enough she might have heard that."

"But I'll pretend I didn't. Welcome home, Jack, and welcome to your guests. Shall I have your bags taken to your rooms?"

"I carry mine," declared Torgi, gripping it with some determination. I decided she'd never met an AI like House before. Nor a house like Dummit Downs.

Vili read that too. "We'll all carry our things in, House," she said. "Just show us the way to our rooms."

Jock didn't stick with us but disappeared, still on the cart, as we entered the house. "No sign of the parents," I whispered. "They won't know I'm smuggling girls in."

"I am putting them across the hallway from you, Jack. Is that acceptable?"

"Fine with me. Have you one ready for Tarmo if he shows up?"

"I do, right next door to you. Will it be only Captain Gallen?"

Uh-oh. I didn't want to mention the possibility of Sandi showing up in front of Vili. "Uncertain. Errol may stay a night." House would have understood I added that for the girls' sake, though maybe not the exact reason. Errol had his own room here that was always held ready for him.

She didn't ask me about it anyway. "Very well. I needn't provide you with an aidie guide, ladies. Jack is almost as good at finding his way."

"To the room I've slept in since I was a kid, House? I might manage."

"I didn't know an AI could be so sarcastic—so *human*," Torgi whispered to Vili. "It doesn't seem natural."

"You'll have to meet M," I told her.

"Oh, yes," said Vili. "The AI in Jack's ship. He's even more that way!"

It was fair distance and up one low flight of stairs to my quarters.

JUMPING JACK

“My hole is to the right here,” I told them. “I would guess these rooms with the doors standing open were meant for you.”

“Did you wish to share rooms?” House asked.

“Not with Jack,” replied Anna.

“I would think not. I prepared three rooms but there is plenty of space for two or all of you in each of them.”

Anna stuck her head into the one directly across from mine. “This is where Tarmo slept when he visited, isn’t it? He described the layout to me.” She turned back to her companions. “You should take this one, Vili.”

“Let’s share it, Torgi,” said Vili. Her friend nodded immediate agreement. Being alone in a strange house can be daunting.

Anna carried her bag to the next room up the hall and closed the door behind her without further words. “In a few minutes we’ll begin our adventures,” I announced and went into my own quarters. No need for a shower but I could change into something more casual. Shorts. The weather seemed suitable for them. No, they seemed suitable for the weather. The weather doesn’t change to suit your whims, Jack, but you can certainly change your clothes.

Only a couple minutes later, a chime sounded. “Anna is outside your door,” House informed me. “Should I let her in?”

“No. Better I do it.”

“Of course.”

I opened and she stepped in without saying anything, giving the place a quick looking over. “I could have found your room too,” she said, apparently satisfied. “I stood outside the door not so long ago.”

When Vili visited me and we kissed. “Will you be patrolling the halls on this visit?”

“I think I can trust House to keep an eye on things. Even on you.” She sank into the chair at my little ceramic desk. “I remember someone else’s birthday, not really so long ago.”

So did I. “You know, that was a very spur of the moment thing for Elsa and me. We just liked the idea of giving the kid a birthday present and thought he was cute.” A wistful little smile came and went. “And maybe sort of lonely, Elsa thought. Once we got to know you, we realized you didn’t get lonely.”

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

Didn't I? I'd never thought much about it. "Your psychological profiles concur with that personal assessment. Tarmo has seen some of them. You are admirably suited to floating in remote space all by yourself, months on end."

"I suppose so. That doesn't mean I don't like human contact."

Anna laughed outright. "I never doubted it." A sudden sobering. "But even then, I think you are sometimes still by yourself. Is there some lunch in this place?" she asked, rising.

CHAPTER 29

TWO OF MY guests hadn't met Dad before, and Anna only briefly at Summit Up. We lunched with him and Mom; Jock reappeared to oversee our service. He only did that for special guests. Or ones he liked. How couldn't he like three attractive young women?

The party would be later. It was looking like we might be the only ones to attend. "Your father is, ah, older than I might have expected," said Anna, as we set off to find things to do.

"No, Dad is not young. He didn't meet and marry Mom until he retired from the military."

"Group Force or Planetary Guard?" asked Vili.

"Force, I'm sorry to say. A ranger."

"What's that?" wondered Torgi.

"They're the ones who fight the enemy hand-to-hand," Anna enlightened her. "Boarding parties and those who repel them."

"And sometimes fight on solid surfaces. More so in the old days. There were still smugglers and even pirates to deal with when he was young, and human feet on the ground was often the best way to do it."

"Gosh." Torgi was impressed. Dad didn't usually have that effect.

"Does the Guard have rangers too?" Vili asked me.

"We call them marines." I hoped she wouldn't ask me to explain why. Not that I couldn't give a lecture on it.

"Both may see more action in the months to come," said Anna. "But we shouldn't be talking about that today! I haven't seen Nira yet."

"Nira has not been feeling well this morning," House informed us. "As you know, she is pregnant."

"Oh, she shouldn't ride horses with me then." Vili was clearly disappointed.

"I don't know about that, Vili. It is acceptable to call you Vili, isn't it?"

"Of course." The princess giggled. "If I'm allowed to call you Housie."

"She admonished my brother for doing that," Anna told her. "He still isn't sure whether you were serious, House."

"He may remain so, Anna. Yes, all of you may call me Housie."

"Then call me Torgi," blurted Christiana.

"I would be pleased to. A ship is asking permission to land at the field." The briefest of pauses followed. "Brigadier McFee."

"Shall we go down and meet him?" I asked the women. "Or we could just deny him permission and send him flying away."

"With his wife gone? Poor lonely Errol," said Anna. "But can't we just see him from the deck?"

That sounded like a better idea. We all went out to lean on the railing and watch his ship descend. Even from this distance I could tell it wasn't the same one as last time. Bigger.

Three figures descended the stairs, boarded a waiting cart. No Jock to greet this bunch. "Oh, hi Nira. Feeling better?"

It was Anna who'd noticed her. She'd lost interest in the new arrivals and had been lounging with her back against the railing.

"Much. I feel a little off now and again. Nothing like the morning sickness I was getting a while back." She came over to join us. "Someone else has come."

"Errol. He brought someone but we don't know who," said Vili.

House could tell us but I was not going to ask. Instead, I said, "House, will you tell the new guests to come meet us here?"

"I will, Jack. Shall I have refreshments sent out to you?"

"It wouldn't hurt." I took a seat in one of the comfortable chairs. The women could do the same if they wished. Torgi was the first to abandon the railing and plop herself down. I watched her as she did so. The woman's appearance hovered somewhere between gawky and striking. I wouldn't mind watching her some more.

And those long legs should be clad in shorts. "I can't see them," complained Vili. "Who put those trees in the way?"

"Not me," Nira laughed. "They were there when I moved in."

They gave up their watch and joined Torgi and me. Not for long.

"Sandi!" Vili jumped up to run to her friend. "What a great birthday present!"

Tarmo and Errol followed Sandburg onto the deck. Sandi was a tall, somewhat lanky woman, with ruddy curling hair, cropped short. Her eyes were dark, gray more than brown. Vili had her wrapped in a hug.

"So they managed to get her here," Anna remarked to me.

JUMPING JACK

“Torgi doesn’t look happy about it.”

We could both see that. No longer the favored friend, the one Vili would be paying attention to, spending her time with.

“Vili will expect Sandi and Torgi to become instant best friends. I wouldn’t count on it.”

Ah, Vili liked people, didn’t she? That was maybe the best thing about her, her ability, her willingness to make friends. Perhaps to see their needs, as well. To empathize. Did Gunilla Sandburg even see her as more than an assignment? Oh, she must or she wouldn’t have come all this way. I shouldn’t doubt her affection for Vili. But I knew it wasn’t as deep as Vili’s for her.

And then, Tarmo might have been the main attraction. He remained with the pair as Errol came and sat by me. A servbot appeared at once with drinks.

“New boat?” I asked him. You couldn’t go wrong to open a conversation with Errol that way.

He sipped from a tall glass. “The N-1 is still assigned as my personal ride, as long as I’m at my current duties. I borrowed that N-5. Bigger, more power, fully planetary.”

Planetary meant like Mom’s ship, intended primarily to operate in atmosphere but quite capable of heading into vacuum. I had noted it had twice the engines of the N-1, but still mounted somewhat forward. The hull had the roughly hexagonal cross-section one identified with some Group Supply designs.

“Gallen and I had to wait a while at Central Station for Sandburg’s ship to arrive. It had jumped way out on the other side of the system.” That was just the luck of the draw. The luck of the jump, some pilots called it. The ship could have shown up anywhere.

“Does she have to go back soon?” asked Anna.

“She’ll return with your brother. The negotiations are ending and the delegation will go home.”

“Oh. But not Vili. I wonder if I’ll be ordered to stay with her.”

“I don’t know, Anna. Tarmo might.”

So this would be, in a sense, also a farewell party. I wondered if I’d be asked to remain close to the princess too. Once the Janic-Thulean delegation was gone, there might not be much attention on her.

I also liked to think someone would find some other use for me eventually. Anna was getting up to join the others. I might as well too. But first—

Torgi was still sitting alone, unsure how to react to this change in her plans. I went over and said, “Let’s go see what’s going to happen now.” She didn’t say anything but she did get up and follow me. Errol rose too, but only to go over to the railing with his drink and stare into the distance. Maybe thinking of Elsa. Maybe thinking of how to design a better relay switch.

Anna was saying, “You can share my room, Sandi. Officially. I suspect you’ll spend your night across the hall.”

“Oh, right,” said Vili. “You wrote me about you and Captain Gallen. And he calls you Gunner, right?” One quick little frown. “I thought maybe you didn’t like the name Gunilla. Anyway, you’ll always be Sandi to me!”

“Let’s get you squared away and then we can have yet another tour of Dummit Downs,” said Anna. “If Nira’s willing.”

“Can’t Jack show us around?” asked Torgi.

“He’d lecture you endlessly about everything,” Nira told her. “You’d never get through with it.”

If they were going to be that way about it I’d stay and have another drink. I beckoned a servbot and got one, then joined Errol.

“Sacky asked how you were doing,” were his first words. “I visited the training facility briefly.”

“I hope you told her I was miserable. How’s her school doing?”

“Very well. She’ll be out there piloting a front line fighter in no time. Not that I want to see her in danger, you know.” He took a long drink, held it for a while before swallowing. “As for what I told her about you, it was very little. Just that you were attached to security for the Thuleans for a while.”

“True, as far as it goes.”

“And I don’t know if it goes any further. The princess and you?” He shrugged. “In honesty, I’d like to see you and Captain Baldwin give it a chance. You’d make a great couple.”

I thought he liked Sacky better than that. “I don’t believe that

JUMPING JACK

would work while the war continues. Do you know if Sacky intends to continue with the military?"

"Totally career. I can see her rising to the top of Group."

"That would probably kill the whole thing right there."

"Don't be so sure. You each have your path that doesn't get in the way of the other's."

Whatever my path was going to be. I sure didn't know. "Hey, if we were a couple we could be known as Sacky-Jack."

"You may be sure I won't tell her that. I'm going to go freshen up in my own room. Thankfully, it's far from all of yours. Party later?"

"Yep. You'd better have brought a present suited to a princess."

"I think Sandi will have to do." He headed his way, I mine.

CHAPTER 30

NIRA DECIDED PERHAPS it wasn't a good idea for her to be on a horse, but now Vili had Tarmo Gallen to ride with. Neither Sandi nor Torgi knew one end of a horse from the other. Anna knew only because her brother had pointed them out to her.

"Do you ride?" Tarmo asked me.

"I have. Not recently." And it had been even longer since I'd ridden at Dummit Downs. There had been horses at my schools. Horsemanship, in fact, was considered an essential academic subject by some. I remembered my first instructor, a hoary old fellow with a huge turban and a lot to teach. "Maybe Nira could pick out something gentle for me."

That got the look it deserved. But she put me on a nice mare and I accompanied the two.

"Okay, the boy can ride," spoke Tarmo after a while, as we wended our way down from the stables through a wooded park. "Much better than me." He gave Vili a sidelong glance. "As do you."

"We've both been schooled," I told him. "Good girl." I gave the chestnut mare a pat on the neck.

He nodded. "I know all about the schools the princess attended and very little about yours. Except you were sent off to the Corvans when you were thirteen or so."

"Oh, you were far away from home, Jack? That must have been awful."

"Not so much," I assured her. "I visited home quite a bit." How to explain those far away schools from those far away days? "I could say I have a facsimile of the education of a wealthy young Corvan gentlemen. The old Corvans, the ones who laid the foundations of their league. There are all sorts of cultures across a wide swath of systems that call themselves Corvan now. Having been brought up in a very different culture, as well as getting a late start, I would never fit fully into that world."

"I think you might have wanted to, once," commented Tarmo.

"I thought I'd end up as an academic in some university there. Maybe marry a rich heiress to help me live more comfortably." That

JUMPING JACK

earned a little snort from Vili. "But I learned skills that were not considered essential in Scotia. Dancing and horsemanship and, well, manners."

"That could be considered perfect training for espionage. Once Anna also taught you a few other skills."

"Or diplomacy. I don't know that I want to be involved in either, though I always knew my schooling was part of Mom's grand plan to make me an ambassador or the like. Can you jump this ditch, girl?" She sailed over without complaint. Yes, horses complain but you have to speak their language to know it.

What was growing in this field? I reined in the mare and waited for my companions. A good-sized bot came rolling up, thinking maybe I wanted something. Yes, thinking. It looked sophisticated enough to be curious. "What's planted here?" I asked it. In Lingo. Any robot that can speak is likely to have that as a default language.

"Hosi beans, sir. I am in charge of these fields."

Not only smart enough to be curious but also to go beyond my questions. And perhaps a little proud of her job. I've never quite been sure whether bots feel pride but they definitely form an attachment to their work. Their purpose. She would be quite distressed if I rode across her field but wouldn't do anything about it.

Yes, she. Definitely a female bot.

Tarmo and Vili rode up. "We're discussing hosis," I informed them. "This competent lady is in charge."

"I've seen hosi beans before," said Tarmo. "I don't think they'll grow on Thule."

"Not well," Vili said, "but they're an important crop on Verna."

"These will be turned under to enrich the soil," said the bot. "Mistress Nira had them planted."

"As she does most things around here. Thank you." I started my mount walking along the road bordering the field.

"You thank bots?" asked Tarmo.

"I do when they're that smart. Just as I thank House." In truth, I tended to be polite to all bots, just out of habit.

"How smart?" asked Vili, coming up to ride at my side.

“An idiot by human standards. But an idiot savant, as are many AIs, knowing a great deal about one thing.”

“Like the cooks at Thule Station.”

“Pretty much.”

“I didn’t know robotics was one of your interests,” said Tarmo.

“I’m just a well-rounded fellow,” I informed him.

I could see him nod. “That I knew.”

Other fields had other crops and other bots. We didn’t bother any of them choosing to ride into the pastures that covered the low hills. Nothing exotic grazed there, only the somewhat rangy white cattle that were suited to this land. Then back around to the house. We’d been gone over an hour; I wanted to allow Vili to ride as long as she wanted, and as far, today.

“We definitely need cleaned up,” said Tarmo, when we reached the stables. “I’m off to the showers.”

“For shame!” came Vili’s vehement response. “Aren’t you going to take care of your horse?”

He was surprised. I wouldn’t go as far as dumbfounded, but maybe close. “Won’t the robots do that?”

“No true horseman would let them.” Vili’s and my riding instructors must have had similar views about such things.

Tarmo had no idea of the correct procedures but he did watch the robots until they were satisfied. In truth, Vili and I let them assist us too. But we would never leave them to do it themselves.

Then we were all allowed our showers. When I came into the lounge—just indoors from the deck—I found two camps. Anna and Nira huddled over there. They had hit it off from the first.

Sandi and Torgi acting like old friends on the big couch by the fireplace. I fixed myself a drink and went out into the open air of the deck, looked toward the sea for a minute or two. When I turned around, Vili had joined the mix and everyone was together. All the women, that is. Even Mom.

The party would start in a bit, such as it would be. A cake, some presents. We might even sing. Did Thuleans do that on birthdays? After a while, Torgi came out, joined me in looking at nothing.

“Are you and Sandi friends now?”

JUMPING JACK

"I think we are. I'm surprised. I was ready to hate her!"

"She was unexpected. I can understand that being upsetting."

"But it shouldn't have been. I knew all about Sandi. Too much! Vili talked about her a lot."

"You might be surprised how much she doesn't know about Sandi. That doesn't matter much. It's possible they may never see each other again. They'll definitely never work together as tug pilots."

"I may not see her either. Vili will go back to her family and responsibilities on Thule someday. She could even become queen! But I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Oh, everyone thinks her brother Nils will be next. They all love him."

I'd have to find out about Nils Lempsen someday. Anna should be able fill me in.

Tarmo came out to us. "I haven't seen your father most of the day," he remarked. "Hiding from the girls?"

I had no idea where Dad was but Torgi let him know, "He's been shut up with the brigadier. Or is it all right if I call him Errol?"

"Everyone else does," I told her. "If Errol really wants to know what's going on he should be talking to Mom."

"I would suspect they're talking logistics. That's more his thing," Tarmo felt.

True. Dad would have data. Analysis was more along his lines than espionage, even if spies did operate under his ministry. The Ministry of Information. He was Second Minister.

And I pretty much worked for him, even if I was officially in the Planetary Guard. The ministry owned the Nativ, not the Guard. Data M and I gathered went to them first.

"As long as they emerge for the party. They can't snub Thulean royalty."

"Yes, that would precipitate all sorts of diplomatic crises. Endanger the war effort!"

"You all joke a lot about such serious things," observed Torgi.

"That," said Tarmo, "is because we're so close to them."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

The girl sighed. "The closest I get is making sure the records of meetings are properly secured and sent where they should be sent."

"That makes you important too," I let her know. "There are those who would love to get their hands on those records."

"I suppose. If it wasn't for this war, I'd be a librarian."

"What? You wouldn't be on stage with those looks?"

Tarmo shook his head. "Quite a waste. A lot of us would pay just to see her standing there."

"Oh, shut up, you two."

"We embarrassed her," I noted, as she went in to join her friends.

"But she liked hearing it."

"Maybe we should be on stage after the war too. A comedy team. You can be the dimwitted one."

"What else? Is this party going to start or do I have to drink more?"

"I think I'm going to go to the kitchens and take a look at the cake. It should be decorated by now."

"Good enough. I'll go with you. Hey, we could add Torgi to the act."

"No one would pay any attention to us."

"That might be all to the good. Lead on, McFee."

"That line again?"

CHAPTER 31

THE CAKE—DECORATED by a human, not a bot—looked fine. We got to see it again, half an hour or so later, after our dinner. The decorator wisely went generic, flowers and such, rather than attempting something weighty and symbolic. You know, flags, crests, that sort of thing.

Even the colors were low-key, an ivory frosting, pastel decorations. I had specifically ordered chocolate cake so it was to be assumed that was underneath the buttercream.

And nineteen candles. A tradition in many places, Scotia and Thule included. Not Janus, as far as my research could tell me. I didn't research all that hard. There had been no candles for my nineteenth, a couple months ago.

"You should have no trouble with those," I told her. "After all, my grandfather had a hundred and twenty to blow out." Vili hadn't been there so she wouldn't know what a lie it was. Anna wouldn't tell her, either.

"But I blew out nineteen candles last night," Vili protested. "That's too many. I'm not thirty-eight!"

Dad came to the rescue. "It wasn't your birthday yet. They don't count."

"Oh. It's a good thing you have a sensible father, Jack." With that she took a deep breath and extinguished every flame. That took us by surprise. We didn't get to sing first.

Just as well. We could sing now. I started us out. My voice isn't much but I did have lessons, you know. Torgi took it up and her voice was much better. Much, much, much better. Is that too many muches? Because I was thinking of adding some more. Everyone joined in by the time we reached the end. Even those who didn't know the Thulean words which would be pretty much just Dad.

"Shouldn't she give a speech now?" asked Sandi.

"Nah, just let her cut the cake," Tarmo answered.

"I'll leave speeches to my mother and simply say thank you to all of you," said Vili. Which was a decent little speech in itself.

Sandi seemed to think it acceptable. "All right, then is it gift time?"

“On the deck,” said Mom. “Shall we take our cake out there?” No one objected to the idea.

Some would say shopping for a princess is hard. I’d say it lets one off the hook compared to normal gift giving. Any little thoughtful thing is fine; they don’t need the grandiose and expensive. I didn’t quite follow that advice.

Errol again maintained that bringing Sandi was enough. Everyone booed him except Vili. Even Sandi. “Oh, very well,” he said and tossed her something he fished out of his pocket. She looked it over and raised questioning eyes.

“That’s a rock from Earth,” he said. “I’ve heard you wish to visit someday. That may do until you can.”

“Oh, wow, Errol. Thanks!”

“Darn,” said Sandi. “If I’d known we were giving rocks I’d have picked one up outside.” I wouldn’t completely put it past Errol not to have done that.

Dad handed her a bottle of wine from our vineyards. “I’ve had a case delivered to the embassy,” he announced. “The malbec from thirty-six.” It was a decent vintage. Not the equal of Grandpa Jack’s best, but good. Our soil was too good, in a sense, for great wines. Good ones, yes.

Apparently it was supposed to be Mom’s gift too, not that hosting the party wasn’t enough. “I picked this up in the gift shop as I hurried out of Thule Station,” said Sandi, thrusting a shopping bag at her. A little stuffed animal in a green uniform. A dog or the legendary creature known as a bear. Vili gave it a hug. Of course, it was all she really needed to give her.

“This is from both my sister and me,” announced Tarmo, handing over a bulky box. It contained gloves for sparring. “Anna promises to include lessons.”

The neatly wrapped rectangle Vili tore open next contained a book. A real book, paper, covers, the whole traditional package. The princess leafed through it. “Why it’s hand-written. And it’s beautiful! Did you make this, Torgi?”

Torgi blushed a bit. “I sometimes practice calligraphy. Those are some of my favorite quotes.”

JUMPING JACK

“Oh, I love it. I love everything! You’ve all given me such a wonderful day.”

I slid a little gift-wrapped box across the table. “It’s small,” Vili ventured, peeling off the paper and lifting the lid. She pulled out a fine, gold chain, a simple chain with a single small jeweled pendant. She looked at it as it dangled from her fingers, blue and white, a diagonal cross of diamonds on a field of sapphires. The emblem of Scotia.

“So you always remember Scotia and us,” I said.

