

## Home Bound

Captain Jack Murphy had just started to feel the calming effects of his medication when his Second informed him an alien ship was hailing them. The news took several moments to register and he silently cursed his timing on the drugs. But the pain was becoming worse by the day. Earth scientists hadn't discovered a cure for his type of cancer by the time Nina was launched on her history-making voyage to the stars. That was, what, eighty-six years ago? Well, eighty-six ship years. Early in the trip, while they were still accelerating and close to their own solar system, Nina had been able to keep contact with her mother planet. But communications had become more confusing as time went on. And then one day they just quit. Repeated calls went unanswered, and the colonists had no idea what had happened. Now they were so far away that any messages received would be from long-dead ancestors. Still they maintained a watch in the Comm Shack, although they hadn't received anything but silence.

The Nina was the first of the star colonist ships to be launched. The Pinta and Santa Maria had gone off to the only other two stars that had confirmed planets capable of sustaining human life. It was a grand experiment and only the select few from an army of volunteers were allowed to go. Jack had only been five years old when his parents had been chosen to lead the first group. The role of Commander had been groomed into him from that time. He had been Second to his father and had assumed command when he was thirty-six. Somehow he had been able to hold together their little community over

the years. He had no children of his own, but had selected a well-respected man to serve as backup. Since his illness, the Second had taken on the duties of running the ship and community, but the colonists had all insisted that Jack keep the title of Captain. They still came to him for confirmation of major decisions. His mind remained alert even if disease was wasting his body.

They were well into deceleration and only months from their new home: the fourth planet from Crucis A & B. Jack had made up his mind to survive long enough to see them make planetfall. But the pain was becoming too much and he had finally agreed to the drugs, even though the medication clouded his reasoning.

He blinked at Crucis' double-star image and tried to force his thoughts back to the problem at hand. Another ship? He turned to his Second. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. We have it on full sensing scan now. There is no doubt that it is under it's own power. We haven't deciphered the communications yet. But it seems to be a hailing routine."

"Could it be the Pinta or Santa Maria?"

"No, sir. This vessel's mass is five times our own, and our sister ships are identical to us. Also, they were dispatched to different star systems. There is no way they could have been rerouted to catch up to us."

Jack had already come to the same conclusion, but he had to explore every option. The next possibility gave him great concern. "Do you think it came from Crucis 4?"

His Second grimaced slightly and shrugged. He also had considered this possibility. "Or maybe just another star traveling race."

"You don't really think that, do you?"

Second shook his head grimly. “No.”

Jack closed his eyes and leaned back. “My God. We come all this way to colonize another planet in another star system, and it’s already inhabited by an advanced civilization. What are the odds of that?”

“Close to impossible, but I don’t know what else to think.”

Jack opened his eyes and stared again at the two stars. For the first time in the eighty-six years he had been on Nina, he was truly afraid for his group. They had struggled and survived so many near disasters of ship malfunctions, not to mention societal crises precipitated by the stress of life aboard a deep-space ship. The original plan called for Nina to make the 1021 light year trip in a little over twenty years ship time, assuming only one deceleration-acceleration cycle to accommodate their mid-deployment overhaul. Unfortunately, the constant barrage of maintenance problems had forced them into six such cycles, increasing their trip time four fold. But they had endured, most of the surviving colonists having been born on Nina. And now they were within reach of their new world. But if this new world was already inhabited by a more advanced race of beings, then how could they possibly carry on?

Jack needed time to think, damn these drugs. For the first time, he called up the images of the sensor scans. They showed the mystery ship to the right and behind the Nina, but it wasn’t keeping station; it was now angling noticeably towards them. Jack turned to the buzz indicating that someone was entering the Captain’s nook. It was the duty communications officer.

She approached and addressed both of them. “The hailing is now coming over voice channels. It’s a broken form of English, hard to understand, but they are going to board us at our main cargo hatches. They request representatives meet them.”

Jack looked to his Second. The prevailing scientific wisdom at the time of their departure had been that Man was the only intelligent, space-capable species in the Universe. So, of course, there was no need to equip their small craft with a defensive weapon system. “Does anyone outside of Command Structure know about this?”

“No, sir. We don’t want to panic anyone just yet.”

“Let’s keep it that way for the time being. Whatever happens, we’ll have to tell everyone soon.” Jack sighed and tried to think. He finally rose from his Captain’s chair. “Let’s go meet our visitors.”

