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First Mission

Jeffery J. Gordon

I'll never forget the old man at the bar. I was a young kid, just out of the academy and heading on my first maneuvers as a military pee-on. Because of my college education, they put me through officer school and I'd eventually get to be a flyboy, but right now I was what was commonly referred to as a 90-day wonder. Anyway, I only had about an hour before I had to check in for final departure and I felt like having something to drink. Since the barracks were on the third planet in the binary system Sirius, a planet with about one-third the gravity of home, it was not uncommon to see old geezers pretty much everywhere. The sensation of being in a lower gravity environment was similar to that of being submerged in water, the stress on the joints and bones was lessened.

So I didn't make much of the old guy sitting at the far end of the bar. He was a nice enough old fart. Biologically he was probably around 85 or so but he fit the bill of one of the older cryo-monkeys that frequented the joint. In the old days, before hyper-dimensional travel, the military used cryogenic techniques for long space trips. Since they could only travel at near the speed of light, it took years to get to the nearest star systems. The only way to send crews on missions was to freeze them into suspended animation, essentially stopping the aging process, and reviving them when they arrived at their destination. The result was that these guys ended up living hundreds of years after going on multiple missions. They didn't look any older than the traditional geezers; what tipped you off was how much they talked. They could rely on centuries of travel, not decades, and from the sounds of this guy, he was one experienced S.O.B.

I took a seat a few places away. He had been talking the ear off of the bartender when he spied me at the corner, sipped his drink, and let in with one helluva story. I admit I didn't want to listen at first, figuring that if he was a cryo-monkey, the story would be military in nature, and after the last 90 days, hearing someone else's recollections of military protocol didn't seem too inviting. It only took a moment for me to change my mind.

"First mission?" he asked me.

"Me? Yea, first mission." I stumbled with the response, knowing it would lead to an inevitable rendering of his first trip into space.

"First time, God, that brings back memories. It's been, oh hell about 1,100 or so since my first trip.

"1,100?" I asked, realizing that he was indeed a cryo-monkey, but still somewhat astonished by the alleged age. "That would have had to have been one of the first missions out of the system?"

"It was. I was 22 when we pulled out. They froze us. The first team to ever go through with a cryo-flight. We didn't have fancy hyper-dimensional travel back then. It was all a big gamble. Didn't even know if we could be thawed properly."

"How long were you frozen?" I asked, then paused, realizing he had gone through this process more than once. "I mean, the first time?"

"15 years. The system was 12.6 light years out, and back then we could hit the high side of 95% of light. We couldn't fold space like these new ships, but we hauled pretty good for old crates. Back then the military was real big on searching for signs of intelligent life. We figured we weren't alone. Anyway, we'd been searching for nearly a century when we started picking up erratic radio signals from a gas giant in that system. Now, gas giants can create radio signals within their own atmospheres under the right conditions but it also might have been a signature from some sentient life form. There was now ay to tell without exploration, so they decided to send us to do a minimum of three years of research into the phenomena."

"It must have been exciting back then."

"Are you kidding? The mission was a bust."

"Radio signals turn out to be nothing?" I asked.

"Atmospheric static. But that's the tip of the iceberg. No, the real story was about what happened to this greenhorn kid who, just like me, was on his first mission. I'll never forget that kid. His name was Christopher Jessigs. He was an..."
ensign. Good kid. Not too bright, but with a good heart, y'know?"

I acknowledged I did with a quick nod and dug my heels in for the long story.

"Now the interesting thing about Jessigs," the old man continued, "was his lungs. It might seem odd at first, but this guy's fantastic set of windbags changed the whole course of the mission. You see, we found that big gas giant and quickly realized that the radio signals were just an atmospheric fluke. It seemed like a helluva long trip to make to be so quickly disappointed. That's when we started to look at the other planets."

"There were other planets?"

"Oh hell yes. And on one in particular, we hit paydirt."

"Whaddya mean?"

