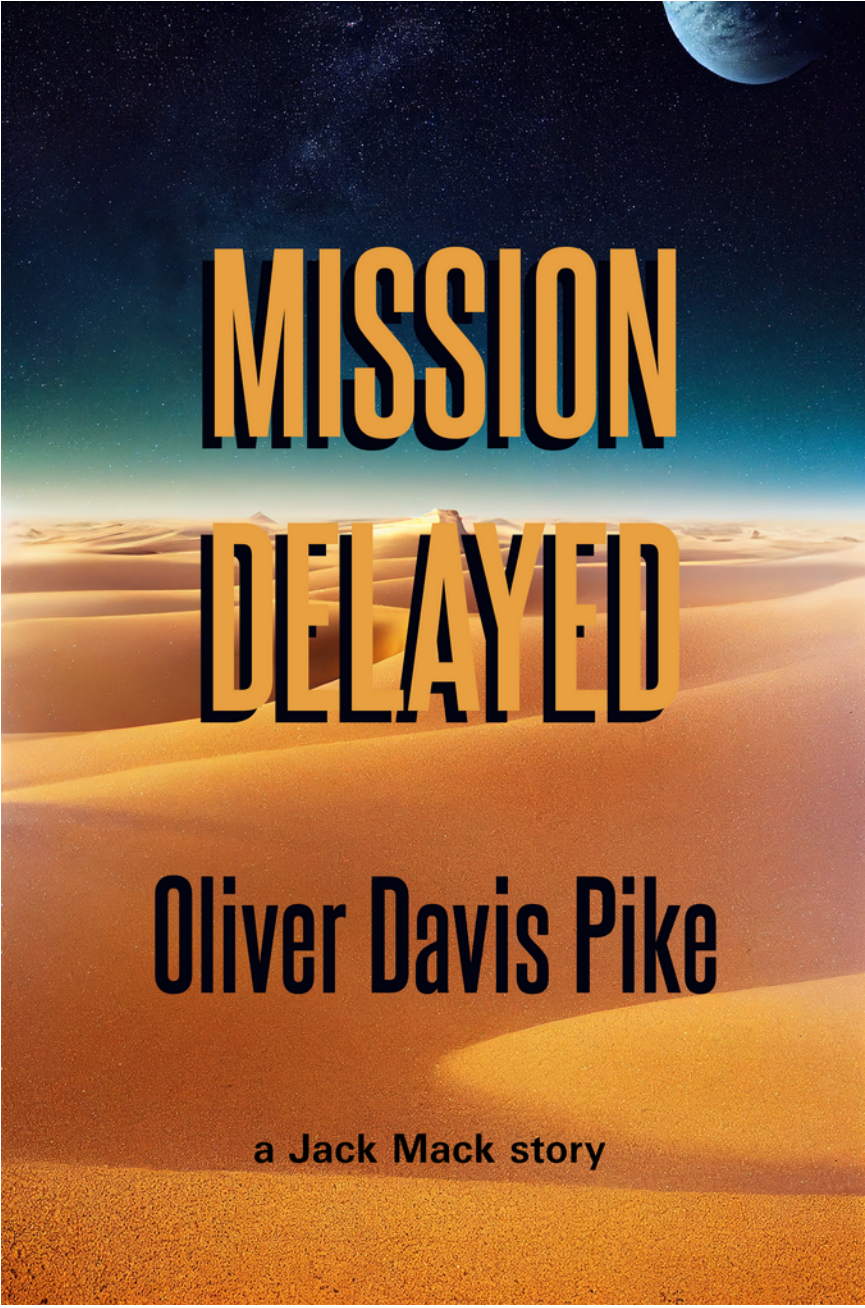


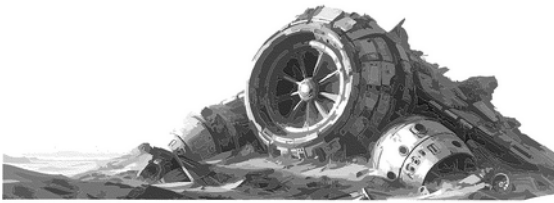


MISSION DELAYED

Oliver Davis Pike

a Jack Mack story

MISSION DELAYED



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Mission Delayed

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CHAPTER 1

TWO MOONS IN this world. Just like home!

The resemblance ended there. What thin atmosphere existed was unbreathable. It clung to the dunes around me, a silver haze. Dunes — they and the sand could not exist without some sort of wind, eroding the underlying rock over eons. Eons upon eons, I told myself. An exceedingly slow process.

Colonel Baldwin's voice came in my ear. The right one. "See anything, Jack?"

"Not so far, Sacky," I replied. I was allowed to call her Sacky, not that I cared about permission. I'd known her when she was still Captain Baldwin. Small clouds of the fine, dark sand rose and lingered in the air as I bounded along in the modest gravity. Strictly, it was not 'sand' in the normal sense, being mostly carbon rather than silicon. Ash? Not that in the normal sense, either, but it was good enough for me. "Radiation level has risen slightly. Not anywhere near dangerous."

"Not yet," she warned. "Keep an eye on it."

"Aw, you care."

"Only a little, Mister McFee. You had your chance with me and let it pass."

"It's never too late! We could always dump our respective spouses and run off together," I told her.

"Hey!" came Aleks's voice. "I could always jump away and leave you here."

"You aren't worth abandoning my career for," Sacky added.

I could have reminded her I was fabulously wealthy. Instead, I asked, "Can you tell how close I am to the signal?"

M was the one to answer. "Nearly atop it, Jack. There is too much rock beneath the surface to tell much. It seems to be rock."

The ship above me was the third that had played host to M, and by far the largest. The advanced AI had been with me, attuned to me, bonded to me, since the war. It would have been pointless to split us up when the hostilities ended, and rendered him essentially useless. I might not even be that useful myself.

"Maybe I can detect something from closer up," I replied. "Ow!"

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Sacky responded at once, with an even voice. What one should expect from a competent officer, I suppose. "Is there a problem?"

"Tripped over something. It's all the same drab and dark gray-brown, and no light strong enough to throw hard shadows." The moons were chasing each other toward the horizon. The planet — planetoid, maybe, or at best minor planet — was small enough that the horizon's lateral curve could be detected, if one were really looking for it. I was looking at it from a low angle, having fallen on my face. Face mask, more accurately.

I sat up and searched for the culprit. What I expected was a rock. What I saw was a piece of metal. It actually gleamed in the wan illumination. But then, what could cause it to corrode here? And the winds that shaped the scape around me probably kept it polished.

Eventually, they would have polished it into nothing.

"I've found something," I let my audience know. "Man-made, I believe." It proved relatively easy to pull the bit of debris from the sand. I could make nothing of it but where one small piece of metal existed there were likely to be more. "Radiation is still low. And I'm attempting to zero in on the signal we detected."

"You mean I detected," came M's correction.

Which was why we were here. M had noted an anomaly and we decided to investigate. We had no other reason to be jumping about from system to system, no errands to run. It had simply been a shake-down voyage for my new ship and I had invited a few friends along.

Sheer luck had landed us near this planet when I'd made my last jump, heading homeward toward Scotia. Random, as all jumps are; there is no telling where one will appear in the targeted system. The place was known. It was marked with a number on our charts, but no one had ever bothered to take a close look. Too far out from its sun, just another sterile piece of rock. Not even valuable for mining.

I got to my feet and stepped forward, a little more carefully now, watching where I put my feet. To no avail — a few seconds later my weight broke through the surface and I fell into a dark chamber of some sort. Thanks to the low gravity, not too hard!

Flipping on the light on the left breast of my away suit, I surveyed the space. Metal walls curved on either side of me, toward the rent

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through which I had plunged. Oh, okay, plunged is a little too dramatic. How about tumbled?

“Crew?” came a voice I hadn’t heard before. It spoke English though the accent was odd.

“Is someone here?” I replied though I already could tell no human had spoken to me. It didn’t even attempt to sound like one.

“Are you part of the crew? You don’t sound like anyone I know.”

“I’m a visitor,” I told what was obviously some sort of machine intelligence. “Is any of the crew around?”

“I do not know. They stopped talking to me.” It paused almost imperceptibly, processing. “I have had no visuals since the landing. What is your rank?”

“Lieutenant Commander Jack McFee,” I informed it. It had been a while since anyone called me that.

Another pause. “I do not recognize that rank.”

“Do you recognize colonel?” came Sacajawea Baldwin’s voice. “I’m his, um, commanding officer.”

I’d let her get away with that. “Of Scotian Group Force,” I added.

“What is Scotia, sir?”

“You’re in the Scotian Group,” Sacky told it. Or him or her. I couldn’t tell. “On a planet in the Bannock system.”

“There was an orange sun. It has a name?”

“That’s Bannock,” I said. Most star systems tended to be named after their primary inhabited planet, assuming there was one, and Bannock was no exception. “What do we call you?”

“I am Earth Initiative Ship CX288.”

Earth Initiative. I’ll admit my first thought was of the paper I could write about this discovery. I do have a history degree, after all, even if my colleagues consider me a dilettante.

“Do you have —” I was almost afraid to say the name. “An Orlova Drive?”

“Certainly, sir. It is necessary for travel to other stars.”

Then, it was. Now, one could work with any of the many jump drives that had been developed in the centuries since. CX288 would know nothing of them.

“That’s extremely old, isn’t it?” asked Aleks. As a fellow jump pilot

— and prize student of the legendary Jeanne Freneau — he knew about drives.

“Perhaps as much as twelve hundred years,” M informed everyone.

“Twelve hundred?” asked the ancient ship’s AI. “I have not been able to keep track. I turned off more and more systems to keep myself operational. Was that wrong, sir?”

“Absolutely the proper choice,” I assured it.

“It is good to be certain of it. I slept much of the time.” A pause. “I think it was much of the time.”

“Until I woke you up.”

“Yes, sir. Now we can continue the mission. Will you wake the crew too?”

Ah. “Later,” I told it. “I’d better go up to my ship and get things ready.”

“Is it a CX series too?”

“Something different. Are you able to hear this, M?”

“I can, Jack. I am an advanced intelligence installed in a McFee W-16B, CX288. They call me M. Do you have another name?”

“I do not understand, M. That is my name. Why would I need another?”

“How did the crew address you?” I asked.

“Old Tub, the engineer sometimes said. Mostly just Ship.” There came a longer pause this time. “Do you know where the engineer is? I am sure she needs to look at the engines.”

How to answer that? “It doesn’t matter, 288. You’ll never be able to lift off from the surface with the mass of a jump element.”

It answered at once this time. “I can see that. Thank you for explaining, Lieutenant Commander.”

“I would guess that is why you landed hard, too.”

“We were not supposed to land. Look only. There was a yellow star the crew planned to investigate next.”

My own home, most likely. Scotia itself. “We’ll see about getting you there, Tub. My ship, um, M, can’t land here either. That is going to complicate things.” Make things impossible would be more accurate. “I’m leaving now but we’ll maintain contact.”