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There were three of them and they were huge. Jack had been prepared to witness just about any kind of animal variation from these aliens, but to his surprise, they had distinctly human form: two legs, two arms, and an upright stance. They were over ten feet tall, but their bodies were proportional. Their torsos were smooth, without any features, and were covered by a glittery substance. Their faces were human-like too, with small eyes and noses, and tiny slits on the side of their heads, which Jack took for ears. The top and sides of each head had different colored and arrayed bits of tuff. One had a more pronounced curvature to its body: perhaps a female, Jack thought. He couldn’t discern any expressions on them, but they didn’t appear to be threatening.

Jack also noted they wore no pressurized suits or breathing apparatuses, save small gleaming tubes that extended from their nose and mouth areas back over their

shoulders. If these Crucis 4 representatives could survive Nina's atmosphere, then the colonists should be able to survive on Crucis 4. If we're allowed to come, Jack thought bitterly.

Jack stepped forward, fighting back the pain in his arms, legs and lungs. "I am the Commander of this ship. I welcome you aboard." He waited nervously, wondering if they had any means to understand him.

His words seemed to delight the visitors, for their manners suddenly became animated. Jack discerned an excited air about them, although he reminded himself not to presume to interpret alien emotions. Finally, there was a metallic noise that emanated from the group, although none of them moved their mouths. The noises began to break into scattered words that Jack could recognize. And then the words became complete sentences, if somewhat broken and grammatically faulty.

The middle alien stepped forward. "Please forgive our abrupt appearance, but we have been searching a long period. We are happy to have discovered you." It turned to the others who nodded agreement.

A spring of hope welled up in Jack. Perhaps they would be allowed to land on Crucis 4. Speaking slowly he said, "We have much to discuss. Could we go to a more private part of our ship to talk?" He searched their faces for understanding.

"Yes. Please to take us where we can talk. We want to discuss much."

Jack nodded to his Second, who left to clear the passageways for their short trip to the Captain's nook. They moved in silence, although Jack's mind raced at how he would broach the subject of their colonization. The aliens' translator devices had allowed them to communicate almost immediately, so they must have been aware of Nina's approach

for some time. They probably listened in on our calls to Earth, perhaps are even aware of our voyage's purpose. They likely could have already destroyed our ship if they had been so inclined, so maybe they'll be friendly, even welcome us.

When they reached the Captain's nook, Jack went to his Captain's chair and painfully eased himself in. He knew he needed more medication, but that would have to wait. He was going to need his wits about him for the expected negotiations. He motioned for his visitors to sit, but the couches and stools were ridiculously small for their use. They shook their heads and stood.

Jack grimaced as a shot of pain coursed through him. He couldn't focus on this matter long, so he decided to address the situation head on.

He spoke slowly. "I'm sure you know that we are traveling towards your home planet. Our hope and intent is to live there. We intend to do no harm and we ask your help. We cannot go anywhere else and will die unless we are allowed onto your world."

He searched the alien faces for any reactions to his words. He had exposed their own vulnerability, but these Crucians surely knew their own superior capabilities. He was asking for mercy.

The aliens looked at each other in confusion and Jack assumed that his words had not translated properly. He was about to try again when the lead alien held up his arm and began nodding with a smile. "You don't seem to understand, Captain. We are not from Crucis 4, we are from Earth."

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The ship's council members filed slowly into the cargo bay and immediately began staring at the three strange forms seated at the head of a large rectangular table.

Those seats were larger than normal and blocky: constructed hastily to accommodate the new visitors. Seated to the left of them was Captain Jack, with the Second standing at his side.

The council was made up of fourteen members of the ship's society and represented what passed for government on the Nina. It had a quasi-military form. Seven members were functional heads of the departments that ran the ship: Engineering, Operations, Science and the like. The Captain appointed these men and women based on a military system of selection: training, experience and fitness evaluations. Seven others represented the ship as a whole and were elected at large to two-year terms. The council voted on all major decisions with the Second acting as a tiebreaker. Captain Jack had the authority to override any council decision if he felt it endangered the ship or mission, but he never had to exercise that power. The council had recently been briefed on the visitors and had been brought to this emergency session. Normally, council sessions were preceded by friendly banter, but now all members silently took their seats.

Jack cleared his throat, signaling the start of the meeting. Everyone shifted their gaze from the strange visitors to their Captain. Looks of concern crossed their faces; they all knew of his deteriorating condition. Jack started. "You'll forgive me for not standing to address you today." He left unsaid that he had delayed taking his medication so he could have a clear mind. But the pain was unbearable and distracting. He gritted his teeth and a spasm passed. Everyone at the table nodded in concern.

He continued. "Our visitors here have told us they are from our native planet, Earth." He saw the looks of doubt around the table. "I believe them. They graciously agreed to be scanned by our own medical department and there is little doubt on this

point. They are from Earth, but an Earth over one-thousand years in the future from what we knew.” He paused as another round of pain coursed through him. He saw one of the council members motion to him, so he recognized her.

