

The Laida Incident

The cart bumped over the rocky soil and Jones bumped along with it, cursing himself for thirty years spent on red sands searching: for rocks, for minerals, for bacteria, for *life*. For something worth value, meaning. A sign that leaving Earth forever had been worth it.

In the poor light, the sands shifted, mocking him. Jones gave the whole planet the finger.

“Hey, Jonesy. How’s it going out there?” The voice was clear and crisp through the comm. “We have your ETA in one hour. Please advise you’re on target.”

“I’m on target, Gurnsey. When am I ever not on target? You expect me to get caught in a traffic jam? Maybe get eaten by some green-skinned monsters? We’ve been here thirty years, Gurn. Nothing has ever happened.”

“Don’t tell me you’re looking forward to the traffic jams?”

“I hear it’s different now, with those cars that drive themselves. Wish we had such fancy stuff out here.” The cart hit some washboard. Jones cursed again. Bounced so hard he felt his behind compress like memory foam. After thirty years, he should have been used to it.

“We’ll have the bay crew ready in an hour then, Jonesy. Don’t get lost.”

There was no sign that Gurn was gone from the comm system, but Jonesy could feel his absence. It had become like that: sometime during his second year he’d developed an ability to sense when others were near, or when someone was waiting on the other end of a comm. Some thought he was crazy when he told them, so he’d stopped mentioning it. Would it be the same once he was back on Earth? He hoped sensing all those people didn’t drive him mad.

Before Gurn spoke, Jonesy knew that the communication lines had opened again.

“Hey, Jonesy. Captain wanted me to ask you to swing south. There’s an anomaly that the geologists want re-mapped. Need you to drop off a drone. I’ll send the coordinates. We’ll need a revised ETA.”

“Always the damn geologists. I don’t need no damn degree to write a paper about what makes up this planet—Goddam Shit of the Universe, that’s what.”

“You know, you’re getting more crabby the closer that ship gets to landing on this planet. You sure you want to leave?”

Jonesy had half a mind to say no. He’d thought about it, thought long and hard about staying on the red planet with crisp frozen air and butterscotch skies and nights filled with billions of dancing white pinpricks. He’d thought about staying in the closet-like room with the narrow bed and slender desk and

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the faded photograph of his sister and the baby who'd been born two weeks before he left. He was supposed to be on Mars until he died. Hell, he'd half expected to die before he reached the planet. He didn't think he'd last five years, let alone thirty. Over a quarter-century celibate, limited human contact, rehydrated potato mash, soy-steak cardboard chews, dry ice cream.

"I've signed up now, haven't I? My replacement's on that ship and my room's packed up. The ship will be here in what, five hours? I've got to go now, Gurd. I've got to."

"Well, we'll miss you out here, buddy. Make sure you keep in touch. Let us know if this 'recovery program' they've developed is worth a damn."

"If it's not, I'll blame you for letting me return."

"At least I'll be out of fist-range by then." Gurd confirmed that Jones had received the coordinates. He signed off, leaving Jones to his relatively silent ride.

There was never complete silence out on the sands; there was always the sound of breath, the beating of a heart, the pulsing of life in veins. Some workers played music, listened to it all the time, used it to keep the crazies away. Jones preferred to hear his own body; a reminder that he was still alive, that he hadn't slipped off into a nightmare, or Hell. The real Hell: the one of eternal turmoil and suffering, where even the few pleasures he currently had didn't exist.

When he'd first arrived, he'd had hope. Fame and prestige awaited him. His place in the history books was marked. The pages were waiting to be filled with his life's details: born on Earth, first immigrant to Mars, brilliant scientist, maker of unbelievable advances for the human race. Chosen mate of Laida Edler, Captain.

This last had been his greatest hope.

Laida was Swedish, smart, beautiful, broad in the hips, bossy. The most tantalizing woman on Mars. One of sixteen women. One of seven unmarried females, and the only one that he would call a friend.

It hadn't taken long for the loneliness to settle into his chest like a permanent G-force. Making a move seemed practical, reasonable, inevitable. Jones leaned forward, brushed his lips on hers. Laida pushed away, turned her face from his. "It's Gurd. We've been seeing each other for two years. Since we arrived, really. I think it's best to remain professional. Keep relationships quiet. The captain should be seen as independent. You know."

How had he missed it? Shouldn't he have known that his best friend was sleeping with the captain? He went directly to Gurd's quarters. Punched him hard on the jaw. Gurd never said a damn thing. Jones heard Gurd's jaw clicked for a week, but he hadn't heard it when they went for a single-shot of moonshine eight days later.

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With Laida out of the picture, there had been no cure for Jones's loneliness. Women were far away. If only he could get near them: all the single, available women who would lap him up for fame, for the fortune sitting in his Earth bank account, useless, waiting for his death when his nephew would inherit everything.