My suit incorporated a tiny thrust tube so I had no difficulty

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jumping out of the hole. With the low gravity, I might have been able to do it unassisted. Hey, I try to stay in shape. I undoubtedly bounded along faster than was safe, returning to my little runner.

A few minutes later, I sidled up to the ship. The 16B was practically liner-sized, quite capable of carrying a small shuttle of this sort. I hadn't had that luxury with previous rides. I, of course, had been the logical choice to go down and investigate, not that I would have permitted anyone else. My ship, my rules.

The new ship wasn't quite commodious enough to stow the runner inside. I maneuvered it to its docking port, lining up with the entry lock. The gravitational pull of the massive jump element could be felt there. That was stronger than in my previous ships, too, though still somewhat less than planetary gravity. A minute or so later, Aleks, Sacky, and my third guest, Livi Radia, greeted me. Anna — that's my wife, you know — had chosen to stay home. I liked to think that was because of our children but Anna does take her job seriously. Far more seriously than I ever could.

My crew — both of them — remained busy somewhere else. True, even in a vessel of this size, there was not a lot of 'somewhere else' for them to be. I'd brought along an engineer from the company. It seemed prudent for this inaugural outing. He might get in my way and on my nerves were he aboard all the time.

And my aide and bodyguard, Kiska, whom I had wooed from Ursan service. Kiska Mur was almost as dangerous as my wife. She would be lurking somewhere.

Mostly I depended on M and a handful of bots for both comfort and company. M had imprinted so thoroughly on me that talking to him was almost indistinguishable from talking to myself. Except the AI knew a lot more than me.

"Safe and sound?" asked Sacky.

"As much so as ever. I don't think there's much danger down there."

"If you avoid falling in holes," noted M.

"The ship has deteriorated enough to present those sort of dangers," I admitted. "I detected higher radiation inside the hull. Gravity, too. There would be an ultra-heavy jump element somewhere in there."

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Aleks seemed to be dredging up some memory. “Didn’t early jump ships use miniature black holes?”

“Already abandoned by the time CX288 would have been built.” For the most part. I was fairly sure of that. “But they didn’t have thrust tubes yet. I would guess a plasma drive running off an atomic core.”

“Hence the radiation,” interjected M. “I’ve been talking to CX288. I don’t think it understands death.”

“Not surprising. Still, it well may have been the most advanced AI ever when it was built. It may also be the oldest operating AI in existence.” And like most AIs then and since, it was focused on fulfilling its mission. A mission delayed.

CHAPTER 2

IT WOULD NOT take long to jump back home, with Scotia being so close, but I did not want to abandon this find for even a moment. Nor to leave the AI. It had been by itself too long.

“I need to assess what can be done,” I announced. “Or let you assess it, Sven, if you’re willing to ride down.”

Sven Riley, being the thorough-going engineer he was, responded, “There is no way I wouldn’t be. It’s the event of a lifetime!”

Which might be true, at least for young Sven. Ha, maybe a year younger than me?

“Got room for me too?” asked Miss Livi Radia.

It would be a bit tight with three of us in the runner. “I suppose you can’t steal any company secrets.”

“Not that I won’t try!” came her cheerful reply. The Radias were the biggest competitors of the McFee Concern. Livi had also somehow become Sacky’s closest friend.

Yes, they were also former, um, interests of mine. That’s all right; Anna liked them both. “Get into away suits then,” I told my passengers. Ones of proper fit for every one of us — plus spares — had been stowed before we ever got underway. Even for the rather diminutive Radia.

Diminutive came in handy when it came to cramming us into the runner. Oh, it was supposed to have room for four but they would definitely be crowded. And Sven was as over-sized as Livi was under.

“Is this Tub male or female?” she asked me as we strapped into our seats.

“AIs were not yet gendered at that time,” I informed her. “Or so I understand. The need for a strong personal identity had not been recognized.”

Sven weighed in. “That, from all I’ve heard, led to instability.”

“Apparently not in CX288. But records that old are not always to be trusted. Assuming they exist at all.”

“That didn’t keep you from using them for your dissertation,” Livi reminded me.

Miss Radia was likely to have been one of the few who had ever read

it. Anna, I fear, was unlikely to have made it past the first page. That's where I dedicated it to her.

"I mainly want to survey the site," I informed them as we separated from the ship. "Locate the drive element and the reactor, if we can."

"If we could separate the drive element we might be able to lift it off the surface," said Sven.

"We'd have to cut the ship in two. Even then, the element's gravity field might continue to hold it together."

"Hmm. If the plasma drive could be made operational it could be used to push it out."

That sounded plausible, not that I had any idea how to do something of the sort. That's why Riley was going down with me.

It might not have sounded so plausible to Livi. "Why not just jump home and get the proper equipment?"

"Might have to," I admitted. We set down in about the same spot I had previously. The fine dust rose in a cloud around the ship before slowly settling. I could see a bit of a breeze was moving it about. Maybe sandstorms hit this planetoid at times. Another thing to monitor.

Of course, I didn't actually 'see' the sand, except on my screens. Few vessels of any size have windows. Also of any size. The very idea of them seems risky. "Helmets on," I ordered, "and all of us into the lock at once. I'm not wasting any more oxygen than necessary."

After jumping down to the surface — and bouncing a couple times — I called the ship above us. "Hear me all right up there?"

"Coming through clear, sir," came Aleks's reply.

I'd never quite broken him of using an occasional 'sir.' "Save the titles for your wife," I admonished him.

"You are the skipper of this ship," broke in Sacky.

"Careful or I'll make *you* call me sir," I told her. "CX288, are you hearing me?"

"I am. Should I call you sir, too?"

I might have laughed but I was pretty sure this AI had not been built with a sense of humor. "Doctor McFee would do but Jack would be even better. We'll be to your site in a couple minutes."

Our first task would be to figure out just where the ship was under the sandy surface. A bot could have done the job as well as Sven. I

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might use one instead if I came down again. Definitely if I came back with a larger expedition.

But I wanted to get as much done as possible right now. We hopped about, all three of us, probing with simple hand-held meters. It did not take long to establish a rough perimeter. Sven seemed puzzled by the shape. "It seems almost round."

"Flattened out some when it hit?" conjectured Livi.

"Could have," I allowed. "But I think it did not settle down too hard, thanks to the relatively low gravity. Some of the crew might even have survived, for a while." I thought on that for a moment. "Tub, who turned on the signal we picked up?"

"Captain Kee turned on the emergency beacon. That was just before he stopped speaking to me."

Maybe before the crash, maybe after. It hardly mattered now. "It is very weak," I commented.

"I had the robots set up a solar panel to keep the signal operating. It no longer supplies much power."

"Robots? Are they operational?"

"They stopped talking too."

Nonfunctioning. They might have just run out of power but maybe could be revived. "You would love to study them, wouldn't you?" asked Livi.

"Me and pretty much everyone else. No matter what their field."

I moved to the approximate center of the area we had begun to map and checked my readings there. "Mass is centered here. The drive element, I'm sure. Hmm."

"Having a brilliant thought, no doubt," Livi remarked to Sven. "He's far too prone to them."

"Bad as my uncle," said the engineer. "Or his cousin Errol."

"It seems to attract tall blond Thulean women. They should find one for your Uncle Olaf."

"You'd have to make it a tall blond Thulean man."

I was a little surprised Livi Radia wasn't aware of that. Pretty common knowledge and, after all, her family did spy on my family. And vice-versa. But back to my brilliant thought —

"The ship is more spherical than those with which we are familiar,

because they were not capable of spinning out the filaments of ultra-massive material as we do now. I would suspect a much chunkier drive element.”

Both came over and looked at their devices. “So it would seem,” remarked Sven. “Oh, how I would love to study it!”

“I doubt it can ever be lifted off this planet but we’ll try to get inside and take a look. The place I fell in is, mm, over there.”

“Where is the main drive?” wondered Riley. “I assume it sits at the rear —” He bounced off, meter in hand. Stopped. “Nothing here. I’ll check the other end.”

We watched him. Best to let him figure this out first. It would help us orient ourselves if we went inside. He shuffled back and forth a bit. “Here, I think. There’s definitely a big chunk of metal. Ceramics, too, I think, going by the echoes.”

All three of us had a rudimentary map on our devices now. “I doubt it was an actual ball,” claimed Sven, bounding toward us. “More elongated. An egg.”

And certainly, as conjectured before, flattened and spread a bit, both by its crash landing and by time. “Do you have a central location, Tub?” I asked. I assumed its systems were spread out to some degree, as with M.

“Forward, Jack.”

That made sense. Most essential systems were likely to have been operated from there, away from the reactor and plasma engine. How they oriented things around the drive element would have to be a guess. Or we could investigate.

“And the drive element is still near the center. The ship must have come down somewhat under control or the element would have punched right through the hull when it hit.” It would be pointless to question the AI about that right now. Maybe we’d figure it all out eventually but there was no hurry after twelve centuries.

The same with whether any of the crew had survived. Any sign of the bodies should have disintegrated. Pretty much any organic matter. The ship itself was disintegrating where it was exposed to the inexorable attack of the elements. Now that I knew the ship was here, I

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could spy spots where its hull lay exposed, shining metal like coins strewn across the endless brown sand.

"There might be other weak spots," I warned. "Be careful placing your feet."

Sven had a warning of his own. "The gravity is going to get a bit peculiar as we go in," he said. "We'll feel the pull of the element at an angle to the gravity of the planet."

"Don't ultra-massives deteriorate over time?" asked Livi. "Break down into other elements?"

"They're pretty stable," he replied. "Otherwise they would pose a radiation danger."

"But it probably has released some exotic gasses and lost some mass," I added. "Say, does the plasma drive use those kinds of gasses or is that just ion thrusters?"

"Plasma engines can be designed to use just about any gas," Sven said. "The problems arise when it comes to storing them. No telling what this one employed, until we can inspect it."

"Or ask Tub," Livi reminded us.

"We won't bother it now," I said. It was unimportant. "Are we ready to go in?" We stood looking down into the hole I had inadvertently created. It was nearer the rear of the vessel than the front.

Down we went, using our thrust tubes to slow our descent. Maybe not really necessary when dropping a short distance in low gravity, but it's best to be safe. "I can feel the element," Livi stated at once. "It's pulling me just slightly to one side."

"Careful you don't float away," I quipped. "Maybe you should hang onto Sven."

I think Sven didn't object to the idea. But he asked, "Forward or to the rear?"

"We're closer to the rear. Let's go look there first." Hatches were either open or easily made so. Nothing was likely to have corroded here. The loss of hull integrity was largely the result of erosion, the wind and abrading sand. Another century and the top of CX288 might have been gone entirely.

And then it would have filled with sand. The lower decks had already done so, our explorations suggested as we progressed, moving

closer to the rear and to the center axis. The hull must have ruptured on impact, allowing it to sift in.

Tub would have faded away, no power left, to never be discovered.

