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Hope by Michael A. Burstein

Samantha Evangelina Jones hated the dark, hated the cold, and hated confined spaces. The irony was never lost on her, but it felt most poignant every “morning,” when the generation ship’s computer would wake her up for the Alpha shift.

This particular morning was no exception. The computer’s alarm chimes began softly, as usual, and then became louder and louder, yanking her out of her dream. It had been a good dream, too. She had been walking naked and alone on the spacious surface of a planet, her feet wet from the dew of the cool grass underneath, while above her she saw nothing but blue skies and yellow sunlight. It made her return to the reality of the *Ballyshannon* that much more revolting.

“Off,” she said, and the chimes ceased.

Jones moaned and stretched as she rolled out of her bed. The artificial gravity caused by the spinning of the ship was set to Earth-normal, which had bothered her ever since the last Earth-born on the ship had died ten years ago. She kept asking the engineers about lowering the gravity, and they kept giving her the same runaround, explaining to her why the laws of physics made it a difficult proposition, if not impossible. She would nod her head as she pretended to understand their byzantine explanations. She didn’t actually believe them, but she figured if she kept up the fight eventually, maybe one of them would become smart enough to figure it out.

In the meantime, she dealt. As she did every day of her life.

She walked the few meters to her private bath, a luxury provided only to the captain and the senior officers of the *Ballyshannon*, and one that she privately thanked God for every “Sunday” morning in chapel. Within a minute, she had showered, as the ship’s computer knew to the millisecond how much water was allowed per day to each of the ten thousand, four hundred and sixty-eight humans on board. If she had stayed in the shower any longer, the water would have turned off suddenly, as she knew from years of experience.

Michael A. Burstein

Rank hath its privileges, she thought as the heat lamp dried her off, *but not too many*.

She donned her captain's jumpsuit uniform, checked her appearance in the monitor, and smoothed down a few wrinkles. All according to the usual, mind-numbing routine.

She turned around, getting ready to leave her cabin and head for the bridge, when she saw the stranger flicker into existence in front of her, blocking her way out. He was an odd looking man, with a wrinkled face, long white hair, and a three-days' growth of stubble on his chin. His torn clothing, a brown shirt and tan pants, hung loosely on his slight frame. His eyes seemed haunted and confused, and he darted his head around in apparent disbelief.

"Miracle of miracles," he muttered in a raspy voice. "It worked. It finally worked."

Jones may have cursed her role as captain, but she had to admit to herself she was the right person for the job. Despite having had a stranger—*my God*, she thought, *a stranger!*—materialize in her cabin, she maintained her calm. She quickly evaluated the situation and decided that she was not hallucinating. She began moving her right hand toward her side pocket, where she kept a stylus, in case she needed a weapon.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked, with a touch of anger.

The man stopped looking around and stared at her, his jaw agape. "Captain Jones? You are Captain Samantha Evangelina Jones?"

"Yes?"

"And this is the *Ballyshannon*?"

She narrowed her eyes and nodded. "Yes, it is."

He shook his head and cackled. "It worked. It really worked."

Jones put some more steel in her voice as she closed her fingers on her stylus. "Identify yourself. Now."

"What's the date?"

"The date?" The question surprised Jones even more than the man's sudden appearance in her cabin.

He moved forward, his hands open in plea. "Yes, the date. What's the date?"

With a quick motion, she pulled the stylus out of her pocket and pointed it at the man. "Stop!"

He obeyed. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Step back."

"Okay." He stepped back two paces. "I'd still like to know the date."

“Ship time, it’s—”

“No!” he shouted, and then he shook his head. “I’m sorry. Gregorian. I need Gregorian.”

Jones sighed, but asked, “Computer, what’s the Gregorian date?”

The computer’s flat voice responded, “Impossible to determine precisely without taking into account adjustments for relativistic travel.”

The man said, “Closest estimate, then.”

After a moment, the computer responded. “April 25, 2335.”

He closed his eyes and smiled, smoothing the wrinkles on his face. “Good. Then I’m not too late.”

“Too late for what?” Jones asked, keeping the stylus pointed at the man.

He opened his eyes again and looked directly into Jones’s face, unnerving her. “I’m not too late to save everyone on the *Ballyshannon*.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Captain, you need to turn this ship around. Now.”

Jones pulled her head back and gave the stranger what she hoped was an impudent stare. “Excuse me. I don’t take orders from anyone on this ship. Especially not from strangers who appear out of nowhere.”