Damned if she didn’t cry. Her girlfriends gathered around to get a close look at it. Even Anna.

“That’s a rather valuable gift,” Mom whispered to me.

“You’re the one who provided the expense account,” I whispered back.

“I believe there will have to be an audit.” She went to get a closer look too.

We all settled down to talking and drinking and watching the moons rise then. It was as fine a spring evening as one might wish for, in a place that had very fine spring evenings. It was Sandi who sat down beside me and said, “That necklace was quite the gesture. How much you actually meant it, I can’t begin to guess.”

“I’m not sure myself,” I admitted. “One moment I feel sincere, another I feel I’m just being manipulative. Your gift had a lot more thought to it than you were willing to let on.”

“Oh, sure, memories of serving together and all that rubbish. I recognized the symbolism as soon as I saw it.” She snickered. “As I was rushing by the gift shop.”

Anna settled on my other side. I began to feel a might uneasy. Two all too competent fighting women had me hemmed in. “I like Vili,” said Sandi.

“We both do.”

“And we know you would never intentionally hurt her.”

“But you can be careless.”

“And fickle.”

“That’s a good one,” commented Anna. “We’ve seen you eyeing Torgi.”

“And her eyeing you, for that matter.”

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"Torgi? She is nice to eye. But so are the two of you."

"Do you think he's hopeless?" Sandi asked.

"No, Vili likes him so he can't be all bad."

"But, Mister Jumping Jack-Mack, if you hurt her—"

"We'll hurt you," Anna finished.

Enough banter, maybe. "Despite the present and this party, I am not really certain I am going any further with Vili. I don't want to chance hurting her either."

"Pulling back now would hurt her," said Sandi.

"But not as much as later," Anna felt. "He may be right about this."

Sandi shook her head. "And I think he should make a commitment. Tonight."

"I can probably guarantee you the only romantic encounter in this house tonight will be between you and Tarmo. I'll lock my door in case any of those girls across the hall try to sneak over."

"Hopeless," said Sandi.

"I'm not so sure," replied Anna.

Both left me sitting. Georgie had risen. Fundy should peep over the horizon soon.

CHAPTER 32

"I'M NOT HERE to see you this time," Robert Douglas told me. "Nor your mother. I've followed the brigadier and Captain Gallen. It wouldn't hurt to have some words with your father while I'm at it." He considered me over the rim of his coffee cup. "But it might be a good idea for you to sit in."

I didn't much like having the man here, no matter whom he had come to see. Especially in that we were still celebrating Vili's birthday weekend. He shouldn't come around reminding us of war and duty and other unpleasant things.

Last night had proven as peaceful as I had predicted. An almost sisterly kiss from Vili—not having any sisters I can't guarantee that is accurate—and all four young women disappeared into her room to gab or whatever. I would assume Sandi made it to Tarmo in time. I wouldn't know; I went to bed.

A bot rolled up. "Mister McFee requests your presence in his office, sir," he said. He addressed Douglas; I might as well not have been there and maybe I wasn't, for him. I wasn't part of his orders.

"Is anyone else there?" asked the sub-minister, raising his bulk from his chair.

"Captain Gallen is present. Brigadier McFee is on his way."

"Very well. Coming, Jack?" I considered saying no but rose and followed him. My presence earned no comment from anyone nor even much notice.

"Thank you for giving me a few minutes, gentlemen," spoke Douglas, from the comfort of one of the big dark chairs. I perched on a corner of Dad's desk, since no one was using it. "First order of business is the princess. With the delegates leaving, we think it best if Vilma's security be handed over to our own people. Your superiors agree, Captain."

"Then Anna would return home too." I couldn't tell how he felt about it. I wasn't certain how Anna would feel about it. "Would the princess remain at the embassy?"

"If she wishes. It seems as safe as any other location." He looked out

the tall windows to his right for a moment. "Security thinks it's safer than here but I wouldn't be so certain."

"She should be quite safe at the moment," stated Tarmo. "She is surrounded by a very competent and skilled group of people."

"Do you include yourself in that?"

"It would be dishonest not to."

"And Jack." He turned to me for the first time. "I would think you'd be assigned other duty as well. Your working leave would come to an end."

"As all things do."

Errol gave that the smallest of smiles. "Jack thinks he's a philosopher these days. So his grandfather tells me."

"A bit of philosophy may help us get through these days," said Dad.

"Jack will be escorting Vilma back to Halifax tomorrow, as planned and expected. Lieutenant Gallen as well. This leads us to our second topic, getting the delegates home. That is going to be your task, Brigadier. You'll be seeing official orders in a day or two.

"Not unexpected. A fleet?"

"Of sorts. And the delegates on combat craft."

"Will I be with them?" asked Tarmo.

"Your people want you to go ahead. Sergeant Sandburg and you can return together."

Both gone in a couple days. I wondered if the man knew Sandi was an agent. And a lieutenant, not a sergeant.

"Errol will escorting the delegation to Thule then," said Dad.

"Or perhaps to Janus. I haven't seen specific orders nor should I. Those are meant for the brigadier's eyes. What I can tell you is the fleet will remain in the Janic-Thule systems and more ships will join it. Soon, maybe."

"A third order of business," commented Errol.

"Yes. There is likely to be a large scale action in the Janics. That's one bit of fallout from our conference. No, Errol, we did not agree to give up yet. But if this push doesn't work—"

No need to finish that. "This is probably the part I shouldn't be here for," I said.

"Nor even me," said Tarmo.

JUMPING JACK

"It doesn't matter much," felt Robert Douglas. "I wouldn't expect anyone to kidnap young Jack and torture him for state secrets."

Errol deadpanned, "But one woman or another is likely to bring it up in pillow talk."

Dad raised an eyebrow at that but made no comment. "How does this escort thing work?" he asked. "Or would I be kidnapped too if I knew?" He gave me a wink. "I wouldn't expect to be seduced."

"Jack could probably tell you if he put his mind to it," said Errol.

"Hmm. It would depend on the size of escort. Some. I would guess a part of the escorting fleet will jump ahead of the ship—or ships—carrying the delegates, and be given a little time to check out the next system and set themselves for possible action. Then the rest will go. There's no point in coming together anywhere as they'll be scattered again."

Dad nodded. "Repeated in each system until they reach Thule."

"Or Janus," said Errol. "That is the most likely procedure. If any problem is encountered when the first ships jump, they would send word back at once."

Of course. I would have thought of that in a little while. I might even have thought of having a ship jump back with an 'all clear.' Maybe not necessary. The delegates would be on a heavy cruiser or even a carrier. No point in bringing that up and it might not be decided until the last moment.

"So," spoke Douglas, "you can go back to your holiday weekend. I need a few more words with the minister."

"Not my wife?"

"Alice sees enough of me in Halifax, I'm certain."

We went in three different directions. My direction was breakfast. It would have been my direction earlier if Douglas hadn't diverted me.

Anna came in and gave the crumbs on my plate a disinterested look. "Coffee," she told the servbot that appeared at her elbow. "No, make that cocoa. You have cocoa, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am" It scurried off to fetch a cup.

"Did you girls sit up late and gossip and all those things I've heard girls do?"

"Until Sandi felt she needed to be with my brother. I used that as

my excuse to escape. Ah.” She took the cup the bot brought, tasted it, shrugged and set it down. “I suspect Vili and Torgi stayed up somewhat later.”

Anna sampled the cocoa again. I guess it wasn’t too bad. “I feel I’m a bit of the odd one out when I’m with them. The three turned into a tight-knit group practically before my eyes.”

“You can still be *my* friend.”

“Thanks. Hey, neither of us is being sarcastic, are we?”

“Only a little. We can’t help that. Do you know anything about Vili’s brother? Torgi mentioned him. Nils, I think.”

“Only that he’s tall and dashing and handsome. Sort of a war hero or at least he’s serving. I haven’t heard of the prince doing anything particularly distinguished. A pilot, of course. They get all the glory.”

I ignored the possible jibe at me. “While you and Tarmo do the important work in the shadows.”

“Exactly! I ran into Tarmo on the way here and he filled me in on what’s next. I’m not sure he was supposed to.”

“I would have if he hadn’t.”

“As I would expect my friend to do. What fun and games are on for today? You aren’t going to ride away on those big smelly beasts and leave me alone again, are you?”

“It depends on what Vili wants. It’s her weekend.”

“I’m sure Vili wants all sorts of things. Good morning, Errol. Late breakfast, too?”

“I ate earlier. Bring me some coffee,” he told the servbot.

“I was thinking of looking over Brendon’s runner,” I informed him. “Mom says she can commandeer it for my official use.”

“To go joy-riding with girls?”

“Anything for the war effort.”

“I’d like to see it,” said Anna.

“Then let’s go down right now,” my cousin decided. He pondered his coffee a moment, swallowed down a large gulp, and left it on the table. If he’d carried it to the workshops a bot would have found it eventually and brought it back.

There were human mechanics at Dummit Downs, but none about this early morning. A sophisticated bot showed us to the runner.

JUMPING JACK

“Major Brendon’s machine,” he announced. “He hasn’t taken it out in quite a long time.”

The runner was not just atmospheric but planetary, designed more for operation in an atmosphere than outside one. But it could soar into space if the pilot desired. Yes, and visit Fundy or Georgie or even some random asteroid. There was room for only two in its cockpit, and they were cramped. The whole interior was cramped. The machine was intended for one thing, to go fast. A toy, essentially.

We looked it over. “That’s not the same engine,” noted Errol. I wouldn’t know the difference.

“No, sir. The major had the Riley taken out and replaced with this Corvanaut.”

Errol chuckled. “Which should have gone into a production machine at the factory.”

I decided not to report my brother to the appropriate ministry. “He listed it as an experimental type, no doubt,” I said.

“That’s what its registry says, sir,” came the bot’s entirely serious reply. “This engine puts out seventy-two tees compared to the sixty of the one it replaced.”

“The unit that went into many of the early W-2s. It uses the same tubes as the engines on your Nativ, Jack.”

I didn’t tell him how uninteresting that was but something else came to mind. “I didn’t see another ship down at our field,” I said. “How did Douglas get here?”

“He never uses a ship. Has no reason to leave the planet so he travels everywhere by airplane.”

For the hop from Halifax it could be just about as fast, in the right plane. Except he couldn’t land as close. Mom and Dad didn’t want a noisy airfield close to the house; thrust tubes, of course, do little more than whisper.

“Can we get this rolled out and give it a test flight?” I asked the bot.

“The major gave standing orders that it always be ready to go.” The bot then sat there just a second or two. “And I am informed it is permitted. I do remember your brother threatening bodily harm if you ever touched it.”

"That's when I was a kid." When we were both kids. "Want to take a ride, Anna?"

"Sure."

The machine had a wheeled undercarriage—pretty common on planetary craft. They all had some sort of solid landing gear. It was rolled out of the hangar and readied.

"Fixed rear tubes," said Errol. "You'll have to make an angled takeoff."

"Or a rolling one." Chances were Brendon did. There was enough room.

I always considered fixed tubes a grave shortcoming. Some space-only ships were designed that way, for the sake of simplicity, control being achieved primarily by applying more power to one or another tube. That might be acceptable if one never had to land but only dock, with no gravity to give problems. The tubes were generally canted slightly, however, which gave a certain increase in directional control.

I'm sounding like one of my relatives. Next I'll be debating Errol or Brendon as to whether the tubes should be canted in or out.

"Climb in," I said to Anna. Climb was accurate; there was no walking through a doorway here. The seats in the control area were tandem, not side by side. These were set a little to the left side of the machine, allowing a narrow space to reach them. Screens all around. I pointed both the forward tubes downward—yes, it had only two—applied power and let the nose rise slowly.

"I've never flown this machine before," I informed Anna. "I'm not going to hurry anything."

"Didn't Brendon take his little brother for rides?"

"Sure. He liked to show off what a good pilot he was. Almost as good as me."

I could hear Errol snort over the comm. My deluded cousin believed he was better than either of us. "Proper angle," said the control computer.

"Here we go." I brought up the main drive and launched us into the sky.

"Damn, doesn't this thing have any dampeners?" complained Anna. "That was a lot of gees."

JUMPING JACK

Errol actually broke in to comment this time. "No more than you'd be likely to feel in a typical fighter," he told her. "Jack wouldn't know about that." It was my turn to snort.

"Let's see the sea." It took only seconds. But disappointing on screens. I took a lazy turn inland. Not too many gees for my passenger. "Any place else you'd like to visit?"

"Not really. I like it at Dummit Downs."

"Then lets get a better view." I took her up to where the entire place could be seen on the screens. That wasn't so impressive either. "I'll bet I could get us to Summit Up and back in an under an hour."

"I could imagine the forces in your turn when you got there."

"Oh, I wouldn't turn. I'd go right on around the planet. Would you like to see the ice caps?"

"Not today."

"We'll picnic at the south pole some other day then. Only one other direction to go." I headed straight up. "This machine could take us to Central Station. We'd stop in the gift shop and buy Vili something."

That got a laugh. One from Errol too. "And pick up a rock while we're at it," Anna suggested. We both snickered at that.

I wasn't concerned about any traffic difficulties, even with the increased security of wartime. The computers kept us humans from banging our ships together and Brendon McFee's codes would permit us to go just about anywhere.

Maybe not as many places as Errol's. "What's that?" My screen showed a small object headed in our direction. Not a missile; I'd dealt with missiles in other places and could recognize them. One wouldn't be here anyway.

"I think it's shooting at us, Jack. Beam weapon."

Why? I had not the least idea. The whole idea of being attacked here seemed an absurdity. But I wasn't going to wait around and ask for an explanation. "We've lost one of our forward control tubes," I muttered, mostly to myself. Run to Fundy or try to set down crippled? Home was a lot closer. "I'll try not to crash too hard."

I easily outran my attacker. Whoever or whatever it was must operate mostly by ambush. Back into the atmosphere. I let the computer do most of the work until we were above Dummit Downs. I

could land the way I took off, but it would be tricky with only one operating tube forward. Or the vertical landing.

“Oops,” said Anna as I turned the nose up. “I’d better not lose my cocoa all over Brendon’s cockpit.”

I went straight down, using mostly the rear array for control, and then slowly tilting us over with just the one forward tube once we made contact. Wheels down. Didn’t airplane pilots say something like that?

Errol held his comments until we emerged. “A pretty landing. What happened?”

“We were attacked by something up there. I’ve no idea what but it was quite small and not very fast.” If birds could fly into space I might have thought it was a bird. And if Scotia had birds.

“A mine. A simple computer-controlled machine carrying a beam weapon. If it had succeeded in disabling you it would have gotten close and exploded. We know a ship jumped in and seeded some a while back.”

“But someone felt the public shouldn’t know, I would guess,” Anna commented.

“Someone higher up than me. You’d have to ask one of Jack’s parents about it. It’s very odd one would be there and would target your vessel.”

“Unless it knew the identification codes of desirable targets. Brendon, in this case.” I looked over his battered runner. Worse than I’d thought and setting it down on its tail hadn’t helped. Brendon would not be happy.

“That would be the most likely explanation. I’ll have to contact someone about it immediately.” He gave that a brief moment’s consideration. “In person. I’d better fly out right now. Can I ask you to get Tarmo and Sandi back to Halifax?”

“I’d be glad to.” I wondered if my Mom’s codes were known by a mine somewhere. Her tub couldn’t outrun anything.

We separated. Within a few minutes, Errol’s ship had launched. “That ride started out very boring,” Anna told me, “but you did manage to provide some excitement eventually.”

JUMPING JACK

“It *is* boring to fly the runner,” I replied. “I don’t know what Brendon sees in it.”

“I suspect half the fun is just building something like it.”

So did I.

CHAPTER 33

"I CAN'T FIGURE out whether you and Vili are together. That gift made me sure you were but then, well, nothing."

So Torgi was going to talk to me about it too.

"I'm not so sure about it myself." As I had told others.

"Oh. I guess that makes sense with all that's going on right now. I just work in an office but I can see the demands on Vili and you. Either of you could be on another world tomorrow." She made it sound a bit romantic. Which it wasn't. "Like you said about Sandi. And when Vili leaves the embassy, I may never see her again either. Or you."

"But if not for this war, chances are none of us would have met."

"I don't know whether that's good or bad."

"Me neither," I admitted. "It just is."

"Here and now, in this world. Our Being." Those deep blue eyes seemed to look way beyond me. "Amid infinite Being."

"Oh? I was just accused of being a philosopher. Maybe I'm not the only one in the house."

"That's just something a Mazdan might say. I included some stuff like that in the book I made Vili. Like, um, 'What serves Being is the Right. To exist is good and the good is existence.'"

"That's right out of the Book of Being."

"I'm not surprised you know that, Jack. Maybe you and I could have been, if it weren't for Vili."

"Because you thought we were together?"

"Maybe. I'm still not sure you're not. Or maybe just because we're sharing a room. It would be awfully hard to sneak across the hall."

"Either way."

Everyone else had found entertainment elsewhere, Vili and Tormo riding again. They'd talked Sandi into trying it. Anna and Nira were off plotting something together. It could be anything from assassinations to baby clothes. Torgi had wanted to see the family library and I was willing to show it.

It might be best to turn our discussion back to it. "This is nothing beside my grandfather's library at Summit Up. More bound books

JUMPING JACK

than you could imagine and practically everything ever written stored in memory.”

“Wow, he must really like to read.”

“Mostly collected by my great-grandfather. The one who started building the place. That would be Barry McFee.”

“I’ll be looking for a librarian job after the war. You have to give me a recommendation!”

“It would be my privilege. And I’d certainly be willing to take you to see it sometime.” I would. But it was best to add, “Giving Grandpa Jack ample warning. He doesn’t like unannounced guests.”

“Not even his grandsons?”

“His grandsons in particular.” Which was an exaggeration, sure. “Being a librarian takes some kind of degree, doesn’t it? You can’t be old enough.”

She looked embarrassed. “I had one year of college before joining the war effort. I intend to go back!”

“Me too. I’ll study history.” Almost certainly history.

“I suppose I would have a degree if the war hadn’t come along. Another thing that just is.”

She would? Then she must be a few years older than me. I’d been thinking of her as a kid, for some reason. Vili and I were the only two kids here, really.

Torgi and I could have stayed in there indefinitely but decided to emerge for lunch. I found we had a different unannounced guest now. Jeanne Freneau. She drank tea with Mom on the deck.

“Don’t worry,” she said, as I took a chair. Torgi settled wordlessly near by. “I didn’t come to bother you.” The second time I’d heard that this weekend. But it was likely to involve me anyway.

“She was looking for Errol.”

“He had something important to tell somebody. Somewhere.”

“So I gathered. I heard things through my own channels, as I was headed here. None of which has anything to do with me or what I do.”

“But I would assume you’re glad Jack wasn’t blown up,” said Mom.

“Anna Gallen would have been a loss,” the general allowed. “But blowing things up was what I wanted to talk about with Errol. Boris McFarland suspects his mother could be part of a plot to kill Jack.”

"I thought he was the one McFee she did like," I said.

"He argues she might harbor a secret hatred of all McFees. I might not blame her if she did. Someone could have used that and recruited her to smuggle in the bomb-bot."

"Wait. Aunt Bissy wasn't there when the first robot was discovered."

"She'd visited a few weeks earlier. She could have ordered it built then. Bissy does have the engineering expertise."

"I don't believe it," stated Mom. "You're suggesting not only a grudge against the family but also plotting with Scotia's enemies."

"Not me. McFarland. I can't buy it either and I don't think he really believes it. Only raising the possibility."

I didn't think it would have to be an enemy power. My grandfather had plenty enough home-grown enemies. "So, what is her status?"

"You might say a very loose house-arrest. That is, she's been asked to remain at Summit Up pending further investigations. Jack told her she was free to leave as far as he was concerned and the authorities don't have enough to force her to stay, but she agreed it might be best."

"I wouldn't mind being forced to live there a while," I said. "Hey, maybe I could be assigned as Grandpa Jack's personal bodyguard. Torgi's going to come along too and spend the rest of her life cataloging his books. She's the only one who can reach the higher shelves."

"Jack!" admonished Mom.

Miss Torgerson only smiled. "It's the truth. I'm forever handing things down to people at the embassy."

General Freneau gave her a more thorough looking over. "You must have a good four inches on Errol's new wife. But not on her mother."

"Oh, the Thane? I met here when she arrived from Thule." Torgi snickered. "She said if we were laid end to end we'd equal three ordinary women."

The mention of Gertrude Alander made me a little uncomfortable, though it shouldn't. "I understand she scandalized my in-laws when she stayed with them. You were there, weren't you, Jack?"

"Yes, Mom, but I hung around McFee House as little as possible."

"I don't blame you."

I'd be back there tomorrow night. How much longer? I would find out—as I may have said before—when I found out.

CHAPTER 34

“Now IF I were to marry Torgi,” I told my Mom, “she’d be the tallest McFee.”

She took it in the spirit I’d said it. “Married to the shortest one?”

“I’m not the shortest McFee, am I House?”

“No, Jack, you’re an eighth of an inch taller than Brendon. Almost.”

“You must have grown,” said Mom.

“It is not unusual for men to continue to gain height into their early twenties,” House informed her. “Jack may get slightly taller.”

“You aren’t actually thinking of marrying anyone, are you?” Her voice might have grown just slightly more serious.

“Only if Jeanne Freneau dumps Grandpa Jack. She’s gone?”

“Flew away in her little ship. It’s too late to propose.” I wasn’t completely comfortable with the look Mom gave me then. “We joke, but you two are more alike than either of you is every likely to admit. I wonder if the special talent you share is related to your personalities.”

“I have many special talents, Mother. Maybe I’ll make a list for you someday.”

“I look forward to it. Where have all your friends gone?”

“Tired out and full of lunch. I don’t think anyone will want to do much for a half hour or so.”

“You must find some new way to entertain them.”

“I just checked whether the swimming pool was ready for use. A warm spring day like this is perfect for it. But, um, they’re a bunch of Thuleans, you know.”

She did know. “Well, don’t worry. I won’t join them.”

“Or Dad, I hope.”

“That, I’ll make sure of. I can’t have your father frolicking with beautiful nude Thuleans. I can’t prevent you.”

Won’t prevent you, she really meant. Mom could send everyone in the house packing this instant if she wished.

So we all swam and, yes, the Thuleans were nude and I was almost getting used to it.

“What is that music you’re playing, House?” I doubted she’d turned off her sensors.

“An ancient Earth composer named Sibelius. He is somewhat revered by the Janics.”

“He’s part of our Thulean heritage too,” said Torgi. “A lot of our ancestors came from the same region of Earth.”