"One planet was different. I mean really different. It had a dense atmosphere, life-sustaining temperatures and no shortage of water. Hell, it was damn near completely covered with water. Long story short, we decided to investigate it instead of wasting any more time on the gas giant, and that's where Jessigs came in handy."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the guy lived in the tropical regions back home and had spent most of his time in and around the ocean. Anyway, this guy used to go deep sea pearl diving. Not only could he hold his breath for ten minutes or so, but he could handle intensified atmospheric pressure better than anything short of a blowfish. Now the atmosphere of this planet was breathable, it was just a little dense. We went without pressure suits or anything figuring why wear the damn cumbersome bastards unless it was absolutely necessary. Everything was fine at first but after an hour most of us were doubled up with the bends. Hurt like hell."

"So that's where this kid came in?"

"Uh huh. They ran a check on everyone on the ship and found that Jessigs had lots of diving experience. They thwarted him, briefed him, and before he knew what he was doing, he was smack dab in the middle of a little desert on a mostly water planet."

"He could handle the atmosphere?"

"A lot better than we could. The first time down we brought him back into the ship within about an hour and he was fine. Didn't even faze him. Slowly but surely we increased his exposure time and in the course of a few days he was able to stay out for up to three hours at a time without any negative effects. It was about that time that things really got interesting."

The old man was beginning to spice up his story with interpretive hand motions. It reminded me of old times when camp counselors would tell ghost stories around the fire at night.

"Well, we'd sent out a couple of probes, to do some digital mapping, and not too far from where we were putting Jessigs through his paces we came across some geographical anomalies."

"Like what exactly?" I queried, begging the question.

"Like cities. Good sized cities. Primitive stuff, adobe style, but still cities. What's more, we could discern some definite inhabitants."

"You mean you guys found an intelligent life form? First trip out?"

"Well, we found a life form, but they were hardly intelligent. They looked a great deal like we do, a little shorter, and with the oddest colored eyes you ever say, but intelligent they weren't."

"But they had cities. That's something. That's when you sent the Jessigs kid in to investigate?"

"Not right away. We used probes and such to gather as much information as possible. Realize now, they had a spoken and written language that we had to learn about, they had customs we needed to be aware of, lots of stuff. We couldn't just send some kid in there with a military jumpsuit on and expect good results."

"But how could you learn the nuances of the language from probes?"