“But—” the man began, then cleared his throat. “Of course not. My apologies. But it’s still imperative that you turn the ship around.”

“No. What is imperative is that you tell me who you are, where you came from, and what you are doing here.”

The man stared at Jones for a moment, then nodded. “Of course, of course. My apologies. There’s no way you could yet understand the urgency of my mission.”

“Which you will tell me about as soon as you’ve answered my other questions.”

He nodded again. “Of course. But could I sit down first?”

Jones pointed her stylus at the one chair in her cabin. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” The man eased himself into the chair, which adjusted itself to his contours. He closed his eyes for a moment. “Comfortable.”

“Would you like a beverage?” Jones asked him sarcastically.

He didn’t seem to notice her tone. “No thank you.” He looked around her cabin again. “Wow. The ship looks so young, so new.”

Jones sat down on the edge of her bed. “The ship’s almost one hundred years old.”

“It’s all a matter of perspective. From my point of view, that’s young.”

Michael A. Burstein

Jones shook her head. “You have an odd perspective. Now would you like to tell me who you are?”

“My name is Boranal Reynolds.”

“Reynolds? We have a Reynolds family aboard.”

“I know. They’re my family.”

“Impossible. There’s no one named Boranal Reynolds on board.”

“That’s because I haven’t been born yet.”

“Pardon? How is that possible? And where the hell did you come from?”

Reynolds took a deep breath and let it out in a slow whistle before answering. “I’m a time traveler.”

Jones hesitated, then nodded. “That makes sense.”

“You believe me?” he asked.

“Let’s assume for the moment I believe you, okay? I have a few questions to ask.”

“Ask away. I have nothing to hide.”

Jones pocketed her stylus. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to convince you to turn this ship around. The future of all the lives on board depends on it.”

A few hours later, Reynolds sat in the ship’s makeshift prison cell, while Jones sat in the bridge office consulting with Goranic McGrath, the head of ship security. As the *Ballyshannon* was a generation ship, the administration of the ship was a forced combination of naval discipline and small-town community governing. Jones was captain of the ship but also the mayor-for-life; McGrath served as chief security officer, but most of his work was more like a community’s chief of police.

The *Ballyshannon* wasn’t just a ship; it was a small town flying through the universe.

“Thank you for helping me get Reynolds to the jail without anyone seeing,” Jones said.

McGrath nodded. “His presence would have been difficult to explain.”

“It’s even harder to explain when you see him appear out of nowhere.”

“Actually, that would have made it easier. If you would only let me install cameras throughout the whole ship, and not just in—”

“Goranic. Privacy concerns? Not this, and not now. We’ve got a more pressing problem to worry about.”

“Sorry.”

“So do you believe his story?”

“Which part?”

“Any of it.”

“Let’s break it down piece by piece.” McGrath began to tick off his points with his fingers. “Point number one, is he a time traveler?”

“Yes.”

“The way I see it, either he’s a time traveler or someone who has invented a form of instantaneous teleportation. And if that were the case, why would he make up a story about being from the future? Ergo, he’s a time traveler.”

“You accept that his time machine had to stay in the future?”

“Why not?”

Jones nodded. “Of course, there’s the possibility that we’re both hallucinating.”

“Unlikely. If it were just one of us—”

“It was a joke, Goranic. Next point, please.”

McGrath nodded and ticked off the next point on another finger. “Is he who he says he is? I had the computer do a genetic scan of this Boranal Reynolds and do a comparison with the other Reynoldses on board the ship. The scan indicates a close to one hundred percent certainty that he is a great-grandson of one of the Reynolds family.”

“Who?”

McGrath smiled. “I’d rather not say. Privacy concerns, need-to-know, and all that.”

Jones smiled; McGrath was using her own argument against her. “Very well, but if we need to present evidence to others on the ship—”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” McGrath said.

“What I would give to see a bridge,” Jones said.

A moment passed, and then McGrath said, “So. Point number three. His story.”

Jones nodded. “Yes. Computer, please play the recording of the interview with Boranal Reynolds in the jail cell. Time stamp Alpha one twenty-three.”

A speaker built into the ceiling of the room began playing the dialogue from just a short time ago.

“Captain,” Reynolds had said, “I really resent this treatment.”

Michael A. Burstein

“Put yourself in my position,” Jones had replied. “How am I supposed to explain the existence of a stranger on board the ship? We’re literally light-years away from any other human beings.”