“And got remixed some later on,” Vili added. “I’m evidence of that. I’ve read that on ancient earth different regions would have inhabitants of quite different appearances, some very dark, some quite pale, some with one shape of nose or mouth, and ones much different in another place. But when mankind began to leave the planet of our birth, much of that disappeared. We all mixed together as we went to the stars.”

“We still see some average differences from one planet or system to another,” I said, “but not those old extremes. I’d say the preponderance of tall blonds on Thule is about as far as that gets.”

The evidence of that was lounging by my pool. “Our original stock was small and isolated there a while.”

“That’s so. You can see how much variance there is on Scotia. We had a variety of settlers, beyond the original colonists.”

“The ones from Canadia,” said Vili.

“And related folk from Oztralia and Afrika and—what’s that other place? The island.” I couldn’t come up with the name.

Vili was able to supply it. She must have been studying up on us. “Jamyca?”

“Right, Jamyca. Lots of Jamycans came here. They were early converts to Neo-Zoroastrianism.”

“Torgi is a Nezo. And a Mazdan, to boot. We don’t have many of those on Thule.”

Mazdans were an order of sorts who took a more mystical approach to their religion. “I only started studying with Mazdans when I came to Scotia.”

“Jeanne Freneau is one too.”

“I know. She was wearing a little pin with our emblem.” Torgi giggled. “I have one but I’m not wearing it right now.”

Indeed she wasn’t. I had avoided staring at her long body as much as possible. But then I ended up staring at someone else which wasn’t much better.

“Oh, Nira, you’re joining us?” called Anna.

JUMPING JACK

No one had warned my sister-in-law, it seemed. Suddenly, I felt exceedingly self-conscious about my own lack of clothes. She'd avoid staring too, I hoped.

And I really hoped she wouldn't emulate the Thuleans. Her modest two-piece suit made Nira's pregnancy more obvious. "I'm glad you got this opened back up, Jack," she said. "I thought about it off and on these last couple weeks but never got around to it." She eased into the warm water. "Ah. I think this will be just the thing as all this goes on." She patted her tummy.

"I hope I can be here for the birth," said Anna. She knew how uncertain such hopes would be. Everyone there did.

"He's a boy, by the way," Nira announced. "Brendon and I found out while he was here."

He suddenly became a real person to me, one who would be running about Dummit Downs before I knew it. Brendon was an extraordinarily fortunate fellow. He and Nira would live here and run the estate and have a prodigious number of brats. It was not going to be my home.

But House would always keep a room ready for me, wouldn't she?

I returned to that room a little later to clean up and dress for dinner. A last dinner here, before heading back to Halifax tomorrow. Dad had already done that, via shuttle.

A casual dinner. We could leave formality for other places and times. The door to Vili's room stood open when I came out into the hall. I could see her at the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing out into the garden.

"May I come in?" A nod, a bit distracted. No sign of Torgi.

"I think everyone else has already gone," she said, still looking out, as if she were seeking something among the flowers and vines. "Did you come to escort me?"

"Sure. We could make a grand entrance if I'd brought my uniform."

"And I could wear the wedding dress. I have no idea what to do with it now."

"Maybe ride horseback in it?"

That didn't get much response. The princess was in a pensive mood. She wasn't always all sunshine; I'd seen that. Her training slipped now

and again. She turned to me. "This is all I need to feel grand," she said, lifting the pendant that hung from her neck and letting it fall back between her breasts.

"I'm pleased you like it, Vili," I said. I reached out and held it a moment in my own fingers, at the end of its fine chain. Vili took my hand in both of hers. I let the necklace fall.

My other arm encircled her waist and pulled her to me. Our lips met. Then mine found their way down her neck as she arched back, explored further. We'd been waiting for this to happen, both of us. "We're going to be late for dinner," whispered Vili.

"Should we care?"

"I think so. We can't be rude to our friends."

"You mean you can't be rude to your friends. I insult them at every chance."

Not this evening. We headed for the dining room, down a couple of hallways and only one short flight of stairs, my arm around her more often than not. Maybe it shouldn't be when we made our entrance?

Oh, nobody would be surprised to see it there. Everyone was waiting. Almost everyone. "Is Mom coming?" I asked House.

"Your mother has chosen to take her meal in her rooms."

"That means I'm in charge. Oh, boy!"

"I believe that would be Nira," Anna informed me.

"Oh, okay. The responsibility was too much anyway."

"Nira planned this dinner," she went on. "I supervised her."

"All things grown or raised here on the estate," said Nira. "Including some fresh from the garden."

It was early for much of that. Not for asparagus. The wine was a pretty good white we made here, served young and brisk.

And there were roast chickens, plump and juicy and oh-so-tasty. Thuleans are generally not eaters of animals. They do not raise them for meat or much of anything else. Animals with backbones, that is. Tanks full of invertebrates were another matter.

"How are they, um, killed?" asked Vili.

"Jock beamed their heads off. Only humans slaughter animals here. It's more humane."

JUMPING JACK

“Robots just never seem to get the knack of it,” I appended. Nor would I want them to.

After, we sat on the deck again. Our last evening out here until—who could know? For this particular group of people, maybe never again. We spoke of this and that and carefully avoided mentioning anything to do with duty or war. The girls spent an inordinate amount of time whispering to each other.

“They’re conspiring,” felt Tarmo.

“But against which of us?” The look he gave me told me what he thought.

It grew late. Both moons stood in the sky, and the Wall loomed behind them. Tomorrow afternoon I’d be piloting all of them back to Halifax. Except Nira. I assumed Mom would come along. We might feel a little crowded. One by one, we said goodnight and found our rooms.

I didn’t go right to bed but sat reading a while. A novel in Latin, which seemed as good a way to learn the language as any. I read aloud and the book occasionally corrected my pronunciation, or gave me a definition if I asked. My door chimed. I answered it myself, rather than asking House who was there.

Vili. A quick look at the hall showed all other doors shut. She slipped in, saying, “Torgi told me I should come over.” She giggled and put her arms around me. “No, she insisted I should come over.”

“Who’s to argue with Torgi?” I asked.

CHAPTER 35

"VILI AND MY brother are in the stables again. Neither knows when they might get another opportunity to ride."

"But not Sandi this time."

"Once seems to have been quite enough. I'd prefer to ride in your air-car."

"Why not? Let's load up Sandi and Torgi and go somewhere." I might have been a tad disappointed I hadn't been invited to join Tarmo and Vili on horseback. "Can you have one sent around, House?"

"I suppose so, Jack."

I wasn't sure what was with her. Maybe she didn't approve of last night. Maybe she thought I should be with Vili after last night. I was not inclined to ask.

We went looking for the others. "So you and Vili finally happened."

"You told me it would."

Anna laughed. "Yes, I did, but I'd gotten less sure of it." She gave me a tad of sidelong scrutiny. "You had thoughts of pursuing Torgerson, didn't you?"

I shrugged, which was sort of an admission of guilt. "She is a very loyal friend. If anything had happened, it could have ended up hurting both of them."

"My, you're capable of being considerate of other's feelings. Who'd have thought?"

"Or capable of pretending to be. I'm not always sure of the difference. Here they are. Want to go for a ride?"

It wasn't male privilege that made me the pilot again nor even McFee privilege, but the fact that knew I more about running an air-car. Torgi had never even ridden in one before. She and Sandi chose to sit together in the back.

"Show us the ocean," Sandi demanded. "Vili said we have to see it."

"But maybe not stop to swim this time," said Anna. "Unless you two really want."

"Nah, we had enough of that in the pool yesterday."

I took us to that same bluff as last time and sat a few minutes,

JUMPING JACK

looking. No one changed their mind about swimming or even walking on the sand. A bit of a cold breeze had come up, off the water. In the air again, I swept along the coast a while, sometimes above the beach, sometimes over the cliffs.

"I see boats," said Torgi. "Is there a harbor like in Halifax?"

"A much, much smaller one. The same town where we would catch a shuttle to the big city. An experimental station for marine life is there too. They mostly hatch things to turn loose in the ocean."

"The kraken," said Sandi.

"And the leviathan," added Torgi.

"They haven't progressed quite that far yet. Let's turn inland here."

I swept left, toward the hills. "Don't the things they have turned loose mutate?" Anna asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised. Keep in mind, we haven't been at it that long on Scotia." Not that long on any world, truly.

"Your butterflies have mutated," piped up Torgi. "I read that. Vili and I have been watching the butterflies outside our room."

"There's a very big butterfly over there," noted Anna. Another air-car. She peered at it a few seconds. "That's the same one that was ogling us before."

I trusted her on that. Anna was good at noticing details. "One of our neighbors, I suppose."

"It's coming awfully fast," muttered Sandi. "I don't like this."

"You have your weapon?" Anna asked.

"Of course. Get down, Torgs."

I didn't note any hostile action by the other car yet. "I could close the top if you're concerned. It will stop any projectiles we're likely to encounter. And a beam weapon would have to be almost held against it." We could go faster too.

"How would we shoot back?"

I was inclined to laugh at that. Then the first shot hit us. Both Thulean agents shot back. My first thought was to go ahead and raise the top and get out of there. My second thought was that the other car was faster than us. I hadn't calculated anything, not consciously, but I knew it was so, even with the top closed.

"They're only shooting at the car," yelled Sandi.

"To disable us. It must be a kidnapping attempt," Anna yelled back.

"They think one of us is Vili."

"Damn, that's a beam weapon."

"A big one."

Three occupants, two shooting. Mostly targeting the main engine, which meant they stayed off my rear flank. They were likely to take it out before I reached Dummit Downs. "I've sent a distress call," I told my passengers. That is, I told the car to send one. I was too busy to talk to anyone. "And I'm putting the top up."

There were immediate words of dissent and I understood the reason for them. Both women thought our best chance was to fight back. I intended to, just in a different manner. As soon as the mostly-transparent lid was in place, I veered hard—toward the other air-car.

The pilot over there thought I was making a break for it and likewise veered, in front of me to block my way. I would have to turn over or beneath it, losing speed and letting our assailants get back on our tail. I did neither.

"Hold on!" I dipped and immediately rose again, directly beneath the other car. That dome was strong. It would hold. I was pretty sure of it. Up at a sharp angle, tipping them sideways. Then I went as fast as I could towards home.

"Are they following us?" I called.

"No Jack, they're upside down on the ground."

Oh. I hadn't really expected to disable them, just slow them enough to break away. "Just as intended," I said.

"Can I sit up?" came a rather small voice.

"Sure," Sandi told her. "Jack-Mack saved the day."

"After nearly killing us," Anna had to add.

"Better me than them."

"I don't know. Dead is dead," she felt.

"Would they really have killed us?" Torgi asked.

"When they found out none of us was the princess? Most likely," said Sandi. "Hey, you have to promise not to tell Vili that I'm, ah, a person who knows how to use weapons."

I could feel Torgi's eyes on the back of my head. I'd hinted there

JUMPING JACK

were things the princess didn't know about her friend. "Not a word," she said, and then giggled. "Anna did it all!"

We limped to the doors of Dummit Downs twenty minutes later. Our main drive gave out halfway there and I had to use the maneuvering tubes to keep us aloft. We had called in as soon as we were clear of our attackers, of course.

"I've already reported this incident to Halifax," said my mother, when we trooped inside. Vili and Tarmo stood behind her, looking somewhat more concerned than Mom. "Someone is coming down to investigate so I'll remain a day or two more."

"And the rest of us should get out of here," I announced.

CHAPTER 36

“GOODBYE, HOUSIE,” CALLED Torgi. “I’m sorry I was rude to you when I arrived.”

“Goodbye, Torgi. I hope you visit again. You would all be welcome here. Even Sandi, though I would hope she and Captain Gallen would stop having sex in all the empty rooms.”

I wouldn’t have thought Sandburg the sort to ever blush. “You watched us?”

“I always turn off the sensors, miss. I understand and respect the need for privacy.”

“She had to do that with Nira and Brendon for quite a long time,” I informed her.

“Yes, Jack. It is surprising which sensors I need to turn off sometimes.”

If I had expected Vili to blush, I was greatly mistaken. Instead she smirked at me.

Then Jock carted us all down to the ship and away we flew, Halifax next stop. Tarmo kept me company at the controls most of the way, saying very little. We would all go to the Janic-Thulean embassy first; a car should be waiting. But Sandi would be on her way home in the morning. “My orders might send me with her,” he confided. “We’ll see.”

Allowing others to oversee the delegation’s departure. If the Scotian military was taking care of that, Tarmo’s presence wasn’t a necessity.

“Back to station security?” I asked. And spying on those who came and went.

“I fear the higher-ups aren’t going to let me settle back in there.”

And what of Anna? There was no telling when she would go, where she would go. I wished she were assigned permanently some place close. Anna Gallen had somehow become my best friend.

“You know you can come and stay overnight,” Vili told me when we parted at the embassy. “No one would mind. Now and again, anyway.”

“Shall we make it Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“Oh, no. My other boyfriend comes on Thursdays.”

JUMPING JACK

I kissed her as long as I was allowed. Then the embassy car drove me to McFee House.

"Welcome back, sir," the butler bot greeted me. "Your room is ready for you."

"Thanks. Say, do you have any sort of name?"

"I have a serial number, sir."

"Hmm, a bot of your abilities and importance should really have a name. Let me get back to you on that."

"As you will, sir. The police have been diligent about stopping by and asking after your well-being."

"An Officer O'Toole?"

"Yes, sir. She seemed somehow disappointed when I told her you'd gone away."

I wasn't sure whether that was touching or frightening. "Are my aunt and uncle still up?"

"Both abed, sir, but Master Errol is here and said he would like to have a word with you when you got in."

"In his room?"

"In the library."

I allowed a bot to carry my duffle up to my room and went to find my cousin.

"Twice in one weekend," was his greeting. "You certainly get shot at a lot for someone who isn't all that important."

"I make the mistake of hanging around important people."

"That seems a valid point."

A communicator lying on the table announced, "General Aruna would like to speak with you. On screen."

The request annoyed him. I could see that, if only for a second. Any evidence of it disappeared when he turned on a large screen set between the bookcases.

"Louis."

"Hello, Errol. I just heard about this mine thing. And there's the boy that was involved! Good evening, Jack."

"General." I nodded in the direction of his image. Did one salute over a communicator?

"So the thing knew our codes? Do we need to update them again?"

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"I doubt it, though it should be done regularly anyway."

"Certainly."

"But Brendon's codes for that runner were quite old. That mine may have had a very outdated list."

"Oh." The general chewed on that briefly before digesting it. "They might well have been the first ones it recognized after floating around for months."

"That would suggest our current security is fairly tight. We were a bit lax earlier on, weren't we?"

"The war seemed far away. It was sometimes hard to even think it was real."

Errol's quick little smile was hard to read. "Not for we who were being shot at."

"Oh, right. You were fighting in the Nevadas at the very beginning. I think your cousin convinced them single-handedly to make a separate peace with us, Jack."

"So I've heard, sir."

"Now it looks like we'll be the ones forced into a separate peace," said Errol.

"Not yet. Things are brewing. Maybe we'll find you a part in them, Jumping Jack McFee." He gave me a hard look. "Advance recon, you think?"

I assumed he was asking Errol. "Perhaps, Louis. He may be called on to continue to provide security for Princess Vilma."

"A waste. What?" His attention was on someone off-screen. "Really? I'm on comm with the boy right now." He nodded and turned back to us. "I was just told Jack was in a running gun battle earlier today. Air-cars?"

"Yes, sir."

"It sounds like something I might watch in a theater. You'll have to tell me the story sometime. Errol." He nodded in our direction and cut the communication.

"Will General Aruna be heading up that action Douglas mentioned?"

"The Janic thing? No. Louis is a strategist, not a leader. Now I want that story he asked you for."

JUMPING JACK

So I gave him the whole thing. More than he wanted, I think.

"So, basically, you butted the other car."

"You might say that." And I would, next time I told the tale.

"And you can't take credit for rescuing the princess, as she wasn't with you."

"I don't have to tell anyone that."

"Probably best to admit to it. This will raise more security concerns for her." He thought only a moment about that before asking, "Do you want to continue to be part of that security?"

I wasn't sure. "I, uh, wouldn't mind. I'm not really sure just what my role is supposed to be these days. It was simple when I patrolled with M."

"And we may put you back together soon, but in a different role."

"The advance recon Aruna mentioned?"

"That's one possibility. By the way, I spoke a long time with your mother, both about the incident and your relationship with Vili."

"Mom probably knows less than she thinks she does."

"She admits she isn't sure what's going on with you two. And it is her policy not to ask House to spy on anyone."

"I'm not sure," I said, "she would if she were asked."

CHAPTER 37

“THEY AREN’T GOING to let me leave the embassy at all since those people chased you. We can’t go anywhere like we did before. Even with Anna along!”

Anna was still here. Tarmo had indeed been given orders to return to Thule. The captain was gone and there was no telling when I might see him again.

I didn’t want to give Vili my own news. Errol had greeted me with it first thing that morning. I think he’d lain awake thinking up awful things he could do to me. “I’m going to be gone a while. I’m supposed to be a part of the fleet that takes your diplomats home.”

“Oh. I wish they’d take me too! What’s the point of sitting here?”

Only her safety. Whether she was truly safer on Scotia than Thule, I had no idea. Maybe she should be sent to some system like Bono, really away from everything. They could probably find her a job.

“You have Torgi to keep you company.”

“But she works all day. Everyone is really busy right now but they say there is nothing for me to do. I think Anna is just as bored.”

I could imagine. “Give her my hello and goodbye, will you? I have to take off right now.”

“That’s even worse. Not one night together. Tuesday or Thursday!”

“We’ll make up for it when I get back. Probably with new medals pinned on me. Maybe your mom will give me another.”

“I have the only medal I need.” Her hand went to her little Scotian pendant. “Be careful, Jack.”

A promise, a kiss goodbye, and I was on my way to Fundy Base. M and I were going to join the fleet.

An hour later I was sitting in a meeting of all the ship commanders. Never mind that mine had a crew of only one. “You’re going to be the advance scout,” Errol told me. “Jumping ahead of everyone else and taking a look around.”

That was a new twist on what we had discussed. “Reporting back only if there is danger or should I come anyway to give an all-clear?”

“The latter. I know that is a lot of jumps, Lieutenant.”

And with a Garda. These other commanders would have it easy

JUMPING JACK

with their Li Drives. Fourteen of them. I supposed Errol commanded a ship too so make that fifteen. Sixteen with little me!

How much bigger would the fleet be that followed, that was to see action in the Janics and maybe beyond? I knew nothing of large-scale actions. I wasn't even sure what its goal would be. Throwing back a Burkut advance or something like that.

Errol's smaller fleet was meant as a sort of decoy, I suspected. Ships moved in for a different purpose, as an escort, not an invasion. Then fleets would be combined, Scotian as well as those of the Janic-Thulean Combined Force, as they went into action. I'm just saying this as I understood it. The generals might have been planning something else entirely.

I took a shuttle up from our conference on the moon's surface to the orbiting station. A long corridor, docking tube after docking tube. This one.

"Welcome aboard, Jack"

"Hi, M. Want to hear about what we'll be doing?"

"Our mission instructions were sent over to me while you were at your meeting. It seems simple enough but the brigadier is asking you to make a rather large number of jumps in a short time. Does he know how demanding that is?"

"I don't think he cares. I'm getting out of this uniform and into coveralls." I wondered if I should wear a flight suit. I never bothered when M and I were on patrol. Nah, this was not likely to be any more dangerous. I doffed my cadet grays—the simplest Guard uniform I could get away with—and made myself more comfortable.

I'd no sooner done that than Errol called. "I have more to lay on you," he told me. He sound almost apologetic. Only almost.

"Let's have it." I wasn't going to say 'sir.'

"I'm asking you to make a quick run through all the systems and report back."

"All the way to Janus or stop at Thule?"

He hesitated. "No one is supposed to know that until we get there but I guess I have to let you in. Thule. We'll stop there to regroup and send the delegates down to the planet."

"Very well. How soon?"

“Now. The fleet will launch tomorrow, so speed is important. No need to spend a lot of time in each system. A quick preliminary look.”

An unnecessary look, I thought, but he was the brigadier and I was the lieutenant. Wasn’t there a special title for the commander of a fleet? I’d have to look it up.

“I’ll begin my pre-flight check immediately.”

“That’s asking too much,” opined M after Errol broke off. “I’ve a mind to tell him so.”

“I’d just as soon get into action. No point sitting here doing nothing.”

“I’ve been doing that for several weeks, Jack.”

“Don’t think I didn’t wish I was up here with you from time to time. Do you have any way to amuse yourself, M? Do you talk to other ships?”

“They’re not very smart.”

“I should introduce you to House. She just might measure up to your standards.” I wondered if there was any way to allow them to talk, as I went through the rituals of preparing for launch. M and Control did most of that, while I watched and acted like I had some reason to be there.

Signals given. All clear for departure. I eased the Nativ out of its dock, slowly brought the two Corvanaut drives up until I had the speed and distance I wanted, and jumped.

Ataensi. I had decided to go dark if at all possible. No signals to anyone I was here. I would sit here half an hour maybe, scan the system, and move on. If all went well, I could report back to Errol in less than four hours. I should be physically all right, taking that time between each of the eight total jumps.

Of course, I would crash then. I hoped he didn’t launch the fleet immediately! All was well here. Hermitage next.

I landed well in but the military instillation didn’t seem to detect me. I looked around for the full time I had budgeted, even if the system was as dead as ever. The little red star didn’t look like much even up close.

On to Oz, which was a busy, populous system with a yellow star. One of the systems we might lose to the Sevens if the war didn’t go any

JUMPING JACK

better. Their claims on Oz were one part of the complex mix of reasons the war started. I landed well out, far from the major station orbiting the planetoid Toto.

What was that moving out there in the darkness of deep space? I wasn't used to seeing much traffic out this far. Ah, just an automated freighter, running on an ion drive rather than thrust tubes. Ion engines work well enough and are relatively economical—many basically run off sunlight—but can not accelerate quickly. They require heavy gasses. As these are a byproduct of super-massive element technology, they are in ready enough supply.

From a mining operation somewhere in the system, I assumed, its cargo on its way to be processed somewhere further in and perhaps eventually loaded on a jump ship carrying it to some distant system, one of those dim, distant stars out there.

Oz seemed pretty innocent otherwise. Again, I remained unnoticed. So did any danger, if it lurked out there. I couldn't forget this was where the liner exploded only weeks ago.

The last jump out was Thule itself. My half hour there, then I'd turn around and repeat the whole process going home.

