

DIM DISTANT STARS



Oliver Davis Pike

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Dim, Distant Stars

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CHAPTER 1

“SEE THAT BLUISH star there? It’s called Sirius. Earth lies in that direction, not too far beyond it.”

I could have asked what was serious about it, but the joke wouldn’t have translated from English. We were speaking Latin. Everyone did at the University of Rome. For the student of history, there is no more prestigious university than the one at Rome.

That is New Rome, of course. Nova Roma. Old Rome is a ruin on a planet of ruins. None the less, the school is named the University of Rome and, yes, it is operated by the Roman Catholic Church. The whole planet is — the planet Avignon. It is the city that is named New Rome. The name Avignon is a reminder that they are in exile, that they will someday return to the true Rome. There is no hurry about it.

“We could take a field trip there,” my companion continued.

“To Sirius?” I asked, as deadpan as I could manage. “Aren’t big blue stars dangerous?”

“Sheesh. To Earth.” John probably recognized I was being facetious but wasn’t willing to acknowledge it.

“Maybe after solstice break.” Christmas break they called it here, to be sure, but as a Nezo I preferred the other name.

“Oh. I had the break in mind for it. I suppose you’re going home.”

I would, though it would be spring there. The solstice fell on a quite different date on Avignon than it did back home. “The first extensive mining of super-massive elements took place in the Sirius system, you know. They fueled the further expansion of humanity.”

“I suppose that seems important to you,” remarked John. John was *not* studying history and did not share my fascination with such things. John’s field was planetology and he was a priest. I refused to call him Father John.

John’s parents called him Juan, back home on some Aiglean world or another. Juan Barbosa. But he told me he had grown up speaking Lingo, not Español. Lingo was the common tongue of mankind everywhere, descended from a pidgin our ancestors called Spanglish. One could always depend on someone knowing it, wherever one went. At least a robot.

Latin, not so much.

"Your grandfather visited Earth once, right?" he asked.

"So he claims. How did you know that?"

"It's in the book. The one your girlfriend wrote."

"Princess Vilma is not my girlfriend," I protested. Sort of protested. Vili had indeed written a book about her adventures and I came off more heroic in it than I might have preferred. Maybe I should have been the one to write it and beat her to publishing. "But it is true Grandpa Jack did the grand tour when he was young, rather than waste time at school."

We both stared at the sky a little longer. Sirius. Bright, but more white than blue. I doubted I would ever have reason to visit. It was said to be a difficult and somewhat dangerous jump, whether one attempted to target it or its white dwarf companion. Neither approach was guaranteed to work as intended.

"Did you have any other plans for the break?" I asked him.

John slowly shook his head. "Not a one. It's too far for me to run home."

And too expensive, I assumed. "Come visit with me then. We have our own blue star." Big Blue was every bit as impressive as Sirius. "And I can show you the Wall, up close."

John rubbed at his chin, or at the small black beard that sprouted from it. I'd let him think and not accuse him of chasing fleas. Not this time. "Would an, ah, Aiglean be welcome among Scotians?"

"Don't you know we're renowned as the most open-minded and friendly folk in the universe?"

"I might have believed that before I met you."

"My parents sent me off to a Corvan school and ruined me." There was some truth to that. "We do mostly speak English at home, though we all understand Lingo. So do the robots."

"As long as I can communicate with them, I assume I won't starve. Very well, Mister McFee, I'll take you up on it. Even if you did take me by surprise with the offer."

I'd kind of taken myself by surprise. "Liner out in two days. I'll make sure to add a ticket for you." A bell began to toll.

"Complin," remarked John. "We'd best get indoors."

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“Yeah. My advisor wants to see me at a most ungodly hour in the morning.”

Eleven times the bell rang as we descended a broad stone staircase. A few other students ambled here and there, most also seeking their own rooms. Any who attended the last prayers of the day would already be at the chapel. That didn’t apply to a Nezo like me but John was known to show, now and again.

We parted in the courtyard, my friend off to join his fellow priests in their wing, I to my own quarters. Or cell. If I’d been aware how spartan the conditions were for students at Rome, I might have chosen a different university.

Avignon lay at a nearly ideal distance from a friendly yellow sun, but had been devoid of life when discovered. More than a millennium of terraforming had followed. Being one of the older inhabited worlds, they had things pretty well in hand here now but the process remained ongoing. That’s what John was studying. The school for planetology and exobiology was almost as renowned as the one for history.

That yellow sun was just edging into the sky — every bit as cerulean as the one back home — when I rose. No servbots here to bring me breakfast nor even coffee. I’d have to make myself presentable and head for the cafeteria. This I didn’t mind; I lived pretty much that way at home. Scotians prized simplicity or at least we claimed to.

An hour* later, I was in the office of Monsignor Claudio Schwartz. Why he wanted to see me, I had no idea. Especially now with the semester at an end and me on a flight out on the morrow. After all, I was just another freshman here. The McFee name meant nothing in New Rome.

And I thought I’d done a pretty decent job on my exams. The monsignor seemed to be looking those over as I entered his sanctum. A plusher, more inviting room than most here, it was. Schwartz himself didn’t seem inviting at all, being a shriveled little fellow with a large jutting nose between close-set eyes. What remained of his hair we students referred to as his halo, wispy and white.

He probably did deserve a halo, having to deal with us. In truth, he was as kindly and understanding a man as any I’ve met. Never the less, I felt some qualms as he peered at those pages.

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“Scholar McFee,” he began, and then chuckled. Or tittered — it was pitched high enough to call it that. “Perhaps I should call you Mister. That was how you were addressed in the military, was it not?”

“It still is, Father. I’m officially a reservist.”

“In the Scotian Planetary Guard. Lieutenant-Commander Jack McFee.”

“Just another student now, sir.”

“And despite your past accomplishments, much of an age with your fellow classmates.” He set the papers down and gave me a long perusal. “Not so much like them in some other respects.”

“More than a few of them served too. On one side or another.”

“Yes, yes.” He nodded in acknowledgment of this fact. “That is one thing I need to discuss with you. It was impressed on us by certain, ah, authorities that your military status might require you to take leave of the university from time to time.”

Probably my mom, I thought. Even if she wasn’t active in the ministry anymore. I only nodded.

“I want you to know we recognize there may be such absences from your studies and you will not be penalized in any way. Now as to those studies — at the end of the semester we find you are at the top of your class.”

I undoubtedly frowned. “I have learned you dislike attention,” the priest commiserated. “Someone has to be first, Jack.”

“Maybe I’ll be able to get away before anyone knows,” I replied.

“Maybe,” he allowed. “May you have an enjoyable holiday, even if they aren’t celebrating Christmas on your world.”

“I suspect I’ll find something to entertain me, Monsignor,” I said, rising.

*It is to be noted we are not talking a Scotian hour here. You might wish to remember those are twice the length of those we use, as we will surely mention them again.

CHAPTER 2

“YOU KNOW YOUR reputation as a jump pilot was what first led me to make your acquaintance,” said Father John Barbosa, as we settled into our seats. “This must seem routine to you but I am terribly nervous every time I jump.”

Well you should be, I thought. A great deal can go wrong. “I admit to being uneasy when I’m not at the controls myself.”

“We could always send you up to the control cabin.”

I wished I could be. It had been too long and I missed the exhilaration of leaping from star to star. “I’m sure they have a Li Drive on this ship. It doesn’t even need an operator, strictly speaking.” But probably a Saldhana or maybe a Ceña as a backup, which did. It was a big liner with Burkut markings, about as big as they make them, with a massive drive element. I could feel its gravitational pull, almost as strong as standing on Scotia. Or Avignon, for that matter.

“How many jumps is it to Scotia, anyway?”

“Not sure. We’re not following quite the same route as when I came. I do know we’ll change ships at Oz and then there are three to Scotia.” Jumps I had made many times, more often than not with me at the controls.

Scotia was not that far — relatively speaking — from Avignon and the other ‘old worlds.’ Not that far from Earth itself. We were practically an old world, too, colonized fairly early in mankind’s expansion into the universe.

As was Thule. We were going to stop there, right? I looked over the itinerary. Oh, just pass through and then on to Oz, where we parted company with this big liner. I counted the systems listed. “Fourteen,” I announced. “Fourteen jumps to Oz. We won’t stop at most of them or it would take forever.”

“It’s more than three times that to my own home.”

“But you’re not planning on living there.” We’d talked about this.

“It seems unlikely.”

I figured John didn’t want to discuss it again. Nor would I say anything of my own future. We were two young guys with no agenda other than to enjoy a vacation. Even if one of us was a priest, and

perhaps not quite so young. John had already passed through a seminary before enrolling at Rome.

But then, I'd passed through a war.

Several jumps later, we reached Toto Station at Oz. Oz was now officially part of the Seven Worlds rather than being in the Scotian Group. That was one outcome of the recent war. We had landed reasonably close. The 'luck of the jump' could put a ship anywhere in a system. We had no control over that.

But John and I wouldn't need to wait around while cargo was loaded and unloaded. We were changing ships here. It should be a somewhat smaller liner, possibly one I had ridden in before, and it was already near its departure time. "Docking for Scotian traffic is on the other side, I'm afraid," I told John. "A shuttle should pass by and take us around the station perimeter." Neither had more luggage than the bags we carried.

"Jack!" someone called. "Jack McFee."

It took me a moment to put a name to the man. "Lieutenant Burke." I took a look at his uniform. "No, Captain Burke."

"Call me Bobby," replied Robert Burke of the Scotian Group Force. He was seated in a small six-wheeled vehicle. "And hop in."

"I thought you would be gone from here," I said, taking the seat beside the captain. John perched uncomfortably behind us.

"Kearney is but I'm still here as the Scotian liaison. Someone has to show these Sevens how to run the place." He glanced back over his shoulder. "I thought you'd be alone."

"My friend John Barbosa." I thought it just as well to leave the 'Father' off. If John wanted people to know he was a priest he would have worn the collar.

"Pleased," said Bobby, before turning back to me. "There's still no clue as to who exploded that ship here last year. You were involved in the operation that attack was, um, aimed at, weren't you?"

"I was. We were shuttling the Janic-Thulean delegation to Scotia."

"I read about that in Princess Vilma's book," piped up John.

So had I. It was reasonably accurate. "There are still a lot of us who would like to get to the bottom of it," I said. "The war might be over but treachery should not be forgotten."

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“Damned right. I’ve been doing a bit of investigating on my own,” The captain shook his head. “Not that I’ve learned much. We can cut through here.” Burke steered into one of the off-limits corridors, the same as the last time I’d ridden with him. Nearly two years ago now, heading home from my first mission. Just turned eighteen. It seemed a lifetime ago.

And I’d be turning twenty during this break. My first birthday at home in a long time, what with the war and being away at school before that. Whether there would be another, who could say?

The liner we then boarded might or might have been one I’d traveled on before. They all looked rather similar. It was a Scotian ship, about half the size of the one we’d left, with the insignia of a diagonal white cross on a blue field painted on the forward control cabin. That cabin was connected to a spine which housed the drive element and that to the engine module at the rear. Containers and compartments were attached around the spine. We entered one to finish the trip to the planet Scotia. It was more crowded than I’d expected. Oz might no longer be a Scotian world but apparently we still visited it and did business there.

“Hermitage,” I announced after the first jump. “Truly the gateway to Scotia, now that Oz is gone.”

One little red star with nothing but a military facility. There was no need to linger, no need to do anything but announce ourselves and jump again. I assume the ship announced itself. That would be protocol. Then on to Ataensi, an orange sun. No reason to stop there, either. “You can see the Wall from here,” I informed John. Someone had brought it up on the cabin screen, maybe to let us know we were home. Nothing was as emblematic of Scotia as the great dust cloud that bounded one side of our space.

Then a different view, as we jumped to Scotia itself. “Rather far in, I think,” I mumbled. “Not too far from the planet.”

Not that one could trust these passenger screens to give an accurate picture. Scotia was centered on ours. “You can see both continents from this angle,” I told my companion. “Yin and Yang.”

He squinted at the screen. “Oh, because of their shape?”

“Uh-huh. When the discoverers of this planet first glimpsed it on

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their screens, they thought the two continents looked something like a yin-yang symbol and named them accordingly. They were less imaginative when it came to the oceans and simply called them the Inner and the Outer.”

“I’ve heard worse.”

So had I. “My home — my parents’ home — is on Yin, south of Halifax. I hope to go straight to the capital from Central Station.”

That hope was dashed a few seconds later, when an attendant found me. “Jack McFee?” The way she looked at me made me pretty sure she’d read Vili’s book too. “I have a communication for you.”

I took the tablet, perused it, signed it, handed it back. “I’m supposed to report to the military base at Fundy. I guess I’ll have to take you along, John.”

“As long as they don’t draft me.”

“Oh, chaplains are always in demand.”

CHAPTER 3

A SHUTTLE AWAITED us at Central Station, the large civilian facility in synchronous orbit above Scotia. At the controls of the shuttle was my brother Brendon.

"Someone might complain if we bring your friend along," he announced. "I'm sure neither of us cares."

"Not in the least," I agreed, settling into the chair beside him. John took a seat behind us. All of us strapped in for a zero-gravity ride. I recognized the craft as a W-7. I'd ridden in General Freneau's personal unit a couple times.

This one, I suspected, was a beater reserved for courier and shuttle duties. "Is something going on at Fundy?" I asked.

"At the station, not at the base. You need to meet someone."

Good enough. I had reasons to want to visit the station anyway. I just hadn't expected to be able to this soon.

"And then we'll go to your home, Jack?" asked our passenger.

"More Brendon's home than mine. You are going to be at Dummit Downs, aren't you?"

"I intend to ferry you down," my brother said.

That seemed to satisfy John. "The marine research facility is near Dummit Downs, isn't it? I'd like to visit it."

"It is," Brendon told him. "At Port Brunswick." We were conversing in Lingo. John might not know enough English to catch the joke behind the name my parents had given their estate. Which was, in turn, a response to that of my grandfather's home, Summit Up.

"Your planet is a textbook on terraforming," John informed us. "There's no reason I can't learn while I'm supposed to be enjoying myself."

Within a quarter hour the moon Fundy, where the main base was located, lay below us. Space craft that couldn't land on the surface docked up here at the orbiting station. Brendon maneuvered us into a space; a docking tube slid out to attach itself. A minute or so later we were through it and into a narrow corridor.

"Are we near where the Nativ is docked?" I asked.

"It's no longer here. We put it back to work."

What? "I thought M and I were going to be kept together."

Brendon grinned. "M is no longer installed in the Nativ." He led us into another tube. "Here we are."

"Welcome aboard," said M. "What do you think, Jack?"

I attempted to hide my surprise. "That doesn't matter, M. What do *you* think?"

"I'll know better when we take this new ship out somewhere."

"This is the famous M?" whispered John.

"I am," M stated. John should have known the AI could hear him. "And I am famous, aren't I? You must have read the princess's book."

"You, um, know about it?"

"Well, of course. I read the advance copy and gave Vili some useful advice on it."

"No time for a cruise right now," Brendon told us. "We did think Jack should get over here and see the new you right away, M."

I looked around the cabin. A lounge or common area, it would probably be termed. Less than spacious and still with a definite military feel to it. The cockpit would be up that way. "This is like the boat we took to meet M the first time, isn't it?"

"We're now building this civil version of the series. A W-6C. Just the thing for the high-powered businessman to be traveling around the system in."

"Except we don't have to stay in the system," M pointed out.

"Garda Drive is installed and ready to jump with," said my brother. "And no visible evidence it's there."

"Unless they check our mass," I pointed out.

"Quite so," agreed M. "The jump element makes us rather heavy."

"I hope the engines are adequate."

"Well," drawled Brendon, "we didn't want to install overly-large and non-standard drives that would draw attention. It has to pass for a civil craft, after all. So we went with a pair of the new Riley six-tubes. The B series."

"I haven't had the opportunity to open them up yet," stated M. He sounded hopeful of doing so soon.

I suspected the machine would still be pretty much of a dog with all

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that mass. No matter. It should be as good as the Nativ had been. But not necessarily as comfortable.

"Who took you out for your shakedown, M?" I asked. "You've not been exactly approving of previous pilots."

"I did. M seems to tolerate me," said Brendon.

"Yes. Your brother is a fairly decent pilot."

Brendon snickered. I guess he'd become accustomed to M's quirks and quips. "I'm spending time up here anyway," he said. "I've been asked to serve on a committee to streamline our postwar equipment, advising both the Guard and the Force. That mostly entails phasing out and replacing craft and engines not built in the Scotian Group."

"You are spending far too much time away from your family," stated M. "And with an infant son. Brendon has shown me pictures."

That didn't surprise me. "Then I need to get down there and see him, too," I said. "How soon can we leave for Dummit Downs?"

"Immediately."

"I'll be back soon, M," I promised. "We'll both get to know this ship better."

As we reentered the hallway, Brendon confided, "The plan now is to let you pilot the ship back to Avignon. You and M. Not set, by any means. There are those who do not approve of letting you run off with it."

I could imagine. I wouldn't trust me either.

"Hey, where are we going?" I'd just realized we'd walked past the spot where our shuttle was docked.

"Change of rides. We'll take Mom's boat down to the surface."

"Redecorated," I remarked, as we entered the cruiser. The charcoal and blue color scheme had disappeared, replaced by an equally ugly maroon and black.

"And refurbished otherwise. Sergeant?"

"Right here, sir," said Giles Boutade, emerging from a room behind the bar. "Doing some inventory. Welcome aboard, Jack." The soldier eyed John but asked no questions.

"Giles is leaving the military to work for me," Brendon announced. "Like Jock does for Dad."

Another former officer's aide, who had segued into a civilian posi-

tion as majordomo at Dummit Downs. Maybe Boutade would hold that position one day. That line of thought once again impressed on me that the family home would not really be my home. Nira and Brendon would take over from our parents.

All this exchange had been in English. Scotian English, which might be accented a little differently from any variety with which John would be familiar. I told him, in Latin, "We two could converse in this language and leave everyone else out, you know."

To which he replied in English. "I try, uh, will try to speak the Inglis. Some is known." He chuckled. "But the practice I need, eh?"

"I've heard far worse," felt Brendon.

Lingo contained a lot of English words anyway. The syntax was largely derived from Español. Maybe I should learn that someday. M surely knew it. He claimed to know every language spoken and some that weren't.

He would be unlikely to lie about it. Advanced AIs understood the concept of lying but were notoriously bad at it. I'm not sure whether that should make us humans feel superior.

I let Brendon take the controls while John and I settled down in the lounge. "Drink, sir?" asked Boutade.

Why not? "A drap of Scotian whiskey for each of us. And join us, if you wish."

"Don't mind if I do, sir." A little tasting might already have been part of his inventory process.

"Call me Jack," I told him as he poured out three glasses. Just enough artificial gravity allowed this.

"And your friend?" he asked, handing us our drinks and settling into one of the chairs.

"Father John Barbosa. You're Roman, aren't you Giles?"

"That I am. Pleased to meet you, Father," he said, raising his glass to the priest.

"To call me John best it might be." He seemingly approved of the sip he took. "Many are the Catholics in the Scotian system, no?"

"Not as many as there are Nezos," I had to say. "But yes, we have quite a few. My cousin converted."

"Because of her husband," noted Giles.

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I only nodded to that. I doubted Monike had any strong religious convictions one way or another. “That’s Halifax on the screen,” I informed John, nodding in its direction.

“The famous circular harbor.” He peered at it a moment or two. “Very large.”

“That it is. When Halifax Bay was first mapped, some of the original colonists feared it was evidence of a super volcano. Not something one would wish to live near nor even be on the same planet with. Surveys eventually showed it was the result of an extremely ancient collision with an exceptionally large object.”

“Not that it couldn’t happen again some day,” came Brendon’s cheerful voice over the com. “I’m making the turn south. We should be home in half an hour.”

CHAPTER 4

“MARVELOUS,” EXCLAIMED JOHN, taking a deep breath of Scotian air. “So many the trees! E — and what es thato?” he asked, jumbling his English and Lingo words.

I followed his line of sight. “Butterfly. They’ve pretty much taken over the planet.” I turned to look at the ship we’d just exited. “That’s a different engine, isn’t it?” Even I could recognize the change in the single external unit.

“We removed the old Riley and put in an Isa. Similar power but more reliable and efficient.”

“Isa? That’s a Pican company.” The four of us started up the path toward the house, visible through the trees. No one had come to the field to welcome us. Not even a robot car had been sent down. I believe Brendon ordered it, preferring to walk and look things over.

“I’m a little surprised you know that,” Brendon remarked, “considering that you always claim to have no interest in engineering.”

“But I do in trade,” I reminded him. “Isn’t Errol off talking to the Picans?”

“Some of their neighbors right now, I think. This Isa engine, though, is being manufactured in the Sevens. It’s supposed to be a good idea to resume trade with them now we’re not fighting each other.”

“The Sevens may come to regret that,” I asserted.

“Dad has said something similar. Say, House, isn’t anyone around?”

“Nira is in the nursery with your son,” came a familiar feminine voice. Exactly where it came from would be hard to pinpoint. “Everyone else is away.”

“House?” wondered John.

“The AI who runs the place. If you thought M was impressive, wait until you meet her.”

“Why aren’t you introducing me right now, Jack?” House asked. The front door swung open to admit us.

“I am John Barbosa,” said the priest, before I could answer her. “We are fellow students.” This he said in Lingo, rightly assuming House would know the language.

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“Will you need a space to celebrate mass?” she asked, in the same tongue.

“How —”

“I’ve no doubt House scanned that bag you’re carrying. You have at least a stole in there, right?”

“I do,” he admitted. “No, Miss House, I have no needs beyond a place to sleep. I thank you for your consideration.”

“At last, a polite guest, Jack. Much better than those Thuleans.”

“But maybe not as much fun. Do you know if any intend to visit?”

“Christiana and Vili have promised to come.”

“Christiana? Oh, Torgi.”

“No one seems to call her that since she married Prince Nils.”

“They’re in the middle of their semester,” said Brendon. “No telling how much free time they will have.”

Of course, their breaks here on Scotia wouldn’t coincide with mine at Rome. Both young women had chosen to attend the university in Halifax, so if they couldn’t make it here, I could certainly go visit them there.

Where was Brendon leading us? I’d been following him without thinking. “Is Nira awake?” he asked House.

“She is and so is Durga. I have told her you are on your way.”

“Thanks, Housie.”

So we went on to the nursery to say hello to Nira and to little Durga. Durga was his maternal grandfather’s name, one of those names passed down in families with no one really knowing their origin. Having spent time in Corvan worlds, I did. I’d run into other Durgas.

He didn’t look much like any of those. The boy had been born while I was on Thule, attending the wedding of my friends Tarmo and Gunner. Four months old? Hmm, more like five.

It was while I was at that wedding I made my final decision to study at the University of Rome, leaving all I knew here, all the friends I’d made during the war, and seeking my direction. No telling whether I found it.

“I should get us both into our rooms,” I told John. “And find something to eat.”

He nodded his agreement and we bade parents and child goodbye.

They weren't paying much attention to us anyway. "Okay to put John in the room across from mine?" I asked House, once we were out in the hall.

"I'm reserving that for the princesses. How about next to you instead?"

"Good enough. Princesses, eh? I guess that's accurate." One by birth, one by marriage. Sisters in law now. "We can get cleaned up and then go find lunch," I told John. It must be somewhere around lunch time. "Or sleep if you prefer."

"We do take the siesta on my home world. But maybe after we eat."

I showed him his quarters, identical to my own, bedroom, bathroom, lounge. Windowless, save for a high clerestory that let in the rising sun. I flopped onto the small couch in my rooms, not feeling ambitious enough to shower nor even unpack.

What day of the week was it here? Were I still on Avignon it would be — Sunday? I thought that was right and knew it was completely irrelevant. "House," I asked, "could you tell me what day this is? I've quite lost track."

"Wondering if it's your birthday yet?" She was attempting a bit of banter, I was sure.

Two could play such games. "Oh, I have a birthday coming?"

"So it seems. Today is Tuesday."

I'd probably find out what day my birthday fell on, eventually. It would help if I knew today's date but I decided not to ask. "Say, Housie, do you have a birthday? We should celebrate it."

There was the slightest of pauses. One who did not know House might not have recognized it. "That's very kind of you, Jack. It's also very hard to say just what day I became me."

"Just pick a day then. Think about it and get back to me."

I should ask M the same question. He'd be likely to give the same answer. I went into the bathroom and splashed a little water on my face. That would do for now.

John's door stood open. It didn't look like he'd had any more energy than me. "Let's eat," I said. He fell in beside me as I headed for the kitchens.

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“I like your family. They aren’t Catholic.” Half a question, maybe, a question to which he could guess the answer.

“Thoroughly Nezo.” Neo-Zoroastrian, that is. Mazdesian, if one prefers to use that more official term. “No baptizing jobs available. Durga was marked with the sacred ash on his naming day.”

John smiled at that one. “I am sure the boy is being baptized frequently. Perhaps with a little added soap.”

“Let’s do some self-baptizing after lunch. There’s a swimming pool.”

And then, maybe more of the family would show up. If not, there was always that siesta.

CHAPTER 5

SUNLIGHT. I THOUGHT to ask House what the time was but picked up my hand com to check instead. I hadn't carried it since I left for Rome, but there it was in a drawer beside my bed. So was my sidearm.

Hmm, not too late. And the date? Okay, two days free before my birthday. Friday? Yes, Friday. I put the commie back and sat up.

"Good morning, Jack," came House's voice.

"Good morning! Anyone show up while I was asleep?"

"They did not. I do understand your parents are coming later today. There are clean clothes in your closet, Jack, but I put the uniforms into storage. I don't think you will be wearing them again, will you?"

"I certainly hope not." No need to shower. I pulled on a shirt and shorts. "Is John up?"

"He's out riding with Nira."

Another horseman? I hadn't known that about Barbosa. I knew quite little of his background, really.

The place looked deserted, save for the stray servbot, as I made my way toward the center of the house. Instead of going to the kitchen, I took a left and walked out onto the deck. Quiet outside too. "My mother's ship is gone?" I might be missing it, what with the distance and the trees between us.

"Brendon flew it away early this morning," House informed me.

Maybe to pick up Mom and Dad. Maybe for some other reason entirely. "I'm starving," I announced, and headed for the kitchens. I was still there when Nira and John returned.

"Coffee," Nira ordered. "You too, John?"

"Yes, please."

I let them settle down with their cups before speaking. "You're a rider, John?"

"My people spend the much time on horseback. A family of vaqueros are. Hmm, are we. Right?"

"Close enough," I felt.

"But you chose to become a priest," said Nira. "Oh, do you have to give up women?" She made it sound rather dreadful.

John seemed amused by the question but answered seriously. "No,

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no. I am of an order that may marry. Someday, maybe.” A rather long pause. “Somewhere.”

John had said before he would not be living on his home planet. I hadn’t pressed him on it. This time, he volunteered more. Maybe he preferred Nira as a listener. “A colonist I will be,” he said. “To be only a priest is not enough, so I learn the science too.”

“Creating a new world,” mused Nira. “It sounds exciting but maybe also a hard life.”

“There will be much work to do.”

More than I’d want to tackle. I’m glad my ancestors took care of all that on Scotia. “Since no one is around, why don’t I take you up to Port Brunswick to tour the marine facility?”

“Surely you want to see more than that on Scotia,” spoke Nira.

“I can play tour guide all next week,” I told her. “Unless John prefers to just stay here and ride your horses.”

“I have missed them,” he admitted.

Whatever world lay in his future was unlikely to have any. “House, can you send an air car around? Any of them will do.”

“Certainly, Jack. Right away?”

“Yes, thank you.” I turned to John. “Air cars aren’t permitted on the streets of the Port but I’d rather not go that far on wheels.” And we could travel cross-country.

The car awaited us at the field. The top was down and I’d as soon leave it that way, even if the control computer would limit our top speed. As soon as John was settled into the front seat, I took us up to about twenty feet. “I intend to head down to the sea,” I informed him. “We can stick to the coast all the way to Port Brunswick instead of following a road.”

“The oceans of Scotia are one of the marvels of the universe.”

That they were. I didn’t go straight to the water but angled across the countryside. Agriculture gave way to empty land. “No one lives here?” asked John.

“All land within several miles of the ocean is designated public property and can not be developed nor built on. It is left wild, not that any area on the planet can truly be called wild.”

“Because all that lives here has been introduced, except microscopic creatures in the sea.”

“We can thank them for making Scotia a bit of a ready-made paradise, with blue seas and oxygen to breathe. Admittedly, the soil is still sparse but we keep working to improve it.”

“There is much to learn here,” he commented and turned his eyes to the passing view. Minutes later, we surveyed the sea from atop low bluffs. It was decidedly rough today, with a brisk onshore breeze.

We followed those bluffs northward. “Is that another air car?” asked John, nodding toward our left.

“It has been paralleling us for some time,” I replied. Sometimes visible, sometimes not. That would have worried me not so long ago, but there was no reason for suspicion these days.

Eventually, it disappeared. A voice came from the air car’s com now to inform us, “Entering the Port Brunswick Marine Research Center. Checking identification.” A pause of three or four seconds was followed by, “Vehicle recognized. Please follow our signal to the main entry.”

I set control to do so and the car lazily changed direction.

“Is that Brendon?” asked the com. There was a human on the other end now. I was fairly certain of that. A female one.

“I’m afraid I must disappoint you,” I answered. “It is only his little brother Jack.”

“We have not seen you here before, Jack McFee.”

“But Brendon visits?”

“He is interested in increasing the biodiversity at his estate.” A chuckle. “I suppose that is your estate too.”

“I suppose.”

“Come right on in. The gate will recognize you.”

It did. “Gates and walls are needed?” wondered John.

“Maybe they’re to keep the fish from wandering away.”

That got the snort it deserved.

CHAPTER 6

“GITA MCFEE,” SAID the middle-aged woman, extending a hand. “Yes, we’re distantly related.”

That wasn’t too surprising. There were lots of us. “This is Father John Barbosa. He’s studying planetology.”

The two shook. “What school?” asked Gita.

“University of Rome.”

She nodded approvingly. “Pioneers in the field. The Church has played a major role in terraforming.”

“Including my own home,” said the priest. “Now it will be my turn to carry on the work.”

We were, once again, conversing in Lingo. Visitors from all over came to Port Brunswick so its director was probably used to speaking it.

“Anything special you want to see, Father Barbosa?”

“Just to be here is enough. We do not wish to impose on you, Director McFee.”

“Gita. Say Jack, are you interested in frogs?”

I made the stupidest reply possible. “Frogs?”

“One of our projects. Brendon has inquired into introducing them to your property. I understand there are plenty of butterflies for them to eat.”

I knew frogs ate something. “Wouldn’t lizards be better?”

“The mice kill them. Far too many mice running about Scotia, you know. We need predators for them, too, but that’s not our focus at this facility.”

For the next couple hours I trailed the two around as Gita gave her tour. I could follow some of what they said. The hatcheries were the big thing here, releasing ever larger varieties of fish into the Scotian oceans. Other sea life, too. Sea weeds and plankton and algae and mollusks and things I couldn’t recognize. “How do all these get along with the indigenous life?” I asked, after surveying a tank of crustaceans.

“It is gradually being poisoned by the chemistry of Earth life, and disappearing.”

John mulled on this a moment. “I would think a few populations

will survive, here and there. As early forms such as cyanobacteria did on Earth.”

“Most likely,” agreed Gita. “Would you like to see the jellyfish?”

“I think I have kept Jack from his lunch long enough. I thank you for making time for me, Gita.”

“Come back anytime. And,” she said, “a smart young fellow with a degree from Rome could probably get a job here.” Gita did not physically wink but her tone suggested one.

If John was tempted, he showed no sign of it. “Lunch in the Port?” I asked, as we glided out through the main gate. “I can park this car and we’d catch a bus downtown.”

He was surprised or amused or both. “You wealthy McFees ride buses?”

“Scotians are thoroughly frugal and McFees are thoroughly Scotian. Hmm.” I slowed and peered through the windscreen.

“What is it?” John’s gaze went back and forth, not finding what had caught my attention.

“That’s the car we saw earlier. It’s clearly surveilling us.” I changed direction abruptly, away from Port Brunswick. “I’m going straight back to the Downs. On the main road.”

My passenger accepted all this without comment. I, however, could think of no reason anyone would be tailing us. Tailing me, I would assume. Nor could I justify calling the police. If it drew close enough, my control computer should be able to read its identification codes; I could take things from there when I got home.

But it did not get close. In fact, it disappeared again. I put the top up and increased our speed.

Neither my parents nor my brother were there when we arrived home, but someone else waited on the deck. A tall blond man who looked just a bit weary.