"What's with the ladders?" asked Livi. "They're at the wrong angle for the element's gravity."

I hadn't thought about it, but I believe the answer came to Sven and me simultaneously. "Acceleration," he said. "Its impact would be at right angles to the element." This he qualified with, "More or less."

"Deceleration, too," I tacked onto his analysis. "I wonder how they achieved it." But not enough to ask Tub. Again, it was the sort of question that could wait.

Eventually we made it to what I would dub the engine room; that is, where the reactor was housed. The plasma drive would lie somewhere beyond it. The pull of the jump element had decreased this far aft.

Sven needed to take only one look. "Fission. I expected fusion."

"The radiation levels should have been a giveaway," Livi pointed out.

To that, I added, "Also the fact that it is still operating. A fusion reactor would have run out of fuel long since."

We checked our meters for radiation levels. They were a bit high but nothing our suits couldn't handle. Said Sven, "I do not think it is operating at anything like its full capacity."

Running down. Inevitable. "We should probably be surprised it is working at all," I remarked.

Tub volunteered information. The first time for that, wasn't it? "I set it to minimum output. It seemed the proper action."

It might not have been certain of that. Hard to tell; the most advanced intelligences I knew had speech as nuanced as any human. "I am sure it was," I told it. "You had to keep the mission intact."

"Yes, Jack. I did."

A fair amount of the ubiquitous drab sand had sifted into the space. It was warm in here too, going by our readings, but the away suits maintained us at a steady temperature. Warmer than daytime on the surface above and much warmer than night.

"Hey, it's wet in here," noted Livi. "How is that possible?"

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I could think of possible answers. Undoubtedly, Sven could as well. There was no guarantee any of them would be right.

But Livi *was* right. The sand was damp, at least here and there. “Leaked out of something, I’d think,” she said when neither of us offered an explanation.

“The relative warmth in here could set off some sort of condensation cycle,” Sven speculated.

“A sealed system,” said Livi. “Until we opened some doors.”

They might be right. To me, it was one of the less interesting questions about this ship. “We’ve been inside long enough,” I announced. “We’d better get back upstairs and investigate further on another trip.”

I intended to make many more.

CHAPTER 3

“YOU CAN’T COME in,” M informed us. “Unidentified organic matter has been detected.”

“Living?”

“In some sense of the word, possibly. There are definitely nucleic acids. We are not equipped for further analysis.”

‘We,’ huh? M’s way of telling me I hadn’t held up my end, I suspected.

“Keep your helmets on and I will flood the lock with Bolox-Four.”

I didn’t even know we had any aboard. “The shuttle will have to be cleaned too, won’t it?”

“It will, when we return home. I would advise setting course at once.”

“As soon as I am decontaminated.”

“No, Jack. That would not be protocol. You must remain in the lock and Aleks will jump us back to Scotia.”

Which he could. Aleks Martín knew how to operate a Garda Drive. No, of course not as well as me. “Very well. Tell him I’m turning over command! Can you patch me into CX288 first?” My suit com wouldn’t reach Tub from here.

“Yes, Jack?” came the AI’s voice in my ear a few seconds later.

“We’ve hit a problem, Old Tub,” I told it. “Contamination protocols. I am sure you know about those.”

“Yes, sir. We have strict rules.”

“It means I won’t be able to come back down for a little while. I promise I will return and, um, help you complete your mission.”

“Very good, Jack. Should I go to sleep?”

“Yes, yes. Sleep would be a good idea. I’ll come and wake you with a kiss.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. That’s all.”

“I believe M’s better qualities are rubbing off on you,” Livi remarked.

“I should hope so,” said M. “Decontamination Step One complete.

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It is safe to remove your helmets and suits. I would suggest tossing them back into the shuttle and resealing the doors between you.”

“But we have to remain stuffed in this closet?” Sven asked.

“That is procedure. If we jump close to Scotia you can be out in as little as an hour.”*

And if we didn’t, possibly days. So it goes — the luck of the jump, as we say. One can never know where one will land, though it would be exceedingly rare to end up on the rim of a system, in its outer cloud of dust and ice. That is because a drive targets the gravity of a sun.

“We’re accelerating, aren’t we?” asked Livi. “Aleks is very smooth on the controls.”

Unlike me. I didn’t worry much about the comfort of any passengers, much less myself. “Comes from being gentle with his students,” I sniffed. “And there’s the jump.”

“I couldn’t feel it.”

That didn’t surprise me. “Are we close?” I asked anyone who might be listening.

“Close enough,” came Sacky’s too-cheerful voice. “I’m sending our information right now.”

If it were truly close, someone would have said so. Hours then, followed by who knows how long in quarantine. I sat myself down in one of the corners and took a nap.

Someone shook me. Livi Radia. “We’re there, Mister Jack Mack.”

“How long was it?” I slid up the wall to an erect position.

“About two hours,” came M’s voice.

“We are approaching the McFee industrial station above Blue,” Sacky added. “That’s where we were directed.”

They wouldn’t want an unknown biological contaminant anywhere near Scotia itself, nor even the base on its moon. Handing it over to our company was a logical move and this facility was the logical location.

That didn’t mean the place wouldn’t be swarming with military high-ups and government scientists shortly.

“Mind if I do the docking?” came Sacky’s voice again. “I should keep my hand in.”

“In case they put you back in a fighter someday? Be my guest but Group Force will get a bill if there’s any damage.”

“That attitude is why the McFees are so fabulously wealthy,” remarked Livi.

“And how about the Radas?” asked Sacky.

“Oh, we stole our money.”

I had to say, “Livi became a lawyer so she could steal more.” A barely perceptible bump told us we had docked. Probably M had done more to get us there than Sacky. “So we’re here. What’s next?”

It shouldn’t have surprised me that Kiska Mur took over the com. Her job was to take care of me, after all. “The shuttle is being detached, Boss, for separate analysis. I am told it may be destroyed or at least impounded indefinitely.”

“Damn,” I said, not too loudly. “I liked it.” The runner had begun life as a fighter in the late war, heavily customized for civil use. For *my* use.

“What about us? How much longer are we stuck in this lock?”

“A decontamination chamber is being moved into place. You are not supposed to reenter this ship.”

That, alas, made sense. So did the next thing Kiska said. “All is ready. Leave any clothing behind in the lock when you transfer.”

“Everything?” gulped Sven.

“Every stitch, Mister Riley.”

This did not bother Livi Radia and me. We’d seen each other nude before. No, no, only when swimming. I should invite Sven to a pool party sometime.

We did as instructed. I was polite and avoided looking the engineer’s direction. I can’t vouch for Livi.

Or for Sven, for that matter. Various lights were pointed at us. We were directed into shower stalls. All this by robots, to be sure; humans were wisely keeping walls between us and them. Blood was drawn.

“You seem to be clean,” some technician or another informed us over the com. “There will be a twelve hour quarantine just to be safe. There is food over there. Ask the bots for a meal.”

I *was* hungry. Shortly, the three of us — now in comfy robes — sat down to eat. “They will want to declare that site off-limits, you know,” said Sven, once we’d dulled the edge of our hunger. “The whole planet, maybe.”

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“Our families would fight that,” Livi told him. “We Radias will want out share in whatever is discovered.”

Both were undoubtedly right. “The only thing I know for sure,” I said, “is that I’ve no intention of abandoning Tub.”

Livi favored me — or my statement — with a smile. “You’ve always had a soft spot for AIs. I’ve never known anyone so polite to robots,” she said, in a bit of an aside to Sven.

“Maybe you’d like Resnovae,” he said, scooping up the last brownie. I’d had my eye on it. Too slow, Jack!

“I spent some time there.” Undercover. No need to mention that. These two knew I dabbled in espionage in my spare time. “They’ve gone too far in their reliance on robots. There needs to be a balance.”

“Scotia seems about right,” felt Livi.

I nodded my agreement. “But maybe headed the wrong direction. Young people are emigrating to new worlds as human jobs disappear.”

“You considered emigrating at one point, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, Livi. I expected to end up teaching at some university in the Corvan worlds.”

“Too late. Your family has their hooks in you now.”

“Anna and I could always run off to Thule. She’d get a security job to support me.”

“Sir Anna, right?” asked Sven.

“That’s the title. Thulean nobility since the queen knighted her.”

“You two were the best thing ever to happen to each other,” Livi told me. I was inclined to agree.

“Are there beds in here?” I asked our servbot.

*As mentioned in other Jack Mack stories, a Scotian hour is about twice the length of the ones we use.

CHAPTER 4

A GOOD REST was just what I needed. Napping in a cramped lock hardly counted.

No sooner had I awakened and sat up, than a familiar voice came over the com. "Things keep happening to you, don't they, Jack?"

"Good morning, Errol. Or whatever time of day it is. I'm honored you came all this way to visit."

"You I don't care so much about. I want to see that ship!"

"Oh, Sven can take care of all that engineering stuff."

"No doubt. In fact, I've recommended he be in charge. But I still intend to come along and offer my expertise."

"Fine with me as long as you remember who is in charge overall."

"Hmmp. Grandpa Jack should never have made you a director."

"I'm very lazy about it. Is Elsa with you?"

"She wouldn't miss it. Your big brother might even show up."

"Oh, tell him he may need to customize a new runner for me. They're making noises about keeping mine."

Another voice broke in. It might have been the technician who'd spoken to us earlier. "We are finding interesting compounds in it, Mister McFee. It would be best if it remained in permanent quarantine."

"How about my own ship? And me and my friends, for that matter?"

"Clean bill of health. We'll keep an eye on you for a while yet, though."

Good. I could put up with a great deal but losing M would be almost as bad as losing my wife. Things did happen to me, didn't they? That was probably because I went out looking for them. I hadn't recognized that once.

"We did detect a few molecules of exotic organics in your air lock. Quite inert, apparently thanks to your ship's AI. They've been filtered out now."

For further study, no doubt.

"Is that your cousin?" came a voice from behind me.

MISSION DELAYED

"It is, Miss Radia," answered Errol. "Can we expect you to stay involved? The Martíns must get back to their respective jobs."

"We could request Sacky be our liaison to the military," I suggested.

"I doubt she's interested."

Livi concurred. "And she's had enough of us for a while, I'm sure." Even if the two of them were close friends. Maybe Livi's closest friend.

"So," I asked, "has anyone figured out just what we brought back with us?"

The tech came back. Or doctor, more likely. "Analysis shows a hodgepodge of genetic material. Some of it human, possibly from more than one individual. Vegetables. Bacteria. Earthworms, even."

"But mutated, I would guess."

"Decidedly so. There wasn't much of it but most of what we found was stuck to your boots."

"The wet sand," stated Livi, before I could get it out.

"By the reactor. It would have been soaking up radiation there for centuries." And maintaining something akin to life.

Sven had risen by this time and wandered over to join us. "Will it be safe for us to go back?"

The question we all should have been asking. "That is not my call," was the doctor's answer. Errol said nothing, if he was still there.