CHAPTER 38

THULE. IT WAS perhaps surprising I had fond memories of the station there. The place had changed me.

But I had emerged on the far side of the system. Logic suggested Thule and Oz were the most dangerous systems the fleet would come through, simply because they were further from Scotia. One should never count on ones enemies being logical.

And then, it would be easier to hide at Hermitage or even Ataensi. Not from me. I trusted the ability of M and myself to detect lurking intruders but an entire system is very large and we had little time. Any enemy had just as small a chance of finding and being near the Scotian ships that were coming. They'd need to hide an entire fleet to have much chance. Or a bunch of mines like that one I had encountered.

We were inside the planet Thule's orbit. Not by much; I'd been closer to the orange star before. Over there, another orange star, dim. That would be Janus. It was a jump I'd made only once before. No reason now. Who could say about the future?

"I don't see anything," I remarked to M. "There's little traffic."

"Remarkably little. The authorities may have restricted it for some reason."

Quite possibly. We continued to sweep for anything that might seem out of place. That one time I had jumped to Janus was my first mission, freshly home from school. Before I had M and this Nativ spy ship. That's when I'd first encountered the previously unknown automated missile launcher, fitted with a Li Drive. Now that would be the way to deal with a fleet. Have a bunch of them randomly jump in and out, looking for targets. Unwieldy, not to mention almost prohibitively costly of resources, and they would almost certainly have to launch from an adjoining system. A last ditch weapon and unlikely to be used against a few diplomats. They just weren't that important.

Indeed, no one might care about them at all now. All this effort, all this secrecy, could be pointless. The IMPs didn't ask me about it.

"Time to head back."

Oz's yellow sun. Such an easy jump. Again, I would not make myself known, even if I was somewhat closer in this time. All my sensors up

JUMPING JACK

again, seeking for—whatever. “There is an unidentified object at some distance,” said M.

I couldn’t figure out what it was either. “We have time to investigate if I open up the engines. Let’s see how fast this machine is.” Which was decidedly not very fast, I knew. We kept scanning as we went.

“It is a mine, Jack. Their appearance was part of the new data I incorporated into my memory recently.”

“Does it seem interested in us?”

“It is moving a different direction. Quite slowly.”

We weren’t on its target list, apparently. It wouldn’t even notice us, know we were there, unless it had specific orders. I decided to call in to Oz and let them know about it.

They recognized me and M without any problem, and accepted that we were on secret patrol in this system. I gave them the coordinates. “We’ll go out and blast the bugger,” said the woman on the other end of my communication. “It’s not the first one that’s shown up.”

Could mines have blown up that liner? Hidden somehow near—or in—the Oz station and attaching themselves at the last moment? It seemed possible but Tarmo’s theory of multiple bombs being affixed at Thule or Janus still made more sense.

Back through Hermitage again, the little red gatekeeper of Scotia’s doors. As in pretty much all the galaxy, the preponderance of stars in the Scotian Group were red dwarfs, most not suitable for colonization nor even mining. Some were dangerous, emitting strong and rather inconvenient bursts of radiation from time to time. What those stars were useful for was providing stepping stones for jump ships. A shorter jump was a safer jump.

Yes, I have been known to make long and hazardous jumps. Those are only when necessary. Normally, I would make those same hops in and out of the closest system to get where I’m headed. I could probably jump from Oz to Ataensi directly, if I really needed. But not to Scotia. The Wall gets in the way.

Another half hour. Off again. Ataensi and Jogahe. Something just jumped into the system. A courier. And it was gone again. Then home. There was no reason to go anywhere near Fundy or the fleet after I

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

randomly landed somewhere in the Scotian system. I could report from anywhere and await orders to jump again.

I was put through directly to Errol as soon as I made myself known.

“Mines at Oz?”

“Only one.”

“Where there’s one there are likely to be more. Get some rest. We launch in two hours.”

I needed more than two but there would be no point in saying so. Not sleep, just inactivity. “Do we have any Sibelius in the library, M?”

“All the surviving work, Jack. Some of it is quite restful. Shall I play it?”

“Please.”

CHAPTER 39

VERY FEW KNEW which ship or ships held the delegates. Only Errol and the captains of the ships they were on. The brigadier had not assigned them until the last possible moment. As far as any hypothetical enemies knew, they could be on any vessel in either wave, any one or more of the scattered ships.

Overkill? I thought so. At least I wouldn't be carrying any negotiators this time. But I'd be making all those jumps again, the ones I just made a little while ago. More jumps and more quickly. Into each system, a much quicker look around, back to report, than jump again with the first wave of the fleet. As soon as we arrived, I'd be on to the next system. It would be grueling. I couldn't deny that. Errol figured no more than twenty minutes in each. There would be no need for a strict schedule. Ships would jump on his command.

And I could use my own discretion on my initial jumps, the scouting ahead of everyone else. I was unlikely to discover any danger even if it was there. I knew that, Errol knew that. A little extra safety measure at best.

"Go when ready," came the command. I was ready. Into the Ataensi system. I traveled fast, as when I had pursued the mine. I wanted to cover as much area as possible, sweeping in all directions. I did give it the full twenty minutes but sensed nothing.

"All clear," I reported, when I popped back into Scotian space. I was a little far out so it took some time for my words to reach anyone.

"First squadron go." I jumped with them. Chances were, a little behind them as the word got to me later. That sort of thing would make all further advances of the fleet a little ragged, with ships scattered through each system.

Orders were to go again immediately. Off to Hermitage. By the time I finished a sweep there, Errol and the second squadron should have joined the first. Again, nothing I could find to report on my return. "First squadron go," came the immediate command and I went with them, barely pausing before jumping ahead to Oz.

"You know this is all a sham," I commented to M.

"How so, Jack?"

"The fleet is a diversion. It's meant to mislead the Aigleans or

Burkuts into thinking it was sent to the Janics just to deliver the diplomats, when it's actually part of a buildup toward a major action."

"That's interesting." A rather long pause for M. "I might never have thought of it but I can see it is a valid analysis."

"Our enemies might take it as a show of strength, an over-response to recent events. That could lead them to think we're more concerned about defense, more uncertain than we are." Than I hoped we were. "You don't see any more mines, do you?"

"Not a one. There's quite a bit of activity in the sector where we spotted it."

I looked at my screens. "Ships stationed here looking for more of them maybe. Errol should be aware of that. A couple more minutes before we go back."

We were still running all the tubes at nearly full power, so I was moving fast when I jumped and reemerged in the Hermitage system. There was a sudden lurch, more than my dampeners could handle.

M let me know what had happened at once. "One of our engines has malfunctioned. I'm shutting it down."

Nothing I could do about it. I reported both the activity in Oz and my own problem. Errol himself responded. "You can still run on one engine."

It sounded like a statement, not a question, but I answered anyway. "I am right now. But a lot more slowly."

"Very well. Jump with the squadron as before and then on to Thule as quickly as you can, but don't bother to jump back and report unless you feel it necessary. Proceed to Thule Station and let them take a look at your ship."

"Yes, sir." I was willing to say 'sir' occasionally, I guess.

CHAPTER 40

“ONCE AGAIN I’VE limped into your station with a broken engine.”

Tarmo was there, not in his old command but as part of the security team preparing for the delegates’ arrival. “Sabotage?” he asked Elsa. Captain Sir Elsa Alander-McFee.

“It’s not,” she assured him. “Simple wear, perhaps exacerbated by the demands Jack put on his engines over the past day or two.”

I’d put some demands on myself, too. I was about to crash.

“Thrust tubes do wear out,” continued Elsa. “This is inevitable considering the forces they must contain.”

Even I was aware of this. Wasn’t Tarmo? “I thought the fields they generated protected them,” he said. “Or something along those lines.”

“Indeed they do, for the tubes would blow immediately without them. But it is those fields themselves that create stresses.”

That I hadn’t known. I’d never thought about it, in honesty. I did know, as with much else of our technology, the generation of the fields inside a thrust tube depended on the use of super-massive elements. I had a vague suspicion it was related to the gravity fields we found so useful.

“It is generally impractical to swap in a new tube in the field, though it can be done. Better to replace the engine.”

“Gee, and I didn’t think to bring a spare.”

“I could replace both with something different. It would take a while to sort out the programming with the control computer and M.” She gave the idea brief consideration. “No, I’ll see about having a new one sent first. I doubt there’s one of that model anywhere in the Thule system.”

As long as it didn’t have to come all the way from the Corvans. Supply chains were already slow and reportedly getting worse. By rumor; I had no official information about that sort of thing.

We headed away from the hangar, where my Nativ hung on the view screen, mechanics in coffin suits examining it. “You know, you hardly even need pulse tube engines for your missions. The missions for which the machine was designed, that is. If you choose to have escapades in enemy space again, it’s another matter.”

“So the ship could use varitube engines?” Though less efficient, the varitube had been the standard for a very long time. Centuries and more centuries.

“No reason it couldn’t, not that I’m recommending it. If we really need to find replacement engines, our own Thule-Riley six-tubes are in ready supply.”

That was what Brendon had discarded from his runner. Not a recommendation for the engine. “Now let’s have a beer and wait for my husband,” she said.

“I think I need to sleep instead,” I informed the pair. “Could I get back to the ship?”

Tarmo took me by the arm. “We should have noticed. I’ll get you into a room here.”

When I awoke sometime later, my cousin the brigadier was on the station. We headed for the canteen for what I considered breakfast. It probably wasn’t the right time for it. Elsa joined us as he sat and watched me eat.

“Have you talked about the ship yet?” she asked.

“Just waiting for you. You know I need your expertise.”

I couldn’t help snickering. Neither could Elsa, for that matter.

Errol began. “You could jump back to Scotia on the one engine and have everything fixed there. Not as well as Elsa could do it, to be sure.”

“It’s a good thing you added that,” his wife told him.

“As for the Rileys, not so good a choice, I’d think. I’d rather drop in a couple of the standard Corvanauts built by Group Supply.”

“That would be a big increase in power.”

“About doubled. But the engine is ubiquitous. Fixing it wouldn’t be as much of a problem.”

Elsa gave this due consideration. “We have spares here. I could do it. What do you think, Jack?”

“I’d have to ask M.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’d like to have more muscles. Don’t all guys?” She talked to her wrist-top. “Patch me into the Nativ in Hangar Fourteen. The AI there will answer to M.”

A moment later, M’s voice came through. “Captain Alander. Always

JUMPING JACK

a delight to speak with you. Are you going to provide Jack with more ice cream sandwiches?"

"Later. Right now we need to talk about your engines."

"The Nativ's engines. They are not part of me."

"Quite true. I need to remember you are a separate entity from the ship. Hmm, I suppose you could be transferred into a completely different one, couldn't you? But that's not our concern now."

The captain laid out the entire scheme of installing the new engines. "I could get onto it immediately and you could be sorting them out in as little as a day."

"I have no objections. It would be interesting to be able to go faster."

"Then I and my team will be on the way," she said. "See you very soon." With that, she got up and said, "This will be interesting for me too." Off to the hangar.

"She probably feels you brought her a gift," observed Errol.

"Are you going to stay long?" I would think he would want to. I wouldn't leave Elsa at all if I were him.

"I'm likely to be in and out of the station. We're going to hold maneuvers in the system. Maybe jump into Trinity, maybe jump into Janus."

"Keep the Burkuts guessing, huh?"

That merited one of his small inscrutable smiles. "Even so. You understand more than you sometimes let on."

"I'll have to stop letting on altogether," I replied. "I guess I have a day or two off, unless you have some other devious plan involving me."

"Your orders as of this minute are to get the Nativ operational and take it back to Scotia at your discretion. So you can relax today, unless you want to watch Elsa's team work."

I would probably pop by the hangar. Maybe I'd say hello to Sandi. She was back to posing as a tug pilot, I assumed. Working as a tug pilot. Not posing. She really was a good tug pilot.

Errol went off to do the things his sort did. I wandered over to the civil side of the station. I wondered if Jitha was still in his office there. "No sir," said the man at the desk in the Corvan offices, located in a tier overlooking the large reception area. Not officially a consulate but it

acted as one in all the essentials. "Mister Jones has been reassigned. Mister Jagannath could speak to you."

"No need. I only stopped to say hello." I wondered if Jagannath was a spy too. I went out and watched the big screens for a while, showing ships coming and going—traffic seemed lighter than I remembered—and views of Thule. I wasn't going to see the planet on this visit. Someday. Maybe with Vili.

There was the gift shop. Sure enough, little stuffed animals in Thulean-green coveralls sat on a shelf. And there was one in a dress uniform, dark green and russet. "What sort of creature is that meant to be?" I asked.

"A mouse, sir."

So it was. Mice, of course, had accompanied mankind everywhere he had gone. They had become part of the fauna of Scotia and were likely to evolve to fill different niches, over the millennia to come.

I purchased it. Back in the military section, I asked a wall comm whether Sergeant Sandburg was on duty. It wouldn't tell me. Apparently I no longer had the privileges of a year ago. A tightening of security?

No problem getting into the docks. I went to Fourteen and watched the busy mechanics clustered around my ship for a few minutes. The hangar doors had been shut and they were working in air. There was Elsa. I wondered if she and M were conversing as she went about installing the new engines. There would be diagnostics on his part almost at once. They were large, weren't they? Well, not really large. Larger than the ones they replaced. A tighter fit. Elsa would know whether the mounts were strong enough to support them. And strengthen them if they weren't.

That couldn't hold my interest. I went along to the canteen for an early lunch. Or whatever it was time for. I didn't intend to set my inner clock to the time of Thule Station. I wouldn't be here long enough. A shift came off duty as I sat there and women and men began to drift in.

Sandi. I waved her over. No surprise on her part. Her boyfriend would have mentioned I was here. I pulled out the mouse. "I thought this could remind you of Tarmo when he's away."

JUMPING JACK

She was amused, at least. "Thanks, Jack. It could probably replace him altogether. You certainly followed awfully close behind us."

"Blame my cousin for it. I do."

"He's convenient for that, isn't he?" A little servbot brought her a plate of something I couldn't identify. It was yellowish. "I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to stay on the station. I'm not that much use to anyone now."

"Tug pilots are always useful."

"And some people could be content in that job. I'm pretty bored, Jack. Thanks for providing some excitement the other day!"

"Next time you can have it without me. Are you thinking of letting Vili in on your secret identity?"

She picked at her meal, prodding it with a fork. "I don't know. I'd hate for her to think that was why I was her friend."

"I'm sure she could see beyond that. I can."

"You're not emotionally involved. This omelet is pretty awful. Another reason to leave Thule Station."

"Back to the police?"

"Not sure. I could officially join Security Section but I don't think I want a military career."

"And after the war? There will be an after, you know."

"Oh, who can look that far ahead? You're heading to college, right?"

"That's the plan."

"Vili, too. She may study history, like you."

"You could just tell Vili your boyfriend recruited an innocent tug pilot into military security and you had no idea of ever doing anything of the sort when you met her."

She laughed a while at that. "And when she inevitably learned the truth, it would be worse than if I simply admitted it in the first place. Better just to not say anything, at least for now."

As good an approach as any. The next day, the Nativ was pushed out of its dock and we started sorting out the new engines. This didn't require major reprogramming, but a good bit of information was added to the control computer's memory and most of that about the former drives was expunged. It would adapt, bit by bit, to the new set

up, testing this and that, making changes as needed. The process never actually ended; Control was always learning new things.

M was, in some ways, enmeshed with the control unit. He'd always been able to access all it knew. He could take over its functions, if needed. But it wasn't part of him. He would learn too, and come to know about the engines in a way of which Control was incapable.

I'd probably learn a few things too. We made short trips close to the station. Things felt much as before. Yes, I could sense the increase in acceleration. The dampening fields were not designed to handle it. "We can fix that up sometime at Fundy," Errol assured me. "Just don't go too fast until then."

By the third day, it was decided we might as well go home. We jumped away from Thule with a freezer full of ice cream sandwiches.

CHAPTER 41

"I LEARNED THERE aren't any cats on your planet. I didn't notice that for a while. In the Janics, they're everywhere."

"They're banned on Scotia. Not compatible with the plans for developing its environment."

"Your loss," said Vili. "I'm glad you're here, anyway."

"Me too. I brought letters. A letter." I offered the envelope.

"From Sandi!" She opened it right then and read quickly. "Oh, she's left her job on the station. Some sort of position with the government, down on the planet."

"A government job?"

"Oh, she's back with the police, I would think. I knew she worked for them. Not right away, but after I left."

I must have displayed a bit of surprise.

"Remember I was working in records, Jack. I had access to all sorts of information. And who would question Princess Vilma's right to look at it?"

"Not me."

"I might," said Anna.

"And of course both of you knew about her."

"Not right away, either."

"We both learned only a little before you," I told her. "Even Tarmo was in the dark."

"Oh? That I didn't realize. I'm still bored here, Jack. Anna and I exercise and practice but that can only go so far." She looked at Anna as if she expected her to finish her thought.

Which she did. "Your grandfather has offered to let her stay at Summit Up. He'll even give her a job if she insists."

"Everyone agrees it's safer than the streets of Halifax. If I don't get out of here soon I'm liable to go screaming down one or another of them."

"And I'll join her. We might end up jumping in the harbor."

"I would say Summit Up is the better option. When are you going?"

"As soon as you take us there, of course."

“Um. All right. I’d better check whether I have orders waiting for me first.”

“Oh, General Freneau took care of all that,” Anna let me know. “And your mother.”

“An unstoppable force when they work together. You’re going too?”

“For a while.”

“But not Torgi. She’s actually needed at her job.”

This was all a lot. I’d only arrived at McFee House last night and came over here first thing this morning. “How do I get you there?”

The girls gave each other an I-told-you-so look. “You don’t actually have to take us there in the sense of flying us yourself.”

“Even though you’re used to doing that,” said Vili.

“Just accompany us there. A ship will be waiting at the port.”

“An airplane, I think.”

“Right. Your grandfather’s own.”

With one of the professional pilots on his payroll. “Tomorrow morning? I should go back to the house and let my aunt and uncle know I’ll be off again.”

“And,” said Vili, “if you spend the night here we could get off earlier.”

I couldn’t argue with that logic. So I came back later, me and one bag. No one questioned my presence; I was security for the princess, after all. Vili’s small sleeping space was somewhat disheveled. The Thulean bear sat askew on her bed.

It made room for us. An embassy car got us to the port before dawn. The airplane area; that was adjacent to where I had landed and taken off in ships.

Airplanes: some were powered by thrust tubes, the same as space craft, but they had wings and required a runway. Robert Douglas would travel in one of that sort, I was sure. More used propellers driven by electric motors. When I mentioned they were noisy, I meant the sound of the props, primarily, but there were many other noises involved in the operations of an airfield.

This morning, it was pretty quiet. A sleek, dark blue machine awaited us, swept back wings, twin thrust engines mounted outboard

JUMPING JACK

near the tail. Airplanes always look so much more aesthetic than boxy space craft.

We were directed aboard. The pilot awaited us in the cabin. "Aunt Bissy!" I gave her a hug. "You remember Vili and Anna." They'd been hard to miss at Errol and Elsa's wedding.

"I do. Welcome aboard."

I hadn't thought of Errol's mom being a pilot. A much better airplane pilot than me; every ship pilot was required to learn the rudiments but I was not certified for aircraft. Shortly, we were aloft. Just where was the airfield at Summit Up? I wasn't sure I'd ever seen it.

But then, only Bissy had to know. Vili fell asleep in her quite comfortable seat, while Anna and I conversed, our voices low. "I'm sure your grandfather's invitation was because he likes you," she told me. "You are accompanying us at his insistence. I don't think he was particularly taken with Vili."

"He'd be likely to ask you to move in permanently."

"Until Freneau poisoned me." She stared out the window. Yes, there were windows. We flew toward the dawn, the ocean yet dark below us, the sky aglow above. "I'm only to stay until Vili is settled in, it seems, though no one is sure when I'll receive new orders. I could spend the rest of the war giving weapons training somewhere."

My own assignment to guard Vili, as Anna's, was coming to an end. I had even less of an idea what might be next.

I reclined my seat, the same deep blue as the plane's exterior, the blue of the Scotian flag, of the sapphires on Vili's necklace. I could use some sleep too.

"Wake up," said Vili, shaking me. "We're there!"

It was quite bright outside. We'd flown into the morning. I couldn't see anything that told me where we were.

Until we trooped down the stairs. A couple miles below Summit Up. The closest place with enough level ground or the closest place Grandpa Jack would allow to be leveled. "Do we take some sort of shuttle?" asked Anna, looking up at the citadel.

"Some sort," said my aunt. "Come along." Much of what was constructed here was set into the hillsides. She led us in, past some

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

offices, to a dark corridor. “Here we are. Jack McFee’s private shuttle is inside the mountain.”

Something else I didn’t know about him or this place. Next she’d be showing me the secret submarine base. The shuttle ran on rails, the track winding around with occasional places to stop, doors that led somewhere. We whistled past them. I wasn’t sure where we were when we halted, just a lot further up than before.

Somewhere behind the lowest lounge. The reception lounge. That, at least, made sense. We emerged into the big room. No one there, only a couple busy cleaning bots.

“Welcome back,” came Stewie’s voice.

CHAPTER 42

STEWARD WOULD BE disappointed when he discovered which woman I was involved with. I wasn't going to switch for his sake.

"The head of security would like to talk with all of you," the AI continued. "He is concerned about keeping the princess safe. I would think Lieutenant Gallen would do a better job."

I couldn't quite keep myself from laughing. "Thank you, Steward. Where is McFarland?" asked Anna.

"In his office in the armory."

She started in that direction. "Stop," I told her. "He can come to us." I wasn't going to let him start things off by demonstrating that he was in charge.

"Right," said Vili. She would understand that dynamic, even if she was rarely personally assertive. If she were pushed too hard, her royal heritage would make itself known.

"Very good, Jack," said Steward. "There is an aidie right in front of you to show you to your rooms. You may change them later, your highness, if you would prefer other quarters."

"Call me Vili," she told him.

"Most certainly, Vili. You may call me Stewie if you wish. Highness is the correct form for a princess, is it not? I have noted some variation in my sources."

"It is on Thule. For my mom, too, but she can also be called Majesty."

"I shall remember that if she visits." I was fairly certain Stewie was making a joke.

We were settled in three rooms in short order, Anna and Vili's side by side with a connecting door. That was sensible but I didn't personally like it, you understand. I camped across the hall. My aunt had disappeared. Maybe checking in with Grandpa, mission accomplished and all that.