From the start, Jones had felt a strange attachment to the little guy who'd become a scientist like his uncle. Jones had been disappointed when Junior (only he called him that) had passed up an opportunity to come out to Mars. He'd remained on Earth and gotten engaged instead. Junior was holding off the wedding until Jones could be there. Another year and then he'd be having the time of his life at that wedding. Jones would have a date on his arm. A slender, moist, hot piece of booty that no one could say anything about. Jones's imaginary woman was better than Laida. And the night would be perfect because he could forget all about the Laida Incident. No one on Earth knew about it, so it would be forgotten. Just like the Tablet Incident; the most embarrassing moment of Jones's career.

Jonesy still didn't know who had decided to pull one over on him. He was the one who drove the south route. He was the one who collected samples, dug pits, filled vials, positioned equipment. There were others who helped him out, and sometimes he stayed in the lab instead of doing field work, though he preferred being outside. The day of the Tablet Incident had begun like any other: a quick shower, shave, breakfast in the cafeteria – mint tea, eggs with tomato slices – a stop at the lab to check in with those that reported to him.

Dayna had assured him that she'd take care of everything. Almost seemed to rush him out the door, now that he thought back about it. Like a chap, he'd gone.

Now, he wondered briefly if this last minute assignment from the geological team was another practical joke. He'd never succeeded in finding out who had been behind the tablet – though he'd always suspected Gurd because of the Laida Incident. Maybe this whole last-minute task thing was another of Gurd's jokes.

Jones steered toward the coordinates, dreaming of what he missed about Earth: women, booze that didn't burn, the smell of wet dirt, fish. He'd had a fondness for sushi before packing up for space. He'd never realized that sushi wouldn't be available on the red planet. If he had, maybe he wouldn't have left. No. That was a lie. He'd been young, vigorous, and thought life was an undiscovered bounty and Mars was a place full of adventurous women willing to try anything and scientific discoveries waiting to drop into his hands.

But he'd never found anything groundbreaking. Not like what he'd dreamed of.

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It didn't take Jones long to reach the site Gurd had sent him too. He put the buggy in park, jumped down, walked to the back and pulled out a drone, carrying it far enough from the buggy to prevent any rock spray from damaging the jeep. The drone, a round disc the size of his abdomen, could hover up to a half meter from the ground. The charge lasted a couple hours. Jones programmed the drone to the settings Gurd had provided him along with the coordinates. He sent the drone on its way, and then looked around suspiciously.

Jones had never forgotten the Tablet Incident, though others had stopped mentioning it years ago. At least in his presence. He was sure he heard whispers, people talking when his back was turned. Laughing over how he had run holding that square piece of Martian rock above his head, shouting, "I've found the key to life! I've found the Alien history of our *lives*." They'd made him watch the video, made him a witness to his own red face, panting, tears of joy.

It was only when he reached the geology department that he was told it was a joke. "Look at this rock, Jonesy," David, the lead geologist said. "It's granite. It's from Earth. This is Egyptian hieroglyphic. A bad imitation of it, anyway. Someone put a lot of thought into this."

There hadn't been enough moonshine in the following weeks to dull his senses. There'd even been a woman that week, but he'd been so drunk he couldn't remember who, and no one had ever come forward to admit to spending a great night with him. The morning after waking up with the simultaneous sensations of loose muscles and a pounding head, Laida had assigned him to three months—three months!—at the distant Cheng facility with only one other surly thirty-something-year-old. Jonesy did his time at Cheng, choosing to put it all behind him and put everything he had into his work. He published a record two hundred and twelve papers in his remaining time on the planet. He was a Martian legend.

Jones stepped toward the buggy. A small, flat red rock caught his eye. He was determined to leave it where it was. He hadn't picked up a rock in over twenty years and he wasn't about to start now.

But his fingers itched. There was something about that rock. He reached out. As a child, he'd enjoyed playing in sloughs. He knew what a snail was. He was pretty sure he'd know what a snail fossil would look like. And this looked just like that. Well, maybe a little different. He placed the rock back on the ground. "Those jokers think they can get me again." The rock glinted. He picked it up. He held it up to his mask, inspecting it.

"They can't trick me. Nope. I think I'll get them." Jones tucked the rock into his belt pouch, stepped back into the buggy.

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He activated his comm. “Buddy, I’ve got something for ya. I’m on my way back now. ETA just under an hour.”

“Jonesy! Hurry on down,” Gurd replied. “Shuttle’s about to land. They estimate a restock time of three hours twelve minutes. Take off in four hours twenty-one. Better get your butt on board.”

“Ah, Gurd, you don’t have to pretend to be so excited for me. I know you want my place. Just know that if I find you in my shuttle birth, you’ll have more than a sore jaw.”

Jones’s ride back to the base was uneventful. He took time in the buggy bay to say goodbye, bid everyone a great time wallowing their lives away amongst the red sands of death, at least until the government testing was complete and they decided it was safe for more people to return.

He stopped by the lab to say goodbye. Dayna wrapped him in a tight hug. “Let me know. Let me know how you are as soon as you can. If you get off this rock okay, I’m the next one signing up. I’ve had enough of this should-be black hole.”