Lauren Jans, Elected Minister of Education, stood. She was in her early forties, trim, with a no-nonsense attitude. “I can accept that humans might physically evolve over time, although I find it hard to believe they would evolve this much. But my question is: why did Earth stop communicating with us only four years after we left?”

Jack was about to answer when he was interrupted by his Second. “Perhaps our visitors can explain that.” What he meant was Captain Jack was becoming too weak to talk.

The visitors, who until now had remained motionless, leaned forward. The center one spoke. “We have had time to analyze your speech patterns, so we can communicate with you more accurately now. Your language is an ancient form of English which was largely lost to our data bases.” He turned and conferred in a gibberish that no one could decipher. He turned back to the group. “Some of our current science does not translate to your language, so we are using the closest approximation. If anything we say puzzles you, please tell us and we will try to rephrase it.”

It waited a moment and went on. “Since you left, Earth people have undergone alternating periods of conflict and peace, the same as thousands of years previously. About the time we stopped communicating with you, there was a great worldwide conflict that resulted in a massive reforming of country borders and societies. The country that sponsored your voyage, the United States, no longer exists. Communication infrastructure was severely degraded during that conflict and it took ten years for it to get



back to normal. But records were destroyed and society simply lost interest in space travel or even its own history. That is why we didn't answer your calls or those of your sister ships."

"Excuse me," Eric George, Science Department Head, interrupted. "What is the condition of our sister ships? Did they reach their destinations?"

The three visitors exchanged glances. The lead said, "We don't know. Like you, they stopped sending after we failed to respond over a long period. We haven't been able to locate them, but neither one have reached their target planets yet."

They both should have arrived by now, Jack thought. The shocked silence around the room hung like a fog. George glared at the visitors. "So you've been to those planets. Have you been to Crucis 4?"

The three aliens shifted in their seats and looked at each other. The middle one said, "Remote sensing and detection was primitive at the time of your launching. It could not have given an accurate depiction of the atmospheric conditions of any planet outside of Earth's solar system. We have thoroughly scanned Crucis 4 and it is not habitable by our standards."

A wave of despair swept the room as council members began shouting and gesturing at each other. Jack was distracted by another wave of pain. He tried again to focus on the situation at hand. He waved his arm in the air and his Second verbally brought the room to order. Everyone stared at Jack for an answer.

"You said not habitable by your standards. Is it habitable by our standards?"

The visitors conferred in their chattering language and turned back to the council. "We do not know for certain. You've overcome great obstacles to reach this far. But this

planet has an extremely hostile environment and we judge that most of your colony would soon perish there.”

Jack sensed irritation, almost a scolding tone, in their reply. He pressed on. “Why have you come all the way here to tell us this?”

There was a long pause. Finally the female spoke. “There was a long period of great upheaval on Earth. It was a harsh and difficult time. Nations dissolved and new governments were created. Humans were preoccupied with struggle and survival. Most of our historical records were lost and nobody cared; we were preoccupied with the present and the future.

“And then Earth entered an era of peace and prosperity and with that, rapid advances occurred in technology, including space travel. We have colonized over forty other worlds. We have few limitations on where we go since we discovered how to utilize portals, faster-than-light travel and other means not even envisioned by scientists of your day. We continue to explore and expand across the universe. Even though Crucis is one of the closest star systems to Earth, we have only recently discovered a portal chain that takes us here. That is why it took us so long to find you. Also, we had to wait until you were far into deceleration before we could approach and board.”

Jack shifted in his seat. “So why are you here?”

“Our people now have a great desire to know our history. Your colony represents some of that history. There was great excitement across all federal planets when this project was announced. We want to bring you back to Earth. Our science can cure all of your ills and you will be revered for the remainder of your days. You will want for nothing.”

The council members looked at each other, a mixture of hope and distrust in their eyes. Jack said, “We will have to discuss your offer in private as a matter of form.”

He ignored what looked like surprise on the visitors’ faces.

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“What is there to discuss?” George said. “We are on our last legs here and they said that Crucis 4 is uninhabitable.”

“Not uninhabitable, just inhospitable,” Jans countered.

George shook his head “We have to go back, our ship is failing. We may not survive the next breakdown. What about our children? They’ve suffered their whole lives with shortages and dangers. We can have food and medicine. We can live out our lives in comfort, without any fear.”

“I agree,” another said. “I’m tired of this struggle. They want us back on Earth. We may not survive if we continue on. Let’s not end up like our two sister ships.”

Most of the council members were nodding agreement. Lauren Jans turned to the head of the table. “What about it, Jack? They can cure your cancer and you will live many more years free of the pain.”