"We should be able to find a meal," I told the women. "There is a small cafeteria for the human workers at Summit Up." There were a good many of those, though they were seen less on these floors.

"I never knew that," Anna said, as I led the way.

"I'd rather eat there than have a bot bring something to my room, most of the time." It meant going back down a couple floors, to the level where we had entered. That was officially the ground floor, everything below being labeled a basement. Maybe all the way down to the airfield. I would have to explore those newly discovered regions someday.

We were settled at a table eating either breakfast or lunch when McFarland and Aunt Bissy came in. I noted a security guard in their wake. "Stewie ratted us out," I told the others.

"I forgive him," said Vili. "You may have a seat," she told the new arrivals. Full princess mode. She just might have been enjoying herself.

Both sat. The guard remained standing, attempting to look vigilant.

"We should speak of your security arrangements, Princess Vilma," said McFarland. He gave a quick but unmistakable sidelong look at Bissy.

Who laughed. "Boris still isn't convinced of my innocence."

"Not completely," he admitted.

"No more killer bots have been spotted, I would assume," I said.

"No, sir." There was the slightest hesitation before the 'sir.' He might have been about to call me Jack. "We figured out how the one you shot got in. Another bot rebuilt itself. We discovered the discarded parts in one of the store rooms."

"You mean I figured it out," said Aunt Bissy. "That was simple enough. Getting the explosive in was trickier."

"Of course, a bot could have concocted something that blows up from common chemicals used here, given the proper directions, but nothing of that sort would be powerful enough."

"So something had to be smuggled in," said Anna. "I would hazard *not* in another bot."

"No, in a human," Bissy told us. "It was a shit bomb."

Vili and I were mystified. "Oh, I know about those," said Anna. She almost sounded happy about it. "Animals are used as well as humans." She snickered. "Like the McFees' horses."

Boris shrugged. "None of us had ever heard of one but we found traces of excrement in the wreckage. It required some research to figure out why."

JUMPING JACK

“We have the best library on Scotia at our fingertips. That helped.”

“So what is a shit bomb?” asked Vili. I wanted to know, myself.

“Various substances can be ingested that will combine to form an explosive within the digestive system. No one is sure when or where the technique was first developed.”

“And you get explosive poop?”

“A little refining is called for before use.”

“It won’t blow up inside you,” added Boris. “But it is toxic. Whoever did it would not have felt well at all for a few days, even if he or she took the antidote as soon as they, ah, eliminated the stuff.”

“I don’t remember my Aunt Bissy being sick,” I pointed out.

“She could have created the explosive when she was here previously and gone home before the poisoning was evident.”

“That’s true,” admitted Bissy. “Logically, I should still be a suspect.”

“And that’s all you are,” said McFarland. “I am not accusing you.”

I was glad to hear that. Boris was a big, gray-haired guy who had headed security at Summit Up as long as I could remember. Maybe before I was born. He might have become a little too entrenched.

“Are you taking any special precautions with the princess here?” I asked him.

He spread his arms. “I don’t know what more we can do. I mean, we’re already guarding Jack McFee.”

“There is no security that can’t be breached,” declared Anna Gallen. “I’d be willing to look over your protocols, if you’d like.”

I think he didn’t like but he told her, “Your expertise would be welcome, Lieutenant. I’d best get back to the job. With your leave.” The security chief took off, his man close behind.

“Despite his suspicions,” said Vili to my aunt, “I think Boris McFarland might like you.”

“Why did you think I visit this place?”

CHAPTER 43

SO BORIS AND Bissy had been a thing for years. Maybe an on and off thing. Even Steward was sketchy on that. Honestly, I'd always thought McFarland preferred guys.

Turns out he'd kept both sexes at arms' length most of his life. I certainly was not keeping Vili at any length from me. We spent a decidedly pleasant hour in my room that afternoon. I hope Anna found some way to amuse herself.

All three of us were to dine with my grandfather that evening. The tower room? Neither Thulean had seen it; I'd been there with Sacky that one time. Sacky. Off training beneath the orange star Bono, so close to the Wall that it filled the entire sky sometimes.

I could have written her, couldn't I? Not important. We'd run into each other someday, maybe even after the war, have a beer or two, talk about our lives. And then go on with those lives.

We were escorted to that intimate dining space, with its view of the surrounding mountains. Jeanne Freneau was there again. I hadn't heard she'd arrived. I supposed she could have already been lurking when we got there.

As we settled, she informed me, "You're officially attached to my command at the moment, on loan from the Guard, just so the record shows you have some sort of duty. Take another day or two here, then go back to Halifax and relax a couple days more. We'll find something for you to do."

It sounded good to me, though I wouldn't mind staying longer at Summit Up. "I should finish getting the Nativ and its new engines thoroughly sorted out."

"Good idea. I'll add it to your orders. Remind me," she said into her wrist-top. "Wait until they've finished installing your new dampeners."

I grinned. "Then M and I can see just how fast the Nativ can go now."

"Still rather slow, I imagine. Just go out and do the sort of thing you used to. No need to jump anywhere." A conspiratorial smile of sorts appeared, and a little of the old mad-woman light was in her eyes. "But you can if you want."

JUMPING JACK

“What’s this about new engines?” asked Grandpa Jack. That led to me telling the entire story of my recent trip to Thule as we were being served and on into the dinner itself.

“So they’re going to attempt an invasion,” he remarked at the end. That was as good a takeaway as any, even if it was a tale of my own adventures.

“An incursion, more likely,” felt Freneau. “I doubt we’ll try to occupy a system.”

“What’s the difference?” asked Vili.

“More than I would want to explain. Let Jack do it. Your Jack.”

Grandpa jumped on that. “And whose Jack am I?”

“I’m not claiming you”

I could pretend to be an expert. “The full-scale invasion of an inhabited system would mean jumping in hundreds of ships simultaneously in hopes of overwhelming the enemy—their ships and stationary defenses both. If that is accomplished, subduing the planets doesn’t matter much. The invading force would control space and control the system. They would occupy it.”

Freneau had to say something after all. “All interstellar trade would be effectively shut off. It’s impossible to jump from a planet’s surface.”

“Or at least it has never been done.”

“I can’t see anything in theory to prevent it but there are overwhelming difficulties, most centering around the mass and gravitational pull of a jump drive element. Also, most drive computers wouldn’t work.”

“A Garda drive might. We’ve gotten off the topic, haven’t we?”

“I don’t suppose this bunch wants to hear about jump theory. I’ll shut up.”

“Most of the invasions during this war have been of uninhabited systems,” I went on, “red stars and the like, in hopes of obtaining strategic advantages. Taking enemy bases, building new ones.”

“There have been Burkut, um, incursions into the Janics, haven’t there?” asked Vili. “Not the Janus system itself. Varra and Jaak. They’re closer to Burkut space.”

“Chances are you’re as knowledgeable about that as any of us,” said Anna. “More than me, anyway.”

“Or me,” I admitted.

“Fleets have, ah, probed both systems,” said Freneau said. “Most of what I hear of such things is second hand. Your new buddy Aruna could tell you all about it, Jack. We do need a way to distinguish between you, don’t we?”

“We could just avoid being in the same room,” said Grandpa Jack. “Do you like the lasagna?”

“Is that what this is called? I’ve never had anything like it before,” said Anna. “But it is really good.”

“Yes. Almost as good as what I sampled on Avignon when I was Jack’s age. I hear you’re thinking of studying there, boy.”

“It’s a possibility. I didn’t know you’d been there.”

“I was getting a different sort of education. Traveling.” He turned to Vili. “That rock Errol gave you was one I picked up on Earth.”

“We thought it was fake,” admitted Anna.

Vili admitted, not very loudly, “I had my own doubts.”

“This is an extraordinarily nice wine, Jack,” Freneau said. “It matches your lazy-whatsit quite well.”

“It does have some character, doesn’t it? I like character. I like it in people and fortunately all three of my grandsons have it. I wasn’t sure about you for a long time, Jack. I thought you might end up the sort of dilettante my father was.”

“Give him time,” advised Anna.

“It would have to be time away from us,” Vili told her. “We wouldn’t allow him to stray.”

There was truth in that. All three of these women had helped point me in the right direction.

“I quite believe you, your highness,” said Grandpa Jack, raising his glass in salute.

CHAPTER 44

“AVIGNON IS IN the Old Worlds, right? The ones closest to Earth.” Anna was asking. She was sometimes surprisingly ignorant of things Vili and I had learned as kids.

She’d been soaking up other knowledge, other skills, and ones just as useful. More useful to her.

“It is. Somewhat this side of their center.”

“But never *with* any of the others,” said Vili. “Strictly neutral.”

“As the headquarters of the Catholic Church, it wouldn’t do to join one side or another. Or yet another.”

“I do know a lot of the Old Worlds were allied with the Aigleans when the war started.”

“Their federation was loosely tied to the Aiglean trade network. They refused to have anything to do with fighting, and voted almost unanimously to become a neutral group.”

“And likely to remain one,” I said. “The Horus Federation. Some of the systems there do trade with one or both sides.”

“As do the Boethians and other neutrals,” Vili pointed out. She turned her attention and the topic to me. “When are you going to leave?”

“General Freneau offered to fly me out when she goes tomorrow. Maybe I’ll take her up on it.”

“That’s awfully soon. You have to visit as often as you can.”

“Hey, with both him and the general gone, we can have the other Jack McFee to ourselves. The *better* Jack McFee.”

“I expect you to keep busy helping solve the case of the killer robots,” I informed Anna. “I know Vili will find plenty to interest her in the library.”

“But I’d still like something useful to do,” she said.

“Steward, are there any jobs for Vili?”

“I can not think of any suited to her skills, Jack. Translation, I believe?”

“And research,” I told him, remembering how Vili had found out about Sandi.

“I shall see,” he promised.

"I know!" Villi exclaimed. "I'll write a biography of your grandfather. I'll pester him with questions about his travels and his career and his family."

"I bet he'll be glad to hear about that," remarked Anna. "Hey, he said his grandsons had character. What about his granddaughters? It isn't fair not to mention them."

"Grandpa Jack, um, seems to like my cousins. I'm afraid he thinks his own two sons are pretty much mediocrities."

Anna objected. "Your dad? But he's important!"

Vili knew better. "A bureaucrat, a gentleman farmer. He's playing a role right now but history isn't likely to remember him."

"Blunt, aren't we? But accurate. Uncle Rupert runs a major business only because he was born to it."

"But you're going to be very, very, very important," she told me.

"Maybe if you two got married and you became queen. Then he could be a footnote in your history. The Queen's Consort. That's your father's title, right?"

"Right. But I'll never be queen." She didn't say she wouldn't marry me. That was something to consider for the distant future for me. I thought she felt the same.

"Very well," said Anna, levering herself out of her comfortable chair. "I'd best get some sleep and allow you two to decide which room you're using." She went through to her own room, the door closing behind her.

Somewhat later—in my room—Vili rolled over on one elbow to look at me and asked, "You like Torgi a lot, don't you?"

"I suppose I do." I wasn't giving the question that much thought.

"I like her too. I wouldn't mind if you had sex with her."

"Huh?"

"I mean, as long as you remember I'm your girlfriend now. You'll be off in Halifax or maybe even further and I'll be shut up here."

Well, Torgi might be lonesome—no, no. "So, what if I had sex with Anna?"

"Not allowed, Jack. You like her just a little too much."

CHAPTER 45

I RECOGNIZED FRENEAU's personal transport as a McFee, a W-7A to be precise. The factories were turning out more of the little craft than any other type, and adapting them to every possible role. That had allowed some earlier designs to be discontinued.

Chances were it had the same power plant as the new ones on the Nativ. It was internal on this model so I never saw the engine. Not that I could necessarily recognize it. There was room enough to carry a crew of three in reasonable comfort. Four might have been stretching it.

Fitted out as atmospheric, intended first and foremost to operate in space. "The Guard is operating a lot of 7As pretty much identical to this one," she informed me. "Excellent for patrol around planets and inner systems."

"But slow," I said.

"Still faster than your Nativ, I'd suspect." By which she meant acceleration. That was usually what everyone meant when they talked about speed. "Despite your increased power, inertia remains a big factor when it comes to getting its jump element moving."

My ship did mass way more than this McFee.

"They don't carry much firepower, either," she told me. "I left the weaponry intact but I'm unlikely to ever need it."

"You have both more speed and firepower than me. I'd better not make you mad."

"Ah, but you can jump away and I could never follow." She sat silently a handful of seconds, her eyes on her screens. "I sometimes dream of jumping far away and never returning."

"World after world after world until you're far beyond anything known to the human race. And there would still be an immense universe beyond, calling."

No more need be said. We understood each other. And I hated to admit Mom was right about that.

"I'll be off to Fundy after I drop you," Freneau said after a few minutes. "A new class of would-be jumpers will be waiting. Do you want to call for a car to pick you up at the field?"

"A trolley is good enough for me."

“Now that sounds like your grandfather.”

“Did you think our family got so rich by wasting money on taxis?”

I didn’t have any place I needed to go in Halifax so I took the trolley toward McFee House after the general dropped me. Then the two block walk the rest of the way. I didn’t mind the opportunity to stretch my legs a little. I’d been riding too much.

A police car pulled alongside, a window lowered. “You’re back.”

“For now, Officer O’Toole. I’ve been coming and going a lot recently.”

“Call me Niki. Officer Niki, if you’d prefer to respect my position of authority.”

“Yes, ma’am, Officer Niki.”

“Are you carrying a weapon there, Jack McFee? My sensors can’t detect one but I’d wager there’s a small gun on your left side. Fairly low.”

“You’re pretty sharp, Niki.” Or I’d gotten sloppy. “It’s a C-140. Thulean government issue and supposed to be undetectable by any sensors known.”

She grinned. “Other than the human eye. I’d love to look at it but it’s not a good idea to brandish firearms on the street.”

“Maybe we can arrange it some time.”

“When you’re at loose ends again?” With that, her window went up and she pulled away.

I *was* at loose ends. The new dampeners in the Nativ weren’t ready yet so I couldn’t fly away. Much less far away. The gate opened, greeted me as usual.

Maybe I should call Torgi, just to say hello, tell her I was back. Oh, Vili would have already let her know I was on the way. I wondered if she’d mentioned the sex thing to Torgi and at once was certain she had. She wouldn’t have said anything to me otherwise—and unless Torgi approved. I considered it a rather bad idea, whatever the two of them thought.

No butler at the front door. Maybe he’d gotten tired of me. I hadn’t thought at all about his name, had I? Even ‘Butler’ would be better than nothing. And no worse than ‘House’ or ‘Steward.’

I could call Vili or Anna for that matter. That was a bit bothersome,

JUMPING JACK

as Summit Up had fields to block all calls in and out, and I had to go through a central comm. Too bothersome for me at this moment, in this mood; maybe later.

No sign of any relatives. It was still early, barely past noon. Rupert at work, no doubt, maybe even on one of his regular trips to one factory or another. Those were rarely more than overnight. Caroline had various clubs and friends and causes to divert her. I didn't believe she had any actual hobbies other than Uncle Rupert.

I went to the kitchen to find a snack. Only bots there. "I'll make my own," I told them, and assembled a sandwich. I carried it out onto one of the verandas, looking over the gardens as I ate. More spring flowers than ever. Someone did a good job designing them. I would guess a human. Definitely not my aunt or uncle.

"Ah, there you are."

"Yes, sir. Are you staying long this time?" asked the butler.

"Almost certainly a couple nights. There's no telling when duty will call me away after that." That was a nice, romantic-sounding way of saying I didn't know. "What do think of 'Major.'"

"Sir?"

"As a name. Shortened from Majordomo, which is what you are." More or less.

"I like it, sir. Major. Yes. Will the mistress and master approve?"

"We'll have to find out. I think I'll suggest my cousin begin using it. That will help."

"Indeed. The brigadier's wishes carry a great deal of weight with his parents."

Meaning he was stubborn and independent and inclined to get his way. Passionate at times. Like his grandfather, Freneau had said.

I might never be truly passionate about anything.

CHAPTER 46

MY MOTHER'S OFFICE at the Foreign Ministry was surprisingly small. She had asked me to drop by before taking off again. Ostensibly, her job involved the posting of minor diplomats. In fact, most of those she dealt with were spies of one sort or another. Observers and reporters of what was going on, for the most part, much like Jitha Jones.

"I never intended you to become any sort of agent, Jack," she told me, "but I did approve every step that has led you that direction. I truly could have had you serving here instead."

"I'm not a spy yet, Mom. I still have hopes of teaching history somewhere when this war ends and writing thick books everyone will praise but never read."

She sighed but said nothing. Mom held onto her dreams of making me a diplomat. I'd probably insult the first foreign official I ran into. Not by accident.

Her comm told her, "General Aruna has arrived."

"Please have him come in." To me she said, "Lou is here to give a briefing. He asked to stop by my office first."

How convenient I was here too. I didn't know which to blame for that. Oh, why not both?

"Good morning, Alice. Jack. Are we ready to march over and attempt to explain things?"

"In a moment. You asked that Jack be here."

"Yes, yes. We're about to launch our offensive along the Janic-Burkut frontier. I'll give a speech here to reassure everyone and then be off to join the fleet." He gave me a glance to make sure I was following, before informing me, "We may be getting you involved in the action, my boy. That's why I asked for you to be here when I give my little talk to these bureaucrats."

"I think we may have to exclude him," said Mom. "He doesn't have official clearance."

Aruna waved it off. "Say he's part of my staff. I'm tempted to steal you from Freneau anyway, Jack. You've shown a grasp of strategy and long-term planning."

"That will be of use elsewhere eventually, we hope," said Mom.

JUMPING JACK

"After the war and after he finishes his education." She did still have her hopes, didn't she? "Very well. Come along."

That meant going across a lawn into a different ministry building. I'm not sure which one. Double-doors hung open to reveal a high-ceilinged meeting room, full of ministers and sub-ministers and experts of various sorts. Dad was among them.

"You sit over there and keep quiet," warned Mom. "As difficult as that may be for you."

"Prime Minister," he began, giving a nod toward a short middle-aged woman. "Gentlefolk. There have been major incursions into the Janic worlds by the Burkuts. We need to respond."

The expected murmurs arose. I almost expected a 'hear, hear' from someone.

"We are launching a military mission to the Janic-Thule Alliance, an action to support them against further incursions and as a warning to both the Burkuts and the Aigleans. In short, we shall launch our own major incursion into Burkut space. Perhaps, if things go our way, even an occupation, but that is not our primary goal.

"A successful operation will also give us a stronger hand in any negotiations that may come. That is outside my expertise.

"Our fleets, over two hundred ships total, will begin the incursion as soon as all is in place. The target is the Ana-Ata system, the site of major enemy military installations. We intend to destroy those installations.

"General Kuulk of the Janic-Thulean Combined Force will head the operations, in concert with our own fleet commanders. That is it, as briefly and as simply as I can present it, gentlefolk, and I trust none of it will go beyond this room. I am also sure you have questions."

"Do we believe a Burkut invasion of the Janics is imminent?" came the first of those.

"Burkut may not have the resources to launch a full invasion of one of the Janic systems. Not unless the Aigleans were willing to lend them forces. We hope to discourage this."

"Those forces are needed elsewhere, aren't they?"

"Yes. Still, gaining a foothold in the Janics would give them a steppingstone to Thule."

"And to us." The Prime Minister said that. She would have been in

on the planning of it all, of course. I assumed some of these others were too. "That would be attractive to the Aiglean command. This is why an offensive of our own there might be the best step."

"It might be our last chance," came from the back of the room.

A last ditch action before making a peace. I could recognize that. Aruna had even hinted of it in his little talk.

"Why are we defending the Janics anyway? They seem pretty luke-warm about fighting the Burkuts."

"But we couldn't just hand them over for someone else to rule," came someone's answer.

"And there are the Thuleans to consider," said another.

A distinguished looking guy nearly in from of me stated, "I knew the Burkut Union well before the war. They're good people for the most part but they do feel the Janic systems should be with them." A dramatic pause. "As do many Janics." He must be a politician. Maybe a senator.

"They feel dominated by the Thuleans. There is resentment."

"This is nothing new and nothing to debate here and now," said the Prime Minister. "When this action is complete, we can look at such questions again, both the ministries and the Senate."

"So how are the logistics of this being worked out?" someone called over the cacophony that had arisen. "One fleet from Thule or Janus, all at once?"

Something more in Aruna's line. "We can jump from two different Janic worlds simultaneously. Varra and Jaak. Those have been the primary targets of Burkut raids; the Janus system itself is further away. Fleets have been gathering in all four Janic-Thule systems, as well as Trinity, awaiting word to jump."

"It would be tricky to get the timing right," someone opined.

"It would be close enough."

The Prime Minister stepped up to the podium. "The general must be on his way immediately to take part in this mission. We thank him for coming."

Aruna made his escape, Mom and I with him. "It went better than I expected," said my mother. "But it's obvious people are fed up with this war."

JUMPING JACK

The general nodded to this. "One way or another, I think this will lead to its end. Not right away, but within a few months."

Mom seemed to agree.

"Whether we can use you, Jack, I don't know. I'll be too busy to think about it, I suspect, but Errol may call you to him. Your ship isn't functional at the moment, is it?"

"No sir."

"We'd want it too, most likely. Have you pop into Ana-Ata maybe and take a look before the rest of us show up." A shrug. "Or after to give a report on the system, if we aren't completely successful. We'll see. There are other ships that can do both and there's my ride." A large, boxy black car whisked him away.

"That's just the sort of thing I was afraid he and Errol had in mind," I told my mother.

CHAPTER 47

IT WAS STILL early. Torgi would be working and I wasn't sure about seeing her anyway. I decided to call her later, just check in, tell each other we were well. That sort of thing.

I could do pretty much whatever I wanted for a while. Fly to Dummit Downs, have dinner with Nira, fly back. Fly to Fundy, sit and talk with M, read, sleep in the ship instead of McFee House. I could requisition a room at Fundy Base for that matter and stay there a day or two.

But to what point any of it? I could see the appeal of Brendon's runner at times like this, being able to just climb in and go fast, somewhere, anywhere. Around the world. Maybe twice.

"Another drink, sir?"

"No thanks, Major. I noticed some of the other bots using your name."

"I instructed them to, sir."

That was one way of getting Rupert and Caroline accustomed to it. My commie sang. "Oh, hi Aunt Caroline." — "The Radias, tomorrow night?" — "I can't guarantee I'll be here. I could be called away at any time." And hoped I would be. But there was a tentative promise to have dinner with my aunt and uncle at the home of Mister and Missus Radia and their reputedly lovely daughter. I should make an effort as long as I was their guest.