"We couldn't. After a while we realized some abductions would be necessary."
"You took some of them into the ship?"
"Had to. Especially for the language. That was a tuffy. But the abductions turned out to be a big breakthrough."
"In what way?"
"We ran all sorts of tests on them and pretty much learned enough about them to fill a library. We didn't find much good about them. They weren't particularly healthy. They ate way too much. They almost all had a venereal disease of some kind or another. They were terribly aggressive. And they were phenomenally superstitious. They could grasp scientific concepts okay, technology was definitely in their future, but they lacked wisdom. Anything that happened was the whim of a god. That's where we felt we could have an impact."
"You used their own superstition against them?"
"Exactly. They never saw any of us on the ship, but the technology we had must have made us seem like gods to them. Now, as a culture, they did two things well."
"They ate and they screwed, you already told me."
"Okay, they did four things well. They also gossiped and speculated. Anyway, it gave us an idea. Every abductee told us the same basic story. They thought their abduction was a sign from their god that something was about to happen."
"A sign that something was going to happen? What did they think was going to happen?"
"The most popular speculation was the end of the world. Never met so many damn cynics in my whole damn life. Not one of them we talked to felt they wouldn't see their world destroyed within their lifetime. And as violent as those little idiots were, it wasn't that hard to believe. Hell, if they've ever developed technology we're all in trouble."
"So what did you do?"
"It went against all of our ethical dogma, but we felt it was necessary."
"We started a little rumor."
"A little rumor? What, exactly?"
"We told a couple of the abductees that a messenger was being sent. A messenger that would walk among them, teach them, sort of be a guide for their consciences."
"And that was Jessigs?"
"Yea, that was Jessigs. With our little abductees spreading the word with the natives, it was time to drop the kid right in the heart of downtown backwardsville. He was a good kid. A nice kid. Little naive, but nobody's perfect, right?"
"How did it go? Did the rumor idea work?"
"Yes and no. We definitely he the nail on the head as far as the gossip idea went. Everyone knew Jessigs was coming. What we didn't consider was the natives' unique capacity to, how would you say, fill in the gaps."
"What do you mean, fill in the gaps?"
"Well, apparently facets of their experiences that they couldn't explain they would sort of speculate on and essentially fill in he gaps. In other words, they told stories."
"That was a bad thing?"
"Sort of. By the time we put Jessigs down amongst them, they figured he was some sort of big political figure, like a king. They thought he was there to run for office and make their lives better."
"Well, in their defense, wasn't it your intention to make their lives better? Whether they wanted your help or not?"
"We struggled with those same thoughts. But for obvious reasons he couldn't stay for very long. We had already used up six months of our trip studying them, and we were only going to stay for a maximum of three years. Nevertheless, he did infiltrate the native population and made friends. Unfortunately, he could never pick up their language, but we got around that. We programmed one of our translators for their language so that he could communicate. They'd speak to him in their language, the translator would convert it to ours, Jessigs would respond and his speech would be electronically converted into their language. It scared the hell out of the natives the first couple of times."
"What ended up happening?"
"They killed him."
"My God! Are you kidding?"
"No, they killed him. Or at least they tried to kill him. Hanged the poor kid. Damn sad too. All we were trying to do was tell them to stop..."
screwing around and getting diseases, stop cheating, fighting, and killing. They showed real promise; we were just trying to help. And they tried to kill him.”

“Then he didn’t die?”

“No, but he damn near did. We couldn’t trace his location electronically because he had damaged his military ID tag. Back then we didn’t put chips in our boys’ heads so we could know where they were all the time; we had dog tags. Normally, they sent out a continuous signal letting the home ship know where we were at all times, but, of course, Jessigs had used his to pry open a stubborn rations box a few days earlier and busted that part off. Anyway, we were able to find him and bring him back to sick bay. He hadn’t died, just passed out because of the atmosphere. He was in it too long, even for im, and he just up and passed out. Three days later he was in good spirits as usual, but by that time we were properly pissed. We brought the main ship close over that city and just fired the lasers off the port bow in all directions. It must have looked like the biggest lightning storm those little cowards ever saw.”

“You didn’t kill any of them, did you?”

“No. We just put the fear of God into them.”

“You head back for home after that?”

“Pretty much, but Jessigs had lost that tag and the captain wanted it back. In retrospect, it was silly to return for it, but the captain felt it would be a bad idea to leave any advanced technology behind. I think that the technology we had showed with that laser barrage was a little more life-changing, but he didn’t want anything physical left behind. Of course, when we went back this time, we were in full pressure suits and armed to the teeth. I’ll never forget the look of absolute fear the natives showed when they saw Jessigs again.”

“Did you get the tag back?”

“Yea, we got it back.” The old man stopped and reached into his pocket and retrieved a small silverish medallion. “I thought I’d show you this in case you doubted me.”

He handed it to me and I turned it over to read the inscription. I could see where the tail end of it was broken off. On the other side, in typical military last name first first name last fashion was the very scratched but still discernible, partial name Jessigs, Christ.

“Well I’ll be damned,” I said to the old man.

“Wonder if they remember the kid?”

“Doubt it,” the old man said as he climbed down from the chair.

He placed a withered old hand on my shoulder, retrieved the ID tag with his free hand and slipped it back in his pocket. It was then that I noticed that on both of his wrists were identical scars about a half inch in diameter.

“Where’d those come from?” I asked as he headed out of the bar.

“First mission,” came his sardonic reply.