Jack scanned the sympathetic eyes, searching him for a decision. We are a democracy, he thought, but they still value an old man’s opinion. “My illness has caused me physical pain for the past few years, but for even longer I’ve had another type of pain: the pain of loneliness. I missed Earth, even with all of its problems; I wanted to be with our own. This trip was a great adventure and we carried the hopes, desires, and curiosities of our entire race. But the psychologists underestimated the effects of extended space travel. Even though our ship is large and self-sustaining, and we’ve been

able to fashion a society, our group has suffered too much from..." He paused searching for the right word. "...cabin fever is the only phrase that comes to mind. I think that is the main reason for most of the difficulties we've experienced on this trip. With that in mind, my first reaction was the same as yours: to return to Earth and lift the lifetime of burden from all of our shoulders.

"But the Earth we knew doesn't exist anymore. The people, governments, problems, everything we were a part of is gone. We would be returning to an alien world; actually, we would be the aliens. And although I'm sure our hosts would make good on their promises to lift our burdens and honor us, what would we do?"

Jack paused as more pain racked him. He would have to take some more medicine soon and his senses would fade. He scanned the others in the room and could see they were struggling with the same thoughts; he had only been the one to voice them. He continued. "We've come too far, we've struggled too much to go back. And even if life continues to be hard, probably even harder, we have to carry on. Struggle is what gives our lives meaning. Crucis 4 is our home now and even if we all end up perishing there, well, I for one want to die at home."

Jack looked at their solemn faces. They knew; they had always known.

Jack's Second interrupted the silence. "We should allow anyone who wants to return to do so."

The others nodded agreement.

Jack concluded the meeting. "We'll schedule a town gathering for later this afternoon. I'll meet with our guests and inform them of our decision. I hope they don't try to force us to go with them. There might be blood shed."

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Jack was in his cabin, confined to bed with tubes attached to his arms and legs. The pain had faded into a fog along with his mind and memories. Second had arranged the monitor so that Jack could see it from his prone position. Jack stared at the image of the partner stars, could sense them getting larger although his rational mind told him it was just his imagination. He knew death was near, but he was going to fight it until they made planetfall. He had come this far and he would see his group, his people, safely on their new home world.

Jack was pleasantly surprised with the reactions at the town gathering. No one wanted to return to Earth, all had strongly supported the council's judgment. The reaction had not been lost on the three visitors. They accepted the decision quietly and prepared to debark. Their offer of technology turned out to be useless, for it was so far out of the realm of the colonists' capabilities, the engineers couldn't use it. They did leave behind valuable information on atmospheric conditions, weather patterns, soil conditions, and the plant and animal life, including suggestions for what might be edible. The picture was grim, chances of survival low.

Jack stared at the image and felt himself drifting off. Memories rushed by in a flash. They had set out on a great adventure, so long ago. Now they were about to embark on another adventure, one that might destroy them all. But they were coming home, and Jack knew that their small band would somehow survive.

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*According to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, time passes more slowly for objects travelling at a high rate of speed than it does for stationary objects. For this difference to be noticeable, however, the moving object must be travelling close to the speed of light: in fact, better than 99.99 percent the speed of light. So one method whereby interstellar travel would be possible is if a spaceship and its inhabitants could be accelerated to just below the speed of light, a 1000 year light trip would take 1000 years to those sitting on Earth, but only 20 years or so (depending on how fast the ship was going) would pass for the astronauts. This is the scientific basis for this story.*

*Crucis A & B is a real double star system located about 370 light years from Earth. I used literary license to place it 1000 light years away to fit the theoretical basis for the story. There are other star systems that far away, but Crucis refers to the common scientific term 'Experimentum crucis' meaning critical/crucial experiment, which was what this voyage represented for Earth society.*

*In the early summer of 1967 I was a naïve 17 year old just graduated from high school when I entered Annapolis and was rudely thrust into the harsh life of a Naval Academy plebe. Not one second went by in the first 6 months of my incarceration that I didn't long to be back home living the carefree life I had known. Most of my friends (those who weren't drafted or went to work on the auto assembly lines) were living the life of 'drugs and sex and rock & roll' at civilian colleges. So I eagerly awaited Christmas break, my first trip home since high school graduation, to see and hang out with all my friends. But after a few days of being with those friends who would take the time to see me (this was during the Vietnam years when American society did not support the troops), I realized that we had all moved on and that I had little in common with them*

*anymore. I was surprised that after a week home, I couldn't wait to get back to Annapolis, even though I still had five more months of plebe torture ahead of me, so I could be back with my fellow Class of '71 midshipmen and our Spartan, but shared, life at The Naval Academy. It's true that home is where you make it and that shared hardships make for strong and lifelong human bonds: something every Annapolis and West Point graduate understands.*