“Tarmo! Are you by yourself?”

“Gunner came along, but she remained in Halifax to visit with our friends. You and I need to speak so I took a shuttle here at once.” He gave John a questioning look.

“I’m John Barbosa,” said the priest, “and this seems a good time for me to go get some lunch.” With that, he left us.

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"A friend from school," I explained. "So what's going on?" I walked over to the bar to pour myself a drink. Tarmo had already helped himself.

"You ran into Captain Burke at Oz Station."

"Bobby. Indeed I did."

"Shortly after you left he was murdered. I learned some of the particulars as I passed through on my way here, though the Seven authorities were not particularly forthcoming about any of it."

Bobby Burke dead. "You have your own sources," I stated.

"I do. First, tell me what the two of you talked about. I know there was a brief conversation."

There was only one thing of any importance, wasn't there? "The liner that was blown up there last year. He told me he was continuing to investigate it."

Tarmo nodded. "I suspected as much. If he left any notes they were either destroyed or confiscated. He didn't have anything new to tell you, did he?"

"Not a thing." We both sat in silence for a little while. I looked toward the horizon, toward that vague blue blur that was the distant ocean. "Someone was following me in my air car this morning."

That interested the man. "Someone might think Burke told you something."

"That's my thought." Now, it was.

"Who is this John Barbosa? Could he be involved?"

That was almost funny. "A priest from the Aiglean worlds. I invited him to visit well before we passed through Oz, and have known him somewhat longer."

"Very well." Tarmo would still regard him as suspicious, I knew. "He had a good idea about getting some lunch."

"Agreed." We passed through the main lounge and entered the kitchens. John sat there with Nira, little Durga in her arms. "What are we having?"

"One of the horses that became too old and lame," replied Nira, completely straight of face.

"Yes. It very tough but also tastes quite bad."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

"Toast me some whole grain bread," I told a servbot, taking a seat.
"Tarmo can have the horse."

"Sir?"

"You've confused the poor little fellow," Nira told me. "Bring our guest some of this stew."

"Yes, ma'am." It scuttled off to comply.

To John, I said, "This is Tarmo Gallen, of Thule. He's in Vilma's book but she changed the name to protect the guilty."

"Pretty much everyone can recognize whom she meant. My sister too."

"Is she coming?" It would be nice to see Anna.

"Duty prevents it. She does promise to come visit you and your son, Nira."

"And will you stay, Tarmo?" she asked.

"Not now. I'll be back soon with my wife and Vili and Christiana."

"For my birthday party. I hope no one gives me a rock."

John cocked his head at me. "A rock?"

"That's in the book too," Nira reminded him.

"Oh, right. Your cousin gave the princess a rock from Earth. Jack and I plan to visit and pick up our own."

That trip seemed unlikely but I wasn't going to say so. Right here, right now, was as good a place to be as any. More so when the servbot brought my lunch.

CHAPTER 7

JOHN SAT READING from a little book. His daily office. One would forever be bumping into one priest or another doing just that at New Rome.

I wouldn't bother him. I walked over to the railing, looked down toward the landing area. Yes, there was Mom's cruiser. I assumed both she and my father were aboard. A cart rolled up to convey them to the house, a human at the controls. Old Jock, most likely. Not that one could make out who was who from here.

More so as the shadows of late afternoon were already creeping eastward across the field. The Wall was becoming more visible; stars should soon appear. It would be a clear night, perfect for viewing the wonders of the Scotian sky.

There were other skies out there, full of their own wonders. Other worlds and worlds beyond them, scattered through that sea of distant stars. A longing had arisen in me, a longing to jump from star to star until I reached worlds no one had seen before.

As the cart emerged from the trees, I spied the ship lifting off again, giving Tarmo a ride back to Halifax. It was to be hoped his next visit would last longer.

John came over to lean on the railing beside me. Neither had anything to say. Dad looked up and waved to us before disappearing through the front doors.

He probably had been thoroughly briefed on John's presence. There might be a dossier. My com called my name. I wished I had left it in my room.

I fished it out of my pocket. I never liked to wear a wrist-top. "Jack here. Gunner?"

"Yep. My husband just called to say he was on his way to me."

"He must long to be with you every moment you're separated," I told her.

"He'd better! Anyway, about this weekend. We're all eager to visit and eat birthday cake and that sort of thing."

"I really am looking forward to seeing all of you again. Will you make it on Friday?"

"That's the big day, right? We hope to be there but your Mom says the party will be on Saturday. Oh, your brother is going to ferry us all. And, um — would you mind if we bring a friend along? A female friend; I'll mention that just so you don't feel threatened."

Who, me? "That, of course, depends on the friend. Another tall, beautiful Thulean would always be welcome."

"Like Thane Gertrude Alander?"

The tale of our encounter must have found its way to Gunner. "Hmm, add young to the qualifications. And slender, as long as we're at it."

"Young, we can do. The rest will have to be in the eye of the Jack."

"Not that I'll notice with you three here. Say hi to Vili and Christiana, and I'll see you when I see you."

"Or a little later than that. So long, Jack."

"Tarmo's wife." John was obviously curious. "Her name was changed in that book too." Fortunately — for me — Vili had chosen to leave Thane Gertrude out altogether. In fact, I doubted she even knew of the incident.

Unfortunately, everyone else did. "Ready to meet my folks?"

"Sure." We did not hurry in. "The princess is attending college here on Scotia, I understand."

"Halifax Academy. I had hoped to convince her to study history at Rome but when Christiana announced she would attend the Academy, Vili decided to go there as well." I was now inclined to feel that had been for the best.

"The librarian princess."

I had to chuckle at that quite accurate description. "Christiana is finishing the degree she started before the war." It seemed a bit unlikely to me she would ever work as a librarian. Even less likely if her husband was named King of Thule.

No sign of the parents inside. They must have headed straight to their own rooms, at the opposite end of the house from mine. "Anything special you would like to see tomorrow?" I asked John.

"Roaming about the fields here would be enough. There is so much to see and so much to learn! Nira has promised me a tour."

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“Scotia is said to be about as Earth-like as anywhere known.” I gave that a second thought. “More Earth-like than Earth itself.”

“That will not always be so. Earth continues to heal.”

“And you would like to go see it.”

“I would. Indeed I would.”

Maybe we *could* take a trip sometime. Me and John and M. “Are the parents going to emerge for supper, House?”

“They are, but they would like to see you in the library first. Just you.”

“Count yourself fortunate,” I told John.

I decided to volunteer nothing of being shadowed nor of the death of Captain Burke. Chances were they had been briefed officially and heard more from Tarmo. Spies who passed in the night. Okay, the afternoon. Never mind.

My father leaned against the front of his desk, a few papers in his hand. Mom was over by the shelves. She got right to it, without even a ‘welcome home.’

“We felt you had best be brought up to date on the Oz incident, as you seem to have been drawn into the investigation.”

“Which has been stalled and nearly forgotten by some,” said Dad. “This report covers what is known. It is neither secret nor urgent. Read through it at your convenience.” He handed the pages over.

“Or not,” added Mom. “You’re free to go back to school and ignore all this.”

I could. What did I have to add, anyway? Still — “Whoever was behind it intended to kill Vili.” Even if she was not the primary target.

“Let us be grateful they didn’t,” said Mom. “To you, among others.”

“The princess proved to be a rather capable young woman,” Dad observed.

“People underestimated her.” Me included, maybe. “She can’t get away with it since writing that book.”

“The same is true of you.”

Mom agreed. “You have become more well-known than we would have preferred.”

“My career as a spy has been nipped in the bud,” I sighed.

“We’ll see about that.”

You can try, Mom. A quiet life as an academic remained an attractive proposition.

Dad chose to ignore our exchange. "We shall be seeing Vili again soon, I understand. Say, Alice, we could have invited her here anytime."

"And her friend Christiana?"

Any response he might make to that would probably be wrong, so I spoke up. "Good idea. She is very nice to look at." The two of them didn't need to know I'd done more than look.

"From the pictures I've seen," said Mom, "so is her husband."

"I met Nils when I attended Tarmo's wedding. The Gallens' wedding," I amended that to. Couldn't forget Gunner. "The perfect royal couple. Tall and beautiful and reasonably bright, but not enough so to get into trouble."

The parents only gave each other a knowing look, before Mom said, "All your Thulean friends should show up in a couple days. Except for the Gallen girl, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's too bad. Nira and she became quite good friends."

So did Anna and I, but I wasn't going to say that. She might well be the best friend I had in any world. Maybe even counting M. "Gunner promised a mystery guest."

"Oh, we know about that," said Dad. "The young ladies ran it by us first, to see if she'd be welcome."

"Livi Radia," Mom informed me.

"Hmm, I've never met the girl but I do think Uncle Rupert was trying to set me up with her."

Dad laughed at that. "My brother would love to see a family connection to the Radias."

"So would the Radias," remarked Mom. "You'd be safer sticking to royalty."

CHAPTER 8

I SAT IN my room, reading through the report Dad had given me. Only four pages. There was, as promised, little in it I did not already know. Multiple explosive devices, as Tarmo had conjectured. Neither of us could come up with any idea then of when and how they could have been attached.

But analysis of the wreckage had provided one new fact. The blasts had come from mines, the quite ordinary sort of mines the Aigleans and their allies had seeded in many systems. Chances were the Corvans had done the same. Throughout the war, shipping had been the primary target.

The question remained how a number of mines had appeared simultaneously at Oz station. I tossed the report aside, stood, yawned, stretched.

“Major Gallen will wish to discuss that with you when he gets here,” said House.

“Major?”

“Yes, Jack. That is his rank.”

I might have been able to tell had he been in uniform. Or maybe not; I’m no expert on Thulean insignia. “I’m surprised Gunner didn’t tell me Tarmo had been promoted.”

Did Anna hold a higher rank now too? Maybe someone *would* mention that. “I suppose we will talk sometime. I’d best get my sleep now.”

“So you can ride early with Nira and Father John.”

“Yes. I don’t know why they can’t wait until a more sensible hour.” Everyone seemed determined to get me to rise at dawn. “Tarmo will want to ride when he gets here.”

“I understand Miss Radia is a horsewoman.”

Oh? “And how did we learn this, Housie?”

“She and her horses have frequently been in the news. Would you like to see pictures?”

“Why not?” I sat down again, though I should be in bed. I expected to see images of dressage or something of that sort. Instead, pictures of a small woman holding a mallet appeared. A polo player.

Now I knew polo, had played polo. It was somewhat popular on the Corvan worlds where I attended school. "Thank you, House. That will be enough."

I made it to bed that time, to be wakened before any hint of daylight had appeared at my high windows. Not by House — John was ringing at my door. He handed me a cup of coffee as I opened to him.

"Not ready yet?"

My only answer was a rude noise. I did insist on grabbing some breakfast before heading for the stables.

"This way," I told John, a muffin in each hand. "There's an elevator down from the kitchens. We rarely use it ourselves but robots ride up and down all day. All night, too, I assume."

"Roomy," was his remark on entering. It was. Large items came up the shaft. "Mechanical?"

"Yep. A tractor beam would be overkill here. There are some gravity tubes too. We use them even less. Here we are." The doors slid open to reveal a warehouse area.

"Ride, sir?" asked a cart, rolling forward.

"No, thank you. We'll walk."

John shook his head, probably over my politeness to a robot. That was somewhat ingrained in me. Maybe in all Scotians.

Or maybe he didn't like having to walk. We turned down a side passage and reached the stables a few minutes later. "Nira awaits patiently," I noted, wolfing down the last of my second muffin. "I hope she picked out a gentle little pony for me."

John repeated the head shake. "You can't get away with that, Jack McFee." People knew too much about me these days.

The even-tempered chestnut mare I had ridden occasionally over the past two years was saddled and ready for me. A good-enough mount but maybe I should have a horse of my own.

Nah. I doubted I'd ever spend enough time at Dummit Downs again for it to be worthwhile. "Do we have a destination?" I asked.

"The hills," replied Nira, waving an arm in their general direction. "John saw enough farm fields yesterday."

"I think I could see them every day. There is so much to be learned here!"

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“He’s probably planning to write a paper,” I confided to my sister-in-law.

So we rode up into the rolling, treeless hills. Only alfalfa and grasses grew there, grew from the thin layer of soil mankind had created and gradually built up on this planet. Worms and a host of microorganisms introduced over the centuries did their part below the surface. Across this landscape roamed rangy white cattle.

Apparently the cattle on John’s world were quite similar. “They are suited to the environment,” he told us. “My home remains a harsh and arid place, and may not have the potential for much further improvement.”

“It is not earth-like at all?” asked Nira.

“Nor will it ever be. We do not have such a sky.” He looked up, his eyes lingering for a moment on the cyan dome above us. “On Juvelo a white sun stands in a field of faded indigo. Ah, more of your butterflies!”

“Bees, too,” I told him. “Can you hear them buzzing?”

“Indeed I can, Jack. They are for the clovers?”

“They are,” Nira said. “Now what can this be?” Her wrist-top was calling her.

We had ridden well out of House’s range. Our commies were the only way for her to reach us. Yes, Nira thanked her after speaking with the AI. “Just letting us know an air car had come across the estate boundaries,” she informed us. “Near our current location. It left after being warned off but Housie says it dawdled rather longer than it should have.”

“This is a danger?” wondered John.

“Oh, no. It’s not unusual for someone to stray across the lines. Their control computers will usually let them know.”

Air cars are quiet by nature. That is, their engines are. There is wind noise and that sort of thing, of course. One could have been near and we would not have known.

They are certainly quieter than horses. “And we don’t really mind,” Nira went on. “We just don’t want any inadvertent damage from a car.”

"Someone could walk in and we would pay no attention," I added. Or ride a horse, for that matter.

One would not be surprised to know my mind went to the air car that had followed us yesterday. Could this be the same one? Could it have dropped off someone while it 'dawdled?' The thought made me nervous — only a bit but nervous none the less. I was not carrying my sidearm, either. I resolved to do so from now on.

Except, to be sure, when I was in the swimming pool. Even if the C-140 *was* waterproof.

"I want to ride to the ridge," I announced, nodding toward the crest of the hills above us. "John could see much of the place from that vantage."

"There's nothing but rock up there," Nira answered, but turned the head of her horse in that direction. It took a good quarter of an hour to reach the top.

"It is a rather grand view," Nira admitted. "There's the house over there," she said, pointing it out to John.

No sign of air cars. That I expected. A human? I'd never be able to pick one out at this distance. Even with a telescope.

"What are you doing, Jack?" Nira asked, as I held my com up to my eye.

"Built-in telescope," I informed her.

"Oh, a bit of spy kit?"

I had to laugh. "Issued by the Ministry of Information." But I could see nothing, other than white cows. A robot over there, going about some chore or another. Hmm, robots.

"House," I called on the com, "could you ask all the bots in the fields to look out for unfamiliar units? Or humans, for that matter," I added.

"Certainly, Jack. It may take a few minutes for the request to reach them all."

"No, problem. Thanks." I slipped my commie back into a pocket. "What do you say we head home?"

"That sounds good," felt John. "I am quite ravenous."

"You should have grabbed a muffin when you had the chance."

Down the hill we rode, and toward the tree-lined pathway that led

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to Dummit Downs. We were not halfway home when House called me.

“An unknown robot was spotted in the fields,” she let me know. “It slipped away but we will continue to watch for it.”

After all, I had only asked that they be on the lookout for it, not to apprehend the unit. But now I knew it existed and further measures could be taken. “Do we have a description?”

“Approximately sixteen inches long and a foot wide, with six tires, and a low dome on its upper deck. It is colored strangely, Jack, all mottled in green and gray.”

“Camouflaged, Housie.”

“Oh. Of course, Jack. We’ve never had a camouflaged robot here before.”

“There’s a first time for everything. Maybe I should be the one to tell my parents about it, okay?”

“Certainly, Jack. Shall I have lunch ready for you?”

“Not a bad idea,” I told her.

CHAPTER 9

“JOHN RIDES WELL. But so many little things about his style seem — well, different. His seat, the way he handles the reins.”

“I think his mount was a tad confused at times.”

Nira smiled at that. “So I noticed.” She cocked her head at me. “You learned horsemanship on other planets too.”

“But the Corvan approach is not so different from what I grew up with here.” Scotians did pretty much ride like Corvans. The Corvans who attended prestigious equestrian schools, that is.

We sat on the deck, John having retired to his room for a siesta. I might fall into one myself, what with the exercise and a good lunch and the midday warmth. And I had reported the events of the morning to the parents, and to Jock, for that matter. The old soldier was in favor of mounting a search for our robot intruder.

“We’re on watch,” Mom responded. “If it gets near the house, we’ll know.”

Probably, I could have said, but didn’t. The unit House had described sounded a bit large to sneak in.

“We have visitors,” House announced. Just when I was dozing off. Could our Thulean guests have decided to come early?

No. “It is General Freneau,” she continued. “I believe your parents knew she was coming, Jack.”

“But of course she would be here to see you,” said Nira, walking over to the railing. “Set down already. House, is Durga with his grandmother?”

“She left him with his nurse, Nira.”

The slight pursing of her lips told me my sister-in-law did not completely approve of her son being in the care of a bot. Just maybe I sympathized with her feelings, though I’ve no doubt I had robot nursemaids as an infant.

“I’ll be in the nursery,” she announced, and exited.

“I keep an eye on Durga,” said House. I wondered if her feelings were hurt. I’d wondered a lot lately about AIs and their perception of the world. Being around M had probably been part of that.

I stood and stretched and went over to the railing myself. A cart was

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winding its way up from the landing area, a human figure at the controls. Jock, most likely. Two more figures rode. I couldn't tell who at this distance.

Yeah, I could have pulled out my com and used that telescope function again. More trouble that it was worth; I'd know soon enough.

I was carrying the com again, but not my sidearm. It didn't seem quite proper to do so around the house. Outside, it would definitely be on me, and just maybe I'd take it along to Rome this time. There had seemed no reason for it a few months ago.

There came the cart, winding out of the cover of the trees. Jeanne Freneau. A short figure in the seat beside her — not that the general was tall — with cropped ruddy hair. Sacky Baldwin? She was the last person I would have expected to show up here, much less in the company of Freneau. Oh, okay, maybe not the very last. Odd, though.

Sacajawea Baldwin and I barely knew each other, in truth. We had spent a day — and, yes, a night — together at my grandfather's home. Maybe we'd felt a connection at the moment but war and duty and all of that had gotten in the way.

As far as I knew, the only connection between her and the general was my cousin Errol. And me. I decided to make no efforts at anything concerning our visitors and settled back into one of the chairs. It was certainly late enough for a drink. No, with Freneau I'd best be careful of all my wits.

"House," I asked, "do you have any idea of General Freneau's musical tastes?" Jeanne had spent time at Dummit Downs. She might have requested something in her room.

"You grandmother always asks for silence when she visits."

I ignored the grandmother remark. It was true she and Grandpa Jack had married — finally! — half a year ago, but I had no intention of calling her Grandma. The next generation, little Durga and his cousins, probably would. Anyway, the request for quiet did not much surprise me. She probably meditated or something.

"I know little of her companion," House continued. That was fine with me. It would help prevent any awkwardness.

"She used to serve with Errol," I said.

"That I do know, Jack, and that she is a fighter pilot. There is little

other information available. At least to me.” She sounded a tad peeved about that.

“I met her at Summit Up. I think she impressed my grandfather.”

“And the general too? That might be a plausible reason for her presence.” I sensed House was not in the least convinced of it. “They are headed in your direction. Your mother, too.”

So they were, emerging from the house. I at once greeted Jeanne Freneau with, “Is this my birthday present?”

Mom looked askance, Sacky looked somewhat less than her usually assured self. Jeanne only laughed, replying, “I needed to get Sacky away from your grandfather!”

“I can imagine. Welcome to Dummit Downs, Captain.” I made sure to look at her uniform insignia to be certain of that rank. People do get promoted. Maybe not so much nor so rapidly after war-making winds down.

“Thank you, Jack. It’s, um, nice here.” Which was to say unimpressive compared to Grandpa Jack’s place.

From the looks my mother was giving the two of us, she might have similar suspicions to those of House. She chose not to address them. “Jeanne has some information for you.”

“In which Sacky is peripherally involved,” said Freneau, dropping into one of the chairs. “Though mostly she just wanted to get a look at this place and jumped at my invitation to come along.”

My mom gave me another sidelong look, even more suspicion-filled, but again made no comment. We all took seats. Mom didn’t offer refreshments so neither did I.

“Sometime,” began the general, “after Sacky left the training facility at Bono, the abandoned station and the nearby asteroids in the Amusement Park — that’s what you call that isolated system, right?”

“Just the Park, usually.” Sacky looked uncertain whether she should have tacked a ‘sir’ onto that. She was looking uncertain about lots of things today.

Freneau only nodded an acknowledgment. “They were destroyed by a massive explosion. We conjecture the drive element in Gordon’s ship underwent fission.”

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I'd always been told that was impossible. "So there went the last slight chance of getting any information from him."

"I would suspect he was dead long before it happened."

So would I, but his whole 'stuck in a jump loop' was quite beyond my understanding. Or that of anyone else. "It's too bad you were already gone," I told Sacky. "It must have been quite an event."

"The radiation probably would have killed anyone in the same system. I am told the flash should be visible in the skies of Bono in a few more months."

"We'll have to go see it. I have a brand new ship, you know."

Mom wouldn't let me get away with that. "You mean we are allowing you to use a brand new ship."

"Property of the Ministry of Information, as was his last one?" the general asked.

"We've decided it would be better for this one to belong to the McFee Concern. Civil registration simplifies matters, now we're no longer at war."

This was the first I'd heard any of this. Just who owned M now? Not that it mattered — it would be impossible to split us up, without essentially rendering the AI useless.

"I will have to take it out for a test run soon." I wasn't going to mention piloting it back to Avignon. No point in pressing my luck.

"We could always assign you something less valuable," said Mom.

I shrugged, unwilling to rise to any bait of that sort. "I have a suspicion that I could simply hold a tiny bit of a super-massive element in my hand and jump without any drive or ship. Of course, I would end up in empty space so it would not at all be a good idea."

"An intriguing thought," felt Jeanne Freneau, "and one I've entertained myself."

"We could experiment with a small vessel with no drive installed. Well, maybe one as a backup."

Mom confided to Sacky, "We don't want to get these two started. They are likely to be even worse than my other son and nephew when they discuss engineering."

The mention of my cousin was all Baldwin needed. "Errol, um, Brigadier McFee? Is there any news about him?"

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“In Lanju, by last report, patching up all sorts of agreements and giving all sorts of advice. Of course, I’m no longer officially in the government so I’m not that well informed.”

None of us believed that except maybe Sacky.

“I had seen reports of Jack’s recent activities,” spoke Freneau. “In light of those I thought it wouldn’t hurt to drop by and tell him my own bit of news. All this is truly far outside my own sphere.”

“And Sacky?” I’d wondered but hadn’t seen a good opportunity to ask about her presence.

“I ran into the captain at Fundy Base.”

“I’d just started a few days leave.”

“We went to visit your grandfather and then got to talking about your escapades and decided to come calling.”

“Plus we came for your birthday,” added Baldwin.

“Will you be staying for it?” Mom asked. “All Jack’s other girlfriends will be here.”

“Only the ones you know of,” I told her.

CHAPTER 10

THE GENERAL STAYED only for dinner and flew away into the night. Sacky Baldwin, however, accepted an invitation for the weekend.

"Is she in the book?" John whispered to me later, as we relaxed on the deck.

I wasn't sure. My recollections and Vili's account didn't always coincide. "She should be, but I don't think the princess ever actually met her." Aside from hearing her call a cheery goodbye as we jumped out of the 'Park.'

"That will soon be remedied," he observed.

Yes, tomorrow. All my guests except maybe the one I would most like to see.

"Sacky doesn't ride," he went on. "Nira asked her."

The two sat on the other side of the deck, conversing in tones as low as our own. What was that over there? I stood and peered into the shadows. "Damn mouse," I mumbled and waved to a servbot. "Another sparkler," I told it. "Anything for you, John?"

He shook his head. "Cats are illegal here, I understand. That's probably good policy."

"Maybe I could get someone to design a robot cat." Not that I would. Robots of any sort are not very good at killing things. Directly, that is. Robot bombs are another matter.

"I'm sure predators will be introduced eventually," John said. "Or will evolve from the mice themselves to fill the niche."

"Killer mice?" The bot brought my cold drink; the evening was just warm enough for that sort of thing. The Wall was rising into a partly overcast sky. In the distance, I could see the ocean glistening, mimicking the stars that appeared and disappeared above. It was exceedingly nice here, as nice as any place I'd seen. True, I was young but I'd traveled to a surprising number of worlds.

There were a lot more of them waiting.

"You've known the captain a while?"

"Yes. Well, I guess no, really. Less than a year. We met at Summit Up."

"Your grandfather's home."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

“Right. We were there for his hundred and twentieth birthday celebration. I was. My cousin Errol brought Sacky along to act as his aide.” Then I remembered our earlier, brief meeting. “Oh, wait, I had already run into her when she was Errol’s gunner. In fact, I rescued the two of them.”

“That would be likely to make an impression,” the priest drawled.

“I believe taking her to a private dinner with my grandfather made a bigger one. She was very appreciative of the banana cream pie. Hmm, I guess that’s where Jeanne Freneau really got to know her too.”

“The general is married to your grandfather.” He stated this as if fairly — but not quite — certain of it.

“For a few months now, though they were a, ah, couple for years.”

“Better late than never is my professional opinion.” He yawned. “I’d better find my bed. Should I wake you at dawn again?”

“If you do, you’ll learn why I keep a handgun by my bed.”

I went over to hang on the railing for a moment, taking in the night. Maybe I could give Sacky an air car tour before the other guests arrived. Whenever that would be. “Housie?” I asked, not very loudly. She’d be able to hear me.

“Yes, Jack?”

“We still have air cycles about the place, don’t we?”

“That we do. It’s been a long time since you or your brother rode them.”

“See to it that a couple are ready to use in the morning, will you? Thanks.”

With that I nodded a good night to Nira and Sacky, and followed John toward my room.

As I drifted into sleep, I wondered where House had put Sacky for the night. Not important. Chances were she’d move when the other guests arrived. Depending on how well she got along with them. I realized Captain Baldwin, no matter how much success she had seen in the military, was somewhat less sophisticated than my other friends.

Could I like that about her? Nah, I wasn’t like that, I reassured myself. A few seconds later the faint light of dawn was entering through the clerestory windows of my bedroom.

“Happy Birthday,” came House’s greeting as I sat up.

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“Thanks. Anyone else up?”

“Everyone except Sacky. She told me I could call her that.”

Then at least she’d hit it off with House. “We still have to come up with a birth date for you, remember.” Clothes, hmm. Something that would hold up to a field trip. “Maybe I should grow a beard again.”

“I would not advise it, Jack, though it looks rather good on your friend.”

M hadn’t liked my beard either. I shaved and headed out for breakfast, along deserted corridors. Dummit Downs was pretty empty at the moment. Things would undoubtedly change as Brendon and Nira settled into their postwar life and added more children to the family.

And I would be elsewhere. Doing what, I had no clear idea. All right, no idea at all. The breakfast room was empty too, except for the servbots. I had polished off a couple scones — the raisins in them were grown right here — and was on what I had decided would be my last cup of coffee when Baldwin wandered in.

Maybe I’d take another cup. “Am I the last to get up?” she asked.

“It looks that way. I’ve seen no one so I assume they are all about their busy days.”

“Then you’ll have to entertain me, Jack. What’s good for breakfast?”

“On Thule, they would offer you bacon and eggs. Alas, though we have chickens there are no pigs on Scotia, so that’s out.”

“They have them on Thule?” She sounded more than doubtful.

“They grow something in vats they call bacon.” I had partaken of the real thing on other worlds. Honestly, I’d not been impressed. “Fresh-baked scones, maybe? Toast and jelly? I’m afraid I can’t offer you banana cream.”

She turned to the bot patiently awaiting her order. “Is there anything with fruit?”

“Bring the captain a slice of apple pie,” I ordered. “A big one. Coffee?” She nodded, the servbot scurried away.

Sacky sighed. “There are too many choices when I get away from a military cafeteria.”

I sipped a little coffee and considered that. “You went straight into the Force when you were old enough, didn’t you?” From birth family to military family. Neither time nor room to learn much else.

“Uh-huh. Um, thank you,” she said, as the server brought a cup of coffee. “I know you thank bots. Sugar? Oh, there it is.” She spooned a bit into the liquid.

“Just a personal quirk,” I told her. “I doubt it makes any difference to them but — well, who really knows?”

“Indeed,” came House’s voice.

Sacky may have snorted a little coffee. Then she settled down to the wedge of pie placed before her. Apples, we did not grow at Dummit Downs but there were orchards elsewhere on Scotia. I suspected they would do well enough here. That was something for my brother and his wife to decide; my parents have preferred the prestige of putting in vineyards, in competition to Grandpa Jack.

“Shall I give you the tour this morning or would you prefer to be lazy?”

“You need to devote all your time to me before your other guests arrive,” she informed me. “Do we walk or ride bicycles or what? I’m not getting on one of those beasts your sister rides!”

“I believe there are some bicycles about but I have something faster in mind.”

Sacky snickered. “You’re not going to wreck your brother’s runner again, are you?”

“Not my fault,” I protested. “You Group Forcers should never have let that mine get through.” How had she heard of the incident? Maybe via Errol, though he was not prone to gossip.

A few minutes later we found our way down to the workshops. “Hey, that’s one of our trainers!” Sacky was pointing out a W-3 fighter, just like they had used at Bono. I could tell it was outfitted for atmospheric use but my expertise pretty much ended there.

“Wasn’t here when last I visited.” A mechanic rolled up to us. “Is that Brendon’s ride?” I asked it.

“It is, sir. He has been modifying it for personal use.”

“Takes up an awful lot of room,” I grumbled. “What do you say we steal it, Sacky?”

“Master Brendon would not approve, sir,” objected the bot. Not that he would stop us; he’d just be unhappy, if robots can be unhappy. Again, who really knows?

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“Let’s go with something smaller,” said Sacky. “You have a lot of air cars and carts and, um, other vehicles, don’t you?”

“Mostly utility, for everyday operations on the estate.” I turned back to the mechanic. I think he — definitely a he — still mistrusted my intentions. “I requested a pair of air cycles be ready for us.”

“Right over here, Master Jack.”

“Ever ride one of these?” I asked my companion, as we inspected them. “If not, we can share one.”

“I know air cycles, Jack. Radias, aren’t they?”

“I’m afraid so. Livi Radia is supposed to be one of our guests this weekend.”

“I’ve read about her.” She made no other comment.

The cycles were simply small air cars one sat astride. Four varitubes served both for propulsion and maneuvering. Sacky donned her helmet and locked into the saddle. I guess she did know air cycles. Military training was playing its part too.

“Can you hear me in your com?” she asked.

“Coming through clear. Let’s move.”

Sacky nodded and we set out in the general direction of the hills. “Hey, is there a governor on this thing?”

“That’s so you won’t beat me in any races and embarrass me in my own home.”

“Hmmpf.”

Not that I couldn’t embarrass myself quite handily on my own. Certain other women in my life might have reminded me of that fact. “House. Have there been any more sightings of our intruder?”

“There have not, Jack. Were it moving I am sure it would be spotted.”

“Agreed. It may be hidden, doing some sort of surveillance.” Or waiting on something.

“An intruder?” asked Sacky.

I gave her a quick briefing. “Too big to get into your house, then. Do you think it could slip into that garage area?”

“Way to much traffic there. It would be spotted for sure.” No matter how well it was camouflaged.

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“No sense concerning ourselves with it then. Hey, wanta see me do a loop?”

“I think the governor would prevent it.”

“Not if I bank off that cliff up ahead. Watch!”

CHAPTER 11

FORTUNATELY, SACKY DID not break her neck. The loop was really more like a half-roll but I let her get away with that. We rode about for an hour or so, me pointing out this and that, before turning our machines back toward the house.

Sacky brought hers to halt, idling on a ridge well above the structures of Dummit Downs, and removed her helmet. "House can't hear us out here, right? Except through our coms."

"True." I removed my own helmet with its built-in com. "Did you want some privacy?"

"A little. Not that I mind her listening, really."

I fully understood. "She doesn't know what to make of you."

"I'll tell her when I figure it out myself. You know, I was first attracted to you because of Errol. I had a crush on him, of course, and was all too aware nothing would ever come of it. You were like a more user-friendly version of him." Sacky smiled slightly at the notion. "Or so I thought."

"I disappointed?"

"On the contrary. I do wish we could have gotten to know each other better but — well, you know. Things happened."