I sat there holding the device for a while. There was Veronika O'Toole's code. Why not?

"Officer O'Toole's personal communicator," came the response. "I am on patrol but you may leave a message."

"Hi, it's Jack—"

Veronika broke in. "Jack McFee. I'll make an exception for you. Even if it's against regs."

"Officer, I have to report I'm once again at loose ends."

"I'm not but I will be in half an hour. My watch ends at Seven.* Why don't you pick me up at the station? I know you can afford a cab even if you're always walking when I run into you."

So I called a cab. I didn't think Mom had canceled my expense

JUMPING JACK

account yet. "The nearest police station," I told it. Him. The cab was male.

"Is there an emergency, sir? I could call ahead."

"Not at all. I'm turning myself in."

"Sir?"

"Never mind." We had left the neighborhood of big houses and estates behind, moving in the direction of the harbor. He stopped before an unassuming two-story brick building on a street of shops and businesses. "This is it? Wait for me."

Officer O'Toole emerged from the tall front doors before I reached them. I hadn't seen Veronika standing up before. Shorter than I'd realized, squarely built, with thick tousled chestnut hair, cut short though not military short. She still wore her Halifax police uniform, tan with teal facings, trousers. I've never seen police in kilts.

Our dynamic had changed. We were no longer exchanging banter on the street, having an innocent, meaningless encounter. I think neither of us knew quite what to say.

"Hi, Niki. Ready to go?" Which was abysmally stupid but I had to say something.

"Sure. Let's swing by my place so I can change." Into the cab. I wondered how she normally got home. Rode the trolley?

Her apartment turned out to be close enough she could have walked. Small, but not as small as my room at McFee House. Maybe as big as my suite at Dummit Downs. Except with a kitchen fitted in.

"Something to drink? It's time for my after-work beer." I nodded, she brought two, we sat at her table. "When I'm on a later shift, I'd be likely to get this in a bar. Not this early in the afternoon."

"Only one?"

"That's what I allow myself. Discipline is important." A slightly self-conscious chuckle. "And not getting fat."

"Both within reason," I said, lifting my glass to her.

She started to say something about that, I think, but changed her mind. "I have to confess I recognized you had a gun because you started to reach for it the first time I stopped beside you. It was only the tiniest movement but enough to give you away."

"That's very good to know and something I'll remember. It's not

really a gun that's necessarily meant to be hidden. When I'm in uniform, it's on my belt. Like yours." She hadn't taken it off yet, nor anything else.

"Would you like to see it?" She pulled it out right then and handed it over before I could answer, butt first. It was rather large and mostly ceramic, as typical of Scotian design. Thuleans prefer metal for almost everything.

"This looks like the sort of thing the Planetary Guard issues as standard. I admittedly refuse to carry one." There was almost certainly one in a locker somewhere with my name attached to it. It could stay there. "Point thirty-six?"

"Forty. It will knock a hole in anything." She sounded rather proud of that. "We have some discretion in choosing our personal sidearms."

I decided to let her look at mine, too. She held it a moment, maybe just getting a feel for the weapon. "This isn't ceramic."

"Some sort of carbon-beryllium matrix. Before it, I carried a C-119, which is mostly metal. Your sensors would have lit up and beeped and called me bad names if I still had it. It was not at all intended for concealment."

That got a small smile. Very small. "What bore?"

"Point forty-eight."

"That's on the large side. For stoppage at close range, I'd think."

"And for safety in off-planet environments. Don't want something with a lot of penetration poking holes in the walls."

Her eyes could have been poking holes in me right then. Niki liked guns. She might even be aroused by them, talking about them, holding them. To each their own, I suppose. As we returned each other's weapons across the table, she held onto my hand, the gun still in it.

"So Jack McFee, what now?"

"We could spend the afternoon taking the trolley from end of town to the other," I suggested.

"We could spend it fucking," she replied.

"On the trolley? Scandalous!"

"Oh, you're the silliest guy I've ever met! But dangerous and competent. I like that. I like all of it, I think."

JUMPING JACK

I liked O'Toole, too. Not 'too much,' like Anna. And Vili had given me permission, hadn't she? She didn't mind.

What was I doing with a princess of Thule anyway? We didn't have any future. Niki was in my arms, our hands straying, our lips meeting. My commie called me. The tune was the one I used to specify emergencies.

"Do you have to?" the policewoman asked.

I nodded and answered. It was Jeanne Freneau. "Vili has been kidnapped. You must get to Summit Up at once. I'll be at the port with my ship."

"Understood," I replied. "Duty," I explained to Officer Veronika O'Toole, and left.

*Seven by the Scotian clock would be Two PM for us.

CHAPTER 48

ALL RIGHT, SO I did care about Vili, whatever future we might have. I cared about her more than anything else I could think of. At that moment.

The general told me what she knew as we sped toward our destination. “Your aunt and Vili started looking into the records of employees at Summit Up and, ultimately, found an engineer Bissy recognized and who had reported himself sick for a couple days. All I know beyond that is that there was gunfire and the man fled in a stolen ship, with Vili as his hostage.”

We would learn more when we arrived. Nothing could be done until then. A pair of security guards rushed us from our landing field to the armory, via tunnels I didn’t know existed. I mentioned this to one of them.

“The guy who did the shooting knew. He ran this way when he made his escape.”

Everyone was in McFarland’s office. Almost everyone. Even Grandpa Jack. Boris sat on a couch, hunched, face in his hands. He looked up when we entered. “Bissy is dead,” he stated. “He shot my Bissy.”

Aunt Bissy? Who had never harmed anyone, who had never held my Uncle Rupert’s acts against me or any other McFee? A woman I loved. Errol’s mom. When would he learn?

“We’ll get him,” I promised. “I’ll get him.”

“And I’ll be with you,” said Anna.

“Good.” I couldn’t think of anyone better for the job.

“What do we know?” asked Freneau.

Anna took charge. “The man was using a false identity. His real name is Mike Gordon. An engineer. Gordon was discharged from McFee employment some time back. He might have harbored resentment.”

“He was running a smuggling operation in one of our facilities. Damned right we discharged him,” growled my grandfather.

“After discovering his identity, Vili and Bissy went looking for him. They should have told me, damn it! I guess they only saw him as suspi-

JUMPING JACK

cious, and not a threat. He panicked, I think, and ran when they confronted him.”

“He shot Bissy down in cold blood,” said McFarland. “There was no reason. No reason at all.”

I could think of all sorts of reasons. Preventing her from raising an alarm would be number one, but also eliminating a witness, someone who knew who he was. Or maybe just anger at being found out.

“Didn’t you see any of this, Steward?” I asked.

“The man knew places where I do not have a presence, Jack. He also somehow took control of some of the sensors. I was unaware of anything until he reached the landing field.”

“A genius even if he is a crook,” my grandfather commented.

Anna took up her narrative again. “He forced Vili to accompany him to the landing area, as far as we can tell. There he used her as a hostage and stole a ship.”

“That all sounds improvised, even if he did have an escape route planned,” I said. “Especially when it comes to Vili.” And Bissy. I wasn’t going to say that.

“We doubt his intentions for being here had anything to do with her. She was a convenient hostage when he ran and now, who knows? Maybe he thinks he can get a ransom. Maybe he just thinks having her makes him safer.”

Grandpa Jack spoke up again. “He saw an opportunity, I’d think. I would guess Gordon was more interested in me. Maybe recruited to spy, maybe looking for some sort of revenge.”

“I’d say both,” Freneau told him. I thought so too.

“Blowing you up might have been his own idea. So how do we go after him?”

Boris showed interest for the first time. “We can track the stolen ship. It will transmit identity codes.”

One of his assistants jumped in. “No need. It’s just been reported at the McFee Refining Facility at Blue. A jump ship was stolen there.”

That facility was located on the next planet out from Scotia in the system, a cold and inhospitable orb named Blue. Jump ships came and went at an orbiting station, freighters mostly.

“Gordon undoubtedly has the codes to operate it,” said Anna.

“He’d have needed them even to steal it in the first place. Is it known whether he jumped?” my grandfather asked the man.

“No, sir.”

“But why else would he steal it?” I asked. “We need to go after him.”

“I’ll have alerts sent out through the system,” said Freneau, “but it is likely he has jumped away. Can I get a communication channel out?” she asked the security assistant. Steward was not permitted to do this, only a human. “And I’ll order them to have your Nativ ready. If there’s work yet to be done on it they’d better get busy! Yes, Fundy Command?”

We left her to her business. “Gordon is no jump pilot,” said Grandpa Jack, “but he would understand how to use a Li Drive without interfacing. If only to have it jump automatically to the nearest star.”

Ataensi? Or some other direction? There was more than one jump available from Scotia, and Ataensi was neither the closest nor easiest. Would he even want to jump toward Thule? Would he want to jump toward any war zone?

I didn’t think so. He was going to run and hide.

“That’s that,” said Freneau. “For now. I’ll have to keep on top of those idiots. Let’s head for Fundy. You’re coming, Anna?”

“I am.” She had her gun on her. That was all the luggage she needed.

We were rushed back to the landing field and launched at once. As we approached the station above Fundy Base, the general said to me, “You are still officially under my orders. No one will question those orders or my authority. Now it’s up to you and Anna and M to look for that stolen jump ship. Trust your instincts as to where it went.”

The first step must be Blue. I explained why to M as Fundy diminished behind us.

CHAPTER 49

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD the 'Blue' name, as the planet had more of a reddish tinge. Rust-colored orbs of its sort were pretty common all over the known universe. Some had been colonized. Earth's very first colony, before jump technology was developed, was on a planet of that sort and it was still inhabited.

No need to go down to the surface. My questions could be asked at the station above it. There was no guarantee of answers.

"He had control of the ship before we were barely aware he was here," I was told. "The man had all the proper codes, both to dock and to access the jump ship. Do you want to look at the stolen ship he left?"

"Did you check it out?" asked Anna.

"Yes, inside and out."

"Then we aren't interested in it. Someone will come for it eventually."

"It's the ship he transferred to we care about," I told him. "We'll need every scrap of information you have on it, every code. Do you know if he jumped?"

"He did, almost immediately. Too close to us! He opened up the engines full and disappeared."

"In a hurry," remarked Anna.

"With good reason. Have all the data I requested sent to the computer on my ship at once. This is a matter of military security at the highest level." It didn't hurt to say that and, in a way, it could be seen as true. He might not normally have taken the word of a kid not even wearing a uniform, but the McFee name helped.

It took longer than we would have liked but I felt having it all would be useful. Essential, even. We accelerated away from the McFee Refinery.

"I think he went toward the Wall, looking for a place to hide a while. He may have no plan beyond that at this point."

"Not to the Burkuts?" asked Anna.

"I doubt he worked for them. Nor the Sevens."

"An Aiglean operation, then."

"That would be my guess." For what it was worth. "I won't attempt

to guess whether he still sees himself as working for anybody. M, did you access the records of recorded jumps?"

"I did, Jack. Did you think he might have jumped away and back?"

"It was a thought. It would be a way to mislead any pursuit."

"There are no records that suggest it but we both know many jumps into the system are never detected."

"Yeah. And he could have jumped out again. I much doubt he is in the Scotian system." I settled into my chair and interfaced with the jump drive. That was through a simple head band, directly linking to the Garda unit. There was no need to look at any screens, though I would if trying to work with a Li Drive.

The easiest, most attractive jump away? There was a red dwarf binary closer but that orange sun would be the one Gordon would choose. I knew it was the one his Li Drive would find easiest to lock onto. Go.

"Where are we?" asked Anna.

"Bannock system," M informed her. "I have checked in, Jack, and requested all data on jumps in and out within the past twelve hours."

"Thanks, M. Let me know if the ship turns up in the records. I need to rest." One jump was no big deal but I'd been running at top speed a while. I'd treat myself to an ice cream sandwich and lie down a few minutes.

"We let you sleep a little while," Anna informed me when I emerged. Almost an hour. I should have been back to work sooner than that. I suppose my look told her I wasn't happy about it.

"You're no use exhausted. M and I were able to look over the data we received."

"There are no records of the Xarov jumping into this system."

"Which doesn't mean much. Xarov?"

"A civilian jump ship," said Anna. "A smaller one used to transport personnel and supplies, not one of the big container carriers."

"Built pre-war in the Corvan systems," M further informed me, and displayed it on a screen. "Equipped with both a Li Drive and a backup Saldhana."

"Which Gordon wouldn't know how to use."

JUMPING JACK

“So I would think. Two main drives. Both varitubes, not pulse units. Quite an array of maneuvering tubes. It almost rivals this Nativ.”

Anna scrutinized the schematics. “Roomy, isn’t it? One could live in it rather comfortably.”

“Two,” I said. I doubted Gordon would harm Vili. He might need her to use in bargaining later.

“So where now?”

“I still think he jumped into Bannock. We’ll check the most likely jumps from here and if nothing turns up, maybe go back and look elsewhere.”

“Bannock. Isn’t that an English word for some kind of bread?”

“It is. But the name here originally came from a different language.”

“Banaka,” said M. “It was anglicized by the Scotians.”

“Whatever we name it, it’s time to leave.” I again interfaced with the Garda Drive. That single red star over there drew my attention. Lock on. Go.

“This is the usual route from Scotia to Bono,” M observed. “One more jump and we’d be there.”

I had a suspicion that was where we would end up.

CHAPTER 50

HERE WE GOT lucky at last. A Xarov had been logged jumping quickly in and out of the system. The little installation here didn't have much to do besides watching the traffic. The place was not at all suited to colonization.

"He landed close in," noted Anna. "No wonder he left right away."

"Uh-huh. Do you know anything about the man? You must have seen some records before we left Summit Up." My mind wasn't really on the question; I was planning the next jump. Into the Bono system. Was Vili there?

"Only that he is a good engineer who got promoted into important positions in your company. Um, your grandfather's company." It was a good thing she changed that. "And he took advantage of it to run smuggling in and out of more than one McFee facility. He ran gambling, too, and maybe worse things."

I wouldn't ask about those. It was enough to know he was a bad guy and my grandfather had destroyed his pocket criminal empire. He should have done more than dismiss the guy. One of Grandpa Jack's failings was to think he could fix things in-house, without bothering the authorities.

"I'm ready to jump to Bono." We landed not too close in, not too far out. The orange sun hung against the backdrop of the Wall.

"This system is where Jeanne Freneau jumped to when she went through the wall. If I hadn't seen Scotia first, shining bright and yellow, it would have been my choice too. I was in a hurry at the time, as I was being shot at."

M corrected me. "We were being shot at."

If I ever attempted to jump through from this side, Bono would be the place to start. Latch onto Nevada or Utah over there. One was closer but the other was brighter and more massive, so it might not matter which.

"I'll need to talk to people here." It would be best to get into uniform, the usual Planetary Guard cadet grays. They were all I had aboard. And I had my orders, signed by General Freneau, allowing me to do almost anything. While I changed, M identified us to the authori-

JUMPING JACK

ties. Military authorities. There was a lot of military in this system, though a small colony also existed.

The apparent boss of them all, Brigadier Sullivan, spoke to me. I guess she figured I really was important. "You think this Gordon is lurking in the system somewhere," she said, when I'd given pretty much the whole story.

"And I doubt he believes he has been pursued."

"Our records do show a ship fitting your description being in the system. They also show it jumping away before we could identify it."

I must have looked as crestfallen as I felt. "There's not much of anyplace to jump from here, except back the way we came." Or through the Wall. That wasn't worth mentioning. "Not for an unskilled jumper using a Li."

She smiled at that. "We know your reputation, Jumping Jack McFee. I would imagine you are right. The only other star the drive would be likely to lock onto would be our little red neighbor. It truly is a dead end."

"Neighbor?"

"We call it the Park. I don't think there is an official name, just a number. It's almost up against the Wall."

It sounded like a good place to hide. "Maybe I should know about the Park." Or just jump in right now. No, a little caution might be wise.

"Why don't you come down then and we'll talk. I'll have you guided to the docks. Until later, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Brigadier, later."

A moment later, another voice came on. "Do you have our signal, sir?"

We did. "What are the docks?" I asked.

"That's what we call our orbiting station because that essentially is what it is. Floating docks. No one much lives there or does business or that sort of thing."

"I see. We'll be there shortly." I might as well pilot the ship in myself, though M could follow a beacon as well as I could. So could computer control, for that matter. The place looked like docks, with ships alongside here and there. Some too big to actually connect hung nearby.

One twenty-four. Yes. Little more than a place to connect the Nativ

to the structure and attach a boarding tube. If there were repair facilities they must be on some other arm of the station. "It's not so different from the secret station where we first met, M."

"But not nearly so secret, Jack."

He had me there. Anna and I went through the docking tube to find a dim-lit but spacious corridor and our escort. Sacky Baldwin.

I wondered if I was supposed to salute or hug her. "I asked to ferry you down, Jack," she said. "I wasn't told we'd be three."

Both women had been in and out of Summit Up, but I didn't think at the same time. "Lieutenant Anna Gallen, may I present Captain Sacajawea Baldwin?"

"Call me Sacky."

"Anna. Can you fit me in or do I have to hang on outside?"

"Oh, we'll make Jack do that. Come along."

A nondescript shuttle awaited us. Not a military craft at all; one would be likely to see something similar at any space port. "We need to investigate the Park," I told Sacky, as we edged out of dock.

"There's not much there."

"What's with the name?" Anna asked.

"We pilots call it the Park or the Amusement Park. The system is occasionally used for training exercises. Jump in a carrier-load of fighters, let us fly around and shoot at things, dock again and come home."

"And there are no permanent installations?"

"Not now. There used to be. We'd like to use the abandoned structure for target practice but aren't allowed." She didn't really seem to mind it much. "It's a pretty nasty place. Regular radiation bursts. But what a view of the Wall! Even on screen. I wish it were possible to get out and look at it for real."

"You must have a pretty good view here," commented Anna.

"Not that much more impressive than on Scotia really. We're hardly any closer, you know."

In comparison to the great cosmic distances known to us, no, it wasn't a big difference. But it was still some number of light years.

"Why are you at Bono?" she asked. "Or is it a top secret mission?"

JUMPING JACK

“We’re pursuing a kidnapper. And I’m convinced he is playing in your Park.”

“And he’s convinced me too,” added Anna.

“Gee, and I thought you just missed me. Coming in for a landing.”

CHAPTER 51

SACKY WAS RIGHT. The Wall didn't look all that different from Bono's surface. In truth, it might be more impressive through the windows at Fundy, without atmosphere to get in the way.

Anna and I were invited to join Mary Sullivan's mess—we were the most junior officers there—and learned about Bono, about the Park. Pretty typical military fare filled our plates. It was probably jumped in, most of it, rather than grown in the system.

"We train all sorts, not just fighter pilots. Your General Freneau sends us her graduates to learn how to react in actual combat, whether jumping a cruiser or the big transports and carriers. I believe you have some experience with that though you never passed through here."

"I was pressed into service," I claimed. "My friend Sacky, that is Captain Baldwin, must be near graduation, I would think."

"Very near. She'll do well; nothing special as a pilot but with the right attitude. Baldwin and her classmates will receive their final instructions in combat units, in whatever machines they are chosen to pilot. Here, they fly a bunch of different fighters, some of them pretty old. Lots of W-3s on hand. They were a standard carrier fighter when introduced but were quickly superseded by other designs."

"Always intended as an interim type, I understand," said a Major further down the table. "Still a lot of them in System Defense service, mostly in atmospheric trim."

Someone said, "The boy's a McFee. He should know all about the ships his family business builds."

Anna had to snicker at that.

"I make a point of knowing as little as possible about that sort of thing. I just fly them. I think I need to fly mine into your Park."

"Is this something you can speak about in front of my officers?" asked the brigadier.

"Nothing secret about it. A man kidnapped someone rather important and seems to have run here with her. The Park seems the logical place for him to hide out for a while. I understand there is nothing there."

"Not much. An old research station was once used to study the Wall

JUMPING JACK

up close. Abandoned, maybe not even airtight anymore. Rocks. Not one of them big enough to be called a planet.”

“This research station is on one of them?”

“Yes. We’ll send everything we have on the system over to your ship. I have heard you have an exceptionally advanced AI aboard.”

“Don’t let M know that,” said Anna. “It will go to his head. Wherever that is located.”

“On the opposite end from his tail,” I informed her. “I need to go in first and snoop. That is for certain.”

“Seems sensible,” agreed Sullivan. “We will stand ready to provide assistance if requested. Or perhaps we should jump a carrier in if we don’t hear from you after a certain length of time.”

“Give the kids something to do,” said the Major.

“That sounds like a good plan,” I said. “If you do send in a carrier, impress on your pilots that Her Royal Highness, Princess Vilma of Thule is aboard the ship over there, so there is to be no shooting at it.”

I had not been so sure that information should be shared but if it made Vili safer, everyone on Bono could know it.

After the meal, I asked if we could be ferried back up to the docks. The brigadier expressed surprise. “I thought you would want to be on solid ground for a night,” she said. “And you have a good friend here.”

“My mission is my only concern at the moment. I am tempted to go up and jump right now.”

“You need some sleep first,” Anna chided. “We both do. There’s nothing we can do on the ship.”

So I allowed us to be shown to quarters but made it very clear I did not intend to show up in the common area later and mingle with anyone. Not even Sacky.

We stood looking into one of the spartan little rooms. “Just how good a friend is Sacky?” Anna asked.

“Not as good as you.”

That earned a rude noise but I think she might have liked hearing it. “You saved her life, didn’t you? I remember that.”

“Maybe. Or prevented her and my cousin from being prisoners in the Sevens for the rest of the war.”

“I saw the way she looked at you. And at me! I would hazard she’s

one of those four you claimed to have had sex with. The one who wasn't Thulean."

There were five now, as Anna well knew, but I chose to only nod.

"Is there still something there?"

Was there? "Not so long ago, the idea of making a life with Sacky Baldwin seemed attractive. It was only an idea, a daydream in idle moments. One of many daydreams."

"Do you daydream about lots of girls, Jack? Not about sex. I know everyone daydreams about that!" We both had to smile. Only for a moment. "About having lives with them?"

"Even about having one with you, Anna."

The admission did not surprise her. Not that I could tell. "I may have had that daydream too. I think we both dismiss it as nothing more." A moment of introspection before going on. "I'm not sure Sacky does."

"Every daydream fades away." Sacky's career would see to that.

"I suppose, but some are more persistent than others. You need to work to make sure yours and Vili's are."