“I thought you liked your new promotion?” Jonesy pulled back, looking at her with an eyebrow raised. She’d be doing his job now.

Dayna shrugged. “Sure, nothing like being in charge of exploring a bloody wasteland, right?”

He laughed. She joined him. She sure had a pretty laugh.

Donks stepped up and put his arm on Dayna. They’d been one of the couples to get together on the planet. Donks was always around the corner from Dayna. “Glad to see the last of you,” Donks said to Jones. “I hope you find your own woman back on Earth. Shouldn’t be hard – you can always pay for one. Find some of that scotch you’re always talking about. Smack some back for me.”

Jones tried to smile at Donks, whose thin moustache, slouchy frame, and possessive arms had always pissed him off. “My sister’s already got me three bottles. I can feel my throat tingle already. Smoother than the stuff you make.”

“I know, but since you still have months to go in space,” Donks held out a small glass bottle. “Dayna insisted.”

Jonesy took it from him. “Thanks man, I appreciate it. Take care of my lab.” There wasn’t anyone else he *wanted* to say goodbye to, except Laida, and, well, he had that gift for Gurd. He made his rounds anyway, heading to the comm room only after Gurd started yammering at him that there was less than thirty minutes until take off and crew and passengers were required on board by T-15.

Jones found Laida with Gurd. “Good. I’m glad I got to see you before leaving,” Laida said. “I know we said our farewells at the party last night, but this is more personal.” She hugged him then. He

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smelled roses that existed only on Earth, peonies, lilies. He tried to pull away. She gripped him tighter. “I’m going to miss you.”

He gave her back a single, sharp pat, which was the key to her letting him go. “Well, it’s been nice folks.” He reached into his belt pouch and pulled the rock out for Gurd. “I figured I owed you one.” He handed it to his friend and waited for an apology, an admission, *something* to happen.

Gurd frowned. “What’s this?”

“Thought you’d try to get me one last time, hey, Buddy?” Jonesy smacked Gurd on the back, making his neatly coiffed grey hair bounce.

Laida frowned, looking over Gurd’s shoulder. “It looks like a snail.”

“Sure does,” Jones said. “Used to play with them lots when I was a boy. Can’t fool me this time. Found it at that location the geologists wanted checked out. Good job on the placement. Something so small, I could have easily missed it.”

Gurd opened his mouth. “Jonesy—”

He held up a hand. “I’m not mad.”

Gurd’s face went from white to pink. A smile began to spread across his face. “I’m not playing a trick.”

Jonesy felt the ship swing. No. He wasn’t on a ship, not yet. He was still on the base. It was a joke. It had to be. “Sure, Gurd. Maybe not you, but someone.”

Laida shook her head. “You’re the only one I’ve allowed out today because of the shuttle’s arrival. Besides, after the last incident, you know the punishment in place. No one would risk it.”

Jones’ stomach clenched. “Someone’s brave.”

“Gurd, call David on the comm. Get him up here.”

Gurd radioed down to the geology lab. David arrived panting.

“What is it?” He ripped the rock from Laida’s hands. He stared at it. Hands still. “Where?”

“Jonesy found it.” Laida looked at him, still surprised. “Is this your idea of a joke, Jones? Are you trying to pull one over on us? Thinking you can skirt the punishment?”

Jones shook his fist, insides shaking along with it. “I’m a serious scientist. I don’t joke like that. Not like Gurd did. Not like that tablet. I *found* this. Someone’s playing a joke on me.”

“Get it somewhere secure,” Laida said to David. “Non-destructive tests only. Send the images to Earth for a consult.”

“Wait,” Jones said as David rushed from the room with *his* rock. “Now just wait a minute. You’re telling me that I’m about to leave and that little nugget’s real?”

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Laida reached out for him. He shoved her arms away.

“Jonesy, you’ve got to get on the shuttle,” she said

“No. Nuh-uh. I’m not leaving, not without my rock.”

Laida looked over her shoulder at Gurd, mouthing something he couldn’t make out. “Jones, the rock stays here. You know the procedures.”

“Screw the procedures.”

“You’re going back home, Jones.” Gurd stood up, attempting to calm Jones. “You’re going back to Earth. Real scotch. Real women. Blue skies. Gardens. Flowers.”

“I’ll trade all the flowers in the world for that rock!” Jones pointed uselessly out the door, toward the corridor where David had disappeared, along with the best find he’d ever had. “That’s mine. I found it, and I want it back! I’m not leaving! Not now!” Jones yelled; if this was a joke, the station would have something to talk about for another twenty years. But no one told him it was. No one told him anything except to get on the shuttle. He shouted, “No,” until he felt the prick of a needle in his neck.

He woke up in space. His stomach heaved. It was going to take him a while to get used to anti-gravity again.

“Hey, there’s the Hero.”

He didn’t recognize the man talking to him. One of the shuttle crew. “How long?”

“Long enough for Earth to confirm it’s real. They’ve already found three others where you placed that drone. You’ll be famous.”

Jonesy said nothing. His stomach heaved, filling his mouth with the red sand he thought he’d left behind.