"And will keep happening. That's life, right? I'll be back to school, you'll be back to the Force."

"But we both still have a lot of life. You're just a kid!" She did more than smile this time. Smirk might be a better description.

"You have only two years on me, Captain Baldwin."

"And some months," she added.

"If you will. Errol told me we should be a couple."

That surprised Sacky. Her mouth opened but she seemed to think better of it and said nothing. Instead she slipped her helmet back on. End of private discussion.

"Brendon is on his way," Nira informed us as soon as we entered the house. "With your mother's boat stuffed full of guests."

Everyone called it Mom's, but the craft belonged just as much to my father. Its interior, to be sure, proclaimed it as the property of Alice McFee. Dad would probably have installed wood paneling.

“Tarmo is with them?” I asked.

“He is. His wife as well.” But not his sister. I did wish Anna could have made it.

“And Vili and Christiana, of course, and that Radia girl. I’ve no idea how they know her.”

“Maybe through Uncle Rupert,” I guessed. “He and Aunt Caroline take every opportunity to show off their royal acquaintances.”

“A bit unkind, Jack, but likely to be true.” She gave me a up-and-down look. “You’re carrying a weapon?”

I had made no attempt to conceal my C-140. “With unknown robots about, it seemed a good idea.” I did not mention mysterious air cars. Nira needn’t know about those. “And maybe I’ll want to shoot a mouse or two.”

“A bit of overkill for that, isn’t it?” asked Sacky.

“It is. I might be able to find something more suitable around the place. After lunch.”

And after a swim. We all felt like soaking in the pool before the visitors arrived rather than starting on anything ambitious. “Our guests will want to swim too,” I warned John and Sacky, “but remember most of them are Thuleans and disinclined to wear anything.” Nira already knew that well.

“I didn’t bring a bathing suit anyway,” announced Sacky. House had found her the one she wore at the moment. “I never expected to spend a weekend here!”

John had no comment. He did, however, head for his customary siesta after we dried off, while Sacky and I went down to the storage and workshop complex beneath the house. “Lots of junk and cast-offs here from when my brother and I were young.” More Brendon’s than mine, what with me attending school off-planet. “There are some target pistols here, aren’t there?” I asked a nearby aidie.

It took but a couple seconds to pull up the information. “Follow.” Pretty much the whole purpose of an unsophisticated little robot of this sort was to impart information and instructions. It wasn’t even gendered.

“Here, sir. More?”

“That is fine. Thank you.” It rolled away on its four little soft

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wheels, perhaps happy to have been of service and to have fulfilled its function. That, again, is all conjecture.

I recognized the ceramic case, unopened for years. "Here we are," I said to Sacky, displaying the long-barreled, small bore air gun that lay within. "There's another. Would you like it?"

"Sure. Should we lay in ambush for your brother? I've always wanted to shoot a superior officer."

"He's reserve now," I pointed out.

"A colonel is a colonel." The girl squinted at me. Maybe she was thinking of shooting a Lieutenant-Commander.

"Let's go find some targets instead." I gathered up all the containers of pellets, each containing several clips.

Sacky looked them over. "These feed through the grip?"

"They do." As with most of the handguns I had carried these past couple of years. "But there is no separate propellant component. Built-in pumps." Powered by specks of ultra-massive elements, as is so much of the technology we use without thinking about it. Tiny force fields and tractor beams and such. Other members of my family could give you a more coherent and detailed explanation.

Some complain of them being inelegant solutions to many engineering problems but they certainly are handy.

"There is an indoor range over that way. I should probably get some work with my own weapon, too." I patted the C-140.

"Anna Gallen taught you to shoot, didn't she?" asked Sacky as we ambled down a corridor.

"She taught me to shoot better. Much better," I admitted. Among other things. "Her brother will be here."

"Um-huh." She cogitated on that a moment or two. "Is Anna your, uh, girlfriend? I couldn't tell when I met her. Not from either of you."

"No. She is not. But she might be my best friend. Here we are." We plinked for a while and then went upstairs, still wearing our air guns. I'm sure we looked a desperate pair.

My far deadlier C-140 I now kept concealed. "No one has arrived yet, House?"

"We expect your brother to drop from the sky any moment. Everyone is waiting on the deck."

I turned to my companion. "What do you say we walk down to the field and be the first to greet them?"

"Couldn't we ride the air cycles? That would make an impression!"

"We're impressive enough as are," I assured her. But I liked the idea. "House, have the air cycles at the front entry, will you?"

"Certainly, Jack. We'll have to sort out your room assignment later, Sacky. You could stay where you were last night if you don't wish to be near the other guests."

"That depends on whether I like them, Housie!"

"Very sensible," felt House. The air cycles were at the front door, hovering in wait for us.

"The only problem with these," I told Sacky as we started down the drive, "is the manufacturer."

"That is the fault of your family for not building their own."

"I must suggest it the next time I'm around Uncle Rupert."

"Not your Grandpa Jack? I thought he'd do anything for his favorite grandson."

"Maybe if Jeanne Freneau put in a good word for me." We timed it perfectly; the ship was setting down just as we arrived. Jock waved to us from a wheeled cart.

I resisted the temptation to take a couple laps around the ship. And I definitely wasn't going to suggest it to Baldwin. She sat, floating beside me, eyes on the yet-to-be opened door. Sacky knew none of these visitors, did she? Maybe that was why she was eager to come down with me to meet them, before anyone else was involved.

She might have met Brendon. Errol would have had opportunities to introduce them.

Impatient Vilma didn't wait for a ramp to be rolled up but clambered down the built-in steps. Our other princess jumped down. "Wow, she is tall, isn't she?" whispered Sacky.

A short and decidedly muscular young lady was climbing down in their wake. That must be the Radia woman. I edged the cycle closer and announced, "We're your official escort."

"Do you have sirens?" called Gunner Sandburg from the doorway. Gunner Sandburg-Gallen, I should say. Her husband stood beside her as they sensibly waited for the ramp.

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To my surprise, Sacky did a credible imitation of one. "I don't think you can keep that up all the way to the house," I told her.

"We'll have to take turns."

"Hmm, yes. This is Captain Sacajawea Baldwin," I informed our new arrivals. "Call her Sacky. Princess Christiana Torgerson-Lempsen." I waved toward the young woman we all called Torgi the last time I'd seen her. Later on, I'd figure out what name to use now. "And our other princess, Vilma Lempsen."

"And famous author, we might add," piped up Gunner, as protective of Vili as ever.

"That's Gunner, Tarmo's wife. You can ignore her."

"Anna told us all about you," said Gunner. "So we're already friends."

"I wish she could have come too."

"As do we. Anna is working as an instructor back home," said Tarmo, "and very bored with the duty." He and Gunner strolled down the ramp, followed by my brother. None had more than a bag as far as luggage went.

"Livi Radia," said Vili, "it is my honor to introduce you to the famed Jack McFee." More than one snicker met that statement.

"Livi and Vili? You have the same name except sort of turned sideways."

Vili sighed. "You have to expect that sort of thing from him."

"I believe my parents tried to connect us at some point," said Livi.

"I was aware such a plot existed," I replied. "Isn't it nice we finally made them happy?"

"I fear," the young woman said, "it will take a lot more than just us meeting to accomplish that."

CHAPTER 12

“UM, COLONEL MCFEE. Should I be saluting you?” She hadn’t up to now, but Sacky apparently wanted to make sure. The cart rolled up the pathway toward the house, the pair of us flanking it on our cycles.

“No, I’m officially a civilian unless I’m called up. Same with Jack.” He nodded in my direction. “Otherwise, I’d make *him* salute me.”

“Oh, your rank is higher, right? I don’t exactly know the differences between Force and Guard.”

“Jack’s rank of Lieutenant-Commander in the Planetary Guard is equivalent to yours of Captain.”

“And here all along I thought you outranked me!” She attempted to sound more peeved than she was. Or so I suspected.

But I wasn’t paying Sacky much attention, being busy taking a bead on a mouse boldly watching us from the side of the drive. They had little fear of humans and none at all of robots. Darn. A miss.

“You need practice shooting from a moving vehicle,” commented Gunner.

“I’m willing to leave most of that up to you.”

“It was an awfully small target,” protested Princess Christiana. “Not like shooting at an air car.” She had memories of Gunner doing just that.

“True enough, Christie. What is that you and the captain are carrying, Jack?” she inquired.

Sacky answered before me. “Air guns. Point-twenty bore. Jack thought we should be armed against a mouse invasion.”

“I remember those from when we were kids,” said Brendon. He turned to Jock, at his side on the front seat. “We do need more effective rodent control.”

“Aye, sir, that we do. They’ve been pestering the chickens.”

“Not to mention eating the crops. I do believe it’s time to introduce some natural predators, but the environmental authority is being cautious.”

“Hawks,” stated Vili. “You need hawks.”

“Or owls,” added Livi.

“They can be noisy,” I commented. It was possible Livi Radia and I

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were the only ones who had ever heard them. Two well-traveled, wealthy brats. Not so long ago, I would have expected to end up with someone of just her sort.

Her response was, "Scotia could use more noise. I hope to hear birds singing here during my lifetime."

"Not if the owls eat them," said Gunner.

We conversed in English; everyone was fluent enough in the tongue, though our Thuleans did have accents. Tarmo and Gunner and Christie, that is; Vili was flawless in any number of languages. She and I and John could hold those secret talks in Latin if we wanted.

But, of course, House would understand us.

House could also speak to us as we neared the residence. "Welcome home, Brendon. Welcome to all our guests, new and returning. Everyone waits on the deck."

"It's good to be here again, Housie!" Christie replied.

"I am happy to hear that, Torgi."

Gunner felt it necessary to say, "Her husband calls her Christie so we're making an effort to also."

"Very well, Christie it shall be."

"Oh, you can call me anything, Miss House. I don't mind Torgi at all!"

Our visitors disembarked with their luggage at the front doors, and Jock drove off. The air cycles were sent following in the cart's wake. Their control computers were just sophisticated enough to do that kind of thing.

The Thulean women converged on Nira and Durga as soon as we reached the deck. Livi and Sacky held back; I could see the two of them giving each other an appraising eye. Tarmo ambled over to where I stood beside John.

"I believe my Gunner is the only one who hasn't seen the baby before." He took a gulp from the drink a servbot had brought and regarded the group around Nira for a moment. "Anna hasn't either."

She was the one who had truly bonded with Nira on previous stays. Aside from Elsa Alander, my sister-in-law might have become Anna's closest female friend. Elsa was now far away with Errol, honeymooning and touring factories on other worlds.

I turned to John. "If at all possible, we should stop and visit Tarmo's sister on our way back to Rome."

Everyone seemed to be coming my way now. "All together," announced Vili. "One, two, three!" They broke into a ragged birthday song. "We'll have to practice that for tomorrow," she decided when they reached an end. Not all reached it at the same time.

"I'm looking forward to it," I told them. "For those of you who haven't met him yet, this is my friend John Barbosa. A fellow student at Rome."

Hellos were exchanged but no great curiosity was shown. That would come later, I was sure, when everyone was rested and fed. "House," I called, "perhaps our visitors should find their rooms and refresh themselves."

"And then a meal," said my father. "Why not out here on the deck on so fine an evening?"

Mom gave the both of us a slightly miffed expression. She was used to being the one who offered and provided hospitality here.

"Would all the young ladies prefer to be close to each other?" asked House.

"Why not?" said Livi.

Sacky nodded. "Yeah, me too. Someplace we can all keep an eye on Jack."

"And his handsome friend," Livi added.

"I'll have your belongings brought along then, Sacky. We put you in the other end of the house last night."

"Lead on, McFee," ordered Tarmo. That joke was getting decidedly old.

We headed toward the proper wing. Into the big central room and take a right into a wide hall. Left and up a low flight of stairs. Right again. "John and I have these two rooms," I informed them, gesturing to the right side of the passageway. "You'll have to fight over the others."

"The Gallens can be directly across from you, if that is acceptable to them," House said.

"Fine with me," felt Gunner.

"I assume Christie and Vili will want to share the next room up."

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Both young women nodded. If House hadn't suggested it, I am sure they would have.

"I'm used to sharing bunk space," spoke up Sacky. "I'll go anywhere you assign me, Housie."

Livi Radia only shrugged. "I'll room with the captain. If we find we can't stand each other, one of us can always move." It was impossible for me to tell whether she was being serious.

It was then Tarmo sidled up beside me and whispered, "A mouse has been following us." I must have looked doubtful of this, because I was. Who ever heard of a mouse acting like that? "It's been appearing and disappearing. I think it has left us now."

"I'll keep an eye out for it." I decided I'd keep the air gun somewhere about me, too.

Half an hour later we all converged once more on the deck. Except Durga. A buffet had been laid out and servbots circulated. Even Jock was there, keeping an eye on the proceedings. Or maybe the pretty girls.

Pretty? Sure, I'd be willing to call any of them that. Even Mom! Well, all right, most would say Christiana was more than pretty. I think her height helped her there, when it didn't make her seem gawky. As long as she stood still she could keep up the illusion.

Our newcomer never seemed to stand still. Livi Radia could qualify as pretty, too. For now. She might look a bit like Jeanne Freneau in a few decades. Not that there's anything wrong with that — just ask my grandfather. Dark hair, sun-bleached on top, and clasped at the nape of her neck, curling down her back. A deeply tanned face and arms. I couldn't tell about the rest of her and had no intentions of trying to learn. A bit of a sharp nose and chin, and eyes that seemed almost black.

"So how do you know Christiana and Vilma?" my mom was asking her.

"We're all at the university together, though we were first introduced at McFee House."

Mom gave me a knowing look. It was as we had conjectured, the machinations of my aunt and uncle.

"I'm studying law there." A quick glance in my direction. "I might

have studied off-planet but my parents thought things were still too unsettled after the war.”

“We were happy to get Jack from underfoot,” claimed my brother. “I say, Sacky, where are you serving now? Or is that a military secret?”

“Just on a carrier, patrolling along the Agora frontier,” she told him. “We’re operating a hodgepodge of Corvan-built types.”

“We’ll be retiring most of those. Expect a bright new Scotian craft one of these days.”

One of these years was probably more accurate. “Didn’t Errol prefer some Corvan type? After his beloved 5C was blown up, I mean.” I’d been there, extricating him and Sacky just before that happened.

“Yes, he got an older Urco out of mothballs and flew his last missions with it.”

“He was assigned a 5E but it never saw action,” Sacky added to this. “He was kept too busy leading fleets and stuff, I hear.”

“And diplomatic missions now,” said Livi. “He should go into politics when he returns.”

There was much shaking of heads. No one who knew Errol could imagine that.

Vili announced, “Maybe I’ll write his biography when he comes back. Or Jack’s grandfather. I haven’t decided yet and school keeps me busy.”

“I’m considering writing my own war memoirs,” said Brendon.

“Oh, the market will be flooded with those.”

“But mine will be better,” he maintained.

I was only half-listening. Something had caught my eye. Yes, a mouse. I supposed it could be the same one Tarmo said was following us. Maybe the one I’d glimpsed on the deck before. But there were lots of mice around.

It should be safe enough to fire out here on the deck. It would probably be safe to fire the air gun indoors, for that matter. I leaned back in my chair and eased it out of its hidden holster — it was longer than the C-140 but could fit in its place without making too much of a bulge.

There the little creature was, slipping along the far wall. Tarmo had noticed what I was up to by now. I don’t think anyone else did. I dropped to the floor and aimed. My target made a most un-mouse-like

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sound when the pellet hit it and popped several feet into the air. I shot again as soon as it landed and it moved no more.

"That sounded like something harder than a mouse," commented Tarmo, walking over to examine it. "A tiny robot."

"Launched by the larger one we knew was about," I said, crouching beside him. "Maybe transmitting a signal to it?"

"That seems likely. We could take it apart."

"Not now. Everyone back off," I told the crowd gathered around us. "It could self-destruct." Not that it would have held a large enough charge to be very dangerous. Best to be safe.

"We need to find its, um, mother."

"Does it matter? This mouse will be transmitting no more information to it."

"But it may have gathered information to transmit elsewhere."

Tarmo was right about that. "If it has been sending a signal strong enough to carry beyond our boundaries, it should have been detected."

A little cleaning bot had rolled up, ready to remove the scraps of shattered metal and ceramic. It did not look at all like a mouse now. "That should go down to the workshops, House," I said. "We can look it over more closely in the morning. I'm sure none of us have said anything the least bit interesting to a spy, but we might find a clue as to who is behind it."

"Certainly, Jack. My, that was a bit of excitement, wasn't it? That little bot sneaked right into the house without me noticing. I think I need to revise some protocols."

I doubted it was necessary. But I did tell House, "Keep watch for the larger robot. I suspect it may try to make a run for it tonight."

"I'll have every activated unit on the lookout. Should I wake you if it is spotted?"

"Wake Tarmo. I've done my part."

CHAPTER 13

“THE SEVENS MAY come to regret having Oz join their group,” pontificated Dad. “It is more prosperous and more populous than any of their worlds, and could well end up dominating them.”

Livi Radia nodded with some enthusiasm. “And its population remains friendly to us.”

Radia seemed very up on politics and such, and quick witted about it. Competitive, even. Inclined to dominate the conversation. She may have met her match in my father.

“Jack mentioned the same thing to me,” said Brendon. I wished he hadn’t. I didn’t feel up to discussing politics or trade relationships or much of anything else.

“Errol is the one to talk to about that,” I stated.

Mom laughed at that. “Who is safely far away from us.”

“He did see some of what was to come, didn’t he?” said Dad. “The Aiglean collapse.” He took a slow sip of his drink, gathering his thoughts. “Perhaps we should have listened to him.” If there was any true regret, he hid it well.

I might as well add a thought or two. “The Aigleians had more of a centralized government than the Corvans. When that collapsed, so did their war effort.”

“Exactly,” agreed Livi. “One of the generals has taken the reins now. Osuna. He is said to oppose the powerful families that have long controlled trade and the Aiglean Alliance in the process.”

“Perhaps,” I commented, “powerful families like yours and mine control too much of what goes on in the Scotian Group.”

She probably had all sorts of answers ready for that but Dad beat her. “You saw some of this too, didn’t you?”

“Errol more than me.” If only because he was privy to more that was going on.

House’s voice broke in. “The intruder has been found. Jock reports that it burnt out all its circuits when our robots blocked its way.”

“Do you want a look at it?” I asked Tarmo. He gave a firm shake of his head. “Might as well just have it put with the other one. We’ll bother with it in the morning.”

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“Very well, Jack.”

“Thank you, House.”

Darn, I’d again become the center of attention. My fault for taking charge. I stood and announced, “I’m heading for my room.”

I was glad the bot had been found before I turned in. I’d sleep better — not that it wouldn’t impinge on my thoughts. Who would think it worthwhile to spy on us? Or on me, most likely.

Our guests all made their ‘good nights’ too. Though Livi Radia might have wanted to sit and talk policy a bit longer, she joined the rest of us after a moment’s hesitation. There would be talk in one or more of our rooms, of course, but it was likely to be on other subjects.

John walked at my side, a bit ahead of the others. “You and Princess Vilma seem, ah, reserved in each other’s company,” he observed.

“I suppose we are taking a bit of a wait and see approach to the future.”

“You are not sleeping with her.”

“And have no intention of doing so.” Nor with anyone else here, regardless of what might have happened in the past. “No need to hear my confession, John.”

“Sex is not a big sin,” he replied, and then gave me a crooked grin. “Even for a priest.”

“Hands off my harem,” I warned him.

A few minutes later we were both sitting with Tarmo in his room. The curtains were drawn back, allowing a wall of windows to open onto a darkened garden. A silent garden. Maybe it did need an owl.

All the women had disappeared somewhere. “I believe my wife and Vili and Christie have become life-long friends,” said Gallen. “A triumvirate.” He frowned at the floor for a few seconds. “Anna will never quite belong.”

“How is your sister?” I asked him. “Still seeing Jitha Jones?”

“No one is seeing Jones on Thule. The rumor is he will be reassigned to the Corvan mission here on Scotia.”

“A spy-master on a larger stage.”

“Most likely. There was never really anything between him and Anna as far as I know.”

"There was much about your sister in Vili's book," said John, "albeit under another name. She seemed very interesting."

"John is prepared to put his vows aside for the right woman," I informed Tarmo.

"Gunner would most certainly shoot me if I forgot mine. By the way, you should practice some with your sidearm. I know you didn't take it with you to college."

"They didn't care for us carrying weapons on campus."

"Your shot at the false mouse was accurate," said John.

"Mice don't shoot back," Tarmo informed him.

"John claims they are going to evolve. Maybe they'll learn how."

"That would be exciting," said Gunner, standing in the doorway. Christiana was right behind her.

"Vili and Livi were monopolizing the conversation," reported Christie, "as usual. They're smarter than me."

"We're just a couple of dim-witted Thulean yokels."

I wasn't about to agree, even if Vili *was* smarter than her friends. "Vili has been trained how to hold her own. All her life."

"I know," agreed Christie, settling her long frame into one of the lounge chairs. "She'd make a much better queen than me."

But was unlikely to be elected. All the money was on Christie's husband, Prince Nils. Gunner had taken a seat next to her husband. Squeezed into the same chair, in fact. I suspected the two of them would appreciate us clearing out soon.

However, Christiana leaned forward, fixed those blue eyes on me, and gave us a complete and unexpected change of subject. "I don't know if I could kill a real mouse. A living being. Do you believe in respect for life, Jack?"

If anyone expected me to pause thoughtfully, they were disappointed. I'd pondered this kind of thing. Yes, pondered. It's a good word, isn't it? "Not for life but for consciousness. Life without consciousness is no more than chemical reactions. Molecules replicating themselves."

It was for John to ask an obvious question. Maybe intended rhetorically. "But what is consciousness?"

"Maybe what you would call a soul. Or a part of it." I didn't have

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answers as ready at hand here, but I pushed on. "I think desire is the basis of consciousness. Desire to feel pleasure, desire to avoid pain. Without these, a creature is but an automaton, responding mindlessly to stimuli.

"The desire to *be*, however, would go hand in hand with self-consciousness, the recognition of an organism that it exists as an entity." I purposely swept my eyes across all four faces before posing a question. "Could an AI ever be truly conscious? Could it ever desire anything in the sense we do? Could it hurt? I certainly don't know."

Tarmo turned to his wife. "Jack has been giving me lectures ever since I first met him. I'm sure he'll end up boring students in some university."

"He's learned the tricks of the trade, that's for sure," agreed John.

"Oh, you guys are terrible. Let's get out of Gunner and Tarmo's way," said Christiana, rising from her place and stretching. It was nice to see Christiana stretch. In the hall, door closed decisively behind us, she said, "I have to officially be a Lutheran since I married into the royal family. It'll be even worse if Nils becomes king because he'll also be the head of the church."

"So you're not a Nezo anymore?"

"I guess not. But Jeanne Freneau assures me there is no real conflict between Mazdan philosophy and Christianity."

"Only if you create one within yourself," John told her. "Good night to you both." He slipped into his room. Maybe I should do the same. Well, my room, not his room.

Instead, Christie took my arm and steered me into her own, where her friends were still holding forth. Fortunately, not on politics.

"They've invited me to come and hang in Halifax for the rest of my leave," Sacky reported, looking up at me for only a moment.

"Bored with me and my home already?"

"It's nice but I don't think I'm suited to country life. Except for riding air cycles!"

"It does seem rather remote here," said Livi Radia. "My family's country place is much closer to the capital."

"Where you keep a string of polo ponies, I understand."

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“Only a few. I’ve admittedly lost some interest in playing. So many other things out there to do!”

That there were. “We’ll have to ride in the morning,” I told her. “I might even get up early, so I’d best to bed.”

“Alone?” she called after me.

“Absolutely,” I called back.

CHAPTER 14

MY RESPONSE TO Miss Radia last night had been as much for Vili as for her. For some reason, I felt I needed to make her know I wasn't with anyone else. I was not going to attempt to figure out what that reason was.

Of course, I knew Radia was only teasing me with her friends there. That does not mean there might not have been a serious question underneath.

Almost everyone was ready to ride in the morning. Even my parents. My brother and his wife. Tarmo and Vili and, of course, Livi Radia. John once again. Gunner had tried riding once for her husband's sake but refused to perform an encore.

"Maybe we'll have some air cycles brought around later," said Sacky. Gunner and Christie seemed to approve of the idea, without much show of enthusiasm.

"We do have to go to the kitchens and supervise the preparation of Jack's birthday cake," Gunner reminded them.

And I had to go inspect our captured robots, sometime. I didn't feel a great hurry but it should be while Tarmo was available. Gunner too. She knew her way around police work, even if she wasn't privy to the same intelligence as her husband.

I did feel the need to walk by what was left of them on the way to the stable. That told me little. "They apprehended the big one down northwest of the house," Jock informed me. "Might have been headed toward the air field. Fried itself before I got there."

The local air field — not the landing place on the estate — would seem a good rendezvous point for the machine and whatever handlers it might have had. Records were already being checked for arrivals there. As with our mystery air car, probably nothing would come of it.

Then we were off on a tour of the farm, I on my accustomed sedate mare. There were barely enough suitable mounts to go around. "Beans, aren't they?" asked Dad as we trotted past a field.

"Hosis," Nira told him. "And we're growing nanga beyond them."

"Past their season," added Brendon.

"Yes, they're a winter green," said Dad. "One more picking maybe? And then turn them under."

“Most likely.”

“Where are your vineyards?” wondered Livi.

“Not much to see at this time of the year,” I informed her. Even I knew that.

“They’re, um, that way,” Dad told her, pointing in something like the proper direction. “We’ll have to send a few bottles home with you, Miss Radia. You think maybe the pinot, dear?” he asked Mom.

“Make it the malbec.”

“You’d better be opening something good for my party,” I told the both of them.

“Good enough,” Nira assured me.

The vineyards did prove unimpressive at this time of year, with not much green put forth yet. Unimpressive to most of us. “A marvel!” exclaimed Father John Barbosa. “So much have you done with this planet.”

“It was a pretty good place already when our ancestors arrived,” said Livi. “A Radia was among the original colonists, you know.”

“So we’ve heard,” said my father.

Livi chuckled at his tone. “Yes, we like to brag about it. First generation Scotians!”

I had ancestors among those first arrivals too. None named McFee, though those were pretty early. “They came from Jamyca, didn’t they?”

“So the records say. I’ve looked at it on maps. An insignificant little island.”

“John and I may go look in person some day.”

“Oh, I wish — well, never mind.” She spurred her horse away from us.

“I think Miss Livi Radia feels stifled,” observed Tarmo. “As much as you.”

“Maybe even as much as your sister,” I said.

That needed no reply.

Livi proved thoroughly conscientious about grooming her horse when we returned to the stables. We’d had to scold Tarmo about that on his first visit. As if robots could be entrusted with the chore!

“House, where are the rest of our guests?” I asked as we trooped toward the house.

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She informed us, "All three are in the pool."

"That sounds good after a ride," said Dad.

"I must warn you they are following Thulean fashion."

"No pool for you," my mother told him. "Nira can decide about Brendon. And as for Jack —" She shook her head. "It won't be his first time swimming with nude Thuleans."

Nor my last, most likely. I *was* curious as to how some of our guests would handle the situation. I donned a robe in my room and headed for the pool. John came hurrying behind me. "Is it, ah, impolite for me to wear a swim suit?" he asked. "House provided me one."

"Whatever makes you comfortable. The Thuleans certainly won't mind."

"Very well." He fell in beside me. "There is not much nudity on Juvelo. The sun is too intense to go outside unprotected."

"The Thuleans mostly live underground."

"In large communities. We are spread out in our little homes and do not see so much of each other."

Nira and Brendon were already in the water, wearing suits. That no doubt made John feel better about his choice. Sacky was as bare as the two Thuleans floating beside her.

"So, with or without?" came a voice from behind me. Livi.

"Without." I doffed my robe and slipped in.

"Me too," she said, and did the same. I could see there was a suit inside her rolled-up towel. The woman had been ready to adapt to whatever she might have found. The others — Thuleans all — joined us within a few minutes.

Many of these friends of mine had been here before, swam here before. Friends, yes, except Radia. I couldn't say I knew her well enough and wasn't sure I'd want to. Old friends. New friends, like John. Or even Sacky; we'd never gotten to know each other that well before.

Don't stare, I reminded myself, not that any of the Thuleans would care. Sacky and Livi were another matter. Hmm, Livi's tan did cover most of her. Not all. "Careful you don't sunburn," I called across the pool to Sacky. She was naturally fair, even paler than the Thuleans. A freckler. Pale nipples. Eyes elsewhere, Jack.

The Thuleans, of course, were all uniformly tanned. Everyone on the planet spends time under sun lamps.

Livi paddled over beside John and me. "You're studying planetology, right?" she asked him, in Lingo.

"Um, this is so. I have less than a year till I am certified."

"So tell me, what was the first planet to be terraformed? We've been arguing about that."

"Oh, that is simple. Earth."

She looked surprised. I was a bit myself; I'd always heard Mars was the first attempt at that sort of thing.

"Our ancestors transformed Earth itself before they left it, making the less hospitable regions suited to human habitation."

Livi considered this, then nodded. "That makes perfect sense."

"But Mars second, right?" I said. "The first go at another planet."

"One that never completely worked out. Mars is still said to be somewhat inhospitable."

"You'll have to go take a look and let me know," she said and backstroked away. I'll admit my eyes followed her just a moment or two. Or three.

"Tarmo!" I swam across the pool to him and his wife. "After some lunch do you want to go look at the robots? You too, Gunner, if you'd like."

"I suppose we should." He didn't sound overly enthusiastic. Like John, maybe he would have preferred a nap.

Sacky was the first to pull herself out of the pool and dry off. Perhaps just a tad self-consciously, with the water no longer providing any concealment. The rest of us did the same within ten minutes or so.

"There is a buffet on the deck," announced House. "Don't overeat before Jack's party."

"That means you, Brendon," I called out. He'd already started putting on weight since leaving the service. I couldn't see any of these others getting fat. Well, maybe Sacky. Yes. I could imagine a middle-aged General Baldwin — she would make general, of course — comfortable in her body and in her position. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

After a snack, Tarmo Gallen and I headed down to the workshops.

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Gunner did not come along; Sacky and Livi did. I was a little surprised to see Brendon already there, discussing the burnt-out units with Jock. Their parts were spread across a ceramic table. I could tell nothing by looking at them.

But then, my brother knew more about engineering than the rest of us put together. "Here's where the mouse was attached," he said, pointing out a spot on the machine's warped upper deck.

"It was reported as having a bump on top when first spotted," I said.

"It must have crept close to the house before releasing it," thought Jock. "Slowly and under cover of night."

"Receiver here?" Tarmo ran his hand across it. "That little mouse couldn't have transmitted much information."

"Maybe only voice," I said. "Someone simply wanted to know what we were up to."

"Most likely. The memory is all shot?" he asked Brendon.

"Completely. It might or might not have been able to transfer some info first. Someone with more knowledge than us might be able to figure out who built it."

Sacky had some idea what we were talking about. Livi Radia had none and her curiosity had to burst loose now. "Why would someone be spying on you? Is it about McFee business dealings? I could see that."

"Little information of that sort would be discovered at Dummit Downs," I told her. I glanced up at Tarmo but he provided no signals one way or another. "This is actual espionage. Possibly linked to certain acts of sabotage during the war."

She cocked her head at me. "So you're still a spy? Just like in Vilma's book?"

"Sort of. Part-time maybe."

"But I am full-time," stated Tarmo. "And I suspect there is more to come."

CHAPTER 15

"I COULDN'T MISS the party," said Jeanne Freneau. "Though I no longer need to ferry Captain Baldwin anywhere."

"She seems to have hit it off with my friends." The two of us were walking up the path toward the house. They were preparing for my party up there.

"Ah, yes, those friends. My Jack tells me that of all the girls you've brought to his home, he liked Sacky the best." She walked on without saying more for a few seconds. "Maybe I do too."

"I like her myself. That of itself means little."

"It is better than not liking her."

I couldn't argue with that. "I suppose that's a present tucked under your arm."

"Suppose what you wish. I was asked to convey the remains of your intruders to Fundy Base when I leave. Someone thinks someone should take a look at them."

"You hear that, House?" I asked. We should be in range.

"I do, Jack. I shall make certain they are delivered to your ship, General. Welcome to Dummit Downs."

"Thank you, House."

I left Freneau to others once we were inside and went to clean up for whatever sort of evening was planned. Dinner first and, I assumed, a cake. The customary thing tended to be done at Dummit Downs.