"Right now, getting her back is all I care about, all that fills me and pushes away every daydream. But who can say about the future? About Vili and me, when we both return to normal lives, no war, no running here and there. When I'm the student again and she is the princess."

"Who can say, you ask? Only you and Vili. Remember, you may be Jumping Jack but you can't keep jumping from one woman to another."

I considered giving my friend some similar advice about her own life. Instead, I went to bed.

CHAPTER 52

“I THINK WE should wear our flight suits,” I told Anna.

“That’s something I never expected to hear you say. You hate them.” When her amusement faded, she asked, “Helmets, too?”

“Having them close would be enough for now. I have a suspicion we will have to get out of the ship at some point.”

“Oh.” She thought on that. “We need our guns then. On the outside of our flight suits, I mean.” Anna always carried her gun somewhere on her.

Anna’s sidearm was the twin of my own, a Thulean C-140. It might have been good for one of us to carry something with a little more range, maybe even a beam gun. A beam rifle, as long as I was wishing for things we didn’t have. Or even Niki O’Toole’s big handgun.

We could have requisitioned something on Bono. I wasn’t going back down. I was going forward.

Ahead of us, Vili, and my future. One way or another. I could very much see Vili and me sharing a life rather like that of my parents. I thought she would like that. No, she would love it. It would fit her. An estate to tend, a bit of dabbling in public affairs but not a career of it. Wine from our own vineyards. A big library, where I could write those thick books. Or nap.

I donned my headband, interfaced with the Garda Drive. That red star was easy to hone in on, wasn’t it? Nothing else that direction to distract one, pull one away. Not much the other direction. There was another red star the other way, the one from which I had jumped to Bono. And Scotia, bright and yellow, further off. I had no doubt I could make a direct jump home if I wanted. Others had, but it was pretty far and very much discouraged.

Back to my goal. The Park. Lock on. Jump.

Desolate. The one sun looked like a tiny hole someone had punched in the darkness, a pinprick of red light. It was a fairly bright star, as red dwarfs go, but distant. “It’s a lot to search,” I said. Maybe to M, maybe to Anna. Maybe to myself.

“We’ll start with that research place, right?” said Anna. “It’s well out from the sun.”

To avoid the worst of its radiation, to get a clearer view of the Wall. That hung huge to one side.

"We're not that terribly far from it," M told us. "No more than half an hour if we opened up our engines."

He sounded eager to do just that. I don't know if I'd ever heard the AI sound eager before. At least not that eager. "We'll cruise in slowly and carefully. Take a good look at everything. You've laid out a course?"

"Yes, Jack. It's on your screen."

It looked good, not that I'd had any doubts. "Lots of rocks. More than could ever have been charted. Another reason not to hurry." I started us on our way and then went back and donned my flight suit. We didn't carry standard vacuum suits, much less coffins, but these would do. And they were easier to move around in.

My C-140 I strapped at my waist. Left side, butt forward, to make the action of drawing it similar to when it was concealed. Nothing to do now but sit, watch the screens. Our position was high on the wall. I almost fancied I could see over it. Take a look with the jump drive, Jack. Yes, it did seem that way. The cloud of dust and gas was thinner further up, eventually a nebulous mist only half-concealing what stars lay beyond. Stars that had been explored, stars yet unknown, never visited. None that I could put a name to. None near.

Further down, I could sense what I thought was Nevada. Or maybe its neighbor, a similar orange star and the third system in their league. Deseret, they called it. This little red star would be nearly impossible to target from the other side. I certainly wouldn't try it. But from here to there? It might just be possible to cross the Wall. Easier than from Bono.

I wasn't here to attempt it. I broke my link with the Garda Drive.

"I estimate ten minutes," announced M. "And I have detected the stolen ship. There is no attempt to hide its signatures, though its power seems quite low."

So he truly was here. I had not been positive, I had felt my doubts, thought maybe I had taken us nowhere, while Gordon escaped. With Vili.

It was near the station. He must have known about the facility,

JUMPING JACK

intended to go there from the first. He might even have been there before.

We approached a large asteroid, dwarfing those around it. One might even call it a planetoid as it seemed roughly rounded. Well, maybe more a potato than an apple. It didn't seem to tumble at all, but slowly spun along its axis. It would take hours to rotate completely. That would have made it a good choice of location for the research facility. Not much gravity and no atmosphere. A number of smaller rocks accompanied it, a swarm of them. Orbited it, I decided. Among them was the stolen jump ship. It was not likely be noticed unless one were specifically looking for it,

I could spy the research center with my screen at the highest magnification, a pair of low, connected buildings, some dishes pointed haphazardly. Once directed toward the Wall, I figured. And there were lights at it. Left burning for the decades since it was abandoned or was someone there?

"You should be able to set us down on this planetoid," said M. "The gravity is not strong enough to prevent landing and launching."

"But both could be tricky," I felt. We would feel the extra mass of the jump element as we got closer. This Nativ would handle worse than my mom's ship did on Scotia.

"We have more power now," he pointed out. "And this ship is constructed to withstand quite a lot of stress."

Gordon could not set his larger jump ship down, that was obvious. If he was in the old facility, he had to have some way to get across to it. So would the researchers who once worked here; chances are a good-sized carrier brought them and they were able to shuttle to their base.

A big ship like the one he stole could well have carried a shuttle. Or at least coffins suits. One could cross that space in one, but I wouldn't want to. It was being allowed to slowly circle the planetoid, along with the rocks that surrounded it. Set to automatically correct now and again with a burst from one maneuvering tube or another.

So we couldn't hide from it but we could set down on the opposite side of the asteroid from the research center. I didn't like doing it. I could envision us stuck there in this empty system and gave thanks Brigadier Sullivan intended to send in a carrier in a few hours.

And to watch in case Gordon bolted for Bono. There was probably not much they could do if he chose to, but we'd at least be able to continue following. By now, every system in the Scotian Group would have been alerted to watch for the stolen jump ship. That was a worst case I didn't like to think about.

M and Control and I managed a landing. I did most of the work, of course! "I guess we walk now," I told Anna, and put on my helmet. A few minutes of checking everything, especially communications, and we were out of the air lock.

"This is a new experience for me," I told my companion.

"I've done it in training," came her reply. "We neglected that with you."

There was not really enough gravity to walk. Nor even to keep us attached maybe, though I didn't test it. Each of us had a small on-off tube that let us pretty much fly over the surface. We held them for more control but they could be stowed on our backs. It might have looked more like jumping. Slow, clumsy jumping.

"The relatively large element in the stolen ship is going to start pulling rocks toward it," I commented. Mostly because I'd just thought of it.

"Would that make it harder to jump away?"

"It might, if they attached themselves. Extra mass."

"We're not going to allow Gordon to jump away, so it doesn't matter. Which door do we knock on?"

"The one directly ahead. Can you feel just a bit of a pull toward it? There's a gravity field operating in there. Do we have codes to let us in, M?"

"No codes needed. Just push the buttons."

"No secrecy needed here," said Anna. "Just scientists going in and out. And not very often, I'd think."

A minute later, we were inside.

CHAPTER 53

AIR CIRCULATED BUT I wasn't going to remove my helmet. Not yet. Anna pulled hers off and set it on a shelf by the inner air-lock door. A shelf probably intended for just that purpose.

"Sullivan warned this place might not be airtight," I reminded her.

"I can't shoot with that thing on my head. And it gets in the way dangling on my back." Those seemed reasons enough for her.

Pretty good reasons maybe. I removed mine and set it beside hers. "No one to welcome us," I whispered. I had no idea how sound might travel in this place.

"So let's go looking for them." The corridors were narrow and no more than half the lights set in their walls worked. Dark rooms opened to either side. There was no point in looking into them, at least not yet. A stairs.

"That might lead to their observatory," I said. "Gordon might be there if he is watching for anything."

"Then we go up carefully."

My guess had been right. A roomful of equipment. I doubted most of it functioned. Dark screens. And a window, opening to all the glory of the Wall.

At the moment. It could be facing the opposite way in a couple hours.

Purple. The Wall didn't have that look to it back home or from any other vantage point I could recall. Yeah, I'd only seen it on screens in most of those other places. Back home on Scotia one could just step out at night and look at it. Unless you were on the wrong side of the planet, of course. Come autumn, Dummit Downs would be on that wrong side, but one might glimpse a ghost of it during the day.

"I could stand here and watch it for hours," whispered Anna.

"Me too." Shapes within the clouds, oh-so-slowly shifting, lit by some internal light. A nimbus playing along the Wall's upper edge, rose and violet, and the infinite black reaches of space beyond.

Yes, yes, I know the universe isn't infinite. Let me be poetic. Something else had caught my eye. "I would say that is a shuttle," I told Anna.

"It looks small."

"M, can you make out that shuttle?" No answer. "I don't think he can hear us in here." We couldn't hear him, anyway. "Oh, it's this room. It's likely to be shielded." The whole place might be shielded, what with the radiation in this system.

"Then let's get out. Do you think he'll come in the way we did?"

"If he does, he's sure to spot our helmets."

Which meant we needed to beat him there.

"Jack, are you there?"

"I am, M. We were in an area where comms wouldn't work." We were running up the hall toward the air lock. Yes, running. There was enough gravity being generated in here.

We seemed to have beat him. We grabbed our helmets and ducked into the closest dark room. "Do you know if Gordon is near?" I asked M.

"I can't tell from here, Jack. You will remember I am on the other side of this piece of rock. However, I believe he went to a docking port rather than using the air lock you did."

Of course. He could pull his shuttle right up to it. No vacuum suit needed.

"Why did they have an air lock at all?" wondered Anna.

"I'd guess in case they needed to work on something outside. Chase the space birds off their antennae."

"They are a nuisance, aren't they? Where is this docking port?"

"In the other building." I didn't have to ask M that. There had been no schematics of the place in the records on Bono but there had been pictures of the exterior.

Back up the hall. We carried our helmets with us this time, attached to our backs beside our little thrust units, though there was no particular reason to. No more than there had been before. "This must be where the two sections join."

"Looks like it," I agreed. A short hallway, but tall and arched. A barrel vault. "I'd bet it is living quarters and storage rooms in the building ahead, science in this one."

"No more than three or four occupants, I'd think."

That sounded reasonable. We cared only about two. Light shone

JUMPING JACK

ahead, stronger light. We needn't say anything to each other; we both knew to slow down, move more cautiously. A kitchen. Mike Gordon was going about the mundane task of preparing a meal.

He was a tall man, thin and narrow of shoulder. One might have been deceived if one didn't note the taut sinews beneath his jumpsuit. And he was alone. Was Vili still on the ship? Or could he already have her somewhere in this facility, in one room or another?

I didn't think we should confront him until we knew. "Come and eat," he called. We knew now. "Don't be obstinate, girl. It won't do either of us any good."

Vili emerged from a doorway. "Ah, thank you for joining me, princess." I disliked the mockery in his voice. I disliked the way he looked at her even more.

Gordon tilted his head, as if he were listening to something, and turned directly toward where Anna and I hid, crouched in the dark hall. He said something I couldn't make out. Not to Vili but as if he were on comm. Of a sudden, I was pressed into the floor. It felt like one of Nira's horses was sitting on me. My head wouldn't lift but I could see Anna was in the same predicament.

"Now here's something new," the man said, taking a step forward and drawing a handgun. "I've know about this place for years. It's not the first time I've stayed a while." He frowned. "I suppose they must know on Bono now. Too bad. Anyway, I made sure to install a few defenses. This is the first time I've been able to use them."

"What did you do to them?" asked Vili.

"A powerful, concentrated gravity field. They obliged by being in just the right place." He took aim.

Vili suddenly, unexpectedly, hit him with a high kick.

"My best student ever!" wheezed Anna. Simultaneously, I managed to move my hand far enough to hit the control for the thrust tube on my back, broke free from the field and skidded across the floor, powering into him somewhere around the ankles. His gun went flying.

Anna wasn't slow to follow my lead and came tumbling out herself. I found myself grappling with Gordon and knew I didn't have a chance. Not in a flight suit, not with all the gear I had hanging on me, no matter how well Anna had trained me.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

But we were three to one. Anna grabbed him around the waist. Vili wisely retrieved his weapon and covered our melee. Ow. A knee to my midsection. The suit might have been to my advantage there. All three of us rolled across the room.

Then he stopped struggling. "I give," he choked out. "I surrender." We all rose, Anna and I with guns in our hands, Gordon with his back against the metal wall. Which unexpectedly opened behind him. He fell back and disappeared. Anna sent a couple rounds after him. We both doubted they connected.

"Something else he installed, I'd think," said Anna.

"He's not important. Vili. How are you? Did he mistreat you?"

Anna shook her head. "I'd say kidnapping is mistreatment."

"Listening to him was mistreatment! He would talk like a crazy man. He'd say my mom would pay a big ransom or he'd sell me in the Nings or Agora. Then he'd claim he was going to keep me himself and rebuild what he called his empire."

"Jack," came M's voice in my comm. Anna's too, I assumed. "The shuttle has just pulled away from this asteroid. Is there anything I should do?"

"Not a thing. I'll be there shortly and then we'll all go home."

CHAPTER 54

I BROUGHT THE Nativ to the docking tube. It had been a little slow to lift off but I had confidence in its abilities—and those of the new engines—now. Vili and Anna came over and I cleared the asteroid a second time. I could jump right now.

But Mike Gordon was over there. It wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on him for a few minutes, see if he jumped. I'd certainly like to see him in custody. Or worse. The man had killed Bissy.

Anna came forward and took the seat beside me. "Concentrated gravity?"

"Akin to what some call a tractor beam. Gravity fields are in more of our useful gadgets than most of us realize."

"I'd guess there were other traps. Maybe building them was his hobby when he was holed up there alone. And now what will he do?"

"Try to jump away, I'd think. I'm surprised he hasn't already."

"Maybe I winged him. Maybe he's lying on the floor over there, dying."

"We can only hope. Damn. There was some movement."

Vili joined us. "What is so interesting?" We were both staring into the screens.

"Gordon is up to something," said Anna.

"I think he's trying to edge his way out of those rocks. He looks pretty much hemmed in." I watched for a few more seconds before adding, "If he gets frustrated he may attempt to jump from a standstill."

"Is that harder?"

"No, but it can give you a big jolt. If you're already moving, it smooths the jump out."

"He's trying to push the boulders away but they're *sticking* to him."

"If I were in that predicament, I'd tuck all my maneuvering tubes in to make them less vulnerable and just push on through. Then accelerate and hope the ship would shed at least some of those rocks."

"Not in this ship," objected M.

"No. It doesn't have enough mass to get into that sort of trouble in

the first place. He must have visited in smaller ships before and didn't know this might happen."

"I'll bet he had a hired pilot, too," Vili said.

The ship suddenly blinked out. And blinked back in. Rocks went flying in many directions. "An unsuccessful jump attempt," I mused.

"Because of the rocks?"

I had to admit I didn't know. In theory—as I understood theory—the jump field would extend to a certain amount of mass around the element and no further. What was within it would jump; what was outside wouldn't. He would take along some rocks but he should be able to jump.

Vili had an idea. "Maybe he wasn't trying to jump to Bono."

"Of course. He tried to get the Li Drive to take him somewhere else and it balked. Unable to lock on."

"Smart girl," remarked Anna.

I wouldn't argue that. "It's possible he tried to get it to take him through the Wall."

The ship blinked again. And again and again, faster each time. Then it disappeared for good. "Did he finally make it?" asked Anna.

I had to admit my ignorance a second time. "I don't know."

"I think it's still blinking," said Vili. "So fast we can't detect it."

"I concur," M stated.

"In some sort of loop. The ship will fall apart in time. But Gordon would fall apart much sooner." I was fairly certain he was already dead. "Remind me to never attempt to force a Li Drive through the Wall."

"Hey, are we late for the party?" came a new voice.

"We're afraid so," responded Anna. "We rescued the princess all on our own."

"And Mike Gordon seems to have self-destructed. You fighter pilots will have to shoot at something else."

"Aw." That may have come from more than one comm. A flight of W-3s came whizzing by. Sacky flew one of them, I would think.

"I'm saying good bye then. If you're out there, Sacky, it was good to see you." And with that, I jumped away from the Park.

Bono. Jump again. I resisted the temptation to go directly to Scotia but followed the path that had carried me to Vili, one jump after

JUMPING JACK

another, no rest. "One of you can report in," I mumbled, when the yellow sun appeared on the screen. "I need to rest."

But someone insisted on speaking with me within a few minutes. "You know there's going to be a promotion for this," Errol McFee informed me. "And at least one medal."

"Great." I'm sure he understood my lack of enthusiasm.

"We were surprised when you didn't show up on our orders. Jeanne Freneau explained."

"Uh-huh. Oh, Errol, I'm sorry about your mother."

"And I thank you for going after the man who killed her. You're certain he's dead?"

"Almost. Or stuck in a loop we can't understand until the end of time."

"That would do as well. Freneau will definitely want you to write up some sort of paper about it. Are you heading to Fundy?"

"We are. I think. Vili's at the helm so there's no telling." The princess made a face at me.

"Getting her back was pretty good too."

"I thought so. How did your action go?"

The brigadier did not answer immediately. "Indecisive. We did some damage, probably discouraged them from any major incursions for a while."

"Something to strengthen us at the bargaining table."

"Exactly. The primary goal."

Vili made a different sort of face at that, an introspective one, perhaps a sad one. She knew the fate of the Janic-Thule Alliance might be decided at that bargaining table.

Errol signed off. I didn't feel like rising out of my chair. Maybe I'd rest right here. "We're moving awfully slow, aren't we?"

"That's what you set when you came out of the last jump, Jack," M informed me.

"We'll take forever this way." I started to accelerate. There was immediate pain, pain like someone had clobbered me with a sledge hammer. "One of the new dampening fields is out," reported M.

"No kidding," I muttered. "Is everyone all right?"

"I feel like all the breath was knocked out me," said Vili

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"I rolled out of the bunk," Anna yelled from the back. "For a moment I thought I was fighting Gordon again."

"Give us a slow, steady acceleration, something I can handle," I asked M. This time I'd let him handle it, while I tried to catch my breath.

It was a good thing there wasn't any emergency. I couldn't have run away from anything quickly enough, unless I jumped. I started to remind M to also plan for a long steady deceleration but he would know that and would have planned it before ever I thought of it. He was probably running diagnostics on the faulty field at the same time.

"Another reason to be checking in at Fundy."

"They did rush on getting the units installed," said M.

"It was necessary. I suppose this ship will continue to be repaired, refitted, repurposed as need arises. After the war? Who can say? I don't know what will become of you, M."

"I can be transferred into a different ship. Or even into a fixed installation somewhere."

Like House. "I just hope someone remembers we're a team."

"I'll be certain to remind them, Jack."

CHAPTER 55

IT WAS INEVITABLE word would get out. I, who had previously evaded public notice, was suddenly famous. As famous as my famous brother and cousin. ‘Jumping Jack Rescues Princess’ read the headlines. I hid at Fundy and avoided interviews. So did Vili.

We’d be housed there a while, Vili and Anna and me. There would be no place safer for the princess than a base on the moon, surrounded by military personnel. But we would leave, in time; we must leave. Our lives would move on. Move in different directions.

While we stayed, news came that an agreement had been reached for the citizens of the three Janic systems to vote whether to remain in the alliance with Thule or join the Burkuts. Most believed they would choose to break away. Then, the war would probably end for Thule, at least war with the Burkut Union. Would they continue to support Scotia and the Corvans or become neutral? Far fewer felt they knew the answer to that.

“There wouldn’t be much reason for me to stay on Scotia anymore,” Vili told me. “According to Torgi, they’re already talking about reducing the staff at the embassy. The Janics would all go home if they choose to leave the alliance.”

The medal they’d given me a year ago would be from an entity that no longer existed. The one from the Janic-Thule Combined Force, with its red ribbon, not the one Vili’s mom had pinned on. Vili had been awarded the Janic medal at the same time, for much the same reason. The Medal of Valor.

I had a new medal now. My second one from Scotia, hung on me by some Admiral I’d never seen before. That didn’t matter as he’d never seen me either. Very few Planetary Guard officers had! Yet, I was now a lieutenant commander in the Guard, with the proper insignia to pin on my uniform. Yes, the same gray one, when I could. I had great doubts I would ever rise any higher in the Planetary Guard. We would part ways when the war came to its close.

“We’ll bust you out of here soon,” said Jeanne Freneau, taking a seat beside me in the canteen. I was taking a break from doing nothing.

“Good. Anna and Vili are even more bored than me.”

"I wanted to get you to Bissy's funeral but you'd just made it back and there was too much going on around you."

I hadn't even thought of there being a funeral. Someone should have said something. Errol should have said something.

"I'm still officially attached to your command, aren't I?" I hadn't seen orders saying otherwise.

"Yes. We won't be able to get away with that much longer. If anyone knew what to do with you, we wouldn't have got away with it this long."

"They can always send M and me back out on patrol. The Nativ is ready to go."

"It's not been that long since you were out there, but an awful lot happened in that time. Where were you last operating?"

"In systems along the borders of Ning space."

"A lot of turmoil in the Nings. The Association has completely collapsed."

"And the Aigleans are pressing the Agora and even the Hansa. I can see why they'd rather not have Scotia still as an enemy on their flank."

She gave that an indulgent smile. "Don't let Aruna hear you. He'll try to get you on his staff again."

"I've had too much free time to think about stuff like that."

"You should be thinking about jumping and the paper I asked you to write."

"Explaining what happened? How can I when we don't truly understand jumping itself?"

"We understand the math."

Someone might. I didn't. "But not what goes on in our own minds"

A slow nod. Freneau had to admit the truth of that. "There are all sorts of ways to describe what happens in a jump and each has a certain validity. Ultimately, they are all metaphors. We compress time and space. We become time and space. We roll time and space up and stick it in our pocket."

"We exist in two places at once." That was one of the more common ones. Maybe no reason to even voice it.

"Or in infinite places and we choose one."

"I think maybe that one works best for me." And it pointed me

JUMPING JACK

toward a thought. "Maybe Mike Gordon is making infinite jumps, with his drive unable to choose one."

"That's possible. Or something else entirely. Put it in whatever you write up. It's all a step toward understanding, even when it's wrong."

I wondered if the general's 'Mazdan mysticism,' as Grandpa Jack put it, was related to that desire to understand. She might see jumping as part of it all. That wasn't for me.

"So you were saying you could get us out of Fundy Base?"

"I was saying it might happen. We certainly can't keep Princess Vilma here forever. You and Anna?" She shrugged. "Maybe no one cares anymore."

"Maybe they never did. Anna is still attached to Vili, though. Officially." We hadn't seen any new orders on that, either.