Our isolation unit was not an integral part of the station but had its own separate docking structure, with no direct access either way. Now it was released and a couple tugs moved us in to couple up at a docking tube. They let us keep the robes, which I'm sure Sven appreciated.

I'd have been willing to stay in mine, in fact, but we were shortly to be reunited with our own clothes. Sacky and Aleks were no longer aboard my boat when we arrived. Kiska greeted us at the lock, giving our attire only a cursory glance. "The Martíns took a shuttle out," she reported, "after hearing that you were all right. There is to be a meeting sometime. No one seems to know when." Kiska Mur hated inefficiency.

M was more tolerant. "Your cousin says to come to the canteen and have a beer while you wait."

I could only shrug. "Might as well. I suppose they don't have any Thulean brew out here."

"You should try good Ursan ale, Boss," advised Kiska.

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

I was unlikely to find any of that either.

Not only Errol but his wife were seated in the low-ceilinged canteen. No need for introductions; my friends knew Elsa and she knew them. "You need to come visit Anna," I told her. "Ditch the old man." I nodded in Errol's direction.

"I'd be lost without her," he said. Errol still had it when it came to women. He'd had too much of it at times, but that has no bearing on this story.

She really should come and catch up with her friend. Friends before I met the either of them on Thule Station, before they got mixed up with Scotians and married them. Anna would make her work out too; Elsa was definitely putting on weight.

"Anna I can usually find," said Elsa, "but you never seem to stay home."

"Hmm, yeah." My wife had been head of security at Summit Up, Grandpa Jack's estate, for a few years now while I had officially been following academic pursuits. We both recognized it was not ideal. "Maybe we'll change that. Say, you," I called to a passing servbot. "What kind of beer do you have here?"

I can tell you I was disappointed with the selection. In time, we were informed there would be a meeting. A little aidie guided us to a crowded room. Scientists and historians, many from the universities on Scotia. Some I recognized. A number of IMPs. Important Military Persons, that is. Technical sorts. Others I couldn't peg.

My little find on a little planet had sure gotten a lot of attention. Attention from two camps: those who were interested in the historical find and those who were concerned about a threat of contamination. Their objectives were likely to be in opposition.

"Come in, Jack! You too, Errol. Sit up here beside me."

"You're in charge, Lou?" asked my cousin as we made our way toward the man, seated at a long, slightly-elevated ceramic table.

"I jumped at the assignment as soon as I heard about it," came General Aruna's reply. "I needed something interesting to do!" He shook my hand and gestured toward a chair directly to his right. I was to be the center of attention, it seemed. "Interesting things happen around you, Jack."

MISSION DELAYED

"I'd rather they didn't. Are we expecting anyone else?"

"This will do. Let's come to order, people," he called out. "Order. Shut up over there, Bruce!" The offender waved and took a seat.

"Better," said Lou, as some of the uproar settled into rather loud murmuring. "The immediate question we have to answer is this: who owns the site?"

I'd already given that some thought, and reached no definite answer at the time. I could legitimately claim the wreck was my discovery, acting as a private individual. But the ship in which I arrived was registered as belonging to the McFee Concern.

And then, company resources would be more than useful in exploring and excavating. I reached a decision now. "I forgo any personal claims in favor of the McFee Concern."

"And you can speak for them?" the general asked.

"He's a director," chimed in Errol, seated at my right hand.

So I was, at least for now. I'm not sure I should have let my grandfather talk me into it. But it did indeed let me speak for the company. At least until Grandpa Jack spoke otherwise.

"Of course we will give the military access," I stated. Within reason. I needn't add that aloud. "And serious researchers."

Errol looked amused by that. Yes, of course I'd be the one deciding who was serious. He fixed an eye on Livi, who'd taken a chair in the front row. "Will the Radias be willing to cooperate in this?"

"If Jack asks us nicely," she told him, to general laughter. Livi wasn't really authorized to make such decisions. It had been theater on my cousin's part. And a good idea to get the Radia name out there early.

"The second question then," announced General Aruna, "is whether it is safe."

The woman seated on Lou's other side remarked, her voice dry, her appearance deadpan, "That issue has resulted in heated debate among my colleagues. The consensus is that we don't know."

I had no idea who she was. Not the doctor I'd spoken with in isolation. Military, maybe? Whoever she was, Lou or someone else high up had named her to head up the biological side of things.

"We do think," she continued, "with strict precautions, study can go on. We want to know about this as much as anyone else."

OLIVER DAVIS PIKE

Maybe not the best argument in favor of poking around in the wreck, but I was willing to run with it. “So,” I said, “the job now is to put an expedition together. The sooner the better.”

CHAPTER 5

“THE RADIATION HAS caused a mutated something-or-other to grow,” said Evelyn McCord. “That’s the scientific term for it.” I was becoming accustomed to the doctor’s dry humor.

“Could it have fed off the radiation? We don’t know. Maybe something else! It could have grown from the crew’s bodies or other organic matter. We won’t know until we get a look, and maybe not then.”

“Not a close look,” I warned her. Then I pursued a thought that had been bouncing around in my head. I caught it this time. “The sand there is mostly carbon. Could it have been able to incorporate some of it?”

“You’re taking a leap in asking about abilities, Jack. It’s only a mix of organic materials, so far as we know at this point. Quite probably not life at all. Not in any meaningful sense.”

“Then it’s not going to grow a brain and begin shambling about?” asked Livi. “Count me as disappointed.”

Yes, Livi Radia was with us. No one was quite willing to tell her not to come.

We were the vanguard, returning in my W-16. I had no idea how many ships might follow. Not too many, I hoped. I wanted to keep this contained! Errol and Elsa and Sven would be coming in what should be the first, a medium-sized liner from the McFee Concern.

Which means considerably larger than my vessel. Along with Livi and the doctor and her assistant and, of course, Kiska Mur, I carried a couple cargo techs drafted from the Blue base. I needed people who could help me move things.

The little cargo loader I carried in place of my impounded shuttle would help with that, as well as get us up and down. “We’ll not attempt to contact CX288 until we go down to the surface,” I announced. “No point in waking it up before it’s necessary. I’m admittedly concerned about using up whatever energy reserves it has left.”

“Getting Tub out is really your priority, isn’t it?” asked Livi.

“The AI is the most valuable thing down there.”

“To you,” said the doctor.

To me. And I was the one in charge! “What I want to begin,” I said, mostly to my pair of techs, “is mapping out the AI’s connections.”

“So we pretty much have to map out all the control section,” said one.

“Pretty much,” I agreed. “But not now. I’ll take Doctor McCord down first to look things over.” Maybe begin ferrying some needed equipment too. More of that would be coming with Errol.

“Doctor Eashy, too?” asked Evelyn.

“Uh-huh. Best to let you get a look at things together.”

Bob Eashy wasn’t the one I had spoken to over com either. That must have been someone on staff at the station. These two came from Halifax Academy, Scotia’s premiere university.

“And I’m taking Mur as an extra safety measure. You’ll have to wait to say hello to Tub, Livi.”

“And dodge monsters.” She wasn’t going to let go of that.

Until we had more feet on the ground or sand or whatever it was, I might include Kiska Mur in every trip I made. “Did you check the equipment I wanted?” I asked my cargo techs.

“Yes, sir,” reported one. I’d have to get their names straight eventually. “There was room for much more.”

“But only us to unload it. Let’s go.”

The four of us donned away suits and headed for the lock. The loader might have large cargo doors, but we still had to use the relatively small passageway built into my ship. I had made certain to have a few of the more cumbersome tools we might need stowed in the smaller craft before we left the station. The machine was designed to readily handle the gravity of Blue, which was somewhat greater than this planet, so there should be no problems in that quarter.

Dwarf planet, I should say. I’d checked the records and that was its official classification. It had never been named, only assigned a number. Maybe I should name it myself. Tub’s Planet? No, Kee’s Planet, after the long deceased captain of CX288. I could make an official suggestion. I could also start using it in my reports.

A few minutes later we had parted ways with the ship and were descending to the planet surface. Kee’s planet, that is. “This isn’t a bad little boat,” I remarked. “Maybe I should steal it.”

MISSION DELAYED

"You would want it customized, Boss," said Kiska.

"True." More powerful engines, at the least. "It can handle very precisely at low speed. As any loader should." But I'd miss the high-speed maneuverability of my previous shuttle.

We set down in a cloud of drab dust, at the same spot as my previous two visits. I'd left a marker for myself. "I want to start unloading first," I told my passengers. "Don't approach the site without me."

It shouldn't have been necessary to say that but one should never over-estimate people's common sense. Even college professors. "As far as I can determine," I went on, "it should be safe to leave equipment in the open. Shelters no doubt will be brought down later on."

"But not for habitation," said Eashy. He didn't sound completely sure.

"Unlikely. We'll all go out together." As before. The air lock was a tad more commodious than in my runner, but still tight for four bodies.

"I'm going to check on CX288 first," I said. "Tub, can you hear me?"

No answer. "Doesn't seem to be awake. Have you made contact, M?"

"I have not. It may not activate until its sensors detect something moving inside the hull."

"You have a way of making sense, M. Let's get busy unloading."

"So you only brought us down as labor, Doctor McFee?"

"How else will you pay your passage, Doctor McCord?"

The main thing was to get the hauler out of the hold. This was in essence a truncated air car. It could be ridden if necessary but it served mainly to move things around. The rear cargo door contracted, opening the way to a modest storage compartment. That had been kept in vacuum for this trip, though it could be pressurized. Maybe if I needed to haul lots of humans.

Kiska got the machine started and guided it out of the hold.

"Sure kicks up a lot of dust," commented McCord.

I nodded. "That's surprising. Thrust tubes don't do that." Not in my experience.

"It's the movement of the cart itself," stated Doctor Eashy, in decid-

edly authoritative tones. "This fine ash responds to almost any disturbance of air, thin though it is."

Kiska was immediately alert to possible danger. "Would there be dust storms?"

"I do not think this planet provides the environment for them to develop."

Neither did I, but I said, "Best to be cautious anyway."

"Always," agreed my aide. "Should we unload the rest?"

"No. let's go exploring."

I guided them around the perimeter we had mapped out, noting the changes in gravity and density. "It would appear that the reactor and engines and storage tanks for the gas took up a large part of the interior. Without them, it might have been no larger than my ship."

"Engines?" asked Doctor Eashy. "More than one?"

"Hard to say without digging them out but our sensor data suggests three nozzles."

"There would have been maneuvering units too, wouldn't there?" Kiska asked. "And some way to brake."

"I suspect they flipped the ship to slow down." I'd given it some thought in my spare time. Yes, and Elsa had suggested it. She had more knowledge of actual practical engineering than her husband. Errol tended to be a theory person.

And I, admittedly, have made it a point to remain ignorant.

I issued the usual warnings about watching their steps and, one by one, we dropped into the ship.

"I'm back Tub," I announced.

"Jack. Did I sleep long?"