There was a pause, and then Reynolds said, “Okay, I can accept that.”

“Fine. Now explain what you mean, that I have to turn the ship around or else everyone on it will die.”

“Captain, when do you expect to reach the New Beginnings star?”

“One hundred more years or so. The computer can give the exact figure. It doesn’t matter to me; I’ll be long dead.”

“True—I mean, no one lives that long.”

“So won’t most everyone on the ship already be dead by the time we get there?”

“That is also true. I meant to say that the descendants of the current population will die. Does it matter?”

“It does. Now make your statement. Why must I turn the ship around?”

“Give me a moment. This is difficult for me.” There was a pause. “Okay. Here’s the problem. New Beginnings does have a habitable planet, just as everyone expected. But the planet is already inhabited.”

“Aliens?”

“Yes, intelligent aliens who resented our arrival. When the *Ballyshannon* arrived—or maybe I should say arrives—we get massacred. A few of us managed to use the shuttles to get back to the ship, but we’re still flying around out there. And the ship is starting to break down. Chances are the rest of us will die out as well.

“We’ve been doing whatever we can to try to improve our chances. I’ve been working on time travel my entire life, hoping I’d be able to come back in time and avert the disaster. And now I’m here and you’re here, and I’m telling you: turn this ship around now, or you’ll doom the *Ballyshannon* to failure.”

“Computer, stop,” Jones said. She drummed her fingers on the table. “So, what do you think?” she asked McGrath.

“Honestly? I think we’d better turn the ship around.”

She sighed. “Then you believe him.”

“Occam’s razor,” McGrath replied. “The simplest explanation is most likely the right one.”

“Problem is, we can’t just turn the ship around.”

“Why not?”

“Do you want to try to convince ten thousand people that a time traveler from the future has told us we have to turn the ship around?”

McGrath opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. He looked into the distance for a moment and then finally spoke. “I see your point. But with all due respect, captain, the evidence is crystal clear. And you and the senior officers do have the authority to take whatever action you need to ensure everyone’s safety.”

Jones frowned. She thought for a moment, and then decided that McGrath deserved to know. “Goranic, I’m about to let you in on a secret, a big one that only a few of the senior officers know about.”

“What is it?”

“We can’t return to Earth. It’s no longer a habitable planet.”

McGrath’s eyes opened wide. “You’re kidding.”

“Why should you say that? It should be no harder to believe than time travel.”

“I—I suppose you’re right. But the evidence for that is right in front of me.”

“I have evidence for the Earth’s fate, and I’d be happy to—I mean, I’ll share it with you later.”

“What is it, if I may ask?”

“A recording by my father.”

“Ah.” Jones’s father had been captain of the *Ballyshannon* before her. McGrath would know as well as anyone on the ship that Jones’s father could be trusted.

“Exactly. Apparently there were more important reasons to build the *Ballyshannon* other than simply because the human race could. The planet was dying.”

“I always thought we stopped radio contact with Earth to keep people focused on New Beginnings.”

“No, that was just the cover story. In truth, we haven’t had radio contact with Earth in years, because there’s no one there anymore.”

“I guess it’s a good thing no one on board is Earth-born anymore.”

“It is.”

“So. We can’t go forward, and we can’t go back. What do we do?”

Jones pondered the question. Some idea was trying to make itself known to her, but every time she thought she had it, it fled. It felt like she was doing a jigsaw puzzle in her mind, but the pieces were morphing as she tried to place them in the puzzle. . .

She shook the exhaustion out of her head and stood up. “What do we do? I go talk to Reynolds again. Meanwhile, you start figuring out how we should inform everyone on the ship that we have a new face on board.”

The prison cell on the *Ballyshannon* was an afterthought, made necessary five years into the trip when one of the men on board had killed his husband over an illicit affair. The crew had remodeled a utility room and turned it into a cell, with conditions even more Spartan than the already cramped quarters everyone else lived in.

Jones had the computer unlock the cell and she entered without knocking. Reynolds was lying on the bed; given the size of the cell, he had little room to stretch out anywhere else.

When Jones entered, he sat up. “So, have you turned the ship around yet?”

“No.” She sat on the only chair in the room; this one didn’t shape itself to anyone. “I have a few questions first.”

Reynolds sighed. “Every second we’re getting farther from Earth and closer to destruction.”

“Let’s start there. Why did you show up today?”

“Huh?”