"Yes, though the princess should no longer be a target for anyone. Were it up to me, I'd send you all down to your family home for a while, and away from anything remotely military."

But maybe not Summit Up. Vili's last memories of the place were not pleasant. She had witnessed the murder of Aunt Bissy. I wasn't sure she was past the trauma of that, however solid her princess facade was. "Some time at Dummit Downs couldn't hurt any of us," I agreed.

"Until we work it out, why don't you come work for me? Help me teach the latest bunch of kids who think they can jump."

"Why not?"

CHAPTER 56

I COULD CERTAINLY jump with the Saldhana but it felt clumsy to me. The general and I agreed it was the drive to learn, if our students had any talent at all. Any lessons learned on it could be transferred to the Li Drive. The opposite was not so true.

I'd had a rudimentary understanding of the Saldhana Drive when I first came under Freneau's tutelage. All my jumps on my first mission, a little before that, had been with the Li. I thought I was pretty good with it, interfacing, not just letting its AI do all the work.

And maybe I was good, but I got way better. I learned the Ceña Drive, still widely used—and relatively low cost—and, most importantly, the Garda, which depended more on the human mind and less on computers than any other. I hadn't jumped with anything else since.

My student and I linked up with the drive again. Yes, that was the way. I was pretty sure I could simply observe this time. "Jump when you're ready," I told her. "No need to hurry. No one's shooting at you yet." That could happen.

Ah, nicely done. "Now we jump back," I told her.

When we docked a little later, at the orbiting station above Fundy, I was called to the general's office. "I'm losing my best teacher already," she announced. "You're officially on leave and have permission to escort your friends to your home. To which they have agreed, by the way."

I thought they would have agreed to anything that got them out of Fundy. I shuttled down to the moon's surface to find Anna had already arranged transport. And for Christiana Torgerson to join us.

"Torgi expects to be sent home," Anna confided. "We can pick her up in Halifax."

I would have bypassed the capital altogether. A military shuttle took us from Fundy to Central Station. There, the big screen in the reception area displayed 'Ceasefire In Effect.'

"Everywhere?" wondered Vili.

I didn't know. "That must mean more negotiations are underway."

JUMPING JACK

With the Aigleans this time? I could find out—I knew important people—but it didn't matter so much to me at the moment.

From Central directly down to Halifax. Torgi was waiting at the port. "We're taking a shuttle like normal people this time," Anna let her know. "Jack will have to pretend he's normal."

A shuttle to the port near the estate. Only one stop along the way. It was fine with me. I was in no hurry. We could even have taken the train, as far as I was concerned.

"Is this it?" yawned Torgi as we touched down.

"Suchet," Vili told her. "There's supposed to be a twenty minute layover."

"Oh." The girl closed her eyes again.

"There's a direct shuttle from Halifax to Port Brunswick once a day," I informed my traveling companions. "I suspect it was added to accommodate important people who visit the Downs."

"Including your parents."

"You can even include me if you wish."

I don't think any of them wished. When we got going again, Anna told me, "Although we are supposedly no longer threatened, I was given orders not to allow Vili off the grounds of Dummit Downs. No air cars, no swimming in the ocean."

"And who is going to check whether we sneak away?"

"There are spies everywhere! I suspect that woman over there in the polka-dot tunic of being one."

I gave her a glance. "She does look suspicious. So does her toddler. But remember, you aren't in charge there. As a member of the Scotian Planetary Guard, and a lieutenant commander to boot, I'll be the one giving orders."

She smirked. "Unless your mom countermands them."

"There is always a chain of command," I conceded.

Half an hour later we were descending. "Here's the Port," I said.

"Which port?" asked Torgi. It would have seemed a sensible question to her.

"*The* Port. Port Brunswick. We just call it the Port around here."

"Oh, the place they raise the fishies," said Vili. "Will someone pick us up?"

"It's always possible." I expected to board another shuttle for the last miles. A considerably smaller one—essentially an air-car. It was the usual way to get back and forth.

I was mistaken. Brendon was there in one of our own air-cars. "After what Jack did to your toy?" asked Anna as she climbed in. She claimed the front seat.

"Errol assures me it was all Mom's doing. I guess I'll go along with that."

"Wise," I told him. "I'm willing to blame her too." We set off, following the road. There was a lane for air-car traffic, where we sped by the wheeled vehicles. Brendon did like to go fast.

"Hey," I asked, "did you ever pilot a W-3? I saw a bunch of them at the school at Bono."

"Not in combat. The design was very much Errol's baby. His first kill was with one in the Dakotas."

"Maybe I should switch from writing your grandfather's biography to Errol's," said Vili. "I was interrupted before I barely got started." Her voice trailed off on that.

"I'd recommend writing your own story," said Brendon. "It will help you deal with all that happened."

Brendon could be remarkably sensible at times.

CHAPTER 57

"If BRENDON HAD worn his uniform you'd know he's a colonel now," Nira told us.

He was dressed like a farmer just in from the fields, down to the dun trousers tucked into his boots. Brendon always favored that look. And managed to make it look smart. He did that with anything he wore.

"And if I was in mine you'd realize I'm a lieutenant commander."

"Gosh," said Vili. "I'm just a sergeant! Reserve."

"We should make her salute us," I told Brendon.

"Anna too. We outrank her."

"Don't look at me," piped up Torgi. "I'm with the diplomatic service!"

"Thuleans don't salute," Anna stated. "You know that by now. Are you home because of the ceasefire, Brendon?"

"Pretty much. I took advantage of it. Fighting had been heavy in our sector lately. Lots of intrusions on both sides."

"But no major pushes from the Aigleans, right?" I asked. "Keeping you on your toes while they concentrate their effort elsewhere."

"Could be. It's hard to see the big picture from where I've been sitting."

I doubted he wanted a better seat. Did I?

Well, yes, of course. I always had. That's why I studied history. I could view it all from that seat. "Do we have time to get into trouble?" I asked. "Or should we eat first?"

"Never get into trouble on an empty stomach," advised Anna. "It wouldn't hurt to pop into our rooms too. Same as last time?"

"Yes, Anna," said House. "They are ready for you."

"Good. I'm going to go get cleaned up." She took off, Vili and Torgi in her wake.

I could probably change or get a shower or something myself. Or I could sit here on the deck and have another drink. I was still there when Anna returned, alone.

She plopped down beside me and asked point-blank, "You haven't had sex since before Vili was kidnapped, have you?"

“No. It was hard to get together on Fundy, and Vili has seemed, well, distant.”

This seemed to match what she’d thought. “Then no sex with Vili. I trust with no one else. You and Sacky didn’t sneak off while I was distracted, did you?”

I had to laugh at that. Then I told her the story of Officer O’Toole.

While I spoke, she messed with her commie. She held it up at the end to display a picture of Niki. “Attractive, in her way. And older than you again.” I might have known it would be easy to access her records.

“So, for a moment at least, you were ready to have sex with the policewoman.”

“That moment came and went, and won’t come back.”

“I can believe that, Jack. I saw how single-minded you were when Vili was in danger.”

I did focus, didn’t I? “I would have done the same were it you.”

She didn’t say whether she believed that too.

Dinner was as good as ever. Brendon certainly was going to get very fat when he lived full-time again at Dummit Downs. I wasn’t sure how Mom and Dad stayed trim. Me? At heart, I might have been as abstemious as my grandfather. Immoderate in moderation. My new motto.

A late dinner and a long day. All of us soon headed for our rooms. I walked down the hall beside Vili, kissed her outside her door. We had hardly even done that since we had parted at Summit Up. There were no words; she went into her room, I into mine opposite.

Right to bed but I couldn’t sleep. I turned this way, that way. I thought of asking House for some music. That can take my mind off all else, let it relax, let me drift into slumber. A different music sounded, my door chime.

“Open,” I said. I didn’t feel like getting up and going into my lounge. And who could it be but Vili?

Oh, lots of people, sure. Brendon might want to talk about something, or even Anna. I heard the door close. A voice in the dark. “Is it all right to be here, Jack?” asked Vili. A giggle. That didn’t sound like Vili.

“Very all right.” A soft, swishing sound. It took a moment to recog-

JUMPING JACK

nize it as a robe falling to the floor. She sat down on the edge of my bed. Someone sat down on the other side.

Well, this brought back memories of my first encounter with Thulean women. Vili and Torgi slipped into bed with me. I asked no questions.

CHAPTER 58

"I'VE NEVER BEEN to Janus," Torgi told us. "I suppose it won't be as easy to visit now."

We'd just heard the Janics had voted to part from Thule. "I grew up more on Janus than on Thule. But Thule is my home. I'm a Thulean now," stated Vili.

"I only jumped in and out of the system once," I admitted, mostly just to say something. "I would guess you've spent time there," I said to Anna.

"Both planets." The Janus name came from the fact there were two quite habitable planets in the system, the conceit being they looked in and out. "And I've visited Jaak, but not Varra. Trained some at a school there. Damned cold place!"

"In a couple thousand years the companion star should swing around and change that," Vili said.

That was a concern for the Janics of the future. Or the Burkuts. There was uncertainty as to whether the three systems would still be joined together at all. Oh, sure, in a couple thousand years, both Janic and Burkut were likely to be forgotten, only names from the distant past.

Vili rose. "I think my breakfast has settled enough. Who wants to ride with me?"

"I went out at dawn," said Brendon. "I always like it best then. Ride with me tomorrow, if Jack will let you out of bed."

That only brought a laugh from the princess. I wasn't that surprised he knew about Vili. I very much doubted he had an inkling of what happened last night. Anna, on the other hand—one could never be sure how much she knew.

"I'll go," I told her, "at a sensible time like this. Don't expect me to join you in the early morning."

Only we two went to the stables. I chose the same good-mannered mare I'd ridden previously. "Let's ride all the way to the ocean," said Vili. "You said we would sometime."

"Are you sure you shouldn't include Torgi?" asked House.

I wasn't—and still am not—certain how much sarcasm was packed

JUMPING JACK

into that. It was certainly a new level for House. Neither Vili nor I was able to keep from breaking into laughter. "I have to have Jack to myself sometimes," said Vili.

"I would think so. Enjoy your ride."

"We're confusing House," I commented, when I was certain we were beyond her range. "You might be confusing me some."

"How so? I talked to you about Torgi, remember? And she's been lonely. No sex at all in months and months."

How terrible. "We can't have that, I guess."

"You sound like Housie now."

We rode a little further before she blurted, "It was really Torgi's idea."

"From the start?"

"Uh-huh. I might not be Thulean enough to have suggested it myself. But she's our friend. It's not the same as if you had sex with a stranger or casual acquaintance."

Like Niki O'Toole. I'd known that at the time, that it wasn't the same thing. That Vili had not given me permission. "I may not be Thulean enough either," I told her.

The ride to the sea took less than an hour but not much less. The bluff we had visited before was the closest spot that was easy to reach. "We should have packed a lunch," I said. "A picnic here." As it was, we'd get back after lunchtime.

"Call Brendon and tell him to bring one. And Nira and Torgi and Anna, of course!"

I didn't think I'd do that, but at that moment my commie sang to me. It was Brendon. We exchanged a few words.

"My parents are home. I wasn't expecting them to show while we were here."

She looked out over the sparkling Bay of Brunswick. "Then let's get back and see why."

Why? All sorts of news to share. The parents were in the library when we returned, their choice of venue for 'serious' discussion, dressed in the clothes they wore to work, standing before the tall book-cases. The first item was that Vili was being called back to Thule. This was followed by the information—not yet known to the public—that

the Thulean Assembly had accepted the Burkut peace terms and the split, and scheduled a plebiscite on the future of the monarchy.

"Then they're out of the war," said Brendon. "Completely."

"So it seems. Thule never really had a quarrel with the Sevens nor with the Aigleans, though I think they would have liked to see us retain control of Oz," my father replied.

"But they won't fight for it," I added.

"No, they won't."

"This means the Janic-Thule embassy will shut down until all things are resolved," Mom said. "A minimal staff will remain. I doubt that will include you, Christiana."

Vili turned to her friend. "I'm going to ask that you come back with me. Visit my home for a few days before you're posted somewhere else."

"There may be no more postings, Vili. I could be out of the diplomatic service altogether in a few days."

"Oh! Then we'll have to make plans for what to do when the war is truly over."

"The last and most important news—" began Dad.

"Not to Vili," Mom interrupted.

"No, not to the princess but quite important to the rest of us. There is likely to be a peace accord. No more fighting for Scotia."

Brendon saw what that was likely to entail. "We'll cede Trinity and Oz to the Sevens?"

"Yes, with certain conditions as to access and so on. That will be worked out. And the Scotian Group will become officially neutral. It's not so bad an outcome, really. The Aigleans make no other demands."

"Errol will still dislike it," I commented.

"That is his problem," said my mother.

Only Vili came visiting that night. Later, as we lay there, bodies pressed together in the darkness, she said, "I wonder if there is going to be a place for me in your life, Jack. As big a place as I need."

"When this war finishes winding down we can both look for that place. It might be easier to find."

She was silent for a little while. "I think you're right. I've no idea

JUMPING JACK

what will come in the next few months. I may not be a princess anymore.”

“You’ll have to go back to being a tug pilot. You know I intend to settle down to a quiet academic life. I’ve said it often enough!” I still hoped for it. I was pretty sure I did.

“We’ll see. I’ll be back on Thule and our paths will diverge for at least a while.”

“Aren’t you planning school as well? We could both go to Rome. It is *the* university for history.”

“I’ll have to see what the head of the Thulean Lutheran Church thinks of that! Oh, Mom might lose that job too, huh?” That deserved a few seconds’ consideration. “But Torgi is talking about attending right here on Scotia and I think I might too.”

So we’d be going different directions there, too. I kissed Vilma Lempsen, Princess of Thule for at least a little while longer. Then we made love.

It might be for the last time.

CHAPTER 59

BRENDON AND ERROL were—again—arguing the advantages of a vertical main array over a horizontal one. As neither was an engine designer I didn't see much point in the discussion.

It was better than arguing about the treaty. Grandpa Jack had told both that topic was strictly off-limits.

I sat reading. Vili had sent a letter. She wrote quite a lot of letters to me, most about nothing much. As she had before we became lovers. Had we returned to that former status? I didn't know.

The usual stuff for a while. Ah, this was interesting.

Mom gets lots of mail telling her how much she is loved and that they would never vote against the monarchy. I get some of that too. And a lot of the same old stuff I used to get, girls asking my advice, boys telling me they're in love with me. Now, I get a lot of questions about my adventures with you! And questions about you. I have a standard reply letter telling them how handsome and brave you are!

Yeah, sure, Vili. I did know it was believed the Thuleans would vote to keep their queen. Queen of Thule she would become, with the end of Janic-Thule. But one could never be positive of such things. Nothing much, then—

You wouldn't believe what happened when I introduced Torgi to my brother. The two fell madly in love! Isn't that wonderful? I do think they are going to marry. A royal wedding, if we're still royal.

Oh, and speaking of weddings—Tarmo and Sandi are having one soon. Tarmo and Gunner, maybe I should say? I'm sure you'll be invited. We can all be together again! Let's hope all the problems with transiting Oz are resolved by then.

At least letters were getting through. The other difficulties were mostly a matter of control being handed over to the Sevens. Bureaucracies were sometimes slow to catch up with change. Elsa needed to come through Oz to join her husband. As much of a bad taste as the accord left with Errol, he had agreed to serve in a diplomatic role for a while, traveling, helping iron out new trade agreements. Elsa intended to accompany him.

JUMPING JACK

I think both looked forward to a schedule of factory tours on the side.

Nothing much in the rest of it. I folded the paper—yes, Vili almost always sent letters hand-written on paper—and tucked it away. Brendon had wandered off. Not wandered, I guess. He'd headed straight for Nira. I was doubting Anna would get here for the birth of their child.

Errol came over to take a chair next to me. "I hear you're to be moved to the reserve list."

"So I've been told. It hasn't happened yet. Elsa's probably told you Gunner and Tarmo have set a wedding date. I just found out."

"Only an hour or so later than me. Everyone's getting married." He might have chuckled. "Except you."

Maybe I should go propose to Veronika O'Toole. She couldn't resist me if I wore my gun. "I didn't expect today's wedding, that's for sure."

"Nobody did, including Grandpa Jack. He was as surprised as everyone else when Jeanne accepted his latest proposal."

"Maybe she'd decided beforehand to turn him down a certain number of times. Rolled dice to determine it."

"Who can say what goes on in Jeanne Freneau's head? She may not know herself."

"Now, now, talk nice about Grandma."

"Ha! I doubt any of us start calling her that."

"Monike's kids might. Their Great-Grandma Jeanne." I had to add, "Not to mention Brendon's boy and your kids when you and Elsa get to it."

"Yes, they might" He nodded, perhaps in agreement, perhaps in approval. "They should. I wish there could have been a Grandma Bissy."

I thoroughly agreed.

"I heard from Sacky. She said to say hello to you."

"And I say hello back. Did she get to fight?"

Errol shook his head. "Called up just in time for the ceasefire. But she'll remain active, of course. Baldwin is career military."

"Will you be?"

"It's doubtful. I'll most likely join you on the reserve list."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

Still as a brigadier, evidently. "Brendon, too."

"Yes. Your brother is eminently suited to civilian life. Maybe he'll take the reins of the McFee Concern, maybe he won't. I'm pretty sure neither of us will."

"You'll go tinker with your engineering projects, I'll go tinker with my history projects."

"Or we both end as diplomats, despite ourselves." He frowned, rethought the statement. "I *will* be engaging in legitimate diplomacy, at least for a while. I think Aunt Alice might drag you into espionage."

"She'll be stepping down from her post soon." But I knew Mom would still have plenty of unofficial pull.

My cousin Monike hurried up to us. "There you two are. Come on, the ceremony is about to start." Monike had taken charge of the day, as she did many things.

"I'm glad he didn't ask either of us to be best man," I said.

"I expected him to pick Brendon." We made our way to our seats. Front row, this time, but both at the far end, being there by ourselves. Boris McFarland stood beside my grandfather. I was entirely good with the choice.

Monike's little girl was the sole bridesmaid, preceding her great-grandma-to-be up the aisle. There were the expected 'aws' and 'how cutes.' Not for Jeanne, for the kid. And there was Errol's other sister, Marie, officiating, in her white robes. She had left all things McFee behind quite some time ago to become a magus. Probably Freneau's choice; she'd want a Mazdesian ceremony.

Marriages of the people I loved. An end of war. I should be happy. Oh well, there would be cake later. That made up for much.

CHAPTER 60

IT IS NICE to have a queen as a wedding guest. Lisi Arjan-Lempson was still a monarch, the Queen of Thule. That meant Vili was still a princess. I don't know how much that meant to her.

I only cared if she cared. The entire royal family was there, Ern Lempson, the Queen's Consort. That would be Vili's dad. Her brother Prince Nils and his fiancée, Christiana. They made quite a couple, tall and beautiful. I'd vote for Nils as king any day. Vili, of course. We hadn't had much time to talk.

An hour earlier, her mom the queen had attached another medal to me. This time for saving her daughter. Oh, one of the previous ones was sort of for that too, wasn't it? I had trouble keeping them straight. And Scotia had given me one for the same reason. This one was apparently a brand new award or order or whatever they called it, and I was the first recipient. 'For Service to the Crown' was all it said on its round silver face, with, not surprisingly, a relief of a crown, and it was attached to a long white ribbon to be worn around the neck. I decided I should wear it through the ceremony. I had all my other medals on me, after all, and was in my full-dress uniform. The same one I wore to Errol's wedding. Yes, with trousers again.

Gunilla's parents and other Sandburgs sat with the royals. I was not surprised to see her mom in some sort of uniform. What the father did I hadn't any clue. A couple of sisters had been wrangled to serve as maids. They were sort of homely, tall, gawky girls. Sandi might have looked about the same at their ages.

There was Anna, on the other side of the aisle. A little sparser over there. I wished more Scotians had been able to come and fill it. Elsa wasn't able to; she and Errol were already off somewhere. In one of the successor associations to Ning, I'd heard. But Elsa's mom and dad, Thane Gertrude and a fairly ordinary guy in uniform sat there, filling in for the Gallens' missing parents. Of them, I knew nothing nor did she or Tarmo offer to remedy that. General Freneau had wavered for a while but chose to stay with her new husband. And Nira was possibly giving birth this very minute. Probably not, but possibly. Was that Jitha

Jones near the back? I'd better stop gawking and pay attention. I was Tarmo's best man, after all.

The ceremony was nearly identical to that of Elsa Alander and Errol, not so long ago. Except in Thulean. I handed over a ring at the appropriate moment, which was all that was expected of me. I did it very well, I must say. Elegantly, even.

And off to a reception, in another slightly-too-small-for-this-many-people room—by Scotian standards—somewhere in the warrens of an underground Thulean city. Talking, dancing, eating cake. No one asked me to make a speech so I didn't. But I should ask Vili for at least one dance.

"Of course, Jack. I intended to save this first dance for you." We whirled about, as we'd done once at Summit Up. Vili's Scotian pendant glittered against her skin, swinging back and forth as we turned.

I returned her to her mother at the end. She looked at the pair of us standing there. "You are still both so very young. Not yet twenty, either of you. But such adventures!"

I was very close to twenty. I wasn't going to tell her so.

"I'm writing a book about it all," Vili told me. "It's nearly finished."

"Does it have a happy ending?"

"Who is to say? My mother is right. We are very young; maybe it's not yet time to write an ending."

"Maybe so." I gave her a bow and left. We might dance again later. That, too, was not yet written.

Where was Anna? Over there, chatting with Sandi and her brother. Jitha Jones's arm encircled her waist. She laughed when he leaned over to whisper something in her ear.

There was nothing more here for me. I asked an aidie to escort me to the shuttle stop. I knew these rooms were close to it. It led me along a metal-walled hall, turning twice. "Up this elevator, sir," it told me, and scuttled away. A few seconds later I was breathing in the open air of this world, a world not of my birth, with its slightly acrid scent. A line of shuttles waited.

I'd finally seen Thule from the surface. The sky was indeed a green-blue, with the orange sun riding through it. It was time to go up to Thule Station.

JUMPING JACK

M would be waiting for me.

AFTERWORD

SO WE COME to the end of the second book of young Jack McFee's adventures. There may certainly be more of them; you didn't expect him to disappear into that quiet academic life, did you? At least, not right away.

Expect to see the return of Jack Mack, with friends and lovers new and old. Enemies, too—I think I see them lurking somewhere in the pages of a sequel.