"A couple days. We hope to stay now."

There was a longer pause than I had expected. "But I can not stay Jack. We must finish our mission."

"And we will help you, Old Tub."

CHAPTER 6

I ESCORTED THE two scientists only as far as the entry to the reactor room. “We’ll need to set safety procedures before we allow access,” I told them. Whether they liked it or not, they surely understood. The hatch was securely closed before we left.

“At least we got a peek before anyone else shows up,” reasoned Doctor McCord. She did not sound overly enthusiastic about it.

More than a peek. The pair had pointed all sorts of devices into the chamber before I could get them to leave. It had all looked much the same as on the previous visit.

I felt it best to return by the route we had come. The core of the ship and its jump element could be investigated later. The vessel was indeed, as Sven Riley had described it, egg-shaped. The engines were at the narrower — pointier? — end and the crew had lived and worked in the more bulbous front. I wanted to get at least a quick look at that area.

“We’re walking on the walls,” commented Kiska as we made our way forward.

So we were. The floors here had become perpendicular to the axis of the ship. “This section is ahead of the jump element. Everything is arranged to accommodate its gravity.” Which could be felt, as elsewhere in the ship, but was less than that of Kee’s Planet.

“And to deal with acceleration too,” Eashy pointed out.

Yes, just as those ladders Livi had noted. Between the element’s pull and acceleration’s push, it might have been a reasonably comfortable environment. At times.

Reversing the ship must have resulted in a bit of seasickness. Dealing with the gravity in here was having something of that effect on us. Between hanging onto ladders and the occasional judicious use of our thrust tubes we eventually made it to what was surely the control room.

Eashy pointed a device at a bit of shapeless debris on the floor. Or the wall, more properly, on which we were standing. “A crew member,” he said, after looking over the readings. “Totally inert. No danger here.”

“Tub,” I asked, “how many crew did, um, do you carry?”

“Five, Jack. Shall I list them for you?”

“Later.” I would want to know that eventually. The names should not remain lost to history.

“At least one died in the reactor room,” said Evelyn McCord. “The DNA tells us that.”

“Not necessarily,” Eashy replied. “There are other ways it could have gotten there.”

“True enough. But likely.”

He seemed willing to agree with that, or at least not argue the point.

“I suspect the rest were strapped in right in this room,” I said. We were sideways to their seats so it was not practical to check right then. “Definite damage to the instruments.”

Which was an understatement. Smashed would have been a better description. The AI’s central brain must be elsewhere but it had been effectively blinded by the damage of the crash.

I was surprised Tub was functioning at all, to be honest.

Both doctors were busy checking readings. “I would think,” spoke McCord, “that this section and its atmosphere remained intact for quite some time. Centuries perhaps.”

Eashy agreed. “Otherwise we might have mummies rather than disintegrated bits of organic matter.”

But the air inevitably seeped out in time. Or there might be other hull breeches of which we were unaware.

“We aren’t going to get anything operational in here,” I decided. “Maybe someone more knowledgeable could salvage some of it. Let’s get back to the surface and finish unloading.”

And then to the ship. I’d bring down my technicians next time. “M, have you been able to monitor?”

“Yes, Jack, but your signal was weak at times.”

“Near the reactor?”

“There, and when you passed closest to the jump element.”

“That element is going to be our biggest problem, I fear.”

“Unless that monster I warned you about shows up,” Livi broke in.

“We locked the door so it can’t get out,” I assured her. “Should be headed your way within the hour.”

We made our way back to the surface through the same now-familiar hole. New access points would have to be created when things got busy.

MISSION DELAYED

I noted that a fair amount of the fine ash-sand had already filtered in. That would have to be dealt with as well. Some sort of covers for our entryways.

By the time we reached our ship another had shown up to orbit Kee's Planet — a Planetary Guard cruiser stationed in the Bannock system. "Our orders are to keep unauthorized ships away," its skipper informed me.

His orders undoubtedly went further. They might include destroying the site, if it became necessary. A warship of that sort carried plenty enough firepower.

"Do you have any word on when the scientific expedition might arrive?" I asked him.

"Only that a jump ship is being readied and its personnel assembled. All sorts, I'm told."

Indeed. I hoped there were plenty of practical engineers and technicians included to do the actual work.

"We'll go back down shortly and begin mapping," I told my little crew. "No point in letting newcomers get the credit."

CHAPTER 7

THERE HAD BEEN no objections from M on returning to the ship this time. We would continue to be on the lookout for contaminants and issue warnings to everyone who went down. And issue them again every time we thought of it. The cruiser intended to send a shuttle down to meet us at the site. I'd impress it on them too.

With a boatload of Guardsmen, Mur became unnecessary. I hoped. The techs and Livi would accompany me on this trip. My biologists could fill their time on the ship going over whatever data they had collected.

"The military beat us," I noted as I set down. "They'd better not have gone poking around."

"Power makes you grumpy," remarked Livi.

"Responsibility does." She and everyone else who knew me was aware of that.

One of the Guards gave me a snappy salute as we emerged. As snappy as possible while wearing an away suit. There was no indication of his rank. "Ensign Jonathon Beers reporting, sir. My men are at your disposal, Lieutenant Commander."

That wouldn't do. My military career was far behind me and I hadn't paid much attention to protocol even then. "It would be best for you and your Guardsmen to address me as Doctor McFee. We won't confuse the civilians that way."

"Very well, Doctor. We're Marines, sir, not Guardsmen."

"I'll remember that, Mister Beers." Yes, badges on the arms of their dark blue suits identified them. No weapons were visible but that didn't mean they weren't carrying them.

I thought it best not mention my father had been a Ranger, their counterparts and rivals in Group Force. Two men were in the open. There might be one or two more in the shuttle. It wasn't very big.

"I'd give you the tour but we intend to be extremely busy working inside the hull. We would ask you to remain out here. Has the perimeter we marked out been transferred to your coms?"

"It has, sir. We've been told it would be dangerous to enter it."

MISSION DELAYED

“You may, with caution, but there’s little reason to. Now, should I leave Miss Radia out here to entertain you?”

“Or entertain me?” asked Livi. “I could show you around the site, if Jack intends to abandon you.”

“Thank you, Miss.”

So I and my pair of techs went in and Livi stayed out. I suspected she and the marines would both grew bored rather quickly. There was too much of interest in the interior for that to happen to us. We went forward at once and began tracing circuits and conduits, figuring out what connected to what. Damage aft of the control room was not so bad, making the task easier there.

Except for finding a secure place to stand! “Everything seems to connect into that area,” said Billy, pointing. Or maybe it was Jock. “Does the AI have any schematics we can see?”

“I would suspect it does but no way to show them. The screens are dead in control.”

“Could it transfer them to our coms?”

“How about it, Tub? Could you send us plans of CX288?”

“I —” The pause was surprisingly long. “I don’t know how, Jack. I could tell you where things are, if you wish.”

“Quite all right. We may ask that of you.” But we needed to establish some reference point. Not so easy in these jumbled rooms and with Tub essentially blind.

“One thing we need to do,” I told it, “is see if you suffered any damage in the landing.” I had decided to avoid words like crash or wreck.

The AI’s response took an unexpected direction. “I sometimes run through my data to see whether I was responsible. I can not find any evidence but I could be missing something.”

Reassuring Tub would do no good. “We’ll run a full diagnostic when we get you back to our base. If there are any problems, we’ll find them.”

“Will you repair them, Jack? I want to work properly.”

“Certainly, Tub.” That could have been a fib. There was no telling whether anything could be fixed or even if it could be transferred at all.

Tub was trying to make sense of it all. Rather human of it, I would

say. The AI had far too much empty time over the centuries to, well, worry, I guess. Even if that word is totally inaccurate.

"Tub," spoke Billy, "I am standing at the starboard hatch to the central control room. What lies directly aft of me?"

"Three point four-eight-two meters of open space."

"Metrics? I guess I should have known they still used them back then. Do you two know how to convert them?" I asked.

"Our devices do," answered Jock. Billy nodded in agreement.

"Remember they used a decimal system of numbers, too," I reminded them. Not the sensible base-twelve we employed.

"How'd they manage to get anything done?" wondered Billy.

I might have asked how we would get anything done but, somewhat to my astonishment, we had at least this space mapped out pretty well before we quit.

And we pretty much knew where most of Tub lived.

"The boys have been doing a geological survey to kill the time," Livi informed me as we emerged from the hull and headed their direction.

"And girls, ma'am," one of them told her. It was not easy to tell in away suits.

"Standard bit of work for an advance party, sir," explained the ensign. He sounded slightly apologetic about it. Maybe he felt he had overstepped some boundary or another.

"Anything interesting?"

"Not particularly. Much of the sand is elemental carbon. Graphite, but with a mix of other compounds, some containing sulfur or oxygen and quite a bit of nitrogen. Lots of nitrogen and sulfur in the atmosphere, too, such as it is. Some methane, too."

I already know some about the atmosphere. We'd analyzed that before I first stepped on the planet's surface.

"One thing there is not," he continued, "is free water. I doubt there is even ice at the poles."

Someone else chimed in. "Might be liquid methane though, sir."

"Which is irrelevant. We thank Miss Radia for her assistance."

"I held things," she claimed.

"And lent us your hauler."

MISSION DELAYED

Probably insisted on driving it. “We are going to head up to our ship. I would recommend you do the same.”

“We will, Doctor. By the way, the expedition ship has arrived. Under the command of your cousin, I believe.”

“You are mistaken, Ensign. It is under my command.”

CHAPTER 8

“WHO IS THIS young fellow who’s running things? Connected in some way, I suppose.”

I could imagine the grumbling researcher even if I couldn’t see him. It’s wrong to eavesdrop but sometimes hard to resist, and these three didn’t realize I was in range of their coms.

A woman answered him. “He has right of discovery, I’ve heard.”

“You heard right,” came a third voice. “But he knows what he’s doing. He’s Doctor Jack McFee, who wrote the definitive study of the first Roman Catholic colonies.”

Ah, someone to defend my honor.

“Oh, of course, of course. Nothing since, though? I haven’t seen his name recently.”

“Shifted his focus to current politics, I understand.” That was the woman again. I thought I knew her. In fact, chances were I’d met all three at some point.

“Yes, there was a well-regarded monograph on the Ursan situation.”

If only they’d known how many times I was shot at during my research. If one is willing to name it such.

I allowed them to move on to another topic — the terrible food — before continuing down the passageway to make my presence known.

“Ah, Doctors. Finding anything of interest down this way?”

“Doctor McFee. We’ve been making a preliminary survey of the crew quarters.”

“What appear to be the crew quarters. Don’t jump to conclusions, Mickel.”

“I don’t know what else they could be.”

“Chicken coops?” I asked. The joke did not go over. “As good a place to start as any and better than some. I suppose you’re also deciding how to divide up your research.”

“Well, yes.”