“If you really are a time traveler from the future, then why did you show up here and now? If the *Ballyshannon*’s mission is doomed to end in failure, wouldn’t it have made more sense to go back to the beginning?”

Reynolds frowned. “Do you know anything about temporal mechanics?”

“Meaning?”

“Time travel. Do you know anything about time travel?”

“Of course not. Until this morning, I didn’t think it was possible.”

Reynolds nodded. “Then let me explain. Time travel is quantized. I can only go back in time a certain fixed number of years. I couldn’t go back to before the ship was launched; today was the earliest I could arrive.”

Jones pondered this for a moment. “Well then, why can’t you leap back again from this point in time, and keep going until you reach the day of the launch?”

Reynolds shook his head sadly. “Time travel requires an enormous expenditure of energy. I’d have to drain the *Ballyshannon* of every joule to make another jump, assuming I could even build another device.”

“That implies that you already did drain the *Ballyshannon*, in the future.”

He averted his eyes. "It was necessary."

"So how were you expecting to get back?"

Reynolds looked grim. "I wasn't."

"So that means this was a one-way mission for you."

"It was. It is."

Jones stood up. "Damn you."

"What?"

"You heard me. Damn you." She felt the beginnings of tears well up in her eyes and fought them; it wouldn't look good for the ship's captain to cry in front of anyone, especially Reynolds.

"Damn me? Why? I'm the one who's trying to save everyone on the ship."

"That's just it. Damn you for making it necessary for me to make this decision." Jones suddenly felt the weight of all her responsibilities crushing her.

"I'm sorry, Captain. If I could have figured out any other way, if I could have traveled back further in time, I would have. I'm a victim of the situation as much as you are."

"*No one* is a victim as much as I am!" Jones shouted. The words echoed through the room before fading away. It was a few seconds before Reynolds spoke again.

"In my time," he said, "you were remembered as the most important captain of them all, the one who made sure that the mission continued on track. We never saw you as a victim. The future hailed you as a hero."

Jones rubbed her eyes. "I didn't choose my destiny. My parents forced it upon me. My role in life is to be nothing but a transition." She sighed. "I'm a shepherd is what I am. I have a ship full of descendents of one group of planet-born, whose role is to be nothing more than the ancestors for a later generation of planet-born."

"It was hard for us too," Reynolds said.

Jones glared at him. "When our parents left Earth, they just assumed that their children would embrace the choices they had made for us."

"Selfish of them."

"It was, indeed."

Reynolds took a deep breath. "Captain Jones, I sympathize, I truly do, but this doesn't come any closer to solving our problem. I know you believe me; I can tell. So I know that you know that you need to turn this ship around and return to Earth."

"I can't."

Michael A. Burstein

“You *have* to. You have no choice. If you don’t turn this ship around, then in one hundred more years, everyone on it will die.”

“If I do turn this ship around, the same thing will happen.” She hesitated, then told Reynolds the same secret she had just told McGrath. “Earth is no longer a habitable planet.”

Reynolds frowned. “What?”

“I’ll explain it to you later. But believe me when I tell you that Earth is no longer an option.”

Jones watched Reynolds study her face, and then he slumped. “No one ever said anything. Captain—that means my mission was doomed to failure from the outset.” He paused. “I should have stayed in the future for what it was worth. I’m sorry I brought this upon you.”

“You should be.”

Reynolds chuckled. “And I guess I can’t ask you to drop me off somewhere.”

“No, you—” Jones cut off. That was it, the missing piece of the puzzle.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “Maybe we can.”

“I was kidding.”

“No, listen. I can’t turn this ship around and take us back to Earth. But there’s no reason why we have to keep heading toward New Beginnings.”

Reynolds opened his eyes wide. “Of course, of course. There’s still time to figure out another destination.”

Jones nodded. “We’ll have to tell the entire population the truth, though. About you, and about Earth.”

Reynolds stood up. “I’d be happy to testify to anything you need to save—to save my family.”

Jones nodded. “All my life, I wanted to give the people on this ship more than just the pointlessness of their transitional lives. Your presence here will let them know that they will be remembered and appreciated by their descendents.”

“Assuming their descendents survive. Which will be more likely once you change course.”

“But it’s not guaranteed?” Jones asked.

Reynolds shook his head. “My appearance here has completely altered the timeline. I have no idea what the new future will hold. But from what I lived through, it has to be better.”

Jones nodded. “We’ll give them hope. That’s the best I can do.”