We do not raise a lot of large animals on Scotia. Horses, yes, but the cattle here at the estate remain a bit of an anomaly. An experiment. I understand they aren't very tasty anyway. So we don't serve much beef or pork or venison or any of a dozen other varieties of red meat I had sampled on other worlds. Poultry is quite another matter. Chickens and quail and turkeys and ducks and on and on. More than one of these would appear on my birthday dinner table. Maybe some fish, too, but those would be raised in tanks or ponds. The seas couldn't really sustain much of a fishery yet, nor had streams been stocked with anything larger than minnows. That would change. I'm sure John could have given me figures on it.

"We should have made you and Brendon wear your uniforms," said

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Mom when I appeared, reasonably well-dressed. "With all your ribbons."

"Dad would have to also," I replied. On second thought, I realized he'd probably like that.

"And Princess Vilma," she said. "She's received decorations too."

"She's wearing the only decoration I care about." I could see the necklace I had given her sparkling even across the room. A pendant in the shape of the Scotian flag, sapphires and diamonds. It had been a rather extravagant gesture but that was Mom's fault. She'd provided me with an expense account.

It dangled now between Vili's breasts, as it had the last time I'd held her in my arms, dancing at Gunner and Tarmo's wedding. A link between the two of us, regardless of whether our futures were to lead us apart or close.

"I'm at the head of the table?"

"Ask Nira. I leave that sort of thing to her." Mom sighed. "Your father and I are leaving more and more to her and Brendon, and spending less time here."

"I will be too."

"Yes. I could never see you settling down to life as a country gentleman." There was a moment's hesitation. "Though if you wanted, the money is there to purchase a place of your own."

"Maybe if I married Livi Radia and she chipped in. But I expect Grandpa Jack to leave Summit Up to me. That's why I'm so nice to Freneau. Where are we putting her, by the way?"

"Again, ask your sister-in-law."

So I did. Yes, of course you're at the head and your father at the far end. Everyone else strung out between. I didn't listen to that part. I considered escorting one young lady or another to her seat but there were too many of them and not enough guys. Unless we drafted Jock and Giles. Where was Giles, anyway? I hadn't seen him around Dummit Downs. Brendon must have left him at Fundy.

Oh, now that Jeanne Freneau had joined us it threw it all off even more. Nira could make sure the right rear ends ended up in the right seats.

Jock did show up in his capacity as majordomo, ordering the bots

around. I took my place at the head of the table, a princess on either hand, my family bunched at the other end. Fish appeared and a crisp white wine. Some sort of crunchy, crusty bread which I preferred to the rest of it.

I suddenly wished we had ice cream sandwiches for desert, just like when I was cruising empty reaches of space with M. I enjoyed that life, though I know most people would find it hard to believe. But I recognized life had just been on hold then. No decisions had to be made about my future, my direction, my purpose. Roast chicken and a lightly chilled red followed the fish.

"You're terribly pensive, Jack," Vili whispered to me. "Are you all right?"

"Things just seemed — unreal for a bit. I felt like running and hiding somewhere."

"That's something we know about," said Christiana, on my other hand. "Formal dinners and constant demands on our time. It gets old after a very short while."

"And I've done it much longer than Christie."

I gave them a smile. Maybe a tad forced but a smile none the less. "And my mom wants me to become a diplomat and lead that same sort of life."

"Poor boy," said Vili. "You can run back to Rome soon and hide in your books."

"She understands me," I confided to Christie. "Say, speaking of books, how soon are you going to be a real librarian?"

"I'll have my degree in about a year and a half. I could go for a higher one but there is not much point. It's unlikely I'll ever actually work as a librarian."

"You never know. And will you work as an historian, Vili?"

"Doesn't writing my book count toward that already?"

"I suppose it does. Modern history. I'll look forward to your multi-volume account of the war."

She made a bit of a rude noise. "What will be your area of expertise?" asked Christie.

"I'm thinking of specializing on the early colonization of space. That's one reason I fell in with John's idea of visiting Earth."

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"I'm still holding you to it," spoke John, seated beyond Christie. "You know, you could do a history of terraforming."

"I'd have to learn more about planetology. If I stick to the development of jump drives, I'd be closer to what I already know."

"Uh-huh. You eat awfully well here on Scotia. I'll miss that when I'm chewing on synthetic rations on some newly-developed world."

"And you are eager to get there, aren't you?"

"That I am. A new life on a new world." He smiled slightly as he added, "And the opportunity to do the work of the church."

Livi Radia, seated opposite him, raised a dark eyebrow at this but made no comment.

Jeanne sat way at the other end of the table, opposite Mom. I might have preferred her conversation up here. Sacky, Brendon and Nira, Gunner and Tarmo. They all seemed happy enough, and happy to be here with me. But I felt distant from them, from all of them.

I would never celebrate another birthday here, would I?

CHAPTER 16

“WE JUST GRABBED something from the gift shop as we passed through Thule Station,” Gunner informed me.

“Another stuffed bear?” This was an old joke between us. I didn’t recognize the object inside the box at first. Oh. A model of Thule Station in a silvery metal. They might actually have bought it in the gift shop. What was that in the bottom? I fished out a bottle of schnapps.

“Anna added that,” said Tarmo.

“Most thoughtful. You must thank her for me. And I thank you for this, um, space station. It brings back fond memories of explosions and near-death.”

I had already received my parents’ present, a rather nice zero-gravity fountain pen. Maybe useful. Probably not. But pretty and, as I was well aware, somewhat pricey.

Nira and Brendon had given me a walking stick. I didn’t quite know what to make of that until my brother slid a short sword from it. Tarmo and Gunner admired it quite a lot.

Again, probably not actually of much use.

“I had intended to give you this at Rome, before you left,” said John Barbosa. He handed over a small box.

“A medal?”

“Saint Christopher, to accompany you on your travels. It is rather old, I was told.”

“I’ll hang it in the new ship,” I promised him. I would also try to find out just how old ‘rather old’ was. Artifacts interested me.

“I had no idea I’d need a gift when I went on leave,” said Sacky. I unwrapped her package to find a display case with all my medals in it, including the one from a Janic-Thulean military that no longer existed. “Housie helped me put it together.” She snickered. “She sent a bot to steal your medals.”

Wherever they had been stored. “Thank you, Sacky.” I really did appreciate the thought of it. “This will look nice in my room. Right next to the Gallens’ space station.”

Fortunately, I wouldn’t be spending much time in it.

Livi came next. “I had no idea what you were like, except what I’d

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heard from Vili and her book. And something expensive shouldn't impress you."

"You could have tested that theory," I informed her, as she slid an envelope across the table.

"Theater tickets?" A pair of them.

"For this coming Wednesday. I am available to use the other ticket, of course."

Oh, ho. I might find some way to get out of that without being too impolite. Or I might actually go with her.

"John's not the only one giving you something old," said Christiana, handing me a beautifully wrapped package. She would go to pains for that sort of thing. I was loath to damage it and get at the gift. A leather-bound book, and it did look old. I carefully leafed through it to find it was a vintage copy of *The Book of Being*, in the original somewhat archaic English. Yes, I know some hold to the theory it was first written down in Farsi but I've seen no real evidence.

"We historians like old things," I told her. "Thank you." I had no idea where I'd keep it. Maybe it should go in Dad's library for now.

Who next? Vili and Jeanne Freneau were eyeing each other. One would get to go last. Vili was closer so she handed me a rather small box. "So you'll remember, too," she murmured, rather enigmatically. Inside was a small pin, enameled in the Thulean colors.

Their emblem had changed from the white and orange rectangular fields of wartime, side by side, to orange-white-orange. It was intended to symbolize some sort of change since the end of the Janus-Thule Alliance but I couldn't say exactly how. The old Janic-Thulean emblem with its red and white diamond was no longer in use, although I'd had my medal with those colors hung on me during the war.

Remember her and Thule. Just as I had given her the necklace to remember me and Scotia, less than a year ago. "I shall remember," I promised, pinning it on my jacket lapel. So what if it was slightly lopsided?

"This is from your grandfather," stated Freneau, passing a small, flat box up the table. "I'd have had no idea what to get you myself."

I couldn't figure out what the object was when I lifted the lid. Ceramic. It looked somewhat like a corkscrew but with a thin, smooth

tube extending from one side, rather than a spiral. I held it up, giving it a quizzical look.

"A gun," breathed Tarmo. "A miniature beam weapon."

I was willing to believe him; he and his sister knew their weapons. Small enough to conceal in one's palm with the barrel projecting. Tarmo leaned in to give it a better look. "I haven't seen one of those in a long time. It's old, isn't it?" he asked Jeanne.

"An antique. Like my Jack." She giggled at her own uncharacteristic quip. "He says he carried that beamer all the way to Earth when he was young. Maybe you'll want to do the same."

Maybe. "I'm thankful for all the gifts," I told the table, "whether old or new. Now where is my cake?"

"On the deck," said Nira. So we gathered out there, the birthday song was sung again — no better than the last time — and I blew out twenty candles. There was a gorgeous sweet white wine to go with the slabs of sweet white cake. I was not at all surprised to hear it came from Grandpa Jack's vineyards.

Livi was right. Nights were too quiet on Scotia. There were few nocturnal insects yet. Definitely none of the sort that make pests of themselves. Those may be necessary to make a complete ecosystem. I went to stand by the railing, looking out into the darkness. Fireflies. That's what Scotia needed. Other worlds had sensibly transplanted them to fill their nights.

I motioned a servbot to me and gave him instructions. He returned with a tray of shot glasses. As I filled each from the bottle of birthday schnapps, I raised my voice. "One more speech," I warned the guests as they gathered around. "I wish to thank you all again for coming. Let's raise a glass now to someone who wasn't able to make it here — Anna Galen."

It seemed a good way to end the day.

But it wasn't really over. As I sat in my room, not quite ready yet for sleep, Tarmo came in. Maybe I shouldn't have left the door open.

"Thank you for remembering my sister."

I waved him to an empty chair. "How could I not? You know, she thinks of me as her brother. The better one."

"I can believe it. May I see the weapon your grandfather gifted you?"

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It was lying on my desk in plain sight, so obviously he could. We both examined Grandpa Jack's beam gun. One did hold it somewhat like a corkscrew, with the short, needle-like barrel protruding between the second and third fingers. That felt comfortable enough to me. Activated with a thumb-button.

"I need to find out how long the beam lasts. Or for that matter, how powerful it is."

"Powerful enough to pull a hole through someone, I'm certain," said Tarmo. "I doubt the power lasts more than twelve seconds or so before dropping off. That's typical."

"But it recharges itself, right?"

He nodded. "I couldn't guess how quickly. I wouldn't depend on it to be ready again were I in the middle of a firefight."

It was essentially a back-up, a hide-away, a hold-out. Whatever term one preferred to use. A weapon of last resort. A name on the side was a bit worn off. B something? And that looked like an O. There was some sort of maker's mark too. Oh, I knew that little stylized cross. "Manufactured on Boethius," I remarked. A major independent world before the war. Annexed by the Ursans in the chaos that followed.

"I would definitely carry it," warned Tarmo. "I doubt our little mouse was the last trouble we're going to see."

Unless I flew back to Rome and forgot about all such things. "I will," I promised him.

CHAPTER 17

"I HAD ORIGINALLY thought I might hang around Halifax on leave anyway," said Sacky Baldwin. "Where else but the big city?"

"The other big city?" I asked.

"Oh, I grew up in Dundee. That's the last place I'd want to visit."

I wouldn't want to either. Dundee, Scotia's largest metropolis, was very much an industrial center, located in a desert landscape on the other side of the planet. One of McFee's largest factories was near it. "Do you have folks there?"

"Divorced ages ago, and both working off-planet now."

Most of our friends were, again, horseback. This Sunday morning would be their last opportunity before flying out this evening. Sacky would go with them. I assumed she would stay in Christie and Vili's apartment but figured it was none of my business.

And I did wish she had chosen to stay. No matter; I was going to head up to Halifax myself in a couple days. Must show John the sights before we returned to college.

Nira and Durga entered, trailed by Gunner and Christie. "Still on your first breakfast? We're ready for our second."

"Help yourselves. We need to find an adventure of our own before our riders return."

"The air cycles again?" asked Gunner. "We never got around to trying them out."

"Or steal Brendon's refurbished runner. Who would like to ride along?"

"No room," said Sacky. "Those fighters barely squeeze in a crew of two."

"I guess you would know."

"That's originally," Nira informed her, taking a seat with Durga in her lap. "Brendon intends to expand passenger space when all the military equipment is removed. He and Olaf Riley are talking about converting surplus machines for sale as civil craft. However," she continued, "I would very much advise against borrowing his prototype."

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"So how about I get an air car and take you three down to the ocean? You too, Nira, if you want. Durga could try swimming."

"I think not quite yet. You girls are welcome to try it out. The water is likely to still be chilly at this time of year."

"But the air is warm."

"All right," agreed Sacky. "Um, swim suits?"

"As you wish. People around here are used to seeing these scandalous Thuleans."

"Seeing too much of them!"

I wasn't sure that was possible but wisely, no doubt, did not say so.

"I hope we aren't shot at like the last time!" said Christiana.

"Unlikely," Gunner told her. She would carry a weapon anyway. That I knew. I would too.

A few minutes later we were heading easterly, toward the morning sun, toward the sea. "Our riders got a later start this morning," Gunner informed me. "John had to say mass first."

It was a Sunday. I would have expected it. Sunday on Scotia. I suppose it's always Sunday somewhere. Gunner sat beside me in the front, Sacky and Christie in back. Yes, of course I was at the wheel again. The Thuleans had no experience piloting air cars. Sacky? She might have wanted to do a loop.

"In a hurry or shall I fly high and slow so you can take in the scenery?" I asked. I'd take a direct cross-country route, as usual, either way.

"There's not really much to see, is there?" responded Gunner. "Grass and bushes and rocks."

"If we went low we might see mice. We could practice shooting them," suggested Sacky.

"Illegal. We're over public land now."

Christie giggled. "We'd all be arrested. What a scandal!"

"A diplomatic insult," agreed Gunner. "Thule would have to declare war on Scotia."

I guess I didn't find that as funny as they did. "I've had enough war recently. Here we are."

"Aw, no waves."

Not many. There was always a little surf on these beaches. "They get

huge in the winter,” I informed them. That was a bit of a fib. This was a relatively protected coastline.

“If you really want to see huge waves, go to the Outer Sea,” said Sacky.

“Too far in an air car! We’ll walk down from here.” The car settled onto a spot on the bluffs above the water, a spot used by any and all for this purpose. Today there was already another vehicle. To be expected on a lovely Sunday morning.

I could see a family splashing below. “We won’t embarrass you, Jack,” Gunner said. “Christie and I can keep our clothes on.”

“If we must,” added the princess.

The water was, as Nira had warned, rather cold anyway. It was a better day for wading and walking than for swimming. Sacky gave me a looking-over when I doffed my shirt. “You’re almost as muscular as Livi, but I haven’t seen you do a bit of exercise.”

“It’s my vacation. I’ll get back to working hard when I return to college.” I had built a good bit of muscle on those long cruises with M, when there was not much else to do but read and work out. Some of that remained with me, though I was not making as much of an effort. I probably should.

“Anna would make you train,” said Gunner.

No doubt. I still had hopes of stopping at Thule to see her, on the way back to the university. There was no need to let anything else get in the way of that. Certainly not a bit of anonymous surveillance.

But that surveillance was on Tarmo’s mind. The first thing he asked when we got back was, “Have you heard anything yet on the robots we sent off?”

“A bit soon, don’t you think?” Freneau had only carried them away with her last night. “I doubt they are much of anyone’s priority.”

“Probably not. We shouldn’t assume they were the only devices snooping on us.”

“There was no sign of anyone on our jaunt to the beach. Nary a mysterious air car to be seen.”

“But you don’t know what might have been unseen.”

“A valid point. Maybe I’ll get a chance to try out Grandpa Jack’s

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beamer on another mechanical mouse. In the mean time, let's enjoy a lunch before half my guests flit away."

Everyone would depart but Tarmo and his wife, and John. We all settled down to that farewell lunch on the deck, as the weather remained fine.

House announced, "A shuttle has dropped a visitor at the landing field. It is Deputy Minister Robert Douglas."

"Not sub-minister anymore?" I asked no one in particular.

"He officially moved into my position when I retired," Mom informed me.

"But still essentially a spy-master." She gave me a look of disapproval. As if I cared who heard a not-very-secret secret. "Won't the new title interfere?"

She didn't answer that. "Has a cart been sent down for him?"

"Let him walk," I grumbled. She didn't pay that any attention either.

"He is riding up to the house now," House told her.

"He'll want to speak with you," said Mom.

"I won't unless he brought a birthday present. Say, Housie, is he carrying one?"

"I am afraid not, Jack."

"And you as well, Major Gallen," my mother said to Tarmo. "We'll see if he wants anyone else."

Or anyone else wants him. I managed to keep myself from saying this aloud. A large, disheveled man found his way to us in a few minutes. He shouldn't have shaved the beard, was my first thought on spying Douglas. It had hidden his double chin. I think most of us knew him, at least in passing. He'd done a lot of the legwork for Mom's department during the war. Her henchman, I called him. Again, usually not aloud. The actual work was to coordinate the gathering of intelligence in the diplomatic service.

Being an officer in the Planetary Guard, I had never answered directly to him nor to my mother. But they sometimes pulled my strings anyway; this I knew.

Douglas lowered himself into a chair near the railing, gazing out over the landscape and sipping a cold drink. He'd get to whatever was

on his mind eventually, sure, but we all had things to do. And, again, I did not answer to him.

Mom sat facing him, exchanging a few words. Just pleasantries, I assumed. He nodded at something and both rose to come over and join us, after already putting a chill on our farewell gathering.

He gave the group a looking over. "Christiana and Vilma could both claim a place at our discussion, as high-ranking members of the Thulean government," he said. "Also, there are aspects that do personally concern Princess Vilma."

"Strictly, they have more right to sit in than I do," stated Mom. She turned her head to me. "Your father felt he shouldn't involve himself at all."

"And I do not wish to either," declared Christie.

Vili looked momentarily undecided. "I think I do."

"Major Gallen, of course. And Gunner, to keep him out of trouble." She smirked a little at this.

"As far as I'm concerned, you can all stay and pester the deputy minister," I told the others. "Whatever you want."

"I'm going to swim again," declared Livi Radia. It seemed there was general agreement with the idea. As good a way as any to pass their last couple hours here. I'd join them if there was time.

Tarmo jumped right into it. "Is there any info on the robot?"

The big man shook his head. "Not much to be learned. The technicians do tell us it was assembled on Blue. Chemical analysis and so on. There are a great many factories and shops on the planet."

Blue was the next planet out from Scotia, a smaller, lifeless reddish orb. There are lots of planets like that, including the first one humans ever visited, Mars. "I've never understood that name for the planet," I said.

Vili did. "It comes from the French word for blood. I am sure M could have told you that."

If I'd asked. I did know many early colonists here spoke French.

"We can assume you are at the center of this, Jack," said Douglas. "Someone is afraid you know something you shouldn't. Whether you do or don't. And in the process, they have somewhat tipped their hand."

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"The mistake many criminals make is trying too hard to cover their tracks," asserted Gunner. "They keep feeling the urge to do more when they should leave well enough alone."

"You've learned that from years of police work?" I asked her.

"Nope. Read it in an old mystery novel."

I was willing to accept that. "So they end up calling attention to themselves."

"That's how it seems," agreed Robert Douglas. "You realize whoever was involved in the Oz attack could also have had a part in the attempts on you." He ruminated on that thought a moment. Douglas did that sort of thing frequently. "Perhaps even those on your grandfather. The sabotage, the attacks. They could even be tied to the actions of Mike Gordon."

"Or they could all be completely unrelated."

"That is also true. What we do think is likely is that someone in the Scotian command was passing information to our enemies. Someone fairly high up."

"Leading to the attack at Oz," said Tarmo. "Do you have any thoughts on the report we gave you, Jack?"

I did. "I came up with two scenarios. One is that a smaller vessel, probably with jump capability, was loaded with several mines. It would have departed as the liner was arriving and released its mines, perhaps just before jumping away. It would not have to be extremely close, though that would work better and the mines would be less likely to be discovered before they struck."

"Sounds reasonable." Douglas nodded in agreement.

"A second possibility is that they could have been hidden somewhere on or around the station, ready to deploy. Either way, when it arrived they would zero in, attach, and destroy. That would require a fairly high-placed traitor on Toto Station."

"Our evidence points more toward the second," said Tarmo, "such as we have. It would be naive to think there were no pro-Seven separatists serving on the Oz station. One or more could have been recruited and helped hide the mines."

"Or someone with a completely different agenda," said Mom, quiet up to that point.

"Could these be the same people who attacked Jack on Thule Station?" asked Vili.

"Those were interested in you, not me. They might have had nothing to do with Aiglean espionage."

Robert Douglas mildly harrumphed at this. "Nothing directly." That, I understood. Various terrorist groups — Janic, Seven, and so on — had been in the mix and might or might not have been cooperating with the Aigleans. Or with each other, for that matter. "Someone *did* know about Jack's first mission and had to be able to sabotage his spy ship. They might not have been directly involved in blowing it up at Thule or any of the later assassination attempts, but might have provided intel."

"My first ship would have been sabotaged at Fundy," I told them. "There were no stops before my engine failed."

"Most likely accomplished by bribing someone of no great importance otherwise. It does show that the military had been compromised."

"Maybe not high up," said Mom. "Getting back to the Oz sabotage, it was fairly common knowledge in our ministry that the delegation would be traveling on that liner. The switch to other ships was quite secret and the traitor did not seem to be in on it."

"Or learned too late to change any plans," suggested Douglas, "or even thought it still worthwhile to make a statement. But likewise they were not in on the planned incursion into Burkut space. This suggests they were not high-level military but, more likely, in one of the ministries. *Quite* possibly serving alongside us."

If that bothered Mom, she didn't show it. "A politician is also possible," she said. "Even a senator."

"There were those who spoke against the war," admitted the deputy minister.

"Then there is only one thing we can be quite sure of, and that is that someone fairly high up was feeding information to our enemies." I thought I had that about right. "So what can any of us do about it?" Meaning me, mostly.

"Not much," said Tarmo. "We can only hope they make another

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move and reveal something.” He smiled at Gunner. “As my wife has suggested.”

Vili piped up. “We’ll have to stand around in groups and whisper to arouse their curiosity.”

I took an immediate dislike to that idea. “There is no reason for you or any of your friends to get involved in this,” I told her, perhaps a little too brusquely.

“Are you going to go investigate on your own?” she asked. “Don’t make yourself a target!”

“Not if I can help it. I’ll be heading back to Rome.”

“You could be called up to active duty, you know,” warned Mom. “If we felt a need for your assistance.”

Robert Douglas held up a wide palm. “I haven’t the least objection to Jack leaving and never thinking about this again.”

Neither did I.

CHAPTER 18

DOUGLAS WAS GONE. A shuttle had carried him back to the airport, some miles away. The deputy minister preferred to travel by airplane. As he never left the planet, that made a certain amount of sense.

Several of my other guests would be leaving in Mom's ship. Brendon intended to ferry them away to Halifax and then go on to Fundy to attend his own duties.

"You know you are all welcome to visit anytime," Mom told them as we settled down after our swim. My Thulean friends did know that; whether extending the welcome to Livi Radia and Sacky Baldwin was wise, I couldn't say.

"And I expect to see you later this week," I said. I might even go to the theater with Livi. Maybe there would be some way to turn that into a group outing.

"On Tuesday?"

"Maybe. No telling how late we'll arrive. John and I are expected at McFee House. We'll stay a couple days, maybe, and I'll show him the sights. Then off to Fundy and away, unless something important comes up." I meant relating to our spy situation. Some of them understood that.

"Here come Nira and Brendon," said Gunner, as the pair emerged from the direction of their room. "I suspect they were making a special goodbye."

"Don't embarrass the Scotians," her husband chided her.

"Are we ready to go?" asked my brother.

"They were just waiting on you," I informed him. I could embarrass Scotians, too. At least family members. "Let's walk down to the ship."

No one objected, though my parents didn't accompany us, nor Nira. The girls' bags were too small to bother with a robot porter. We wound our way down through the trees, chatting about nothing much.

It was Gunner who nudged me and nodded toward the side of the pathway. A rock? It didn't look quite right, quite real. "You have your weapon on you?"

Only the air gun. It might not be effective. Oh, the beamer was in my pocket. I edged to the side of the road. That definitely didn't

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belong there. Out came Grandpa Jack's gift. I extended my arm and gave it a blast. A column of smoke shot up as it scuttled into the shadows. I gave chase, which might not have been the smartest move.

But Gunner followed on my heels. "There it goes! Head it off, Tarmo!"

Not only Tarmo but Sacky ran after the robot-rock. Livi Radia hesitated but a second before joining the chase. It suddenly veered in her direction to avoid our pursuit.

Another might have flinched as it rushed toward them. Livi stood her ground, giving it a kick as it tried to slip by and flipping it over.

"Keep away from it," yelled Tarmo. "It could be dangerous."

She paid him no attention but placed a foot directly on the overturned machine. "It was trying to right itself," she explained when we reached her.

If it were going to explode it probably would have already, but we shouldn't take chances. "You put a hole right through it," noted Gunner. "I wonder if that damaged some of its controls."

"It might explain why it hasn't burnt itself out like the other."

Brendon came over and gave it a good look. "I ought to take it along right now, as long as I'm going to Fundy Base. House, can you hear me?"

"I can, Brendon."

"We need some sort of safe-box for this snooper. Do you think you could send one down?"

"I think Jock could take care of that. I'll ask him." There was a pause of nearly a minute. "Yes, he is on his way."

My brother knelt to examine the robot more closely. "Definitely a listening device," he decided. "It might have been recording your conversation with Douglas."

We stood guard, waiting for Jock. The robot occasionally made an attempt to right itself, extending one of its six wheels this way or that. The controls for that action might have been damaged too. A few short minutes later, a cart came down the path, Jock at its controls.

"Hmm, should fit well enough," he said, eyeing the machine. "Can't it be deactivated, sir?"

"I wouldn't try poking around inside it," replied Brendon. "That box will block communication?"

"Absolutely. Should withstand a good bit of force, too."

"Then let's get it in instead of standing here gawking," I said, scooping it up and dropping it into the crate. "Make sure it's sealed tight," I told Jock.

"That I will!"

We all recognized there remained a very slight chance of it being dangerous. I didn't completely like the idea of it being on the same flight as the four women. Or my brother, for that matter.

No one brought up any concerns so it was carried on down to the landing area and loaded into an external cargo carrier. The girls trooped aboard; the ship lifted off. John and the Gallens and I turned back toward the house. "I'll give you a lift," offered Jock. We all climbed aboard.

"That Radia is the daring sort," remarked Tarmo as we rode up the pathway. He gave me the eye for a moment. "So are you, although you would deny it."

"They both make quick decisions," Gunner put in.

Jock laughed aloud. "Are you trying to make a match for our boy Jack?"

"Oh, no. I wouldn't wish to unleash such a dangerous combination on the worlds."

My parents already had some idea of what had happened. We filled them in on the rest on arrival. "I'll contact someone with all the details we know," said Mom. "Douglas, maybe. They can be waiting for the bot at Fundy."

"It may or may not have listened in to our meeting with him," Tarmo told her.

"And may or may not have transmitted anything," I added to this. "But our opponents did reveal themselves again. As Gunner suggested they might." I gave a respectful nod in her direction.

Mom said nothing for a moment, only regarding the three of us. Yes, there were four with John but he wasn't involved in any of this. "Robert and I met with you on the deck in anticipation that someone might be listening. We discussed nothing that was actually secret but

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revealed enough to perhaps frighten someone into action. You will have to keep your guard up, all of you.”

“And maybe you asked House not to report intruders to me?” I asked.

“Ah, yes, I did that. I am sorry, House, for involving you in any deception.”

“You are endangering Jack and his friends,” replied House. I am quite certain she did not approve.

“It’s all right, Housie,” I assured her. “No one was hurt.” Yet.

“If you say so, Jack.”

“Could you have some supper sent to Tarmo and Gunner’s room? The four of us will eat there.”

“I shall.”

Mom hurried off to relay her information to Robert Douglas or whomever. We headed for our rooms.

“You’ll be heading home soon?” I asked, as we ate shrimp — vat raised, just as on Thule — and sipped chilled white wine.

“I should debrief at your base on Fundy and then we could be on a liner to Thule. No more than two or three days,” said Tarmo.

I’d figured as much. “As long as we’re headed that way, you two could ride with John and me. The new ship isn’t as roomy as my mom’s but it should be comfortable enough.”

Gunner asked, “How soon?”

“Friday, maybe. We can be flexible.”

They needed no convincing. “Sounds good,” said Tarmo, and peeled another boiled shrimp.

All this depended on me being allowed to jump away in the W-6. That was not yet guaranteed but I suspected recent events were all in my favor. I had a traitor to catch, after all. Or something along those lines.

As I prepared for bed, House spoke to me. “Jack, does it bother you that your mother misled us?”

“A little, Housie. She hasn’t put aside her wartime mentality yet. Not completely.”

“Yes, Jack. I can see that. Why do humans go to war?”

“Different humans might give you different answers. I would say it

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comes down to one human or group of humans wanting something another group has.”

The barely perceptible pause told me House was pondering that. “I do not understand, Jack.”

“That’s probably for the best, House.”

CHAPTER 19

THREE OF US rode the next morning, our last time before leaving. John and Tarmo and I, with Nira and Gunner choosing to stay indoors. The weather had changed for the worse so that might have been a good decision.

Misty rain came and went. Just what the crops needed, I was sure. "This would have all run off, once," observed John.

"It still does in many places," I replied. "We keep improving the planet."

"Your brother is playing a role in that. We talked about some of the ideas he has."

"You'll be applying ideas of your own, soon," Tarmo said. "You're going to an Aiglean world?"

"It is in their sphere, but neglected. A planet called Frontera, with an orange sun. I am promised a position there."

I'd have to investigate where that was. Even M might not have that particular bit of information in his memory. "And you will also serve as a priest," I said.

"I will serve in whatever capacity is needed."

That sounded like a bit of a dodge but I didn't press my friend. "We could ride all the way to the sea," I said.

"It feels like the sea is coming to us," replied Tarmo.

John looked up to the overcast skies. "It is marvelous. We do not have rains like this on Juvelo. It is a planet of extremes."

"I hope your Frontera is more hospitable."

"Someday, it may be. Should we have our eyes open for robots again?"

"I don't think it would matter now."

It wouldn't. There would be nothing to report. Moreover, House was establishing new protocols to detect intruders anywhere near the residence.

"If it is still rainy tomorrow morning, we might as well get an early start to Halifax," I said. The forecast was not promising.

"By shuttle?"

That would be my usual way to travel between the city and Dummit

Downs, assuming there was no ship to give me a lift. “We could take the train. It’s almost as fast. Or even an airplane.”

Said John, “Trains are common on my home world. We do not waste energy resources by flying everywhere like you.”

“It’s the same on Thule,” responded Tarmo. “But they mostly run underground.”

“Must not give you much of a view. If we had the time, we could board one of the ships that runs up the coast.”

Neither seemed comfortable with that idea. Floating about in the ocean was not part of their experience. “Are there seas on your new home, John?” I asked.

“There are. Microbial life was introduced in them a century ago, but they are still full of dissolved minerals.”

“Green from iron?”

“Even so, Jack.”

That meant the atmosphere might be breathable by now. Barely. Father John Barbosa and the other colonists had their work cut out for them, to use an old cliché.

There isn’t such a thing as a new cliché, is there? Never mind. We rode on a while, mostly through the uncultivated hills, before turning back. Even on a morning like this, Scotia was a paradise compared to most worlds.

There was little to do the rest of the day except be lazy. That was sort of the point of being here and that was fine, for a while. No news had come from anyone. I assumed both Brendon and his passengers had arrived where they were supposed to arrive. Maybe Mom had heard. I wouldn’t ask.

I was asked, instead, a little before lunch, to come to the library. Both the parents were there. They had something on their minds. That was rarely a good thing.

It was my father who started, once I settled into a comfortable chair. Maybe I should come back here later and read some.

“Your grandfather has quietly transferred some company stock to you. He says he thinks your voice would be useful on the board.” I wasn’t sure Dad was convinced of this. He continued by telling me,

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“You should be aware you are his only grandchild for whom he has done this.”

That surprised me. “Not even Monike?” She was the expected heir, when Uncle Rupert retired from running the McFee Concern. “Hey, that makes me her boss, doesn’t it?”