“I’ll leave that entirely to you. I’m not interested in taking all the credit here, nor even much of it. Lots of room for you and your assistants and anyone else to pursue whatever aspects of the site you find interesting. But the AI in this ship is mine.”

MISSION DELAYED

If it sounded like a warning that's because it was. They knew I could bar any one of them.

"Certainly, Doctor."

"Call me Jack." With that I left them and continued aft, my original destination. They claimed to have news I should hear. I just wanted to get back to disconnecting and moving Tub.

I might claim I was in charge but I was leaving the everyday administration to others. Sven Riley, in particular, and Livi Radia was proving rather helpful to him. The McFee-Alanders, Errol and Elsa, had immersed themselves in the hands-on aspects of the work. That entailed slowly dismantling what could be dismantled, and preparing it for transport.

There was some debate over whether it should go to Bannock or be jumped to Scotia. I personally favored the first, for most of it, but had decided to let others work it out. Maybe the Concern could endow a museum on Bannock. I'd have to bring up the idea at a board meeting. I had been known to attend.

The interior of the rear of the ship was off limits for now, except to the biological researchers, and they were to stick to the strictest of safety protocols. Many of those working there were not entering the reactor room at all, but had set up outside it. That included Doctors McCord and Eashly, who had assistants now. I'm not sure how many. These wore not away suits but the full work suits used in the vacuum of space, more akin to armor. They were pretty anonymous when they were suited up.

McCord jumped right into it when I appeared. "We think you were right about the compound being able to incorporate the carbon sand, Jack. Some small quantities of it have drifted into the room, most likely from a breach near the engines."

The biologists had taken to referring to it by that name, 'compound.' No worse than another.

"But that seems only a very tiny percentage of the compound's mass. We suspect it is not easily assimilated. Even over centuries."

"Pure graphite? I'm not surprised."

"No, of course you aren't. Of course. We have also figured out a small garden was somewhat near the reactor, both to provide a few

fresh vegetables and for research. That explains some of the DNA we found.”

“Radishes,” explained Eashly.

“Yes. The earthworms, too, and nematodes and bacteria. Almost certainly only one human.”

“Maybe the engineer,” I guessed.

“Was the engineer a woman?”

I nodded. “That matches. They have done more direct research on the compound back at Blue than we have.”

Smaller courier jump ships had been carrying information and the occasional researcher back and forth. “They found no photosynthesis capability. That does not rule out deriving energy from light in some other way.”

“They haven’t nearly as large a sample as you.”

“They didn’t,” she said, and gave her colleague a sidelong look.

“They’ve made it grow.”

“Yes. Water did the trick.”

“At first,” said Doctor Eashly.

“Without a source of energy it only expanded briefly before, apparently, using up its reserves and dying. Which is not to say it was ever alive.”

“Radiation might have kept it going. No one was willing to try that.”

Good for them. “I wouldn’t have. So the Blue sample is now inert?”

“Not only inert but destroyed. The compound exists only here now.”

I slowly nodded. “Is it worth continued study?”

“We would like to figure out just exactly what it is,” said Doctor Eashly. “It is decidedly unique.”

“I have people who would like to look at the engines. The reactor as well.” They would have to do so on site. There was no way we were going to lift those.

McCord disapproved with unusual vehemence. “I am *not* willing to certify it safe. Not without further study.”

“Very well. By the way, have you figured out the source of the moisture in the reactor space?”

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“We have theories,” was all Eashly seemed ready to say. “There were water tanks for the crew and the garden but they seem to have gone dry long since.”

“Which doesn’t mean the moisture couldn’t have persisted in a sealed environment, does it?” I asked.

McCord waved a hand. “Not our field of expertise, Jack. You’ll have to send us an engineer.”

“But you weren’t willing to certify it safe,” I reminded her.

“Oh, don’t pay any attention to us!”

CHAPTER 9

THE TOP OF the ship was laid open in several places, both for access and safety. Hull integrity had been poorest near the center, where the bulging waistline was most exposed to natural forces. They would have opened it up in another century or so without us.

The academic members of our expedition hurried to keep ahead of the engineering faction's disassembly of the wreck. I left most of the complaints to Sven to handle. He handed them over to Livi Radia, who was better equipped than most of us for that sort of thing. I should have given her an official title and position.

But my attention was not on that sort of thing. "Can you sense this, Tub?" I asked, as I threw a relay switch.

"There is a visual," it replied, "but it contains no information."

Ah. "Have you made a note of that?"

"I have, Boss," replied Kiska. "We've found Tub's eyes?"

"One of them, at least. Linked to a nonfunctioning camera, I would guess. We can label and disconnect it."

One by one, we had been discovering such connections, as we explored Tub's network. I knew transplanting the AI would prove a difficult task. It was a good thing I wasn't an engineer or I might have recognized just how difficult and given up.

"You were connected to the robots on board, weren't you, Tub?"

"I was, Jack. They were autonomous units but would follow my instructions."

"We've found one." And had already transported it. "Can you tell me how many there were in total?"

"Ninety-three."

"That's a lot," felt Kiska Mur.

"I assume you are including little floor scrubbers and such," I said.

"Yes. They are all robots, aren't they?"

"Indeed they are, Tub. Why don't you list them all and Kiska can record them. Duty calls me elsewhere."

"You can ignore it when it calls," commented Kiska.

That I could, and sometimes did. Right now, Sven and Errol had asked me to meet them aft. Probably some business they could have

MISSION DELAYED

handled themselves but important enough to keep me in the loop. I could get back to Tub. After a run up to the ship for rest and food and fresh oxygen. One can spend only so much time in an away suit, after all.

Tub. The bulk of its capacities would have been utilized for the operation of the ship. Little true artificial intelligence would be required for most of that. I estimated its abilities were on the level of one of our more advanced agricultural bots. Not at all comparable to the most powerful AIs I knew — House, back at my childhood home, Steward at Summit Up, and, of course, M.

M was a bit of a marvel. The Corvans had turned out others of his series but none had demonstrated his breakthrough capabilities. Bonding with me might or might not have had any bearing on it. Naturally, I like to think so! It's not necessarily that he was smarter — if I might use that word — than House or similar AIs, but that he managed to match them in a much smaller package and had achieved it much more quickly.

Scientists have dreamed of stuffing such an intelligence into a human-sized package but no one has come close.

My biologists — yes, I call them mine — were in their makeshift lab when I arrived. Two figures in white work suits emerged from the decontamination chamber that had been set up in there. They moved stiffly in our direction. Work suits are pretty rigid. One can't even nod ones head. Well, one could but no one would see it.

A couple of the research assistants? No. Errol greeted me. Chances were Sven was in the other suit.

"We've been exploring far aft," he said. "As far aft as we can. It's a jumble of broken ship back there. If we want a closer look at the engines, we'll have to dig down to them outside."

"They may have partially broken loose," Sven added. "We have discovered the source of your moisture. Not water at all. Or not wholly. Ammonia used to create the plasma for the engines."

"While doubling as part of the coolant system for the reactor. A very neat solution," felt Errol.

"For the time. I'd love to see a hydrogen-helium ion drive with a fusion reactor from the period."

"We'll have to find another wreck for you," I told him. "Maybe one of the generational ships launched before the jump drive was perfected."

"Some may still be traveling out there, somewhere," said Errol. I think each of us took a moment to imagine that possibility. Three dreamers, temporarily united. "Anyway, the system is actually still intact after all this time but a little seepage was to be expected. Very little, but occurring over a very long time."

"Mixed with condensation from whatever moisture was in the air in here."

"As many times as the reactor room has been opened and closed now, any balance that existed may be permanently upset," I said.

"Possibly," admitted Doctor McCord. "We'd assumed the ammonia content was a by-product of whatever processes were going on in the compound. We'll have to rethink that."

"We were inclined to ascribe it to the nematode component," said Bob Eashy.

Errol remarked, "It basically looks like wet sand." He might not have been back here to see it before.

"It can't actually move, We think, simply expand," Eashy told him. "Despite Miss Radia's apprehensions."

Some apprehension was healthy, I thought.

"The real question, for us, is how it absorbs the radiation it lives on."

"If it does live," I reminded McCord. And everyone else.

"Point taken, Jack. Genetically, it *is* closer to a nematode than anything else. Just possibly it could be a very devolved and mutated form that has lost most of the functions of its ancestors."

"Or even an organic muck filled with microscopic nematodes," said Eashy. From the look his colleague gave him, I don't think she took the idea seriously.

"That's a worm, right? My brother talks about that kind of thing." I heard Errol snicker.

"Ah, yes. He's turned himself into an ecological expert of sorts, hasn't he?" Was there a trace of condescension in McCord's voice? Or even more than a trace?

MISSION DELAYED

Errol informed her, “Brendon prefers to think of himself as a gentleman farmer.”

Doctor Eashly jumped into the short pause, bringing us back to our topic. “It’s a variety of roundworm. Or many varieties of roundworms, I should say. They can be found pretty much everywhere mankind has gone.”

“Like mice?” Our little companions as we explored the galaxy.

“Even more so. There are likely to be a few in your bowels right now.”

A few minutes later Kiska and I were riding up to the ship, with me at the controls. Not that Mur couldn’t serve as pilot, if necessary. She was a woman of quite a few talents. Billy and Jock rode with us.

The cargo techs were now engaged in their proper roles, packing stuff to move elsewhere. My stuff, I should say, whatever items I valued enough to go into the external cargo pod on my ship.

I wasn’t willing to let everything go to a museum on Bannock.

CHAPTER 10

MY PERSONAL 16B was powered by a pair of fourteen-tube Series B Riley drives, the largest engines we manufactured. Yes, that's Riley as in Sven; his uncle Olaf had designed them, as well as taking the lead on the entire W series of space craft.

Sven might not have the genius of his relative but he was still one of the best engineers I knew. Knowing engineers was an inevitable consequence of being a McFee.

I was explaining my hurry to him. "Tub has used up so much energy in reawakening and broadcasting that I fear it is near the end of operation. That is why I would rather get it up now than come back later."

Sven considered that. "It's quite spread out but much of that is nonessential. Still, it's a lot to bring up."

That it was. "I'd rather dismantle it as little as possible. There's too much danger of damaging something irreparably."

We were too far away from the wreck to use a focused gravity field — what some call a 'tractor beam.' Definitely not with my ship, despite its powerful engines. The larger expedition vessel might be able to pull it off.

A big military ship would be even better, if we could get someone in command to lend us one. Nah, between the ultra-heavy element in CX288 and the gravity of Kee's World, even that probably wouldn't work.

"You intend to stay until you get that AI off the surface, don't you?" he asked.

"I do. Then — I'm not quite sure what to do with it."

"Install it in another ship," he suggested. "That's its natural environment, so to speak."

"How about our old ship?" M broke in. "It's still sitting in dock."

Sven nodded. "The 6C could be perfect. Just the setting to study your Tub in."

I wished M was ambulatory and could come down to the surface to assist me, rather than up here in orbit. He could definitely help with Tub's transfer to a new ship. If it were possible to get it away in one piece.

MISSION DELAYED

I rose and announced, "I'm ready to head back down. We've left Livi in charge too long."

"We could probably leave her indefinitely."

No doubt. "You like her, don't you?"

"Um, yes. I mean I guess so and we get along pretty well and, um — do you think she likes me?" he blurted.

"If she didn't, she would have told you."

"Oh, I know that. But, well, there's liking and there's liking, you know?"

"Yes, Sven, I think she likes you both ways."

He looked a tad doubtful. Trust me, Sven! "But we're so different. She's sophisticated."

And rather wealthy, though not exceptionally so. Livi was not that near the center of the Radia family power structure. "Her family sent her to the best schools. Just like mine. Maybe for much the same reasons."

"Oh? Errol told me your parents had a diplomatic career in mind."

"My cousin has been gossiping? A different sort of diplomacy, maybe, as a lawyer."

"And neither one of you has ended up quite as intended."

"True. Anjalivi Radia might even end up attached to an engineer."

Sven wasn't willing to comment on that idea. As we and Kiska squeezed into the lock, he finally said, "You'll probably have to transport Tub on the expedition ship."

"That would be most practical. I'm particularly concerned about it having no power source, even if not very long."

"That's what we need to work out then," he said. We transferred to the shuttle. I took the controls and sent us toward the surface.

Sven's mind remained on the project. "Matching the electrical systems is the thing," he stated. "Then Tub could draw power from either ship. Or even this shuttle, for a little while. It would only be vulnerable when we switched from one to the other."

Even if Tub was asleep. The only alternative would be to shut it down entirely and that had its own risks. "Set someone to work on it, will you?" I asked. "I know Livi will keep you too busy to do it yourself."

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He had no answer for that but I am positive Kiska allowed herself a barely audible snicker.

I went on. "There is other machinery on the downed ship we will want to power up in time."

"But not as much of a priority as Tub. We could experiment with one of the robots."

More of those had been located, in part thanks to Tub's list. "Good idea. They have some sort of batteries, don't they? Coming in to land." That last was for the folks at the site.

"They do. None self-powered, it seems."

Many of the robots with which we were familiar had tiny gravity engines of some sort built in. Their power lasted pretty much forever, or at least longer than the machines themselves. They worked on much the same principles as those tractor beams I mentioned. Focused gravity.

For smaller house bots, however, batteries remained practical. Damn, I was getting tired of this away suit. In theory, all I needed was a respirator, though I might want a parka too! We tended to forget it was rather cold outside our protective garments.

Too cold and inhospitable to try to stay down here. A few shelters had been erected, for work or for storage, but not habitation. One belonged to the Guard cruiser that orbited overhead. A few Marines or Guardsmen came and went, occasionally conducting their own scientific tests. Maybe trying to assess any military value of Kee's Planet.

Some, I think, just wanted to get a look at the place. Curiosity drew them but discipline kept them from getting too close. "Ensign Beers. They sent you down again?"

"In rotation, Doctor McFee. It was our turn."

Made sense. "Have you been inside yet? I could give you a tour, if it is permitted."

"Orders say to stay topside, sir."

Too bad. If one must have duty it should at least be interesting. "Unless there is an emergency, I assume."

"I am to act at my own discretion then, Doctor."

"Let's hope you don't have the need. This is my aide, Kiska Mur."

His eyes may have widened a tad at the Ursan name, not that such

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names aren't found throughout inhabited space. People travel, people mix. Old cultures become new ones. "Miss Mur."

We walked together over to the closest entry to the wreckage.

"Sir," spoke Beers, "just how do you suppose this ship ended up here?"

"As a guess," I answered, "and purely a guess, I think they might have simply landed too close to the planet on their last jump and couldn't avoid a collision. That is almost never a problem these days with highly maneuverable ships and control systems able to make decisions much more quickly than any human."

And that might be why Tub wondered if it could have been responsible. I won't argue whether 'wondered' is the right word. It's close enough.

"And it was twelve hundred years ago?"

"Between eleven and twelve, I would estimate. When humans were first seeking beyond what we call the Old Worlds now. We're not that far from Earth here, you know." Not compared to some of the colonies out there. "If they'd made it home, Scotia might have been colonized much earlier."

"The doctor has written books about such things," Kiska informed him. "He is much more brainy than he looks."

"Indeed. Don't be fooled by my pretty face."

"Uh, yes, sir. I'll get back to my men," he said, wheeling about and bounding their direction.

"And his women," said Kiska. "They look nice but who can tell in these suits?"

"I'm afraid you're unlikely to find out, my dear Miss Mur." I peered toward the rear of the buried ship. "They've begun excavating around the engines. Errol, most likely."

Kiska only gave the work a glance. We dropped into the hole rather than fooling with the ladder and immediately headed for Tub.

"We're getting close, Tub," I told it. "Almost ready for the big move."

The AI did not seem to care about that. "Did someone turn off the Orlova Drive, Jack?"

The drive had been pulled out and transported to my own ship

hours earlier. We had found that Tub had several connections to it. We assumed for monitoring rather than control.

“We moved it, Tub, so you can be hooked back up later.”

“And resume the mission.”

“That’s the idea.” Sort of. We needn’t connect Tub to the same drive. Maybe something more up-to-date, in an up-to-date ship. The drive is the control for our jumps. Its targeting mechanism, one might say. Our ancestors on Earth discovered how to jump quite some time before they learned how to aim at another star! Who is to say where some of the early blind jumps ended up? They could have landed anywhere in an exceptionally large universe.

Like the early generational ships, not a one had ever been found.

“Want to hang around, Kiska? You could go visit the biologists if you’d prefer.”

“Thanks, Boss.” Her face betrayed nothing. That was Kiska Mur for you. But she did somewhat hurry toward the aft sections.

Half an hour of work followed. I only know how much because I looked at the records later. I was too absorbed to count minutes at the time. To be sure, I did not do that much of the physical work. I’d just get in the way of the techs and engineers.

But I talked to Tub through it all, checking its well-being, what it sensed as we turned things on or off, or removed them entirely. One team was setting up a temporary power supply, for switching over when we were ready for transport.

A loud thump reverberated through the metal. A slightly less ominous pop followed it.

“Did we launch and land again, Jack? We must have come down hard.”

“No, Tub. Maybe something hit us.”

“My outside sensors are inoperative. I can not see what happened.”

“I’ll go look.”

Not that I needed to. My com had come alive. “We’ve had an accident at Dig Site One,” someone said. “Everyone in the aft sections should evacuate.”

I got on immediately. “This is Jack McFee. Everyone anywhere in the

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ship evacuate at once.” Except for me. I hurried on toward the reactor room.

There was a slight mist in the air. I pulled out my meter to analyze it as I moved along. Ammonia. Not much of it.

It took no great leaps to figure out where it came from. The mist began to change to a fog. Something dripped from the walls here and there, colorless and clear. I rushed into the biology lab. A small pool had formed in one corner, where the off-kilter gravity had directed it.

Several figures, in both work suits and away suits huddled near the entry. “Why are you still here?” I yelled. Not that there is much point in yelling over a com.

“Kiska is still in there,” said Evelyn McCord, pointing toward the reactor room. “Bob, too.”

I was torn between herding them out of the place or going into the reactor room myself. I chose the latter but not before yelling — yes, again — “Get out!”

I couldn’t see a damn thing in there. “Kiska!”

“Here, Boss. We’re helping the techs to the exit. They were kind of knocked around.”

“How many are in there, McCord?”

“Three were working.”

“We’ve only found two,” came Eashly’s voice.

I waded in. Yes, waded. Liquid was sloshing around my ankles. “Can you see the entryway, Eashly?”

“I can, Jack.”

“Lead that pair out, if they can walk. Mur and I will find the other one.”

“Follow me,” I heard him say. I guess they *could* walk. I swept the space with the device in my hand. There? No, that was interference from the reactor. And that was Kiska. I could barely make out her form visually.

“Over there,” I heard her call, and a narrow beam pointed into a far corner. Leave it to Kiska to have a hideaway beam weapon somewhere on her. Of course, I had one too. We both arrived about the same time. “Down and out,” she said. “Drag him, Boss?”

“One leg each. Where’s the damned doorway?”

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That was not a rhetorical question. I was asking my com. "Twenty-two degrees to your left," it told me. I was grateful we had bothered to map out the place.

"Now get the hatch shut!" I ordered, as soon as we made it into the lab. The flow of the ammonia did not hamper that operation. It had noticeably lessened. A few seconds later, a troop of Marines greeted us. Just a tad late, Ensign Beers, but I'm glad you acted on your own discretion.

"We'll all have to decontaminate," he told us as we made our way outside. A couple Marines carried our downed scientist. "Already being set up."

But there had been little damage to the ship's structure, other than the collapse of a few thin spots on the top of the hull. Everyone accounted for, not one injury reported, other than ours. Which proved to be a concussion.

Now I could worry about Tub.

CHAPTER 11

"THE ENGINE SEPARATED when we dug around it, and tore up the supporting structure," explained Errol. If he felt any chagrin he didn't show it. "At least one of the ammonia tanks ruptured."

One of the machine operators expanded. "The stuff was pressurized. It really shot out of there, like opening a champagne bottle."

I nodded. "I heard it go."

"Mostly it shot outside but some went into the interior. I suppose you discovered that."

"Yes. And thoroughly contaminated it. The site and probably the entire planet are likely to be declared off-limits."

Making finishing up and getting Tub away even more urgent.

"Not necessarily," felt my cousin.

"If the authorities don't do it, I will. Was Elsa anywhere near the accident?"

"Up at the ship. She and Sven were conferring over something. You'd really shut down your own site?"

"It has become too hazardous. I'll discuss it with Commander Donnell, and I think he'll agree." He might even want to bring his cruiser down and scorch the place. "So, have you got the engine you wanted?"

"It sank deeper. The ship just ahead of it is resting on rock but nothing but this sand was beneath the engine."

Which was probably why it broke loose in the crash. Even I could see that.

"We'll try to get a look inside it and take a few pieces if we can. I suppose we'll have to give up on the reactor altogether."

"You have one week," I warned him.

He turned his head toward my own work. "Can you have your computer out of here that soon?"

"That is my plan."

It had been my plan. This disaster had thrown things off. Fortunately, there was no damage and no apparent contamination in this end of the ship. None the less, everyone was going through strict decontamination procedures before leaving the surface.

And though I wanted to stay with Tub, my presence was unneeded as he continued to be disconnected and prepared. I made my way aft. Not all the way; the former laboratory area remained shut off for now. My biologists were examining the areas where the ammonia had briefly run through the ship. That was mostly gone now.

“We can’t find any sign of the compound out here,” said Bob Eashly, “but that doesn’t prove it isn’t here. Most of our equipment is in the off-limits area.”

Doctor McCord added, “It’s likely to be too dry in this area. And getting drier all the time. But it might be growing into Radia’s monster inside the reactor room.”