Dad chuckled but it was Mom that answered. “I believe that may be one the positive benefits he had in mind. Your father holds some stock, of course, though he has always kept the family business at arms’ length. Rupert has his shares, as well.” She paused a moment. There was a more serious tone to her voice as she added, “Bissy’s holdings reverted to the company when she died.”

Uncle Rupert’s first wife, murdered by Mike Gordon. “So will Olaf’s,” I said.

“I didn’t realize you knew that. Yes, Olaf Riley received a good chunk of stock when his company was bought out.”

I listened to things, at least when my cousin Errol McFee mentioned them to me. There were a few other stock holders, but Grandpa Jack had thorough control of the company. My own father’s shares served mainly to help keep Dummit Downs operating. And send me to school!

“This helps legitimize your use of the new ship. Questions are less likely to be raised if there appears to be a close relationship with the company.”

“So I am going to be allowed to take it.”

“And M. It was pointless to let them sit there.”

“Now,” said Dad, “it will be to everyone’s advantage if you draw attention to yourself. Let them become accustomed to you as a wealthy playboy with your own yacht.”

“With the reputation I’ve already cultivated as a stingy Scotian? It might be hard to pull off.”

“Dating Miss Radia might help,” commented Mom.

The last thing I wanted was to be part of that set, but I only nodded. “Pretending to be on serious company business might work better for me. But I’ll be off to college shortly anyway.”

The two looked at each other. Yes, knowingly. “And have you any plans yet beyond your time at Rome?” asked my father.

“Further study? I could be Doctor McFee and make you both insufferably proud of me. Maybe write a thick book or two while I’m at it.”

Dad might have sighed. It was barely perceptible. “I have sometimes felt I should have taken that path.”

I was all too aware of that. “I do not intend to hurry onto any path,” I declared. Including any that involved one of those young women who had just left.

Mom seemed lost in thought. “You have already set foot on one path we never expected,” she said at last. “We had heard all the stories, read the reports, but it never quite sank in until we saw you in action these past few days. You have turned into a very competent and surprisingly dangerous person, my son.”

“But decidedly too independent,” added Dad, with the ghost of a grin on his face.

I wasn’t sure that was possible but was polite enough not to say it. Little presented itself for me to do the rest of the day, and that was good with me. Back to being competent and all the rest tomorrow, maybe.

CHAPTER 20

ON A MORNING not only still damp but noticeably cooler, we waited at the terminal in Port Brunswick for the shuttle to Halifax. Dummit Downs was on the route of a smaller shuttle which had carried us this far.

With the end of the war, the direct, no-stops route between the two largest cities on Yin had been canceled. That had existed primarily for the sake of various governmental individuals, my parents included.

"We'll only have the one stop," I told my friends, as we boarded our ride. The shuttles were essentially large air cars. This one must seat nearly forty passengers, but was barely half-full. The doors closed and we left the Port behind us.

"Between the rain and our speed I can't see much," commented Gunner. She squinted through the glass. "Is that the ocean over there?"

"It is. We'll glimpse it off and on for a while and then the coast will curve away from our route."

Not long after noon we reached the station in Halifax. "We can get on a trolley into town."

"Not necessary," said Tarmo. "I requested the Thulean embassy to send a car."

His wife wouldn't have that. "You mean you asked Vili to request it."

It didn't matter to me. "Are you going to stay at the embassy?"

He shook his head. "Just check in and be away again to Fundy. I expect to end up waiting there for you."

"And I'm staying with Christie and Vili," announced Gunner. "I wonder if Sacky is there too."

John had nothing to add to our conversation. I believe he was somewhat awed by the city. I'd seen bigger, on other worlds. Far bigger. Scotia was, in many respects, quite provincial.

A car pulled up with Thulean insignia, small and discreet, on the door. The same orange, white, orange as my pin. "You can return with me to the embassy last," Tarmo told the driver as we climbed in. "What's nearer, the girls' apartment or this place of yours, Jack?"

As I had no idea where their apartment was, I simply instructed the woman to drop me at McFee House first.

"McFee House," she repeated. "Map? Ah." The vehicle's systems brought up what was needed. She had spoken to it in Thulean but I had become competent in the language over the past two years. Her uniform was Thulean too, the ubiquitous military green coveralls I had become used to seeing at Thule Station. Those hadn't been worn at the embassy when it belonged to the Janic-Thule alliance.

"Here we are," I informed John as we rolled to a halt before the house. "You two are welcome to come in also," I told the Gallens.

"We'll get together tomorrow, I'm sure," replied Gunner. Tarmo just looked like he was in a hurry to get moving.

I might have been a bit eager myself, eager to get up to M, to say goodbye to Scotia again, to jump from star to star. We went to the front gate, located close to the street. Once, this had been countryside but the city had crept out to surround the old place.

"Welcome, sir," came a voice. "You have been expected."

"Thank you, Major. I trust you are well."

"Quite well." The gate swung open. It still squeaked. It would seem odd to me if it didn't, now. A fairly long, shaded walkway, broken here and there by low risers, led to the big blocky house.

"Is Major like House?" whispered John.

"McFee House doesn't have an AI to run everything, like Dummit Downs. Major is the lead robot and fills many of the same duties, but is not nearly as powerful as House." I had named him Major myself, short for Majordomo. He had only a number when I first met the old fellow. I felt that should be remedied.

"It is a rather old place," I continued. "Practically ancient. House AIs had not really been developed yet when it went up and no one has seen the need to install one since."

John accepted everything I told him. "And this Uncle Rupert of yours runs the whole McFee business, um, empire."

"Within limits. Grandpa Jack still holds the reins, even if he has let them go a little slack."

I wondered if Rupert and Caroline knew about the stock. I didn't wonder how they would feel about it. They wouldn't like it one bit.

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Major himself greeted us at the front door. “Your aunt and uncle await you in the library, sir,” he said. “I have chosen adjoining rooms for you and your guest. Shall I have your luggage taken up?”

We had only a small bag each but I decided I might as well make Major feel useful. I use the word feel in the loosest sense. Our bags were carted off by a servbot and we went down the hall to the library. I knew my way around McFee House well enough, though I’d only made brief visits over the years.

My uncle’s library was not nearly so impressive as that at Dummit Downs. There were fewer books and more screens, and wide glass doors that opened to the gardens. Those, admittedly, were impressive.

Welcomes ensued, Rupert shook my hand, Caroline gave me a tentative hug. Even after years, she knew some of the family resented her replacing Aunt Bissy. I can’t say that I did. I also can’t say I particularly liked Uncle Rupert’s second wife.

“This is my friend from the university, Father John Barbosa.”

Aunt Caroline took his hand. “Are you on the faculty at Rome, Father?”

“No, no, Missus McFee. Only another student.”

“He’s taking a crash course in terraforming,” I elaborated. “John will soon be off to help make another planet suitable for human life. They’ll probably make him their bishop or something.”

John raised an eyebrow. “I know that is just a lucky guess, even if you are a spy. Yes, I am likely to be named Bishop of Frontera.” He sounded almost apologetic about it. “The planet is one of the Church’s projects, of course.”

Things fell into place. Some things. Rome had played a major role in helping settle colonies throughout known space. “I expect to be showing John the sights tomorrow,” I told them. “Beyond that, there are no fixed plans.”

They needn’t know the reasons for that, nor anything about recent events. “Oh, I do have an engagement to accompany Miss Livi Radia to the theater in the evening.”

If I had expected enthusiasm, I was disappointed. In fact, Uncle Rupert seemed a bit cool to the announcement. I believe I had gone from being seen as an asset to becoming a threat — not only to Rupert

but to his daughter Monike. "I do expect to be on my way back to Rome by Friday," I hastily added. "It should be another three months until Scotia sees me again. Maybe longer."

"Jack and I were considering a jaunt to Earth," said John. "Perhaps on our next break."

I nodded to indicate some sort of agreement to the idea. Would that be John's last break? He was near the completion of his courses. At any rate, Rupert shouldn't see me as an immediate danger.

"That sounds interesting," spoke Caroline. "Didn't your father visit Earth, Rupert?"

"When Jack's age. I'd say that's the best time to do it. We have an engagement tonight but I am sure you can find supper for yourself and your friend. Will you show them to their rooms, Major?"

So I had them calling him Major. That was good. Errol had promised he would use the name around the house. We followed the robot to what I was fairly sure was the room I used on my last visit. Quite small, as were many bedrooms here, and across the hall from Errol's only slightly larger suite.

"Your rooms adjoin," Major informed us. "Would you like me to send some supper up?"

I checked my commie. It was still rather early. "More like a late lunch, Major. We would appreciate a meal."

He rolled off to attend to it. "Before you and I go out, I should check with our friends." Whether all was well with them, whether they had any plans. "Gunner is the person to call. I can ask after Tarmo."

So I did. Tarmo was already out of the embassy and on his way to Fundy. She was going to stay in Vili and Christie's place.

"Is Sacky there too?"

"Sacky's not staying here, which is good. It's crowded with the three of us."

"She's at Livi's apartment," I heard Vili call.

Maybe I should contact her too. "Have you any plans for the evening? I'm going to show John around a little."

"Oh, these two have to study. All they do is work! And I'd just as soon relax here and watch them."

"I knew you were a sensible person," I told her. "Just what Tarmo

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needs to keep him in line. I'll get in touch tomorrow and maybe we can plan something then."

"Good enough. I suppose they have classes sometime."

So did I. I said goodbye and started to call Sacky, but the food showed up. The captain could wait and the pilaf couldn't.

We ate in silence for a minute or two, before John said, "I would ask you not to mention my possible, ah, elevation to anyone at the university. My fellow priests might treat me differently, even if they do not mean to."

"I can keep a secret."

"So have I learned." He chewed another mouthful of rice. "You look like your uncle."

"Some say I resemble my cousin Errol too." But I was darker, as were my father and Grandpa Jack. Yes, shorter too. In those respects I more resembled John!

"And your uncle owns this house."

"He does not. It is property of the McFee Concern."

"Ah, a perk of being the head of the company. But not forever, then."

"Rupert has a lot of years in him yet, if he wants to continue to be in charge. He might not. However, I doubt he and Aunt Caroline would move out of this place until one of them died, nor would anyone ask them to."

John nodded his understanding and ate on.

Rupert liked being the head of the McFee Concern, but not so much for the power it gave as for the prestige attached to it. He and Caroline reveled in being part of the cream of society here in Halifax, throwing and attending dinner parties, being seen at all the important cultural events.

That was Caroline's doing, to be sure. Bissy had been a no-nonsense engineer. Errol might look like his dad but he very much was his mother's son.

I called up Sacky. "Oh, I'd love to go out with you and John," she told me. "Livi has all sorts of things to do and she doesn't need to drag me along."

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“We’ll pick you up,” I promised. She might be surprised when we showed up on a trolley.

CHAPTER 21

WE WENT DOWNTOWN by trolley, too, all the way to the bay. Every tourist needs to see the bay.

“A bunch of us took a short leave here when we finished basic training,” reported Sacky. “We didn’t get beyond the bars.”

Plenty of those lined this waterfront street. Small shops, eateries of various sorts, what I assumed — or hoped — were hotels filled the spaces between them. Being Scotia, the neighborhood seemed more picturesque than seedy.

“When I was a student at a Corvan school, some of us ventured into truly rough districts. That sort of thing was discouraged, of course.” I had to let out a rueful chuckle. “It was decidedly stupid of us.”

“Some stupidity must be expected from youngsters,” John felt.

“Especially rich, privileged youngsters. What could ever hurt us?”

Sacky said only, “There are areas like that in Dundee. You should be escorting us around a higher-class neighborhood, Mister McFee.”

We had looked out across the wide Halifax harbor so there was little reason to remain. I consulted my communicator. “That way,” I decided, nodding toward the southwest.

“Walking?”

“I’ve wasted enough money on buses,” I told them. Yes, I could have afforded a cab without even thinking of the expense. That went against both my nature and upbringing.

“I’ll bet those fellow students thought you were a tightwad,” said Sacky.

To that I could only smile. She was quite right.

Our surroundings changed from pleasure to small business — warehouses, offices, mostly closed. This was not the port area, proper, which remained busy day and night. A robot cart passed occasionally. A few humans walked briskly here and there, focused on their own destinations and ignoring us.

“There’s a, um, not exactly upscale shopping and entertainment district a couple block this way,” I informed my companions. “A nice place to wander around and look in windows, and maybe get something to eat.”

"Family friendly," Sacky stated. "Not the sort of place you'll take Livi tomorrow."

Recognizing it as a joke and no sort of accusation I responded, "Maybe I should."

We turned to our right at the next corner, onto an inadequately lighted street. An alley, maybe I could call it. A little way down its length, two men stepped out in front of us. I didn't even need to look to know someone was behind us too.

But John did. "Another one," he commented, rather nonchalantly. "Do they mean to rob us?"

It was possible. Unlikely, but possible. The two before us held short lengths of pipe. I could guess the one behind was similarly equipped. At that moment, I wished I had carried the stick Nira and Brendon had given me.

Yes, I was carrying my service sidearm, secure in its concealed holster. And yes, the little beamer was in my pocket. I did not wish to use either, if at all possible.

"I think their intention is to hurt us," I told the priest. "Or me, specifically."

He nodded and a knife appeared in his hand. This did not greatly surprise me. John came from a harsh world and it was the sort of tool he would be used to carrying. That did not mean he knew anything of knife-fighting!

Whereas I did. I stepped forward, attempting to appear unconcerned. "Can I do something for you, gentlemen?"

One snickered. The other sneered. Both were large. Without looking, I could guess they had put their smallest man behind us. A quicker man to block us if we bolted.

But all three of them men. Having trained under Anna Gallen I knew women could be every bit as dangerous. I gave Sacky a quick side-long glance. Had she learned anything of personal combat?

The answer to my question came from behind us. "We're going to teach you to put Scotia first."

"Scotia first," repeated one of the others, and slapped his club into his meaty palm to emphasize the statement.

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“Enough of you McFees betraying us,” continued the fellow at our rear.

“Traitors,” hissed the one in front who had spoken before. His companion only glared at us, his malice unconcealed.

“Wall-men,” whispered Sacky. I had no idea what she meant by that.

“A wall we are passing through,” I answered. “Watch my back, John.” I rushed forward, catching my target unprepared. The pipe in his hand flew clattering across the pavement as I put a shoulder into his midsection. He went down hard. Fortunately, there was no body armor to get in the way; I had gambled there wouldn’t be.

I turned at once to the other man, menacing me with his pipe but undecided on his action. Indecision is rarely a good choice. “Here,” said Sacky, handing me the pipe my first opponent had dropped. I hoped she was keeping an eye on him, because I needed to keep my own on this man.

He swung. I dodged. I swung. He dodged, but left a wide opening. In went my pipe like the end of a rapier, catching him hard in the sternum. With an ‘oof’ he collapsed onto his rear end.

I turned to see John faced off with the third man, knife versus pipe, neither willing to attack. Of a sudden, the man wheeled and ran. The odds were no longer in his favor. My first opponent attempted to sit up, to be met with a kick in the face by Sacky. He rolled away, staggered to his feet, and ran the other direction. I don’t think our third attacker was capable of doing anything at that moment.

“I’ve called the police on my wrist-top,” Sacky reported.

Were it left to me, I wouldn’t have bothered. I’d rather go get something to eat. “What is a wallmen?” I asked her.

“What are Wall-men, you mean. I’ve run into a few in the service, with their ‘Scotia first’ slogans.” She added to this, with some vehemence, “I’d kick them out.”

I guess I didn’t know everything. I certainly didn’t know whether this was a random attack or tied to other recent events.

“It seems they knew who you were,” she said, glancing at the groaning man at my feet, “but not what you could do. You need to teach me some of that.”

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If there were time, I might have enjoyed it. Who knew when I might see Sacajawea Baldwin again? A police vehicle pulled up shortly.

Statement were taken, names were checked. Needless to say, mine was recognized. I still had a sort of celebrity status, mostly due to Vili Lempesen's book. But I was a war hero too, wasn't I? That helps in dealing with individuals in any uniform.

"We won't need you to come to the station tonight," the sergeant in charge informed me. "Tomorrow will be fine." She considered what she had just said. "I suspect this case may find its way downtown. You'll be informed if it is. McFee House, right?" I nodded. "Should we call anyone, sir? A taxi?"

"Not for us," I said. "We were headed over that way —" I waved an arm in the proper direction. "To have some fun and we're not allowing a few ruffians to prevent that."

I think Sacky might have snickered.

CHAPTER 22

I WAS NOT at all surprised to find Robert Douglas at the Halifax police headquarters the next morning. It was located in the old downtown, a sprawling place not far from the Thulean embassy. I seated myself across from him at a metal table in a windowless room. A gray-haired, heavy-set woman occupied a third chair, at the head of the table. "Your friends got home safely last night?" he asked me.

"That they did." I suspected they had enjoyed themselves. "We can assume our other friends once again tipped their cards."

"Possibly. May I present Tara Pavek, the Halifax chief of police? This is Jack McFee, Tara."

"Good morning, Mister McFee. Before we proceed, I will inform you that we have added patrols to the area around McFee House. I assume the house itself has a good defense system."

"I am sure it does." Errol might well have tweaked it. "I should be gone from the city by Friday and someone else can worry about me."

She gave Douglas a quick sidelong look. "Yes, me and my associates," he admitted.

"And then I'll be beyond even your reach."

"But maybe not beyond those who would harm you."

"These Wall-men."

Pavek addressed that statement. "That's what they call themselves. They go on about the Wall protecting us on one side and how we should do the same on the others. Form a human wall."

"Isolationists."

"Exactly," said Douglas. "They see the McFees and the other large companies as getting us entangled with outsiders."

"In other words, they blame us for the war."

"And its outcome. The loss of the Oz and Trinity systems to the Sevens. Some call for war with them to take them back."

"And annex the Sevens while we're at it," added the chief.

"But we must recognize that our own recent, um, events might not be directly connected to the movement. Someone could have simply stirred up those three last night."

I could see that. "Or they could even have been no more than paid

muscle, whatever slogans they might have spouted.” I gave that a moment’s more thought. “Slogans that might be intended to mislead us.”

“But the man we brought in is definitely connected to the Wall-men cause,” Pavek said. “We may be able to find out who set him and his partners on you.”

“There are drugs,” suggested Robert Douglas.

“Which you know we are not permitted to use,” she replied. The chief sounded pretty firm about that. I would guess the Ministry of Information was not quite so strict.

There was not much more to say right then. I had no doubt investigations and communication would continue without me, and that was all right. Douglas and I headed for the lobby, where John waited.

“You showed admirable restraint by not shooting your assailants last night,” said the deputy minister.

“That would have made it difficult to question them. Or give them drugs. The chief is from Bannock, isn’t she?”

“Born there. The accent?”

“I thought I recognized it. It is not very pronounced. Ready to go, John?”

“More than ready, Jack. A trolley again?”

“Oh, the police are going to take you home,” Douglas informed us. “After all, they brought you.”

That was true. I was not certain I wanted to go straight back to McFee House but John and I got into the waiting patrol car. Me up front, the priest in back. “You know the place?” I asked the officer at the wheel.

“My regular beat,” he replied. “One of use will be driving by from time to time.”

“Oh.” I did hesitate before asking, “Will Veronika O’Toole be on patrol?”

“Niki is gone. Emigrated off-planet when a recruiter came and made her an offer.”

“Oh.” Yes, I said it again.

“She did tell us about her encounter with you. We weren’t sure

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whether to believe it all.” The officer grinned. “There wasn’t a word about it in that book.”

I hadn’t told Vilma about it. Wisely so, I’m sure. “It did happen. I don’t think we need to go into details.” We rode on without words for perhaps a minute. “I never got the chance to apologize for running off.”

“The book does explain where you went, sir, and why. I’m sure O’Toole understood.” Then, more seriously, “I think it might have been the incident that led to her decision to emigrate. A new start on a new world, as the recruiters like to say.”

“My friend here is doing the same,” I said.

“Maybe the best choice for a young person. There’s not always much of a future in staying put, is there? Here we are.” The car came to a stop before McFee House. It remained until we were inside the gate, then slowly rolled away.

“It’s early still,” I said. “Is there anything you would particularly like to see or do?”

“There is a Catholic cathedral, is there not?”

“So there is. I was only in it once. It’s not very impressive.”

“Nothing to compare to the Mazdesian temple, I’m sure.”

“Oh, that’s just a big barn. We Nezos tend toward an unadorned aesthetic.” Exacerbated by the Scotian temperament.

“Do you have *any* impressive buildings?”

“We haven’t time to go see Summit Up, I’m afraid.” Nor an invitation from my grandfather. “It should impress anyone.”

“I’d rather see the vineyards near it. There must be harvesting going on in the northern hemisphere.”

“We can share a bottle of wine from them, anyway,” I said, as we paused at the front door. “I’m going to call Sacky.”

“Hi!” she answered. “Your friends are too busy with their lives and college, so Gunner and I are on a bus riding around town.”

I heard Gunner give her own, “Hi!” in the background.

“Much safer than having you give me a tour, I must say,” Sacky continued.

“All right,” I said. “Have fun. Will you be at Radia’s when I come?”

“Don’t know! We may just ride all day and all night!”

"Just be sure not to end up going absent without leave," I warned her. "See you later."

"I like Sacky," said John. "She is bright and able, and seems a good person. Yet she pretends to be less sophisticated than she is."

"That's a bit of self-defense."

"We all have our ways of protecting ourselves, eh?"

"Don't go too priestly on me, John," I told him as we stepped into the entry hall. "Had any thoughts in the last minute on what to do?"

"Eating is always good. We were hurried away too soon this morning."

I could agree. It didn't take long to get some baked goods in front of me, on a table in the kitchen. John tended to be more a meat person. Enough so to make me slightly uncomfortable at times. After eating, we strolled around the gardens until it was time to eat again. John was impressed. His enthusiasm even had me seeing the place with new eyes. It was not Caroline's creation, much less Rupert's; they'd hired one of the best head gardeners to be found and didn't skimp on the robots needed to keep it all tidy.

Then it was time for John's siesta. While the priest snoozed, I went to the library to find a book. No one would pester me in there. Uncle Rupert was conscientious about being at the office and touring the factories and all of that. Caroline had clubs.

I didn't find anything interesting to read and might have taken an inadvertent siesta myself. After a while, John came in, saying, "Your aunt and uncle have invited me to dine with them while you are gone this evening. A few friends, they say."

"Then I needn't worry about entertaining you. I suspect you will enjoy yourself." He was someone Aunt Caroline could show off, a visitor from far away with an interesting story. Just the sort of thing for which she was ever on the lookout. "Be sure to wear your Roman collar."

I wondered if he'd be asked to say grace.

It was time I got ready for my own evening. Now what did one wear to the theater? It had been easier during the war, when I could always rely on my uniform. I did have some dress clothes of a sort available,

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sent along when I traveled from Dummit Downs. Some would call them rather conservative of color and cut.

I preferred the word 'elegant.' All the same, I'd rather be in coveralls.

A cab. No choice there. Miss Livi Radia was not going to ride the trolley. One showed up at the gate soon after I called and we sped away. A robocab, of course. I wasn't about to splurge on a human driver.

"Requested address, sir," she announced. The place wasn't impressive.

"Wait," I told her. As I had hired the cab for the evening that shouldn't have been necessary. Doesn't hurt to be specific with robots, however. I went up to the apartment number I had been given, on the third floor.

Gunner answered the door. "He actually showed up," she called to someone inside.

"He's braver than we thought," answered Sacky. "Come on in."

"We're about to go out for the evening with Christie and Vili," Gunner said. "More miles on a trolley!"

"Hey, you're carrying your stick," Sacky said, suddenly quite serious. "Do you expect more trouble?"

"Not even a mouse."

"But it's always best to be prepared," said Gunner. "Hey, Livi, there's a guy here!"

"With tickets!" I called.

The apartment did not surprise me. Well appointed, somewhat bold in its colors. Expensive simplicity. I'd have guessed a professional designer was to blame, except Miss Radia's personal style reflected the same aesthetic.

"Gray," she said, looking me up and down. "We certainly aren't going to clash."

We all headed out, Sacky and Gunner, I assume, to catch a bus, Livi and I in our cab.

"Dinner, first?" I asked my companion. That was just to be polite; there was more than an hour till showtime and she would expect us to fill it somehow.

"Sure. Need any recommendations?"

"Probably, but I have a place in mind already." I gave the cab an

address, and added, "We won't need you for some time after. I'll call when it's time." It would be simpler, as well as more interesting, to walk around the theater district.

To Livi I said, "The tickets are for *The Boor*. A new version or a revival?"

"A revival, presented in as authentic a form as possible. In English, of course." Livi frowned "There has been recent criticism of shows presented in Lingo."

More of this Wall-men mentality? "My tastes admittedly tend toward humorous operettas. Usually in Lingo."

"Sure, Jack. Your Miss House told me a little about your listening tastes."

I'd have to remind Housie to use more discretion. Fortunately, Radia didn't dwell on the subject. "Your friends told me you love theater. Real theater."

"I do. A screen is not the same. When —" Did I want to talk about this? "When I was by myself on long patrols, I quickly became tired of watching and spent more time reading."

"And listening to composers from millennia past." So she was going to circle back to that.

That didn't mean I had to talk about it. "Here will do fine," I told the taxi. It was the same restaurant to which I had taken my Thulean guests a year previous. Safer to stick with what I knew tonight.

That included women. I found myself liking Livi Radia, perhaps being attracted to her on some level. It would not do to let that go anywhere.

"Ah, Lieutenant-Commander McFee," said the human head waiter. "And Miss Radia. Welcome. It has been some time since we have seen either of you." I have no doubt some computer had kept track and informed him of this.

"No military ranks," I told him. "I'm retired. And I've been off-world. I couldn't speak for Livi."

"And you shouldn't," she replied and proceeded to order.

"My full given name is Anjalivi," Radia said as we waited for our first course. "You would be likely to hear my parents call me that."

"Hmm. I don't think I know the etymology of the name."

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"I suspect it was made up here on Scotia by mashing together a couple names."

"Wouldn't be surprised. I've heard Anjali used on Corvan worlds." And Radia, for that matter. "Your parents hobnob with my aunt and uncle."

"Dad is all about connections. He heads up sales at the company." She gave the servbot delivering our consomme a brief glance. "Mom was and is a lawyer who allowed him to sell her on the idea of marriage."

"And you will have a role in the sprawling Radia empire someday?"

"I suppose." Miss Anjalivi Radia did not sound at all enthusiastic about it. "Your father did well to distance himself from the McFee Concern, I think."

But I might be getting sucked into it. Those shares in my name came to mind. "I used to see myself maybe leaving Scotia altogether to get away from the family business," I admitted. "And from the family name. Teach at some university far away."

"It might be too late for either of us to escape. This is rather good." She busied herself with a couple spoonfuls of the clear soup. Chickens were surely involved in its making. "Some of my acquaintances would not consider this restaurant upscale enough. They are a bunch of snobs, of course."

"Of course," I agreed. "I'm not snobbish at all, you know."

This didn't get the laugh — or at least smile — for which I had hoped. "No, you're aristocratic. Maybe that's why you and Vili get along well. You both have this innate sense of your status."

It was not nearly so simple. Nothing is. I didn't feel pursuing the subject. "Have you thoughts on my other friends?" I asked, still attempting to keep the tone light.

"I like Sacky quite a lot. I wish she was staying around. Ha, if she were willing to give up her military career, I'd ask my dad to give her a job. As for Vili and Christie — I like them well enough but I doubt we'll ever be really close. Best friends close."

"That is rare."

"Vili is not your best friend either, is she? No, you needn't answer

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that. But I can see something is going on between you. Far be it from me to blunder in before you both figure it out.”

No, I could blunder quite well on my own.

CHAPTER 23

THE PLAY WASN'T bad. The theater was a little artsy place I'd never heard of before. Maybe another facet of the snobbery Livi had mentioned.

"The language was updated," I commented on our exit.

"Or we wouldn't have understood it." There was a touch of amusement in her voice as she added, "Most of us wouldn't."

"The centuries-old attitudes could not be updated. The enmity to all religion. Shall we get a drink before ending this evening?"

"I expect nothing less from my escort. Why did the playwright hate religion, Mister Historian?"

"Because he saw it only as a tool of repression. Which it was on that world at that time."

"Horus."

"Yes. Quite a tolerant planet these days, by all reports." They were involved somehow in Errol's negotiations to set up neutral trade connections. I might ask my cousin about that someday. We took a left through the wide doors of a bar, joining a throng of other post-theater drinkers. Or people who had skipped the plays and just came for liquor.

"What was that stuff we drank for your friend? Something Thulean?"

"Schnapps. It is popular there."

"Two schnapps, neat," she ordered. "We'll drink to all our Thulean friends."

Two shots of the colorless liquor were duly delivered. "Oh, it's cold," she said, on sampling hers. "You didn't serve it that way."

"Thuleans don't. I don't think it matters." I raised my glass. "To all friends new and old, Thulean and Scotian alike."

"Don't forget John," she told me.

"Him too." We downed our shots.

Livi looked around the place. "Some of my friends are here. I don't think I want to talk to them this evening, much less drink to them. Let's get out of here."

I was willing enough. I called the cab to come for us. Not long after, we stood at Livi's door.

"Time for an awkward goodnight," she said. "Do we shake hands? Hug? Kiss? Have sex?"

"I am fairly sure you don't mean the last of those." I hoped not, anyway.

"Oh, I probably would go to bed with you if you asked. I'd probably *marry* you if you asked."

"I'm sure you're not in love with me."

"And I'm sure you know that doesn't matter. We'd make a marvelous couple." She laughed, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and went inside.

I suspect I could have followed her. Instead, I went to the waiting cab.

Which I sent away. There was no hurry to return to McFee House. I'd rather take a trolley than sit alone in the back of a cab. Yes, I do like to be alone. Just not right then.

None the less, I was alone in my head. Well, no. Vili was there. Had I only been in love with the idea of being in love with Princess Vilma Lempsen? I had made her my romantic ideal for a while. That's another cliché, isn't it? Whether old or new.

Few rode the trolley into the neighborhood of McFee House, much less at this time of night. It was an area of large homes, of wealth, secluded from the city. My stop lay about two blocks from the entry gate. More time to be alone, to walk and to think.

To look at the stars. Halifax was notably rainy — when it wasn't foggy — but the skies had cleared tonight. I couldn't see Sirius from here. It would be hidden behind an edge of the Wall. Maybe it was too far anyway. Maybe it was the wrong direction. But I could jump to other worlds where the bright blue-white star could be seen. Sirius and so much more.

"Good evening, Master Jack," said Major, as the gate swung open.

"Good evening. Has everyone turned in?"

"They have, sir. I need my own downtime soon."

Robots didn't sleep, exactly, but they did need an hour or so to sort themselves out, now and again. There would be backup systems to

keep things running. More so, maybe, in this house where there was no central AI and the robots and computers managing things were not so interconnected. Unplanned redundancy.

Major's voice returned when I stepped into the house. I don't think he could talk to me when I was between there and the gate. "A Mister Douglas called the house earlier. Also a woman named Alice McFee. Your mother, Master Jack?"

"She is. Did either leave a message?"

"Only that they wish to confer with you in the morning. Your uncle informed them the library was at their disposal."

"In person? Or on screen?"

A momentary pause. "I am not sure, sir. I am quite sorry not to have asked. Should I call them up right now?"

"Absolutely not. It does not matter in the least." Though I rather liked the idea of Major rousting them out of their dreams.

You're not going to be able to sleep, I told myself, so I went to the kitchen for a cup of cocoa. It was pretty good cocoa, originating on one planet or another in the Scotian worlds. Not on Scotia itself. Major himself rolled in shortly.

"Will there be anything more you need this evening, sir?" he asked.

"Not a thing, Major. I will be leaving either late tomorrow or early Friday, so you may be prepared for that."

"Master John too, sir?"

"Yes, Master John too." One must remember to be specific. Even House was not always able to extrapolate meaning from the things we humans said to her.

"Very well." He hesitated a moment, then asked, "Sir, do you know when Master Errol might return?"

That did surprise me. It showed a leap beyond Major's usual thinking. "I am afraid not. I do believe he is near the end of his mission." It seemed unlikely he and Elsa would take up residence in McFee House on their return. Perhaps for a while.

"Thank you, Master Jack. A goodnight to you."

With that he rolled away. I decided I might as well do the same.

CHAPTER 24

IT TURNED OUT that Robert Douglas was in person and Mom was on screen. They did not have a great deal to say but one or the other had decided I should hear them say it.

“Your encounter led us to look more closely at the Scotia First movement —”

“Meaning the Wall-men,” interjected Douglas.

“Yes. To take a closer look at their possible involvement in these wartime crimes.”

“And crimes since.”

“Also possible,” admitted Mom. “There is rhetoric from certain political leaders that places them uncomfortably close to these people.”

I’d been in a room with many of those leaders not so long ago. No elections had been held since. They would all still be in office and I assumed they hadn’t changed Prime Ministers on us. “I remember a rather distinguished-looking gentleman raising some objections during General Aruna’s briefing,” I said.

“Oh, you mean Cameron Finch, I’m sure. I couldn’t imagine anyone more moderate than the senator. He would be appalled to have his name associated with the Wall-men.”

I’d take Mom’s word for his character. She could be trusted more often than not.

“Someone else that highly placed could be involved,” said Douglas.

“Or high-level bureaucrats like you and me,” Mom replied. “Or like I used to be.”

“We both were privy to a great many secrets during the war.”

“You still are,” she reminded him. “But things have settled down around you, Jack.”

“Nothing interesting in my life for several hours now,” I reported.

“And you can fly away soon and forget about all this.”

“I won’t forget what happened at Toto Station.” But, admittedly, there was little I could do about it.

Robert Douglas might have read my thoughts. “You have been helpful in pointing us in a direction. Maybe even the right direction.”

“Are you leaving tomorrow?” asked Mom.

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"I should shuttle up early. My friends here intend to get together one last time this evening."

"Be sure to write," she said, and signed off. Douglas rose and nodded toward me and Uncle Rupert, who had been seated behind his desk. He had said nothing throughout the call nor had anyone even remarked on his presence.

"I'll be off then. Thank you for the use of your office, Mister McFee." With that he was gone.

"So that is what's going on," commented my uncle.

"Part of it."

"I fear that's all any of us ever see, my boy. Our own little pieces. Maybe that's all we need." My expression may have suggested I didn't completely agree. "Oh, but you're like your father, always wanting to see the big picture."

I chuckled politely. "And quite willing to tell you about it."

"Indeed. I know my brother's tendency to lecture all too well. I say, your friend provided some interesting pictures of other worlds last night." He seemed to picture those worlds for a moment. There might have been a romantic buried somewhere in Uncle Rupert. "Though I believe he ended up fielding more questions about you than himself. And the Radias wondered about your intentions toward their daughter."

"We're conspiring to take over both our family companies and merge them."

That brought a rarely-heard laugh. "Don't let Monike hear that. She might believe you!"

"Since getting to know Livi, I can half-believe it myself. I must thank you and Aunt Caroline for your hospitality."

"Always glad to have you, young man. You liven things up around here." He checked his wrist-top. "Time for me to be off, as well." Out the door he went in Douglas's wake.

Uncle Rupert didn't know half the livening up I had done. I am certain he had been just as oblivious of his son's activities when he had lived here.

I didn't need to ask where John Barbosa was. He sat in the garden. He'd be willing to sit there all day, if I let him. All too soon, the priest

would be on a planet where such sights could be no more than memories. I do not think I could do that.

But then it wasn't my calling, was it? Not that I knew what mine was. I ambled down the shallow slope and slid in beside him on a ceramic bench. "Still want to go to the museum?"

"Certainly, Jack." He looked about us, at the beds of flowers, at the trees. Those were some of the oldest and largest on the planet. "Miss Radia is right. This world needs birds."

"My brother thinks bats should come first."

"Bats." He pondered the word briefly. "Flying mammals, right? I've never seen one."

"They're nocturnal so you probably wouldn't even if we had any. The Scotian environment seems to have become Brendon's new passion."

A small bot — not quite aidie size, but close — came down the path to halt before us. "Guests have arrived, sirs," it reported, wheeled about, and went back to wherever it had come from. Apparently, Major couldn't talk directly to anyone out here, either.

Oh, sure, he could contact us on our commies but had orders to do so only in emergencies. "Sacky and Gunner, I assume," said John, rising with noticeable reluctance.

"Some swell neighborhood," remarked Gunner, when we found the pair in the kitchen. "We figured your fabulously wealthy relatives could spare some coffee. And here it is." A server wheeled up with two cups.

"Sugar, Miss?" it asked.

Gunner stirred several spoonfuls into hers. Sacky added only a tad, plus cream. That wasn't 'real' cream on this planet. We neither ate nor milked cattle. "Bring some for us, too, will you?" I took a seat at the small table. The breakfast table? Maybe only I thought of it that way. "Are you sure you won't be bored?" I asked the pair.

"Undoubtedly," Gunner replied.

Sacky chose not to answer directly. "I'll bet you liked to visit it as a kid. I always enjoyed museums."

I might have grimaced. "I didn't have many opportunities. That was a disadvantage of attending schools off-world."

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“Oh, then we’re doing you a favor taking you there. Or you taking us.”

“One or the other,” commented Gunner.

“Or both.”

Both had come by trolley. All four of us left the same way, walking down the tree-lined streets to the stop and boarding an eight-wheeled box. Typically, few passengers rode it through this neighborhood, and none boarded or exited.

“The museum is at the university, north of the downtown center,” John informed us, reading this information on his wrist-top com. “It would have been simpler for you to wait for us there.”

“We needed an excuse to see the inside of McFee House.”

“We were casing the joint,” Gunner claimed. She might have been reading more detective novels.

“I must warn Major to watch out for you two. Did Christie or Vili have anything to say about joining us? Or Livi, for that matter.”

“Livi has other demands on her time, it seems. I doubt any of us see her again while you’re here,” said Sacky.

“Sacky is going to stay with us tonight,” Gunner added. “You’ll have to pick us up at the apartment in the morning.”

They could have made their way to the terminal on their own. No need to point that out. “I fear we will be waking the princesses early. We need to be on our way before dawn.”

“They’ll want to see you anyway,” asserted Sacky.

“Though,” Gunner added, “I can’t imagine why.”

I was used to Gunner. John, I think, hadn’t quite figured her out yet. “Sacky,” he said, “surely your leave is not over already.”

“I could dawdle another week but I think this is the right time to leave Halifax.” She seemed shy about adding to this but blurted out, “General Freneau has invited me to come and stay a few days at your grandfather’s place, Jack.”

“I do hope she told Grandpa Jack about it. Say ‘hi’ to everyone for me. Stewie included.” Stewie being Summit Up’s equivalent to Miss House.

We both had memories of my grandfather’s compound, and our

brief time together there. Less than a day but without that day, Sacky Baldwin wouldn't be in this bus with us.

We had to change from that bus to another that ran to Halifax Academy. It was considerably more crowded. Young people, mostly, as young as we were. We did not stand out.

Well, maybe John did a little, and not just his appearance but his unconcealed interest in everything we passed. None of Gunner's coolness for him, yet underneath I am sure both were keenly observant of their environment.

Sacky and I were more interested in conversing. Mostly we spoke of her life in the military. Despite my rank, I had never served as part of a unit as she did. I was an exceedingly undisciplined sort of soldier.

"Is this our stop?" asked Gunner.

I glanced out the window. "Seems to be." If it wasn't, it was close enough to walk. We left the trolley with a good half of its passengers. "There is no paying for the bus. That is right?" John whispered to me.

"Trolleys have always been free. Your trains are free to ride on Thule, aren't they, Gunner?"

"Of course. I can't imagine charging people for that sort of thing."

Though Scotian trains are also free, I had paid for us all to ride the shuttle from Dummit Downs. There were differences in our cultures, and that was to be expected.

The architecture of the university contrasted sharply with that of Rome. Some might characterize it as bland and uninspired, making the same use of stacked slabs and wide windows one saw at Dummit Downs. Overall, the museum didn't compare with the collection at Rome, either, but it was the place for Scotian history. Same with the library. It was natural that John wanted to see the exhibits about our planet's early history and terraforming.

The images of barren rock didn't do as much for the rest of us. We wandered into the military history wing. Prior to the recent war, there wasn't much military history to show. We'd been a notably peaceful bunch, aside from the ongoing — and admittedly increasing — skirmishes with the Sevens. I am sure I've said something before about that being the igniting element for a war that spread across the known universe. Not that it wouldn't have happened anyway.

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And there had been pirates. The displays might have over-emphasized their impact in the attempt to add interest. "My father was among those who helped stamp out the last of them," I lectured my little audience, "as a colonel in the Rangers." I think Gunner already knew that. Sacky was impressed.

And I was hungry. "Let's get some lunch."

CHAPTER 25

A UNIVERSITY CAFETERIA is a university cafeteria. We had to pay at this one, not being students, but it didn't make the food any better.

"There's Christie," announced Gunner, rising and waving to her. We already knew not to expect Vili. A class or a meeting or something. I couldn't quite figure that out and knew it was not important. We'd see her later.

"I have a class this afternoon," Christiana told us. "Then we'll both be free to go out and carouse."

Carousing was not in any of our natures. We were a terribly boring bunch. Not surprisingly, with two of us not being Scotian we were conversing in Lingo. A young man at a nearby table gave us an ugly look.

Gunner noticed. "I hope he makes trouble," she whispered. "We can let Jack beat him up." Not that she couldn't do a quite credible job of it herself. Gunilla Sandburg-Gallen was a dangerous person, especially with a gun. I assumed she carried one.

Undetectable by any scanner, as was mine. Hmm, I'd bet the little beam weapon would show up — but it might not be recognized as a weapon. I'd have to think about the best way to carry it, should I choose to.

"We could sit in on Christie's class," I suggested, as we left the cafeteria. "Will it be interesting?"

"Not even to me. The history of data retrieval systems. In other words, how things were filed."

More in my line, maybe. "Let's wander over to the library then," I said, "and you and Vili can meet us there."

So it wasn't the most exciting way for us to spend our last afternoon in Halifax. Our last day on Scotia, for three of us. John Barbosa might never visit the planet again. Yet there was plenty here to interest him; more so than the rest of us.

Gunner chose to explore the building. Maybe casing the joint again. We followed her to the rooftop terrace. A few students sat about, busy with some academic chore or another, or at least trying to give that

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appearance. I doubted the faculty came up there much. They rarely choose to be that accessible.

We were more interested in the view, the campus laid out around us, the city beyond. At a hazy distance, the harbor. It was the reason Halifax existed, the center of our world.

Sacky leaned against the parapet beside me while Gunner prowled. "I like being here," she said. "I like being with you and your friends. But I also like my life in the Force. My career."

"I'm pulled in different directions myself. It can be hard to find a proper balance."

"I think maybe you have too many directions open to you, Jumping Jack McFee."

"The only thing we know for sure about the future is that it will come. We might even be there to see it."

"I would hope so. So what will my future be, Jack?"

I'd have to be careful about playing fortune teller. "Chances are you'll meet a handsome young officer one of these days. A brigadier, at least. Maybe a general."

She made a face. "That would be the death of my own career. I need support, not competition."

"I've found that not only my cousin Errol but also my grandfather and General Freneau think we're a good match. Something about a girl like you grounding me or words to that effect."

"You probably need it," she allowed.

"Maybe we can find out someday." This was the second woman to whom I'd said something of the sort recently.

Sacky giggled. "I have to make major first."

And I had to graduate, or so I had told myself. I didn't know if that truly mattered. "You will. I promise it." No other promises could be made.

"And I promise not to get involved with any generals soon. Nor even brigadiers."

"What are you two laughing about?" asked Gunner, returning from her patrol of the perimeter.

"The future," Sacky informed her. "How is yours looking, Gunner?"

"I don't even know what you're doing these days," I said. "Aside from keeping Tarmo in line."

"I'm attached to the royal family. Just one of several guards providing security." She gazed out over Halifax before continuing. "I expect to be in Christiana's or Vili's personal detail when they return to Thule. Possibly as lead."

"Does that interfere with you and Tarmo being together?" wondered Sacky.

"Not so much. He's spending less time in the field and more in an office."

I almost asked after Tarmo's sister but, no, this was not the place nor time to bring up Anna. "Vili should be along shortly. Let's go find what hole John has hidden himself in."

Gunner sensibly called the priest on his com. I suppose that was easier than searching, but not as much fun. "He'll meet us on the ground floor," she reported.

Down we went. The library used sensible mechanical elevators rather than gravity tubes. Scotians generally preferred them but I'd seen plenty of the latter on Corvan worlds. I disliked floating up or down a tube.

Vili awaited us. "Christie should be along in another half an hour."

"I don't understand why she needs a degree to sort books," said Gunner, collapsing into one of the overstuffed chairs.

More so in that she was unlikely to use it. Still, "She sees it as unfinished business. Getting back to a life that was interrupted by the war."

"Exactly," agreed Vili. "She is looking into the cataloging of your grandfather's library as a senior project."

Next year. "And are you specializing in anything yet?"

"Not really. I am writing a paper on the history of bicycles. There sure are lots of them on this campus."

"Maybe you should introduce them to Thule," suggest Sacky. "I sometimes ride one around the base." She giggled. "And even inside our carrier." I strongly suspected that was frowned upon.

"They would require a complete change in the infrastructure in our cities," Vili replied. "Otherwise they'd be running into all the pedestrians."

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Most of the bicycles I'd seen around Halifax seemed to be of ceramic construction, as is so much manufactured on Scotia. No Thulean profligate use of metals for us! Belt drives were common. As far as I knew, their design had changed little in the millennia since they were invented on Earth.

I would have to read Vili's paper. She did well, I had decided, to attend college here. And I could see I had done just as well not to. Christie showed up shortly, a little short of breath. She must have hurried over. Perhaps that was a bit touching. Perhaps she needed a bicycle.

"All here?" she asked

I answered for the group. "So it seems. I understand Livi won't be joining us."

I wasn't sure whether Vili or Christie was going to answer that. For a moment it appeared each was waiting for the other. "Livi said she doesn't want to intrude," Christie said. "She had you to herself last night and that was enough."

Certainly not that simple but we were all willing to let the explanation stand. We might each have interpreted it a little differently. "I'll have to ask you all to ride the trolley again," I said.

"Still being a cheap Scotian," Gunner remarked.

"Thrifty," I told her. "We're thrifty."

"As long as you're not thrifty about entertaining us tonight."

"Right," said Sacky. "We expect extravagant gestures from you."

"But not if we have to dress up. Are these school clothes all right, Jack?" Vili asked.

"Just fine. Casual dining on the bay is the agenda for tonight." We had been walking toward the bus stop. "And I mean *on* the bay, not overlooking it. I've made reservations for one of the floating restaurants."

John hadn't heard of these before. "So we just drift around and eat?"

"Pretty much. There's a sort of tour attached but not much to see at night except the lights along the shore." I looked to the sky. "And if it rains any harder, not those either."

"It sounds romantic," Christie confided to Vili. "I bet he takes all his girlfriends there."

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“It saves time by taking you all at once,” I told her. The trolley arrived and we headed toward the harbor. Straight through the downtown; no need to change buses.

Maybe it could be romantic floating in the harbor, whether it rained or not. Tonight was about goodbyes and nothing else. This visit — these visits — had been far too short. We’d be parting when we returned to shore, none knowing when or even if we’d be together again.

“I’ll order an embassy car to pick you up in the morning to take you to the terminal,” Christiana informed us. She was learning to assert her privileges as a princess. “All four of you, right?” She was looking at Sacky when she asked this.

The captain nodded. “I’m on my way back to duty. By a round-about route.”

We ate and gazed at the lights and then the evening was over.

CHAPTER 26

"I NEVER STOOD in line on my own world. No one there would even think of doing so." John stated. The four of us were queued at the terminal, waiting to board our shuttle to Central Station.

"Wouldn't that result in chaos?"

"Why? Everyone knows who is next."

"You come from a civilized people, John," I informed him.

Whether standing in line helped any or not, we did all get aboard. From Central Station, where civil traffic came and went far above Scotia, we would take a military flight to Fundy. A regularly scheduled shuttle; I couldn't expect my brother to chauffeur me this time.

We spoke very little over these flights, each with our own thoughts, maybe. Gunner fell asleep. John read his office. Then we were at Fundy. Not at the base on the moon but at the station above it. Tarmo waited at the docking tube.

"Freneau will remember you eventually," I assured Sacky. "Come along to my ship and I'll introduce you to M."

"I've been told he's a lot like you."

"Except smarter," Tarmo told her.

Smart enough to know we had arrived. M had little to do but monitor communications when he was stuck in dock. I could conjecture that he was curious or that he grew bored, but it is anyone's guess whether such terms truly applied.

"Welcome, Jack," he said as we emerged from the docking tube. "Are we going to finally get under way?"

"It seems likely, M. We will have some passengers."

"All of them?"

"Not me," Sacky told him. "Some other time, I hope!" Her eyes were taking in everything, as might be expected from a pilot.

"M, allow me to introduce Captain Sacajawea Baldwin."

"Sacky. Call me Sacky."

"Very well, Sacky. Father John, it is good to see you again."

"You are going to take the two of us all the way to Rome," I let M know. "The Gallens will go as far as Thule."

"Rome? That will be interesting."

He'd be left in dock again when we got there. M certainly recognized this.

"Hello the ship!" came Jeanne Freneau's voice. "Permission to come aboard!" She didn't wait for that permission but came in to join us in what I was inclined to name the lounge. "Now I need something like this for our jump school. Maybe your brother and his committee can find a spare or two."

"More likely, they'll decide you have more ships than you need."

"So we need more students! Would you like to learn to jump, Sacky?"

"Thank you, no. Jump pilots are such an odd bunch."

"And proud of it," I let her know. "I'd give all of you a tour but I don't know this ship's layout yet myself."

"A military W-6 would carry a crew of four to six, normally," said the general. "With fairly spartan accommodations and no extra space."

The four of us should be comfortable enough on this voyage, I thought. I'd be even more comfortable traveling alone. Well, yes, with M. "The control cabin is what counts," I said, and went 'forward' to it. Not that it necessarily lay forward of the lounge; that was just the customary way of referring to it.

Nor was there any up or down. Those names were pointless in a vessel that never entered a planetary gravity field. With the gravitational tug of the jump element, 'down' was toward the center of the ship. It was a pretty good tug, enough to at least keep things in their places. And we didn't need an artificial gravity generator, as in my mother's ship, to walk around.

"Pretty nice," felt Freneau, on seeing the cockpit.

"Not as roomy as what we had in the Nativ," I said. But better appointed. The seats could even be described as luxurious.

"This is essentially an enlarged version of the W-2 I taught you in," the general continued.

"A W-2C, to be precise," said M. "Quite different from the previous machines in the series."

"Yes, they stuck my school with early-run ships with inadequate engines. Ready to head out, Sacky?"

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“Yes, ma’am. I hope to see you all again one of these days. Oh, I guess you’ll be gone for good, John.”

“One never knows,” he replied. “Goodbye to you, my friend.” Then Sacky was gone. ‘One of these days’ might be long in coming.

I was ready to go, right then. The authorities would disapprove. “I’ll need some authorizations,” I told my little crew. “Then a shakedown cruise around the system. Make yourselves comfortable.”

I went back to the controls, both to further familiarize myself with them and to start the processes that would allow us to launch. “Could you bring up some information on this ship, M?” I asked. “Registration and such first.”

All was as it should have been there. The vessel indeed officially belonged to the McFee Concern and I was given authorization to use it as I saw fit, including jumping out of the Scotian system. Hmm, yes, I could visit worlds outside the Scotian Group, too. I made my requests both for a launch now and for a longer voyage, as soon as possible.

“How about our equipment, M? Anything interesting I should see there?”

“Unlike our Nativ —” I was a bit amused he described it as ‘our.’ “This machine is armed. Here are the schematics.” A single beam weapon that would pop up when needed. Not much use in any real fight — much less in a dog like this W-6 — but it might surprise an unwary attacker.

The main engines were a pair of Riley B-series six-tube units, as I knew already. The maneuvering tubes came up next. “These are not what I expected, M.”

“They are somewhat more powerful than the standard units,” he stated. “They should add considerably to our speed when all directed rearward.”

“But we’ll still be terribly slow with the mass of our drive element. Very well. Every little bit helps, I am sure.”

“Even so, Jack.”

A casual observer might not detect the difference in the units. That, too, might afford some small advantage. A voice on the com told me I was cleared for flight. I was warned not to jump.

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That could come later. I went to check on how my passengers were settling in. "Only two bunks," complained Gunner.

"But they are surprisingly large," Tarmo said. "They're over there." He gestured toward hatches on one side of the space. Such kitchen facilities as existed were part of the lounge. "Some storage compartments back that way. It's quite a bit more compact than your mother's ship."

"That it is. Are you ready to go for a cruise?"

CHAPTER 27

“APPROVED FOR LAUNCH,” came the voice on my com. That would be the final permission. Proper codes had previously been transmitted to M and the control computer.

I’d have to become more familiar with control. M would already be and I could rely on him for now. We eased away from the station on maneuvering power only. The ship might not offer the fine control its predecessor had but it was handy enough.

All four of us crowded into the cockpit area, though there were but two command chairs. John occupied one of those. The Gallens settled on jump seats behind us. The screens showed all clear ahead. I brought the twin main drives on line and gradually moved forward. Yes, the vessel was as sluggish as expected, grudgingly accelerating.

But no worse than the Nativ had been. Its dampeners were better too. Gradually, I increased power. Where to? Out, away from the sun and Scotia, I decided.

“An object is approaching,” M announced. “It seems headed directly toward us.”

“A ship?”

“It seems smaller, Jack. I believe it is a mine.”

Here? I hesitated not a second but locked onto the first star that presented itself to me. That happened to be Bannock, an orange sun closer to the Wall. Jump, I said to myself and to the universe, and I was there.

Tarmo had taken in the situation immediately. “A mine?” he wondered. “Could it have been a relic from the war?”

Floating in space for the past year or more? “I much doubt it. That was meant for us.”

He could see that. “Lurking near the station. Perhaps launched just now.”

I was inclined to think it had been in place for a while. Whoever sent it our way would be long gone. “It was targeted on this ship and its codes, which means someone at Fundy passed along information.” I had a suspicion those codes were not a particularly well-guarded secret.

"But they might not have been aware we had a jump drive and could disappear."

"So what now?" asked Gunner.

"I jump back and report it. That mine had to originate in or near the Fundy facilities so we're safe as long as there's some distance between us." That was almost guaranteed, as all jumps were random and I could land anywhere in the Scotian system.

I did jump and did pop into the Scotian system at a considerable remove from Fundy. Nearly ninety degrees away and closer to the sun. There would be a noticeable lag when I spoke to Fundy.

But report in I should, identifying myself and my position.

"What happened?" came the response. "You were ordered not to jump."

"Emergency." I proceeded to explain the circumstances, as we slowly cruised back toward our home port. That would take hours.

Fundy did not get back to me immediately. My news might have called for a quick conference by various Important Military Persons. IMPs, as I was inclined to call them. "An explosion was reported," I was informed at last. "We didn't know what blew up but now we can assume your mine self-destructed. Return to Fundy and there will be a debriefing on arrival."

"So our shakedown cruise continues," I told my friends. "Amuse yourselves as you will."

The Gallens gave each other quick glances. "We're going to, um, get a nap. Those beds do need to be tested."

Yeah, sure, Tarmo. After all, the two had been separated for three or four days.

Once they disappeared, John remarked, "Your friends remain calm when most extraordinary things occur."

"It's their job. Mine too, I suppose." It was once. Who could tell about the future?

We sat watching the screens. "I might as well test this machine's capabilities some," I said eventually. "Shall we open her up, M?"

"Her, Jack?"

"It's definitely not a him."

"No, it is only a neuter piece of machinery, as is the control

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computer. But I know humans like to assign gender where there is none.”

“I could even give her a name. Or it, if you prefer.”

“There is a serial number.”

Now, I knew M was not being completely serious about all this. He was sophisticated enough to pretend to be unsophisticated. “Just ‘Ship’ is probably all we need. Taking a long time to reach a decent speed, isn’t it?”

“Don’t forget we shall need to decelerate, as well.”

“If I do, you’ll remember for me. Good, old dependable M.”

“I am younger than you, Jack.”

“So you are. How about some turns at speed? We can roll Gunner and Tarmo right out of bed.”

“Not if the dampening fields work properly.”

He had me there. “Say, is our larder full? Any ice cream sandwiches in the freezer?”

“Fully stocked, Jack. I made certain your favorites were included.”

“Good, young dependable M,” I said, and went to get some ice cream.

Eventually, we docked at Fundy. “A shuttle is waiting to take you down to the base,” I was informed. “Captain Gallen is asked to accompany you.”

As a Thulean he couldn’t be ordered to do anything here. Except leave, to be sure. But he came along without a single complaint about leaving Gunner behind.

“General Aruna. This is unexpected, sir,” I said. The strategist and various IMPs were arrayed around a table. No longer being military, I shook the general’s hand and gave a nod of acknowledgment to the others present. Not that I had been prone to saluting when I did wear a uniform. Tarmo and I took the chairs offered.

“All this is not quite in my area of expertise but it borders on it,” Louis Aruna told me. “Also, I happened to be on hand.”

A screen turned on and the face of Robert Douglas appeared. Much too large! It was good he was regrowing the beard, however. Or it would be good in a month or two.

He said nothing. It was Aruna who asked, "What is your assessment of this, Jack?"

"It seems the act of a mid-level operative, someone who actually performed sabotage or espionage, and now fears discovery."

"Not one of the leaders then," said Douglas.

"They might not even be aware of me."

"And whoever is involved is over-reacting to Jack's threat," added Tarmo. His wife might have told him that.

"Right," I agreed. "I know almost nothing."

"But someone thinks you do," said one of the IMPs.

Aruna said, "Or fears Jack will keep digging."

I had to admit, "I suppose I will. But there is not much soil to do it in."

"We've always known there were traitors on this base," spoke the woman at the head of the table. A general, I could see by her uniform. "Their ability to target a mine on this ship shows they are still active. Did we find any remnants of the device?"

"Not a single piece," came an answer from down the table.

"It is entirely likely," said Douglas, "that if Mister McFee jumps out of this system and returns to college, no one will bother him again. I much doubt their reach extends as far as Rome."

I recalled having a ship blown up at Thule but felt it just as well not to bring this up. The deputy minister was probably right.

"We must launch a thorough investigation of who could have launched that mine and where it might have been concealed," asserted the general in charge.

"And who has access to my ship's identity codes," I added.

Tarmo again jumped in. "For that matter, who knew when it launched, though that might not be pertinent. The mine could have been activated days previously, but that would have made it harder to hide."

"It's a good thing we brought you two down," felt Aruna. "Anything more to say, Douglas?"

"Not on this incident. We continue to investigate those, ah, higher up who might be involved. Good afternoon, gentlemen." The screen went blank.

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Afternoon? I supposed it was. Maybe evening. I'd hoped to be on my way by now.

"Anyone have anything to add?" asked the woman at the end of the table. They didn't and the meeting adjourned.

"You can be on your way now," Aruna told me. "All approved and ready for launch." His voice became more subdued, more serious. "Whatever Robert Douglas may think, I'd advise you to be careful."

"I intend to be, sir." Half an hour later I was in my command chair, making final preparations.

CHAPTER 28

“FIRST JUMP IS to Ataensi,” I announced. We had departed Fundy without incident this time. I concentrated on the orange star, attempting to ignore its little red companion Jogahe, and went.

“Fairly far out,” I said mostly to myself, and sent our codes to announce our presence. We needn’t wait for any reply; indeed, I could have just jumped again and probably not been noticed. I was sticking to the rules on this trip.

“Do you rest between jumps?” asked John.

“Sometimes. It does tire one to repeatedly jump.” There were theories as to why this was so, some saying it was physical, other that it was mental. Some even claimed there was a mystical element involved. I won’t name any generals of my acquaintance here. “I have jumped three times this day. Maybe a break is in order.” I considered this. “After the next one.”

That would be to the red dwarf named Hermitage, the gateway to the Scotian worlds. At one time the Group extended to Oz, and to Trinity beyond it. Those were now part of the Sevens. But Hermitage had always been a gateway, the only sensible entry to this end of our space.

Little red stars were always more difficult to target. Were I truly tired I would try to wait a while. “Anything to report, M?” I asked. “I know we still carry a good bit of surveillance equipment.” I’d have to learn more about it when I had time.

“Just ordinary traffic. Should I be looking for anything in particular, Jack?”

“Only more mines! Time to move on.” I picked up Hermitage more easily than I had expected and reached toward it. There we were, so far out that the sun barely outshone the stars behind it. “A good place to rest a few minutes,” I said, and went to find another ice cream sandwich. I deserved it.

I assumed M sent codes to the small military installation here. The fact that I hadn’t thought to do it did indicate I was a bit off. Gunner and Tarmo sat in the lounge. A small machine scuttled by me. “Hey, I didn’t now we had bots aboard,” I said.

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"Just the one," M replied. "It cleans things up."

"Better it than me." I fell into the only empty chair. Darn, I should have got my sandwich first. Later.

"We're not home yet, are we?" asked Gunner. "I couldn't tell how many jumps we made from here."

"My jumps are all so smooth no one feels them."

That interested Tarmo. "Jumping is not always the same?"

"The jump itself is. How we handle the engines before and after is what makes the difference. A good steady acceleration will even the whole thing out." With a touch of a smile, I added, "Which is not always so easy in a combat situation."

"I can imagine. I did feel that very first jump when we dodged the mine."

"That was a bit bumpy, wasn't it? To answer your question, Gunner, I've jumped twice since we started this journey. I'm taking a few minutes rest before moving on to Oz. I want to be at my best for that."

After all, it was no longer a Scotian world. Who knew what I might need to deal with passing through it? Customs and bureaucracy and what have you. Unless I jumped in and out without saying hello, and went on to Thule.

I got up to fetch my ice cream. Maybe I'd try out one of those bunks. This would be about bedtime back on Scotia. No, I went back to the control center and sat beside John with my snack. He was my guest on this vacation. I shouldn't ignore him.

Except that I dozed off. Then I couldn't help ignoring him. More so in that he had disappeared by the time I woke. Hmm. We still floated at a distance from Hermitage. Time to jump away. I began a slow acceleration. Lots of space, lots of time. I should probably let everyone know what I was doing. "Where's the com for the ship?" I mumbled.

"To your left, Jack. See the switch?"

It was further from the other communication controls than I might have expected. "Thanks, M." I flipped it on and announced, "I'm jumping to Oz now. Don't blame the pilot if you spill your refreshments."

An easy jump to a bright yellow star. Off we went.

Not too close, not too far away. I sent my signals and asked permission to pass through.

"Proceed to Toto Station," came the reply. I came close to ignoring it and jumping away. But no, I had already identified myself. If I'd intended to do that I should have come and gone without letting anyone know.

"On our way," I told them. After all, there might be some important reason to their request.

Toto was a planetoid that orbited somewhat further out than the planet Oz. It acted as the center for most traffic in and through the system. Toto station itself orbited it. I cruised toward it and considered grabbing another nap.

First, where were the facilities in this ship? I decided to make a search rather than ask M yet another question. With the pull of the jump element, there would be no need to install gravity pots, as in most military craft. I entered the small lounge area again. John sat reading. No sign of Gunner and Tarmo. Must be testing the bunks again.

There was the way we came aboard, at the other end of the compartment. A heavy door was closed but not sealed, opening into a narrow passage beyond a thick bulkhead. Those bulkheads were a feature of Errol and Olaf's designs; much of the ships' strength was concentrated in them. To my left, the airlock. I slid open the door to my right. Yes. Even a minimal shower. Again, not as roomy as what the Nativ had offered, but adequate. One person could be comfortable enough in this ship.

But it was not designed for one or two persons on long patrols, as had been its predecessor. "How far out from Toto are we, M?" I asked.

"Less than an hour. I have begun our deceleration."

With the judicious use of our dampening fields, I could cut deceleration time. Accelerate more quickly as well. It was more comfortable to take our time, exposing neither my passengers nor myself to excessive gees.

I took a seat beside John. "I hope your vacation has not disappointed," I said.

"Not at all. Rest and excitement in just right proportions. I did not mind spending time with so many attractive women either."

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Neither did I. "I do intend for us to make that trip to Earth at the end of this coming semester. That will end your stay at Rome, won't it?"

"My classes, yes. I may not be away immediately."

Getting everything set up for his assignment to Frontera? We would have months to talk about our respective plans. I might have some eventually.

"You intend to use the trip for research, don't you?" the priest asked.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Of course."

M interrupted us. "Toto is on the com, Jack."

"I'll take it forward." I could have sat right there and talked to them, but I preferred to be near the controls. I needed to establish routines on this new boat.

I identified our ship and waited for a reply.

"Is this Captain Byron?"

"Byron? There's no Byron here. This is Jack McFee. My registration should say that."

There was a more than momentary pause. "Curious. If you will, sir, please come to Dock, um, Forty-two. Why Forty-two, Bailey? Isn't that being used for storage?"

"Beats me," said someone in the background. "That was the order that came down."