“We’ll send a robot in to look,” I told them. “I’m sure we have some to spare.”

That we did, if I ordered it. Soon, a little eight-wheeled utility bot rolled toward us. The peculiar gravity — as Sven had labeled it — bothered robots more than humans, but the going was not too bad through this section.

“You have an operational camera?” I asked it.

“On your feed, sir. Go?”

“Yes. A human will accompany you to the first door.”

That human was ensconced in a work suit, and was there mostly just to open said door. She was warned not, under any circumstances, to pass it.

The pictures on our coms didn’t tell us much. It still looked a bit damp in the lab. Glistening. “The lights are still working,” remarked Evelyn.

The robot pivoted its lens this way and that, up and down. “There! On the wall,” called out Eashly.

“Pan back to the right, slowly,” I ordered. “Stop.”

A brown stain. “It *could* be the compound,” felt McCord, “but it’s an odd place for it.”

Or someone simply sloshed something. I set the bot to continue panning. A small pool persisted in one corner. Maybe ammonia, or partially ammonia. “Move in on the puddle. Give me a close up.” It seemed perfectly clear.

MISSION DELAYED

"The laboratory seems clean," stated Bob Eashly. "Kind of a mess, though!"

Except for that suspect stain. "Return to the doorway and await instructions," I ordered. To the scientists I said, "It doesn't matter whether your lab is a mess. You won't be working in there again. But I understand the advantages to getting at your notes and equipment. There's no reason those can't be removed and decontaminated."

I hoped there was no reason. If one appeared, someone would inform me.

"Are you going to check the reactor room?" asked Bob. "I know I don't want to go in there again!"

"You were crazy to go in the last time," I assured him.

"I just followed your crazy assistant."

I gave the situation a few seconds of thought. "Ronnie," I called. "Are you willing to go in and open the other door. You do not have to if you feel any doubts at all."

"Happy to do it, sir." She sounded far more cheerful than the situation warranted.

"Back away immediately once you pull it open, and retreat to the door into the laboratory. Or further, if you wish."

She did exactly as ordered and the robot rolled forward. "Our lights are all out," remarked McCord.

"I could carry one over to the doorway," volunteered Ronnie.

"You absolutely will not," I told her. "Bot, can you move a light to the entry?"

"Can, sir."

"Do so. No, the other entry."

The room was thick with brown muck. Ammonia mixed with the planet's sand or the compound? Who could tell?

"Robot, return to us. Ronnie, shut the door to the lab and get the hell out of there."

With a definite quaver to her voice, Evelyn McCord asked, "What can we do?"

"Two choices," I had decided. "Shut it off and never come back, or try to dry it out."

"But how?" someone asked.

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“I have a thought on that.” I asked my com to put me through to Errol.

“What can I do for you, Jack? Do you plan to give us an extra week?”

“I need your equipment. Meet me above the reactor section.” I put the com away and told the biologists, “The rest of you had better get out of here. In fact —” I put the device to public announcement and told everyone else to do the same.

Errol and I were going to do something either brilliant or incredibly stupid.

CHAPTER 12

“OPEN UP THE entire top of the ship?”

“All the way up to, oh, at least a third of the length. A good, wide opening so the sun shines in and the breeze blows free.”

“Jack fancies himself a poet, I think,” said Kiska Mur.

“Always has. The family has tried to live it down. What’s the idea, anyway?”

“We’re going to dry it out.”

“Ah. A good direct approach. I like that, Boss.”

“You would,” said Errol. “We’ll get right at it. Everyone’s out?”

“And accounted for.”

It took less time than I expected to rip off the ‘roof’ and leave a wide gaping hole. “I doubt any of that metal is of much importance,” Errol said, giving the scrap a quick looking over. “And we haven’t time to check. Is everything exposed you wanted?”

The reactor was the main target and that was in plain sight. We’d give the room a couple days to desiccate and then check it out. Cautiously.

And before we left, I intended to shut that reactor down. It had kept Tub alive through many centuries and now its job was done.

Right now, the job was to move the AI out of its home and pack it up. Nothing else did I think of the next two days. Any decisions were left to whoever wanted to decide! I think that meant Livi, more often than not. Sven was too busy helping me. By the end of the allotted time, Tub was crated up aboard the liner far above us. Sleeping, its power coming from equipment Sven and his cohorts had devised.

Had it had truly survived? Would it successfully be transplanted to a new ship at Scotia? No telling. I’d done what I could. We’d done what we could.

I went up to my own ship to rest a few hours, before the final preparations for the expedition’s departure. I slept, I ate. I slept some more.

“We should be winding down here soon,” I told Livi, when I had done sleeping. “My part of it, anyway. Yours too, I suspect.”

“Back to being all on my own in Halifax.” She took a sip of her coffee and managed to look halfway pathetic. I was not taken in.

“Hey, I’ve served Sven up for you. If you pass on him, I’ll have to introduce him to Princess Vilma.”

“Trying to find matches for all your unmarried friends, Jack?” She gave my statement the very brief consideration it deserved. “I don’t think he’s Vili’s type.”

“I’ve given up trying to figure out that kind of thing. I just throw people at each other.”

“How about someone for Kiska? Your aide is lesbian, isn’t she?”

“Do you think Anna would allow me to take long trips with her if she wasn’t?”

“You definitely wouldn’t want the two of them to get into a gun battle.”

“They do spar sometimes. I think either one could take me.”

“Except when you fight dirty. Anna has warned me about that.”

She would. “An ancient philosopher advised, ‘Never give a sucker an even break.’”

“I happen to know where that came from. Remember I’m rather well educated, Jack McFee.”

“It makes you awful hard to impress. I have noticed Kiska and Evelyn McCord making eyes at each other. More than eyes, maybe.”

“Hmm, can’t see it long term. But one never knows, do they? I might have said the same about Anna and you not so long ago.”

Any outsider might have.

“So Tub is all stowed away.”

“As is pretty much everything we’re taking back.”

“No monsters, I trust.” My look must have betrayed something to her. “Jack?”

“I’ll admit, Livi, that when I got a look into that reactor room I was scared. As scared as I’ve been in my life. That — stuff had spread everywhere. Maybe it was no more dangerous than a field of clover. I was not about to find out.”

“I understand the hurry to get out now.”

“It is unlikely anyone will come back. Not soon, anyway.” Maybe researchers could be allowed in, come a couple decades. I might even be one of them. I stood and stretched. “Time to slip into an away suit again and go order people around. You coming down?”

MISSION DELAYED

“Might as well. It could be the last time, huh?”

“Your last time could be last time if you wanted. Kiska, you awake?”

“Coming, Boss.”

“Is anyone else aboard, M?” I could lose track of whom I had shuttled up and down.

“I am.”

“True enough. Keep an eye on things.”

This would not be my last time. Inevitably, another trip or two would be needed. Things would require my attention. Then, maybe a long solo cruise somewhere to clear my head.

Oh, I might invite my wife along.

Doctor Evelyn McCord and her fellow biologists were my primary concern at the moment. The only real concern; everything else going on was just the business of packing up to go. There were still artifacts that needed shuttling up to the expedition ship. A few to my vessel, even, though I hadn’t much space left.

I asked Errol to join me when I spoke with the scientists. “How does it look in there now?” I asked them.

“Just about like it does out here,” came McCord’s reply, as she gestured toward the dunes around us. “Pretty much all dried up. We’ve removed our equipment from the lab and put it through decontamination, ready to shuttle up.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mine,” said Errol. “Everyone else was busy.”

I didn’t trust my cousin’s judgment so much since the engine incident, but he’d probably done right here. Errol was usually a notably level-headed fellow. He’d let his enthusiasm override that.

Bob Eashy spoke up. “We have to recognize that, um, particles of the compound might lurk in the dark recesses somewhere — they will dry out eventually. We can’t say they will be *dead*, in that we’re not sure they were ever alive. And we don’t know enough to say they couldn’t rejuvenate in moisture.”

“So this site should require special permissions and cautions to ever visit again,” said McCord.

“If anyone is allowed to come at all,” I said. “Let’s get a look.”

We didn’t have to go inside. We could stand by the pit and look

down. The reactor room did look considerably better. "We have one more task down there," I stated. "I intend to shut down the reactor. I recognize the radioactive material will remain but shutting it down may reduce the leakage. And the space will no longer be heated. All the more so now it's open to the atmosphere."

Errol nodded approval. "It could be rigged to blow up."

"Dangerous. And the radioactivity would remain."

"True. We'll send a robot down to attend to it."

That was the sort of thing I could depend on Errol or Sven to take care of. "One more walk-through of the ship, I think." I might not need to come down again after all.

I descended into the hull and started making my way forward. Kiska followed at a somewhat discreet distance. She recognized my introspective moods. There's nothing like an aide who respects ones privacy.

Much had been removed. Much lay in scrap on the floors. Or walls. I've no doubt another team of historians could remove just as much as ours had. On up to the control center. Five individuals had pushed humanity out further into the galaxy than any before. I had their names from Tub and intended to create some sort of monument. On Bannock, most likely, along with the bulk of the artifacts. Others could write about the expedition itself. I looked forward to reading their papers.

All I was taking back for myself was Tub. Well, yes, and the Orlova Drive. A real working Orlova.

I turned around. "Time to head back to the ship," I told Kiska.

CHAPTER 13

THE ACTUAL WORK was done by the teams that had transferred M a couple times. I trusted them but was nervous none the less. It was disconcertingly similar to when Anna bore our first child.

M and I had traveled far in the W-6C, a customized medium cruiser suited to the young playboy sort I posed as, not so long ago. All the way to Earth, once, and into the Ursan systems as well. To planets unknown and unnamed.

I had grown. I suppose M had too. The new ship was better suited to us. But the old one could be Tub's new one. The jump element remained in place. It would have been too much trouble to pull it out and repurpose it to another craft. The drive was another matter.

We had decided to install the Orlova Drive. What better way to explore how it worked? However, it was in parallel to a Saldhana backup. The Saldhana Drive always felt clunky to me but was widely used.

Tugs moved the ship away from its docking and the techs brought up one system after another. There would be sorting out, to be sure, but Tub and I could handle it.

"My visuals are working again," it said. "Can I look — into the cabin. There you are. It is good to see you, Jack."

"Can you see outside?"

"Yes, I can. What is that yellow star? It is very close."

"That's Scotia, the star you were headed for, Tub. Mission complete."

"Thank you, Jack. Where are we going next?"

AFTERWORD

This Jack Mack novella is set about four years after the events in the novel *BLIND JUMP*. Things have, obviously, changed for Jack McFee. Adult responsibilities. Children! He has picked up an assistant in Kiska Mur — as competent as his wife Anna may be, she can't take care of him all the time. How Kiska, the former Ursan spy, came to work for him is another story, one which I hope to publish one of these days.

That and other Jack Mack tales are in the works, set in the decade or so of peace after the war where we first met Jack. Beyond that? Who can say?

Stephen Brooke