I could visualize his shrug. "All right. Dock Forty-two. There will be a beam to follow. We'll get this sorted out, sir."

"You got that, M?" Of course, he did. I only asked to be polite. "Let's go in."

That was when the firing began.

CHAPTER 29

I COULD HAVE jumped to safety but we were close to the station, moving slowly and somewhat sideways for docking. ‘Turn’ said my mind. I did. I appreciated the power of those non-regulation maneuvering tubes as we veered sharply away. I opened up the main drives and accelerated. The dampening fields couldn’t keep up; I could feel the gees.

As, I assumed, did my passengers. I had other, more pressing concerns. “Any damage, M?”

“None that seems an immediate threat. I would advise against jumping.”

Or going this fast, no doubt. No more fire came our direction. Tarmo was the first to join me at the controls. “We were attacked?”

I only nodded. Explanations were not available at the moment.

A panic-filled voice was on the com. “Are you all right over there? We don’t know what happened. There was no order to fire!”

“It’s these damnable Scotian computers,” came another voice. Bailey again, I figured.

“We seem to be intact but in need of repair,” I replied. I was almost surprised at how much calmer I sounded than those Sevens. “Was that gun automated?”

“No, sir, the crew received an order to fire. I shut them down immediately when I saw what was happening.”

“Then I must thank you. Will it be safe to come back in?”

“Absolutely. All weapons personnel have orders to stand down unless the commander gives a direct order.”

I could probably trust this commander. The computers were more questionable. A new dock was assigned and I brought the ship in without incident. He was there to greet me when I stepped from the docking tube. And apologize, no doubt.

Indeed, “Our apologies to you, sir,” were the words that greeted me. “We will get to the bottom of this.”

“You must give my thanks to the officer on your coms. Her quick thinking may have made all the difference.”

“Lieutenant Leah Clarke. I will certainly convey your gratitude to

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her. I am Abner Delany, the commander here.” A major, if I properly read his insignia.

“Jack McFee,” I said, extending a hand. He may or may not have known who I was and may or may not have read Vili’s book, but the McFee name itself carried weight. I was no longer some kid who had blundered into an accident.

So he at once got to business. “We are uncertain why you were even flagged in the first place. Your ship did come up as suspicious but we can find no evidence of it happening now. The record seems to have simply disappeared.”

Something to puzzle out later. “The idea was obviously to draw me into firing range.” Tarmo had come out to join me.

“Ah, Major Gallen. We did not know you were aboard.” The two, it seemed, were familiar with each other.

“Major. I would not be surprised if this event was related to our conversation on my last visit.”

Delany showed no sign of surprise. “The death of Lieutenant Burke.”

“And his investigation into the destruction of the Scotian liner.” By then, Gunner and John had emerged as well. On a large screen, I could see figures in work-suits already assessing the W-6 in the vacuum of the dock. The outer doors had been closed. Air could be pumped in, if needed.

“Let us discuss this in my office,” said the major. His eyes passed over the four of us as he tried to decide who should be there.

I decided for him. “Do you want to accompany me, Tarmo?” A nod. By asking this I established myself as the leader here. That was the plan, I should say. Otherwise, Delany might have deferred to the Thulean, who was older and had a military rank. Taller too, which does make an impression.

“Keep an eye on things, will you?” I asked the other two. “Or find a bar, if you prefer.”

Gunner could be trusted with either assignment. We followed Major Delany to the large room that served as his headquarters, at an easily walkable distance. I doubted his Scotian predecessor had an office so near the docking facilities. An orderly table, rather than a desk, was

central to the room. A Rawat hung on the wall, a reproduction, of course, but a good one and almost certainly painted by a robot.

We settled in plain chairs around the table. An aide or secretary took her place at Delany's left hand. "I do not understand this at all," said the major.

We'd best explain it then. Over the next quarter hour, between Tarmo and myself, the officer got a pretty good rundown on all that had happened recently. I saw no need to hold anything back from him; everyone recognized the sabotage here did the Sevens no good.

Nor the Burkut nor probably even the Aigleans. Corvan interests? Maybe. Our allies had not wanted us making a separate peace and could have tried to prevent the conference between Scotia and Janic-Thule. However, most saw that as reaching. Both Janic and Thulean separatists, or even Scotian dissidents could have been involved.

And we couldn't ignore the Ursans. They had played both sides against each other more than once during the war.

Now, though, we seemed to have a lead, tenuous perhaps, to Scotian saboteurs. Delany seemed satisfied with the story we gave him. "So someone knowledgeable of your ship's codes? And the computers here on the station. That would very much suggest a Scotian."

"A Scotian who served here, perhaps," suggested Tarmo. "Someone who had access codes and could come and go."

Delany gave him a sour look. "I would think my guards would notice such a person."

"Not if it were someone already familiar to them."

"As Burke was," I said. "Did someone take his place?"

"A small Scotian team remains but a replacement was not sent. They are supposed to leave soon and let us run the place on our own." If anything, he looked even more sour than before. "Considering today's events, we might not be ready for that."

"There is Major Kearney too, sir," said the aide.

"Oh, right. Kearney has come to check on things from time to time. That has certainly helped."

The former Scotian commander here. I had no idea what her postwar duties might be.

"Someone would have needed to jump here shortly before us.

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Someone who knew we were coming and had the proper codes for my ship," I pointed out.

To which Tarmo added, "But that someone would also have to know all the workings of this station to pull it off."

"They could have come in on a commercial flight," suggested Delany.

"Or an informant could have come to alert someone already in place here," I said. "Maybe a member of that Scotian team." I hated to think that of any of them.

Delany turned to his aide. "Look into all comings and goings here in the last, hmm, twelve hours. Jump ships."

That had jumped from Scotia. Not that they couldn't lie about that. No one could tell the origin of a ship that suddenly appeared at the end of a jump. But there would be identification codes if it docked at the station.

"A Burkut liner," she reported. "Still here."

He dismissed this. "They don't make the run to Scotia."

"A courier from Scotia. It's gone already."

"Military?" I asked.

She nodded. "Jumped away before your incident. Credentials were in order."

"Appeared to be in order," said Tarmo.

She frowned at her screen. "I'm sure it has been here before. Let me see — yes, it usually shuttles official visitors, I don't see one listed this time, though. I'll keep checking the traffic, sir."

Most likely a waste of time. That Scotian visitor was almost certainly who we were looking for.

The door opened to a middle-aged fellow in coveralls. His eyes went from Delany to me and back again. "We've checked over that McFee thoroughly," he reported. "There was minimal damage to the rear maneuvering array. Supports only, not the tubes. One small hole was knocked into a rear compartment, which sealed itself off immediately. Neither we nor the installed AI found anything else."

"We'll begin repairs at once, with your permission," said the major. "We owe you this."

I was agreeable. "By all means." There was no point in asking how long it would take.

The mechanic went off, presumably to make a start. Delany waited for the door to close behind him before turning back to us. "If this were all about investigating something that happened during the war," he informed us, "we wouldn't be cooperating with you. That's the past and of no concern to the Sevens. But whoever is involved in this has compromised the station and we can't have that."

I recognized the major's need to rattle off this official disclaimer. One didn't come to run a station like Toto without being politically savvy. It did not mean his cooperation would not unofficially extend beyond what he had said.

"I see you are not using Kearney's old office," said Tarmo. "Did Burke?"

"He did not. For now it remains unoccupied."

For now. He might have intentions of moving in eventually. Or repurposing it. That was neither my business nor of interest to me. However, "We should take a look at it."

Tarmo agreed. "Definitely."

CHAPTER 30

“SOMEONE HAS BEEN in here.”

That was too obvious to need saying. But how recently?

Tarmo and I had been accompanied — or maybe escorted — to the office by security personnel. A pair of them. This place lay nearly on the other side of the station from Delany’s current headquarters, amid a complex of administrative and business offices.

“Burnt out,” remarked one of our companions, slipping into a seat before a terminal and attempting to activate it. She looked around the room. “They may all be.”

“That would have been the intention,” said the other. “If there was a hurry, they might not have done as thorough a job as they hoped. I’ll check the other rooms.”

Tarmo gave this all an approving nod. These were his kind of people.

“Ho, come quickly!” came her cry from the next room. When we reached her, she was already on her com, calling for medical assistance.

On the floor lay a body. A woman, in a Scotian uniform. “Alive,” came Tarmo’s immediate assessment, as he crouched beside her. “Maybe not for long. It’s Major Kearney,” he stated, rising to his feet.

Shot? I wondered. Knifed, more likely. Much blood pooled on the floor. I moved aside so the medics could get at her. They must have been stationed near.

“We know who the passenger was on that shuttle,” remarked Tarmo.

But why was she on it?

Two medics worked efficiently as a team, their expressions unreadable, unemotional, intent entirely on their patient. Kearney’s eyes half-opened, seemingly unfocused. I doubted she was conscious at all.

No, she began to speak, her voice gasping, gurgling, barely to be made out. Tarmo and I crouched near in an attempt to catch the words. “Mar — Martín had nothing to do — with this. Any of this.” Several ragged shallow breaths followed. “Save him. Save the — boy.”

I thought she had drifted again into darkness. Then her eyes fixed on

me. "Errol?" I did not correct her, but moved closer. "Damn it, Errol, you made me do this." A whisper. "I'm sorry."

Major Jane Kearney said no more, then or ever. One of the medics shook his head at us. "Too much damage, too much blood loss."

"Could she be chilled?" asked Tarmo. Such a procedure would be in hopes brain function could be preserved until the body was repaired. I had no idea whether they had the facilities to do it on Toto Station.

"It would be pointless."

His colleague concurred. "She'll not be coming back."

Tarmo swore softly, before saying, "I can understand her mistaking you for your cousin. But what would he have to do with her?"

"The two of them had a relationship before Errol met Elsa. I don't think it was at all serious for him." My eyes went to the dead woman. "I can't say about Kearney."

Rising to my feet, I told him, "I also have no idea who this Martín she named might be. We should check everything in this office, shouldn't we?" Tarmo was the policeman, after all, and should know how to proceed.

Neither we nor the station security found any useful evidence. The three terminals in the office were indeed all damaged. "I think the only point in doing that," confided Tarmo, "would be to hide any communications that might have taken place. Someone could have spoken to a ship from here, or an accomplice on the station." A search of desks and cabinets revealed nothing.

"Maybe," I suggested, "Major Kearney kept some sort of log wherever she was stationed on Scotia. We should send a message detailing all of this by the next available courier."

"To whom?" he asked. "The military headquarters on Fundy?"

"Perhaps. Or to Robert Douglas." I wasn't sure I liked either solution. I might do better contacting my mom!

"I'll be contacting Thule, as well. There is not as much hurry there."

By then, the pair of us had exited the former Scotian offices and headed down a corridor toward the docks. We could have commandeered a ride but I wanted time to think things through a little. "General Aruna. I'll send a message straight to Louis Aruna." He was one man I definitely trusted.

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“He’s not directly involved in this.”

“Which makes him all the better choice.” At least in my mind.

Tarmo was willing to accept this, it seemed. “I have a thought,” he began, just a tad hesitantly. “We might suggest, subtly, of course, that Kearney told us much more than she actually did. This would make you a target again.”

“And you as well, my friend.” If it drew out someone else who was involved, it would be worth it. Unless, of course, we ended up dead.

“I must include that in the message,” I decided.

John and Gunner awaited us where we had left them. Whether they had visited any bars in the interim, I can not say. The screen showed us station personnel busy on repairs to our ship. “We’d best go check in with Major Delany,” advised Tarmo. “He needn’t know about any little deceptions we intend.”

That I could agree with. The fewer in the loop, the better, and the major needn’t be in it at all. We told him only that Kearney had spoken ‘a few words’ to us before dying. That information might or might not be repeated somewhere, if not by Delaney then maybe his aide.

I did send the facts of the situation and Kearney’s exact words to Scotia and the general, with a courier departing within the hour. Tarmo Gallen and I had recorded those words on our commies. It came natural to both of us to turn them on.

“So what now?” asked Gunner. “Have we been offered rooms?”

I shook my head. Seven hospitality did not seem the equal of Thulean. “We’ll have to sleep on the ship.”

“I was told we might not be here very long anyway,” spoke John. “The ship can be ready in a few hours, maybe.”

“But we’ll wish to stay until some official Scotian contacts us. Let’s go find some food.” If the mess wouldn’t feed us, I knew there were restaurants for travelers. “And perhaps somewhere to drink, after.”

Good places to get rumors started. Tarmo proved far better at this than me. I suppose I’m just too innocent and honest. Much sooner than I would ever have expected, the station was abuzz with the mystery of the late major’s final words.

While we pondered real mysteries. The mystery of the Scotian courier ship that jumped away. The identity of Kearney’s assassin.

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The mystery of her own role in all of it.

Major Delany greeted us on our return to our dock. "She's ready to go," he informed us. "As good as new."

"Better," asserted the station's chief engineer. Sevens would never admit that Scotian work was the equal of their own.

But no messages had come. I had hoped for at least an acknowledgment. We settled into the lounge in the W-6, a bit drained and with little to say to each other. Maybe I'd slip into one of the command chairs and nap.

M's voice broke into my torpor. "There is a small ship from Scotia approaching," he informed us. "It is our old vessel, Jack."

CHAPTER 31

"ALEKS MARTÍN. ONE of my instructors, but from time to time asked to act as a courier. It was impressed on him that these were sensitive missions and he was not speak of them to anyone." Jeanne Freneau might be giving us the straight facts but her frown clearly showed her disapproval of them. "Even me."

"So he was not actually involved in anything. Just a dupe." I might not have used so harsh a word but Tarmo's summary seemed about right.

Another question interested me at that moment. Only me, I suspect. "So this is what happened to my old ship?"

Her passenger, a nondescript young man in civilian attire, said, "All the listening equipment has been removed from the Nativ but it still belongs to the Ministry of Information, so we've been using it as a diplomatic shuttle. It was necessary to add a Li Drive in addition to the Garda you used."

"Not that I need it," said Freneau. The Li employed artificial intelligence to do the heavy lifting. Pretty much anyone could use it; in fact, it could jump without involving a human at all.

"I'm Paolo Hill, by the way," said the man, extending a hand.

"One of Douglas's people," the general added.

A spy, then. No surprise that someone of his sort had been sent. More surprising was Freneau. I could guess that she had volunteered because of Martín's involvement. And maybe because she was the second-best jump pilot alive.

I'm too modest to name the first.

I shook and we settled around the table in Major Delany's office. Six of us with the major and his aide; John and Gunner were being left out again. "Martín had jumped Major Keareny here and back several times in the past year," said Hill. "Ostensibly to check on the transition to Seven control. This appeared to be more of the same. However, this time, she ordered the boy to go home without her, carrying a message."

"You know to whom?" asked Delany.

"We do. We'll get into that." He turned to face me directly. "We can assume Kearney came with orders to eliminate your ship. She might

not have known who was aboard. I think we can also assume she played a major role in the liner explosion here.”

Tarmo and I had surely shared an unspoken suspicion. “Yes,” said the Thulean. “She did have the means and the opportunity to conceal the mines somewhere on the station.”

The idea was new to Delany. He considered it a moment, then nodded slowly.

I gave it some thought too. “She would have had Martín jump before the attack to disassociate the ship, while she remained to carry it out.”

“The message may have been nothing more than an excuse to send him away,” Tarmo conjectured.

“It contained an order to send him back to Toto in two days,” Hill told us. “Chances are that was already planned anyway.”

“It was sent as a written order just so Aleks wouldn’t be suspicious, I’d say,” felt Freneau.

“Most likely. We believe the conspirators expected the ship and Jack to be destroyed and their role not be found out at all. Kearney would return to her post on Fundy and things would go on as normal.”

“But here I am,” I announced.

“And because you weren’t blown into little pieces —” began Freneau.

“Once again,” Tarmo interjected.

“Yes. It’s quite surprising, isn’t it? Anyway, Aruna sent men at once to pick up poor Aleks and he pointed to his contact at Fundy.”

“Who had already heard what was going on by then, and bolted. I have every confidence we’ll apprehend him.” Hill was probably right about that.

But I doubted the fugitive was very high up the ladder in this conspiracy.

“This answers many questions,” stated Major Delany. “But who killed Kearney?”

“A trained assassin, fairly obviously,” said Tarmo. “Someone felt it was too much of a risk to let her live. Whether she completed her mission or not.”

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“Yes,” agreed Hill. “It was a bit foolish of her to think she would ever be allowed to leave alive.”

“She didn’t think like you spies,” I informed them. “So what’s next? We can assume the assassin has left the station. Most likely aboard a commercial flight somewhere.”

Delany had only to look at his aide. She was already checking departures. Far too late, I was sure.

“We would like you to go back to Scotia. Just for a day or two, and then you can be on your way again.”

I exchanged a quick look with Tarmo. “As I detailed in my report, we started a bit of a rumor that Kearney told us more than she actually did. It might ruin things if it is believed I went off to Scotia and reported it all.” It might already be ruined, in fact.

Delany looked me askance but commented only that, “We can certainly keep your departure secret here at the station.”

“And the same will be done on Scotia. That is already planned.”

“Then you and I can go in the Nativ,” said Freneau. “Paolo intends to stay here and look into this end of the investigation.”

“Quietly. With your permission, sir,” Hill said, with slight bow of his head to Delany.

“Certainly. Then the McFee ship will remain?”

“So it seems. Keep an eye on the crew, Tarmo.”

We didn’t even take time to make a goodbye to John. I figured he’d understand and I’d be back soon. Freneau let me finesse the Nativ out of its dock. “I know you’re better at that sort of thing. Plus, you’re familiar with its control computer.”

That was true. M might be gone but the same control was there. “The Garda is still installed?”

“But rarely used. Want to take the first jump?”

“Hermitage, here we come.” I cruised out a short distance from Toto Station, steadily accelerating, targeted the dim red star, and went to it.

“Landed pretty close. I’ll do Ataensi.” She didn’t bother to check in but jumped to the orange sun at once. The Wall now showed on our screens.

“Not announcing ourselves here, either?” I asked. A firm shake of

the head. The general was in a hurry. I targeted Scotia itself and made the jump. It might have been the quickest Oz-to-Scotia run I'd ever made.

We were not particularly close to the planet nor to Fundy Base. There would be some hours to fill. I might choose to fill them with a nap; I hadn't had a lot of rest and jumping takes something out of one too.

"Sacky's on her way back to her posting," said Freneau.

"I hope she enjoyed her visit to Grandpa Jack's." Had it been cut short?

"She enjoyed all her visit, Jack."

"We certainly supplied her with enough excitement." I did not intend to say anything more than that. "Is this Aleks Martín anyone I know?" I had met some of her students and even taught a few myself last year, when I'd been bored with having no official assignment.

"I wouldn't think so." I thought she was going to leave it at that. Then, almost grudgingly, the general said, "Aleks is a good kid. One of my best jumpers, too. I guess that's why he was picked to be a courier. That's what I assumed anyway."

A reasonable assumption at the time. That he was inexperienced and unlikely to ask questions may have had more to do with it.

A voice came over the com. "Your ship is recognized, General Freneau, and authorized to dock at Fundy Station. Hmm, exact location to be transmitted on secure channel 11Z6."

"Thanks." To me, she said, "Our friends are playing spy games. I'll trust you to take care of all that."

I nodded, switched to the designated channel, and followed its beam in.

CHAPTER 32

“OFFICIALLY, PAOLO HILL returned with Jeanne, though only a handful know they ever left here. Your presence will be kept totally secret.”

“I’m not sure why I’m here at all.”

“At my suggestion,” replied General Louis Aruna. “Or perhaps my order. You know I respect your ability as a strategic thinker. And you are already as deeply involved in the situation as anyone.”

Why was a general who had nothing — nothing directly — to do with espionage calling the shots? Aruna had been part of the war staff, as one of the top strategists. What his exact role was now, I had no idea.

I had no idea what the next move was, either. Aruna had come aboard the *Nativ* as soon as we docked. I assumed we’d go somewhere to do something.

“Did you catch Kearney’s contact, Louis?” asked General Freneau.

“We did. He’d boarded a military freighter. Being a logistics officer, no one thought twice about his presence there.”

“But you did,” I said.

“My office did. His plan was mostly just to get away from Fundy without thinking out his next move. He’s a commander in the Planetary Guard, by the way. A Francis Murray.”

I’d never heard the name. Freneau had. “I’ve dealt with him. Can’t say I know him well. You’re going to take this boy away?”

“Down to the planet.”

“Then I’ll go my own way for now. You two get to the bottom of this.”

We exited the *Nativ* via its docking tube and headed opposite directions down the corridor. “I’d have held our meeting here,” said Aruna, “but Robert Douglas has a dislike for space travel. Maybe even a phobia. A definite handicap for a spy, I’d think.”

He immediately turned into the next tube. I was not surprised the general had a ship ready and waiting. “An N-5?” I guessed on getting a look at the interior. “Errol flew one into Dummit Downs, once.”

“That was this machine, my personal transport. I lent it to your cousin.”

No artificial gravity turned on. Maybe not even installed, being a military vessel. If it operated in atmosphere much, that was just as well. Ships fitted with an artificial field would turn it off anyway, when in planetary gravity, but the weight of its generating element would remain and impact handling.

The only gravity at the moment was that provided by the station and that was minimal here. I floated in more than I walked. "Ready to go, Marcus," announced General Aruna.

"Aye-aye, sir," came over the com.

"We're the only passengers?" I asked, as we strapped ourselves into rather comfortable, chocolate-brown chairs.

"Everyone else has gone down already. Including our prisoner."

That made sense enough. This compartment was fairly obviously the general's mobile office. Some sort of military equipment would be installed here normally, surveillance devices, maybe even weaponry controls, though N-5s were not generally combat craft.

The machine pulled away from its dock. No gravity at all now. "This may take no more than a few hours and we'll send you back to Toto," said Aruna. "No one who shouldn't will even know you were here."

So he hoped. I knew better than to say that aloud. I could leave it to people like Douglas. "Are we heading to Halifax?" I was thinking of the government complex there.

"Nowhere near it. We need a more secure location."

No point in asking where. A little gravity? Not enough to pour a drink yet. Maybe that should wait for Thule. I could share a schnapps with Anna Gallen.

More pull now. Gees from a dive, as well, not quite compensated for by whatever dampening fields we carried. Marcus must be taking us in fast. Aruna turned on a screen. A body of water appeared at its center, growing larger.

"Lake Nibi?"

"Yes. There is a military base on the west side."

Of that I was well aware. The McFee Concern had facilities there too. Dundee could be made out on the opposite shore, further north.

Deceleration. I definitely felt those gees. Shortly after, we set down.

DIM DISTANT STARS

“Stay with the ship, Captain,” called out Aruna. “We will not be gone long and may wish to get away quickly.”

A ramp had rolled itself into place before our doors opened. The heat! Always expected yet always surprising. Though on nearly the same latitude as Halifax, it felt hotter here during the days. Yes, and colder at nights. Nibi, by far the largest lake on Scotia, shimmered in the distance. It provided the ‘dot’ on Yang, just as a somewhat smaller body of water did for Yin. Another reason the names suggested themselves to the first explorers.

We entered a closed car and were spirited off somewhere. Human driver, in a Group Force uniform. The buildings we passed all looked much alike. Barracks? Beats me. The one we stopped in front of did look a little different — it had a sign.

Which meant nothing to me. I followed the general in and down a wide, concrete-floored, harshly-illuminated hallway. Maybe the lighting was supposed to have some effect on those who entered. I suspect the average Scotian would simply think it wasteful.

A man with sergeant’s insignia stepped out of a side corridor. “This way, sir.” He gave me an appraising look. He might have wondered if I was a ‘sir’ too. A door opened and in we went.

I was not surprised to see more of those Important Military Persons, representatives of both Guard and Force, in that rather spacious, high-ceilinged chamber. Robert Douglas was there, of course, and what I assumed were a pair of his minions. Or aides, if you want me to be polite. Various people in civilian dress, possibly from one ministry or another. Or yet another.

I was surprised to find the prime minister there, seated at the far end of a long table. Even more surprising was the man with whom she conversed — Jitha Jones.

Well, I’d been told he would be posted to Scotia, hadn’t I? Jones was likely to be the highest member of Corvan intelligence in the Scotian Group, whatever his official title might be. Not ambassador or attache or anything diplomatic at all. The Corvans refused to refer to their missions as embassies, insisting they were a trade association and not any sort of nation. Jitha had referred to himself as a consul on Thule Station.

Prime Minister Buey looked up as we entered. "Welcome, General Aruna. We can begin now. But first, the Honorable Jitha Jones has something to say."

Jitha stood, his dark eyes moving from face to face. "Doubtful it seems," he began, "but not impossible, that some faction within our Corvan League did involve itself in these events, or perhaps had knowledge that was shared not with you. If so, you have our apologies and a promise to aid your investigation as we can."

A pretty speech. I know Jones well enough to guess he had rehearsed it. He probably meant it unless — or until — he received orders otherwise. Every person there surely remembered the Corvans were no longer our allies.

Then his eyes lit on me and he added, smiling, "Ah, Jack. I can not say I am surprised to again find you in the middle of things."

"I am," I replied.

A few polite laughs. Jones sat, Buey stood. "Would you open our discussion, Louis?"

"Certainly, Madame Prime Minister," the general said, coming to his feet. He probably called her Tara in private. "We all agree that there is no need to speak with Aleks Martín again, do we not?" There were general sounds of approval to that. "That is good because we didn't bring him along. You have all read his statements and the results of our investigation."

Or had their flunkies do it. 'Our investigation?' I wondered whom that involved.

"We hope to employ the Lieutenant in furthering that investigation. General Freneau has approved this."

"Freneau?" asked someone. "What is her involvement in this?" Maybe he hadn't read the report.

"Martín serves under her," said someone else.

Yet another voice added, "One of her jump instructors."

"Now that is cleared up," continued Aruna, "we can get to Commander Murray. Are we ready, Robert?"

Douglas nodded to one of his people, who got up and hurried through a side door. A few seconds later, she reappeared, the prisoner and a pair of guards behind her.

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“Over there,” Aruna ordered.

Commander Francis Murray of the Planetary Guard went to stand where he was told. I may never have taken my service with the Guard that seriously, yet it peeved me that one of ours was involved in all this.

A few preliminaries followed, statements of names, of purposes, of purported crimes. Robert Douglas rose to begin the questioning. “Mister Murray,” he began. ‘Mister’ was the standard way to address a Planetary officer. “All evidence indicates you are guilty of treason, but this is not a trial. That may come and it would do you well to cooperate before it does.”

The commander only stared into space, saying nothing, indicating nothing.

“You might tell us where your orders came from. You could give us names of your fellow conspirators at Fundy Base. We have arrested a couple of those already. Your own logs pointed to them.” Douglas’s eyes turned my way. “One of them probably sabotaged your first ship, Jack.”

“I’m still inclined to blame the Aigleans,” I said. They were certainly behind destroying it at Thule.

“They may well have worked together, at least on occasion.” His attention went back to the prisoner. “Did you know Major Kearney was dead?”

The man suddenly brought himself into focus but spoke no words.

“Murdered,” continued Robert Douglas. “Assassinated by someone in your own organization.”

Or just maybe those Aigleans I’d mentioned. Or someone else entirely.

“But — she was supposed to come back after the mission. As usual.”

“As usual? Do you know what her mission was, Commander?”

“To check on things the way she always did and — and send and receive messages.”

“Then you didn’t know she was sent to destroy Jack McFee’s ship and everyone on it?”

He gave me a wide-eyed look. “No, sir. I didn’t know a lot of what she did. She got her orders direct, mostly.”

Douglas nodded, almost managing to look sympathetic. “Yet you

know she was capable of blowing up a ship, don't you? That she helped destroy the liner at Toto?"

Murray nodded dumbly, dejectedly. "They really killed her, sir?" he choked out.

"They did. I would not be surprised if they decided to tie up other loose ends as well." He stared directly at the officer, his meaning clear.

Murray seemed to decide of a sudden that it was in his best interest to speak. "We ran separate and independent operations. Those overlapped at times. Mostly me procuring items she needed."

Like explosives? I wondered. The same thought might have been on every mind in the room.

"I — I can name my direct contact, the person who relayed orders to me from higher up. And a few operatives at the base. You have some of those already, I guess." He shook his head. "Kearney. I recruited her and it came to this. They shouldn't have — they shouldn't have."

I am doubting anyone felt much sympathy, either for Murray or Kearney. It was Aruna who asked, "How did Kearney become part of this?"

The man seemed hesitant now. Then, with a shrug, he went on. He must have known there would be no point in holding anything back. "She already sympathized with our cause. Her disappointment over Errol McFee may have pushed her the rest of the way." Murray looked toward me as if we were old friends, though I had never met the man. "We had hopes for your cousin but he got himself enmeshed with the Thulean cause. Then he advocated for continued war where our people favored withdrawing and putting Scotia first."

"Scotia first," I mouthed to myself. All right, maybe I was loud enough for Aruna to hear me.

Douglas went on now. "I believe, ladies and gentlemen, we are seeing only a small piece of a much larger conspiracy. With the end of the war, it may have wound down some, but you may be sure it still exists."

"How do we find it?" asked the prime minister. "How do we root it out? There are those who spout this 'Scotia first' slogan in our own government."

"Most of whom are unlikely to have ties to any of this."

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"There also have been outside elements involved," said General Aruna. "During the war. They may have disassociated themselves since."

"Or they might be the ones cleaning up after themselves," I said. "Why not join in?"

"Entirely possible," agreed Douglas. "Or in cooperation with those who are involved here."

A question came from up the table. "Were these people actually willing to be betray Scotia and work with an enemy? That doesn't sound much like putting Scotia first."

"Some of them admire the Aigleans' new leader. This General Osuna," noted Buey.

"They'd like someone like him in charge here." The woman who spoke glanced in my direction. "To counterbalance the power of the wealthy families."

Sure, I knew about that. No need to tiptoe! "But he wasn't in charge during the war," I pointed out. "Isn't it possible our traitors didn't realize who they were collaborating with?"

"Entirely possible," Douglas admitted. "We must also recognize the Ursans seemed to have a hand in this from the start."

"They did try to kill me a time or two. So did Sevens."

That got some curious looks. Many — maybe most — of those here would never have heard these details. Their information might even come primarily from Vili's book.

"Well, Jack," spoke Aruna, "we might ask you to be a target again. We'll send you right back to Toto and no one may realize you ever left."

"And they'll think I still have Kearney's nonexistent dying confession in my head."

Robert Douglas announced, "A handful of undercover agents have already been sent to Toto Station on a commercial liner. As we no longer run things there, they will not be able to linger without raising suspicions. We will not ask you to linger either; if no one takes our bait, it would be best for you to depart for Rome, as you originally intended."

"And be out of all this," added Aruna. "We'll attempt to carry on without you." That got him a chuckle or two. I might even have

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smiled. "I think our part in this discussion is over. With your permission, Madame Prime Minister."

A minute later we were hurrying down those overly-bright corridors on our way back to the general's ship.

CHAPTER 33

ALEKS MARTÍN WAS a slender young man, almost as blond as a Thulean. By young, I mean around my own age. The two of us were on our way to Oz, as if nothing had happened and he was simply following the orders Kearney had sent.

We traveled in the same W-2C he had piloted before, a machine from the jump school. These were early models with somewhat inadequate Thule-Riley main drives, and had been deemed unfit for combat use. So jump drives were installed in some and these were handed over to the school.

Freneau had taught me in one like it. They were worse in acceleration and handling than any machine I had operated since.

I was entirely willing to let Aleks take the helm. The jump drive was a Saldhana. Freneau preferred her students learn it first. To someone who had mastered the Garda, it felt clumsy.

"Ataensi," he announced. "We're supposed to check in."

"Right. Everything as normal." It didn't really matter, I was sure. Codes were sent. He prepared for the next jump, the one to Hermitage.

I expected no problems. Martín was one of the general's prize students, after all. Away we went. Nice and smooth. Again, he announced himself.

"Are you planning to stay in the service?" I asked him. "You could make good money jumping big liners."

He pondered what had been a throw-away question, meant to fill time. "With the Li Drive there's not the demand there used to be."

"Every ship should have at least a Saldhana as a backup," I stated. "Or even better, the Li should be the backup."

"Maybe so, but no one wants to spend more than necessary. Oz next."

I didn't bother him while he targeted the yellow star. Again, a clean jump. "Really close to Wizard. Almost within the orbits of its moons."

Wizard was a giant gasbag planet in the Oz system. The other big one, an orbit further out, was called Witch. "Watch out for flying monkeys," I warned him.

"Huh?" He apparently didn't know the origin of the names.

"I'll explain some time. Calling in to Toto?"

"Might as well. It will take us some time to get there."

The gravitational tug of Wizard wouldn't help in getting us moving. Not as bad as landing too close to a red star in a binary system like Ataensi. In that situation, it might be better to jump back immediately and try again.

Martín sent our identification codes. At this distance, we shouldn't expect a quick reply.

"Is it so that General Freneau taught you to jump?" he asked.

"I could already jump. She took the rough edges off and introduced me to the Garda Drive."

"I've tried using it. She says you're the most talented jump pilot she ever knew."

I was inclined to agree, not that I would say it. "Oh, that's just because we're family now." Then, on a far more serious note, I asked him, "Are you supposed to have heard the news about Kearney?"

"I am. It would have seemed odd if word hadn't reached Scotia, wouldn't it? But I am supposed to know nothing about Murray or anyone else who was involved. Which is close to true."

"So you're just obeying the orders Murray gave you. That makes sense." And seemed reasonably plausible. "I am sure you were warned you might also be a target."

If he hadn't been, he was now. We made our slow progress toward Toto Station and, in time, docked. Major Delany made sure the passageways were clear of anyone not totally essential, so some secrecy could be maintained.

There was little to do now but wait for things to happen. If they didn't, both Aleks and I would be jumping away from here. "I'll leave with Martín, most likely," Hill told us when we assembled in Delany's office. "The three operatives that were sent should follow soon after."

"I would rather they had not come at all," stated Delany.

"I considered not telling you about them, but decided they could be more effective with your cooperation. We thank you for agreeing to their presence."

The major shrugged. "I have no doubt other spies pass through this station. Any of yours here, Tarmo?"

DIM DISTANT STARS

“Oh, several. But they spend all their time in the bar.”

“When they’re not seducing your crew,” I added.

I think neither Hill nor Delany approved of us. “I take it no one has tried to assassinate anyone in my absence.”

“No suspicious activity at all,” the Thulean reported. “It is quite disappointing.”

“That may change,” felt Hill. “Someone may see Lieutenant Martín as a threat now, possibly carrying a report back to Scotia. We need to keep an eye on his ship.”

“Mine too,” I reminded them.

“Perhaps not so much. If it is believed Martín and I are to deliver a full report, we will be considered a more important target. There is no reason you can’t jump away at the same time we do.”

“Home to Thule at last for Gunner and me,” said Tarmo. “Not that we won’t keep an eye on this investigation.”

“You Thuleans have no more reason to interfere in Seven affairs than the Scotians,” objected Major Delany.

“It was our diplomats who were targeted,” Tarmo pointed out. “Though none were killed, other Thulean citizens were. Do not think we will forget that.”

Again, I think Delany brought up Seven sovereignty here as a matter of form. Get the disclaimers out of the way and then get to work.

“Where is Aleks now?” I asked.

“Sitting in a bar,” reported Hill, “and acting lost. He does it pretty well. The major and I both have personnel keeping an eye on him.”

So there was nothing else to be done. We could prepare to be on our ways. “It wouldn’t hurt for the four of us to be seen exiting this office together,” I said. “Secrets shared and business completed.”

“And no more reason to hide,” agreed Hill. “I’d better go get that boy and inform him of our intentions.”

Tarmo and I headed for my ship. I guess I could call it mine. The McFee Concern held the title and I held stock in the McFee Concern, right? “We’ll leave shortly,” I told the rest of our party. “Any problems with that, M?”

“None at all. I am looking forward to seeing new worlds.”

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“So let’s go have a meal,” I suggested. “We can use Tarmo’s expense account.”

He only shook his head and muttered something about ‘stingy Scotians.’

We had just reached dessert when the alarm sounded.

CHAPTER 34

“AN ATTEMPT TO strap a bomb to our ride,” Paolo Hill reported. “And a firefight with the guards. Our would-be saboteur is, unfortunately, dead.”

“Unfortunate for him especially,” cracked Aleks.

“Still, we lost an opportunity to question him.”

It seemed unlikely he would have known much. “Base personnel?” I inquired.

“Yes. Can’t blame this one on a Scotian.”

“He came in from the outside in a work-suit,” one of the security officers told us. “From some other dock.”

I’d suspected that was how my W-4 had been sabotaged at Thule. No proof of that was ever found nor even who exactly had done it. But it was assuredly on Aigleán orders.

“I’d consider this the sign for both of us to be on our way. We’ll have dessert on the ship, folks. Ice cream sandwiches for everyone.”

Martín edged his vessel out of dock a few minutes later, with the aid of a trio of tugs, and headed toward Scotia. Our destination lay the opposite direction. More or less. I settled into my cockpit chair, Tarmo sitting beside me, and received permission to launch. Into space I cruised, gradually accelerating, Oz’s yellow sun behind us. I needed to put some distance between us and the busy station before jumping.

“Our way is clear, Jack,” reported M.

“Yeah. Let me pick up a little more speed. All right.” I targeted Thule’s orange star and jumped toward it. It felt almost like a homecoming to be in the system again. We had emerged fairly far out but on the same side of the sun as Thule and its station.

“It should take a little over three hours,” said M. “Shall I set a course?”

“Sure.”

“Will we stay here long, Jack?”

“I don’t really know, M. I had intended a day’s layover but things may have changed.”

“And then on to Avignon. I have looked at the various routes we could follow.”

“Easy jumps, I hope. This will be as new to me as it is to you.”

“I almost wish I was going with you,” admitted Tarmo, as we rose and passed into the lounge.

“You and Gunner and Anna would always be welcome to visit. Or come with John and me when we visit Earth on our next vacation.” I looked around. “Where is John, anyway?”

“Sleeping,” answered Gunner, pointing a thumb to the bunk compartments.

A good idea but I never felt quite right slipping into bed when my ship was underway. Despite the fact that M could handle things quite well. I’d probably nap in my command chair again.

“Does Anna know we’re on the way?”

“She did,” Gunner said. “Our arrival keeps getting put back.”

“Only by a couple days. We can blame all that on Jack.”

“What, her favorite adopted brother?” I protested.

Gunner snickered. “She needed a little brother to take care of.”

“Whereas I was the one who took care of her,” said her big brother. Her real brother.

“Tarmo did more to raise her than either of her parents. Don’t give me that look, husband. She says so herself.”

“Anna and I have different fathers. Mom did marry mine. Anna chose to use his surname.” My friend might have sighed. “Our mother works security at some mining facility. Neither of us has seen her for years.”

But the pair had followed in her career footsteps. I was not going to ask how the fathers might have made their livings, nor where they were now.

“Anna is no longer on the station, right?”

“Serving on the planet as an instructor,” Tarmo said. “Ilmar Torsten has taken over her post.”

“I remember Ilmar.” We had discussed weapons on occasion. Just a kid, though undoubtedly older than me.

“You could do his job better. You could probably do any of our jobs better.”

“Well, Anna did train me.” That seemed as good a deflection as any.

“Indeed she did. Three hours, M said?”

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“That is correct, Tarmo,” came M’s voice. “Time enough for a nap.”

“Good idea,” felt Gunner. Tarmo concurred. Both disappeared into the unoccupied bunk room.

“I shouldn’t watch them, should I?” asked M. “I didn’t recognize what was happening the first time. No one had sex on our old ship.”

I struggled to keep a straight face. “It would be best to give them their privacy.”

“Yes. I know this is something I can never understand, Jack, love and sex and procreation. Yet I recognized his sense of contentment and accomplishment when your brother showed me pictures of his child, and somehow shared in them. I do not know if this is anything like the happiness humans feel.”

“Neither do I, M. It may not matter what we call it.”

“You are prone to saying things like that.”

“I am, aren’t I? It leads people to believe I’m a deep thinker.” But maybe not M. I wondered if he would feel something akin to sorrow if I died. When I died — M was likely to outlast me.

I went to the control cabin. After a while, John came up to join me.

“An hour and some yet,” I told him. “Let me pull Thule up on the screen.” A view of the planet was not interesting enough to hold our attention long. I switched to one of the orbiting station. Unlike the clean disk at Toto, Thule Station was an assortment of units assembled over time. It looked like a floating pile of boxes.

“I’m not sure yet whether we’ll go down to the planet.”

“I wish I had time to see what has been done there. I understand it is somewhat like Frontera.”

“The place is on the chilly side. I’ve never been beyond a city so I couldn’t describe the rest of the planet.” John would know as much about it as I did. Maybe more. “Except the sky. It has a greenish tinge to it. The Thuleans prefer more poetic descriptions for it, such as turquoise.”

“Yes, Frontera will have such a sky.” He lapsed into silence.

Was John thinking of that new world and the life laid out for him there? I envied him a bit for having a vision, while I had no idea where my future might take me. Not for the first time — and quite likely, not

for the last — the urge to jump away from all I knew, to explore those dim, distant stars, rose in me.

Maybe I was no more certain what happiness was than M.

I pulled up an instrument screen. Decelerating. M was being too nice to us with these gradual changes.

“Hey, Jack, you have a new ship?” came from the com.

“Anna? Who let you on coms?”

“Who would stop her?” came a voice in the background. Good question.

“Yes, it’s a new ship,” I said. “Same old M installed. Same young M, I mean. I am chauffeuring your brother and his wife.” I glanced at the man seated beside me. “And a man of mystery. Say hello to Anna Gallen, man of mystery.”

“Pleased to meet you, Anna. I am John.”

“There went the mystery! Oh, the people here want to direct you to a dock so I’ll get out of the way. See you soon.”

Instructions were duly sent, and a beacon to follow in. “Anna is the woman known as Frida in Vili’s book, is she not?” asked John.

“She is. I am positive everyone on Thule Station recognized her identity.”

“She seems very interesting. I look forward to making her acquaintance.”

CHAPTER 35

"IT'S ABOUT TIME you showed up."

"We were busy saving half a dozen worlds," her brother told her. "Jack helped." He stopped suddenly and looked Anna over. "You're a captain, now?"

Anna's hand went to the insignia on her collar. "I thought we could be equals at last, but I just learned you've been promoted to major."

"About time for both of us," felt Tarmo. "I understand you have spoken to John already."

"Yet he remains a mystery man. Introduce us, Jack."

"Captain Anna Gallen, may I present John Barbosa."

"Captain Gallen." He actually gave her a gallant little bow. Wasted, maybe, on a Thulean.

But then one never knows. She tilted her head at the priest. "An Aiglean of some sort, aren't you? A year ago, Tarmo and I would have escorted you off the station."

"Maybe into internment," added her brother.

"I was safely on Avignon at the time. It is good we can be friendly now, no?"

I cut in on their pleasantries. "Just where are we going to be friendly? Are there rooms on the station or do John and I sleep on my ship?"

"We are all going down to the planet at once," Anna informed me. "Or in ten minutes when the shuttle leaves."

"You will be our guests," said Gunner.

My instinct was to beg off. But John did want to see the surface. It wouldn't hurt. "I'll have to inform M of the change in plans." My communicator wouldn't work for that on this station.

"I'll plug you through," said Anna. "I still have clearances up here."

A minute later M was as aware of my plans as I was and we were headed for the military terminal. The much larger civilian facility lay on the other side of Thule Station. Not exactly the other side but close enough for me to say it.

I was well aware we were not necessarily out of danger. Any sort of attack did seem unlikely but one must be prepared for the unlikely. I

remained vigilant, as did all my companions except John. Most might not have noticed the difference between us.

The shuttle proved a spartan little tube with straps to hold us in place. No point in seats with no artificial gravity generator. "Home-built?" I asked Tarmo.

He only shrugged. The man had little interest in anything outside his own field. It definitely was nothing from the Thule-Denis line. Some of those had served with Scotia, and even with the Ning. Good machines, going by what I had heard.

We settled at a ground station, with other shuttles lined up beside us on an open pad. I'd no idea whether it was near the spot I had landed half a year ago, for the Gallens' wedding. It could be on the other side of Thule.

"Jack told me truth," spoke John. "It is cool here. I come from a warm planet." Most of his words were aimed at Anna, beside whom he walked. He was much of a height with her, which meant an inch or so more than me.

Squat, shapeless buildings lay about us, some of them nothing more than entries to the underground warrens that Thuleans called cities. There were trees. Thule was hardly a barren wasteland, and large areas of cultivation lay beyond and between the cities. John would want to see those.

An elevator. A train. I think it could be called a train, or maybe a tram. The smell of Thuleans packed in their habitations, all much closer to each other than Scotians would feel comfortable with. "Here's our stop," announced Tarmo.

We made our way up a corridor, lightly traveled, Thulean pedestrians passing in both directions. Tarmo halted before a metal door, set in one of the ubiquitous metal walls of Thule. "We have a fairly spacious apartment, but both frequently sleep elsewhere. There is room for all of us."

"Is your apartment near, Anna?" asked John.

"I just have a room at my base. It's all I need."

"Ah, as is my cell at the university." The priest gave me a sidelong look. "Jack likes to complain about his."

"He's a spoiled rich kid, you know."

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"We've done our best to toughen him up," added Gunner.

John responded seriously. "I have learned our Jack is a dangerous young man. You are all dangerous, are you not? Where I am a simple, peace-loving priest."

Anna's eyebrows rose just slightly. She hadn't known about John's calling.

"But off to do a dangerous job on a new planet," I pointed out. "What time of the day is it here? I feel like I should be eating one meal or another."

"Close enough to suppertime. We can eat at a canteen or bring a meal here."

"Nobody cooks in their quarters," said Anna.

This place served mostly for sleeping. No kitchen. I had noticed that. Typical of Thule, going by all I'd read.

"Everyone is tired," said Gunner. "Order us something, Tarmo."

He sat down in a corner and spoke into his wrist-top. "I would like to visit one of your communal dining rooms, if there is time," said John. "There is so much planet and only a few hours!"

"We could arrange a jaunt outside tomorrow," spoke Tarmo, rising and rejoining us. "Unless there is a hurry to be on your way."

"Not at all," I told him. "It might even serve our mission." If we still had one.

"Yes. Or news might reach us from your home."

The meal was fetched by a bot. I'd seen few in the short time since we'd arrived; not nearly so many as one would on Scotia or Oz or even up at Thule Station. A table unfolded from the floor. Thulean space-saving ingenuity. There might be no cooking facilities in the apartment but beers did appear from a refrigeration unit. Also pretty much hidden in a wall.

"Is this traditional Thulean food?" wondered John, as we took places around the table.

"Borrowed from the Sevens," I told him. I knew this much. "They call it fish and chips."

"We already raised potatoes and fish so it fit readily into our cuisine," said Gunner.

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“My wife is far more knowledgeable about such things than I. Anna and I are quite uneducated.”

We talked through what I assumed was the evening. Anna and John dominated the conversation, once we’d covered our own recent adventures. Their talk was of the future. I didn’t have much to add on that topic.

CHAPTER 36

MAKING COFFEE WAS an apparent exception to not cooking in their rooms. Anna had already prepared a pot when I emerged from the Gallens' spartan spare bedroom. No one else seemed to be up yet.

"I like your friend, Jack. He has a purpose," she said, as I poured a cup of my own. "I can't find one these days."

I almost said the same, but realized it wasn't true. I had purposes and cross-purposes, all vying to become my path forward. Right now, that path lay through Rome.

Ha, all roads led to Rome, didn't they? That was the old saying. Perhaps studying there was only another way to escape making any decision, as had been those long, solitary wartime patrols. "You don't have to stay with your current career," I told her.

"I could break completely. Become a colonist somewhere."

That was a more drastic step than I'd had in mind. And I didn't at all like the idea of Anna being so far away. "My grandfather would hire you anytime."

"But that would be the same career, wouldn't it?"

Gunner and Tarmo entered the apartment at that moment, bearing what I suspected to be breakfast. "Our other guest still asleep?" asked Gunner.

"John was reading his office when I left him. He should emerge soon."

"He'd better before the doughnuts are gone. Are we all up to a field trip?"

"You're really going to give John a tour?"

"It is for you, too," Anna informed me. "You've seen very little of our beautiful and fascinating world." Then she laughed. "Most of what I've seen has been during training exercises. I may be more familiar with the surfaces of some of the Janic worlds."

"Do we still call them that?"

She shrugged. Tarmo said, "Janus remains Janus, of course. I believe the Burkuts no longer use the name for the other systems."

I could have taken John to see other interesting worlds within the Scotian Group. Bono. That would have been a good choice, if we'd had

the time. "Here he is. Fill your stomach, John, and then we'll see about filling your day."

"I am most grateful that you do this for me," he stated, taking a place at the table. We were and had been speaking Lingo; it's what we gravitated to when I was with Thuleans.

"It's a vacation for us, too," Anna assured him. "For me, anyway."

"Can you hang around long?" I asked her.

"I was given flexible leave. Maybe I'll go up to the station when you depart."

Our first order of the day was to board a train. Then another one, that passed from the city's tunnels to the outside. Everything looked a little different from the way it would on Scotia, the light not quite so strong, the colors shifted some. Agricultural fields lay on either side. Some sort of grain? Brendon would be interested in that.

"Barley?" conjectured John.

"I think so," Gunner answered. She did not sound overly sure.

"Barley is grown on Frontera. Not on my home world." That led to another long discussion of other planets, again mostly between Anna and the priest. Maybe she more serious about leaving Thule than I had realized.

The train made another of its frequent stops. "Here's where we debark," announced Tarmo. "I have arranged a car for us." It proved not to be an air car, as we might have used at my home, but one with six wheels and large pneumatic tires. We all climbed aboard, Tarmo at the controls. The seating was rather high off the ground — but not as high as an air car!

The air here was not only cooler but slightly thinner than on Scotia, with a bit of a metallic edge to it. Completely breathable, though not ideal for someone of my heritage, nor most humans, for that matter. I did know the Thuleans upped the oxygen levels in their cities.

Low rocky hills rose around us. Some sparse vegetation sprouted from inhospitable ground. "Thule, not so different from when our ancestors came here," said Gunner, appointing herself tour guide.

"But there were no plants then. No life at all." said John.

"A barren rock," she agreed. "But with a decent climate."

"When there wasn't acidic rain," Tarmo added.

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So I had read. "No wonder you went underground."

"All the methane and other nasties are gone from the atmosphere now," said Gunner. "Thule has been at it longer than most worlds."

"Definitely a success," agreed John.

Maybe so but I still wouldn't want to live here. The view was admittedly nice as we climbed into the hills, a patchwork of fields and reservoirs, a network of canals, laid out below. Not enough to hold ones interest long, though.

Unless, to be sure, one was John. He was drinking it all in.

"Are we near any of the seas?" I asked.

"Just a little too far to travel," was Tarmo's opinion. "They do not begin to match those you know on Scotia. Murky and greenish."

"And cold," added Anna. "No swimming!"

I wouldn't have attempted. "I don't see many agricultural robots."

Gunner said, "It's mostly humans on machines. Thuleans are good at making machines. Robots, not so much."

"So I've been told." Thule was renowned for turning out engineers. My cousin Errol had studied here. "There are some humans on machines heading our direction."

"Tricycles," remarked Tarmo, checking a screen on his dashboard. "Three of them. No identifiers but that's common in the country."

I believe four of the five individuals in the car checked their weapons at that moment. Not that we suspected anything; it just came natural to us. That trio couldn't be much of a threat to a larger, well-armed group anyway, whatever their intention might be.

They could simply be agriculture workers checking us out. They could be fellow tourists enjoying a ride in the countryside.

They could have rockets.

A rocket. It slammed into our rear, lifting it several feet but not flipping the car. We came back down hard. "Get on the floor, John," I ordered, as we undid seat belts and drew weapons. The tricycles sped in our direction. Their riders held sidearms.

They must have had only one rocket, and a small one at that. On hindsight, I did recognize the difficulties of smuggling and deploying even that.

None of us had been injured. There would be aches and bruising

after that bounce. That I didn't doubt. Nothing that would keep us from fighting now. Gunner and I did know how to fight but the Gallen siblings had military training. We would follow their lead here. "Let them get close," called out Tarmo. Our assailants' weapons might be better for this sort of open-air fighting; my own was designed for use in close environments and it was likely the Thuleans' arms were of the same sort.

Finding cover was the problem. Those attackers were mobile and could approach from different directions at once. Our car offered minimal protection, whether we hunkered down inside its open body or tried to hide behind it. "Gunner! Jack!" came Tarmo's command. "Underneath, one covering each side."

The rear end rested on the ground so there was neither the need nor ability to protect that direction. Gunner and I took up our stations. Here they came, spreading out.

Traveling fast but traveling straight. It would have been more sensible, offered a more difficult target, had they swerved back and forth. They might have felt a quick rush and end to things was the best choice. Or they might not have had a firm grasp on tactics.

They were assassins, not soldiers. I might not be either but I recognized the vehicles made easier targets than their riders. On foot, the attackers would have no advantage. I reclined, propped on my elbows, holding the gun ready. Let that one get closer. And fire.

The cycle went end over end, much the way they had probably hoped our car would. The rider made a long arc against the turquoise sky before landing hard. On a rock.

Tarmo and Anna were firing now. Another cycle was incapacitated, but without harm to its rider. He ran to his comrade, climbed aboard the other ride, and the two sped away. All over, except cleaning up the mess here. Tarmo was already on his com, calling for assistance.

Anna and I walked over to the assassin I had unseated. A woman, definitely dead. The body armor she wore had not been enough. She could have passed for Thulean readily but it was unlikely she was. We went back to the car. Gunner and Tarmo had climbed up and were bending over John. He had never unbuckled from his seat, and sat slumped over.

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Gunner rose and shook her head. "His neck must have snapped in the original jolt. He is dead, Jack."

CHAPTER 37

“SHE CARRIED FALSE identification,” reported Tarmo. “The consensus is that she was Ursan. Body chemistry, dental work, all the markers we generally go by.”

Ursans didn’t surprise me, whether they worked for their own league or were hired assassins. Targeted on me; that was obvious. Probably on Tarmo as well.

Did someone truly still see me as a danger? Maybe it had become personal for them. Maybe, as a McFee, I was seen as a symbol. Of what, I’m not at all certain.

“We’ll have to ask you for any directions on John’s remains. It is felt you would know best.”

“We’re far too distant from his home,” I said. “I suppose I could take the body to Rome and let them make a decision.” That idea left almost as quickly as it came. “No, bury him here. John’s wish was to live and die on a planet with an orange sun. Let it be Thule.”

Tarmo only nodded and left me. We sat in a police center, somewhere in his city. Anna took his place, sitting beside me.

“I really liked John. He was passionate, so full of hope and plans for the future.”

“I did too. And — and I brought him here and ended all that.” I couldn’t help myself. I mourned John, and I felt self-pity and guilt, and all sorts of frustrations I’d held in too long bubbled up. So did tears. I hadn’t cried in public, cried anywhere, in years.

She spoke not but only put an arm around me.

“Thanks,” I whispered. “I guess I have to go back to being in charge now.”

“Only if you want to, Jack. You expect too much of yourself, sometimes, and push your friends away.”

“I know that,” I admitted. “I find it easy to become detached.”

“As if you don’t really need any of us — or fear needing us.”

That hit close. I didn’t mind. I got up and announced, “I need to speak with Tarmo about a funeral. This *is* something I need to do myself.”

“But I’ll go with you.”

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It was mostly a matter of finding a Roman priest. Those were scarce on Thule. John Barbosa would be interred early tomorrow and then I would be on my way. Back to Rome where I would have to inform the university administration he would not be returning.

I wasn't sure I wanted to return myself.

There was little for me to do on Thule that afternoon and little I wanted to do. I might have preferred being back in M's company. Soon enough. We'd jump away tomorrow.

I felt that catch in my heart again. There would be no tears, this time. That had been done. But I would continue to mourn. I would not forget my friend.

We ate in a canteen that evening. The Thuleans called it a canteen. Cafeteria would be just as inaccurate. A community dining room might be better, if a bit unwieldy to say. Again, I missed Father John, and wished he could have experienced the meal. Smorgasbord is what the Thuleans name it, a buffet of the foods produced on their own world. Shrimp and crayfish and other crustaceans they raise in tanks, and fish with a similar origin. Their seas can not support much animal life yet. They might never. Potatoes in a variety of disguises. Imitation meats that might have been made of almost anything. Piles of baked goods. Sweet, exquisite deserts.

It was almost as good as a Scotian meal. After, we returned to Gunner and Tarmo's apartment, and broke out the schnapps. To Father John Barbosa we drank first. Then we just drank.

"I'll go up to the station with you tomorrow," announced Anna Gallen, "if only to say hello to M in his fancy new ship."

"A jinn in a new bottle," I said. I wondered how M would feel about the metaphor. It was possible he wouldn't even understand it.

Tarmo was fussing with his wrist-top. He should leave business to business hours. I guess it's always business for a spy or policeman or whatever exactly he was. Some of each. "No sign of our fled attackers," he reported. "They might be off-world by now."

Normally that wouldn't have bothered me much. This bunch I wanted to see brought to justice. Or even to revenge, though John would have admonished me for having such thoughts.

"And a dispatch followed us here, Jack. Not much to it. A few more

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arrests at Scotia, information pointing to individuals higher in the government.”

Probably not to those at the very top. I’d like to see them brought to justice, too.

“To the arrest and punishment of those involved,” I said, lifting my glass. “And now to bed.”

Whether I would sleep I didn’t know. It might be difficult tonight. But eventually I would.

CHAPTER 38

A HANDFUL OF us gathered for John Barbosa's funeral. He would be interred somewhere following it. Where didn't matter.

Goodbyes were made to Tarmo and Gunner, and Anna and I were on our way. Another spartan shuttle took us up to the station. Thule Station, where so much had happened to me over the past two years. Where I had met Anna.

Even though I had slept with Anna once, there had been no shows of affection since. We truly had become like brother and sister. Did I feel something more that I didn't show? I'll admit I did.

As for Anna's feelings, I would not presume to say, but she had told me she feared ruining our friendship. I might have felt the same. She remained 'the' woman for me in many respects, the one with whom I felt a true connection.

We could have gone straight to the ship and M from the terminal, but chose to stop in the military canteen, to share a beer, to say goodbye.

Goodbye. For a little while or forever? I knew my life had taken a different direction, one that led me away from Thule and my friends here. "I missed you when I saw all your friends on Scotia," I told her. "You will have to come and visit too."

"It is always possible. I'm told you entertained quite a few young women during your short stay."

"Told by Gunner, I assume. Did she also tell you what a well-behaved gentleman I was?"

"Actually, she did. I believe she was a bit surprised."

Not just her. "I was distancing myself again, I fear."

Anna nodded. There was nothing really to say about that. We finished our beer. Despite the disapproval of Errol and Brendon, I do like Thulean beer. It has character. Down a familiar hallway we walked, past the armory where Anna had once taught me tricks of her trade. Ilmar Torsten held sway there now; if I came back this way I might pop in and visit.

I didn't feel like anything of that sort right then. "This way, I think,"

I said, turning into a side passage. Anna didn't correct me. She knew her way around the place better than I did.

A maintenance bot slowly rolled along ahead of us. As we went around it, I immediately realized the two men we had been walking behind had disappeared. Anna recognized it as quickly as I did. "Drop back," she whispered.

We both did, getting behind the robot again. It might be a false alarm. Those men might have simply gone some other direction. But I felt safer with some cover. A juncture of hallways lay ahead. The obvious place for an ambush.

Maybe too obvious. They seemed empty as we gingerly slipped by. Still — those two men reminded us that two had escaped our fight yesterday. There might still be a plan to take me out. Or orders that had not been countermanded. Could they even be able to get onto the station, much less into this military section? And with weapons?

Weapons. "Come with me," I told her, and sprinted back the way we had come. She followed without question.

Into the armory. As I feared, a body lay on the metal floor. Not Ilmar. It must be a subordinate. "Knocked on the head," said Anna. "I'll call for medics. And security."

So those two ahead of us were assassins. They may have recognized they had been detected and slipped away. They also might make another attempt. That could depend on whether they knew security had been alerted. "If that pair has any sense, they'll run for it now."

"Whoever heard of agents being sensible?" came Anna's retort. "We wouldn't do this sort of work in the first place if we were."

Help arrived quickly, with Ilmar Torsten right behind. "Check what's been taken," Anna told him.

His assistant seemed to be all right and was already coming around. "You'll not get much useful from her for a while yet," warned one of the medics.

"No need. We know what's going on."

"A pair of C-119s gone missing," reported Ilmar. "At least a couple knives."

"They'll use the knives if they can," I felt. If they hadn't aborted.

"Two men," Anna told the security detail that had shown up. "In

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regulation green coveralls when last seen, but they may have ditched those. Maybe hiding out, maybe making a run for the civilian side.”

I would have done the latter of the two. Get on a commercial liner and leave Thule.

And now it was time for me to leave Thule, wasn't it? Nothing more for me to do here. Leave it to the station security.

No, damn it! Those men were responsible for John's death. I'd stay here and help however I could. This was no time for detachment.

But the would-be assassins might expect it of me. They would want to cut me off from my ship, lie in wait somewhere along my way to its dock. “Let me be bait,” I asked. “Maybe I can draw them out.”

Everyone disapproved. Even Anna, who would have undoubtedly made the same suggestion were our roles reversed.

“If they are after me, you can catch them. If not, I'll be safely in my ship.”

Anna pointed out, “Or they can knife you before you get there.”

A short conference ensued, both in person and over communicators. Making plans, arranging personnel. Security went off in various directions. Some, I felt certain, would double back around toward my ship and my path to it.

A few minutes later, I started away. Anna would follow at a discreet distance. Other security would be posted in sensible spots. We were ready. I was ready.

But one can never be completely ready. As I proceeded down a seemingly safe and empty corridor, something hit me from behind. Someone, I should say, throwing their body into my back and sending me to the floor. My gun was out almost immediately, to be kicked away.

One assailant spoke to the other. Some Ursan language was my guess. I didn't understand it. He took off down the hall, maybe to block anyone's approach. The other had knife in hand, ready to thrust, thinking me too dazed to fight back, wind knocked out of me.

Which might have been so. I did have enough presence to pull the little beamer, my grandfather's heirloom, out of my pocket. Extend the arm. Push the button. A hole appeared in the man's forehead.

Handy little device. Thanks, Grandpa Jack.

Firing came from down the passageway. Not very loud; the guns we carry make no more than a polite little ‘pop.’ Ursans I had encountered before had totally silent weapons but those can lack power, in comparison.

I got up, retrieved my gun, and strolled to where the commotion was rising. A man lay on the ground with blood flowing from a couple places on his body. Still alive though and maybe not likely to die from his wounds. Maybe something could be learned. “Your work?” I asked Anna.

“Yep. You killed yours, didn’t you?”

“Couldn’t be helped.”

“That happens.”

It was necessary to hang around the station a little longer than I had intended. Reports and so on. Eventually, Anna and I found ourselves on our way to the docks again. We reached them this time.

“Welcome aboard, Captain Gallen,” said M. He’d recognized her new rank at once. “And you, Jack. Is John coming?”

“I’m sorry to say that John Barbosa is dead, M.”

“How, Jack?”

“Murdered by agents. Agents who were after me.”

“I am not sure what to say, Jack. You are not physically hurt yet you are wounded, are you not?”

“I am, M.” I wasn’t sure what to say either. M could occasionally astound me.

“We are still headed for Rome? I shall prepare for departure.”

“And so we part again,” said Anna. “Each going our own way.”

“If we can figure out what those are.”

“Maybe I should go off-world. Take John’s place somehow.”

“You could,” I allowed. “Or you could decide to marry me.”

“Yes, I suppose I could. You would have to decide to ask me first.”

I hesitated a moment too long, perhaps, for M. “So decide, Jack,” he demanded. M had always liked Anna Gallen.

“Anna, will you marry me?”

“Sure. Are you still going to get me a job with your grandfather?”

“Absolutely. Someone has to support me. We’ll have the wedding at his place too.”

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“When?”

“On my next break from college. Our honeymoon can be the trip to Earth I had promised John.”

She sobered just a little. “That would be perfect, Jack McFee. Can I announce our engagement?”

“By all means. I’ll send a letter to my parents immediately. Or when I get to Rome.”

There was no more to be said. I took Anna in my arms and kissed her. It was a long kiss but we had no time for more. Not now. Nothing for M to avoid watching.

Then she was gone. Shortly after, I was on my own way, jumping to another star and then another.

All roads lead to Rome. For now.

AFTERWORD

SO ENDS THE third book of Jack McFee's adventures. Yes, he and Anna could have a happily ever after life together, but I would expect more adventures, wouldn't you? Not to mention a wedding!

Watch for the return of Jack Mack, and Anna too, with friends and enemies new and old. Until then, thank you for reading this novel and be sure to read the previous adventures, if you haven't already.