

JACK McDEVITT

GLORY DAYS

The operations center, ladies and gentlemen. Contrary to popular opinion, this was the real heart of the starship. This was where things happened. You'll also notice, by the way, that the Venture is the only place on Skyrise that has real artificial gravity. Uh, please, madame, stay on this side of the rope. Landings and ground activities were controlled from here, weather and other local conditions monitored, astronomical efforts coordinated. The Venture was capable of receiving more information every second than is contained between the covers of all the books in the Montague Public Library. The rescue of Matuba was planned and executed from here; and technicians sat at these positions and listened helplessly while Peter Bolieau and his team were destroyed. Bantha Morgan sent the Elian CONTACT message -- Excuse me, sir, could you move a little, just a little, that's good -- from right here. And the last message from outside was received in this room. Unfortunately, we don't know at which position, or by whom. No record exists. And for those of you who count such things, that was eighty-two years ago.

I should have realized right away that Lenny was up to something. I mean, it was a strange time to be pushing a long-handled broom across the bridge. But there he was, shoving the accumulated dirt into a dust pan.

But time was short, and I didn't have time for trivia. "Lenny," I said, "you do know they've ordered the evacuation, right?" This had been coming for weeks, so there were no klaxons, no alarms, no rushing around. By then, there were barely a dozen people left on Skyrise.

Lenny was on one knee, near the command chair, finishing up. Its black leather pads glistened in the soft lighting. I liked the bridge: the illumination was soothing, and it seemed to flow from all the overhead panels and the walls. You never had to squint into a glare, or hold something up to the light. It was a hell of a lot better than ordinary bulbs. Problem was that nobody understood how the lights worked. Like everything else.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Late." I looked at my watch to emphasize the point. We were down under an hour, and nobody was going to wait around. Anybody who was late would head to a better world. "You better get to the Tube."

"I guess." He glanced around the bridge, at the view screens and the consoles and the crew's stations and the ship's schematic. I liked Lenny. Everybody did. He'd started as a tour guide thirty years before, become a station fixture, and was, by this time, a legend. He had always been associated with the starship in one way or another, had arranged concerts in its recreation areas, had orchestrated visits by school children, had passed his waterhole time with the engineers, and had eventually become something of a reigning expert himself. There were even stories that he could talk to the Venture. Not just to the response systems, but to Command & Control. To its inner workings. Well, we all

knew that was mythical; but I also knew this was a hard time for him.

He was close to retirement now, a man of average height and rather ordinary appearance, save for startling blue eyes. His white hair was neatly combed, and he wore the carefully pressed shirt and black string tie which had once been part of the tour guide's uniform. I wished the crisis could have held off a few more months, until Lenny was gone.

"I'll tell you," he said, getting up, and tapping the contents of the dustpan into a bag, "I still can't see why we're giving up without a fight."

I crossed the room and sat in the command chair. It was a good feeling: the chair seemed to radiate power, as if it were connected directly into the heart of the ship. I caught a flicker in Lenny's eyes of barely disguised disapproval. "I don't think it's a case of anyone giving up," I said.

He looked at me as if I should not be allowed out alone after dark. "I wouldn't know how else to describe it."

I'd been through all this. I'd been through it with the Director, with the Board, with the survey team. And I did not feel like going through it again. Even with Lenny. So I sighed, and opened my arms in a plea for understanding, and threw the blue switch. The POWER indicator blinked on. "Activate navigation," I said, talking toward the overhead. It was a spooky feeling.

The systems came to life. Numbers which meant nothing to me slid across displays, lamps went green, and relays clicked in the walls. Main screen showed the Venture's silver hull inserted halfway into its bay at the station hub, like a torpedo awaiting ignition.

"They could have tried," Lenny said.

"They did try, Lenny. You know that. But nobody really understands the equipment. Or what needs to be done." It was okay when the skyhook made its own adjustments, as it had for several hundred years. But things had begun to break down, and nobody knew the firing sequence. Or had the theoretical knowledge to figure it out. If we took a chance and got it wrong, a lot of hardware would go down. There was a city at the bottom of the elevator, and a dozen others along the equatorial track. The price for failure would be catastrophic.

"We're going to lose a lot of technology," said Lenny. He stared at me, as if I personally were responsible for the present situation. "We've known for years this was coming," he said. "Years."

I looked at my watch again, hoping to derail him. He was right, of course: we'd had all the time in the world to look at the problem, try to understand the computers, maybe just figure out how to do it manually. But it was too late now.

"For all we know," he continued, "the thing still works. If someone were willing to take a chance, we could try it. Head for goddamn Star Harbor and Bernham's Swirl. Find out what they're doing. Why they aren't on the radio anymore."

The quantum drive hasn't been fired for two hundred years, Lenny. And there are

no shuttles. No way to get off it once it's disconnected from Skyrise. "Let it go," I said. "We've got things to do."

He seemed to relax a little. "You know," he said, "I used to wonder about that when I first came here. Would the engines work?" He moved behind one of the crew's chairs, took a dust cloth from his pocket, and idly pressed it to the already-gleaming fabric. "What do you think?"

"I doubt it," I said. "You want the truth, Lenny, I think they'd blow up if anyone tried to start them." That was not what he wanted to hear. "Listen," I said, "it's getting late. You might want to get your stuff together and get down to the Tube."

He made himself comfortable. "I'll wait for you, if you don't mind." His brow creased. "I'm not anxious to leave. And my bags are already on the car."

The station was a skyhook, held in geosynchronous orbit over Port Darby, where its long elevator tube was anchored groundside into Broadside Terminal. The weight of the tube was stabilized by a ten-thousand-kilometer-long counterpoise, which trailed out beyond the station like an enormous tail.

The problem was that three moons created a need for periodic adjustments in the station's orbit. And the system had failed. The experts thought the strains on the tube were becoming severe enough to tear it out of the ground, or to drag the station and the counterpoise down in what promised to be a major disaster.

The solution was to cut the Tube. If everything went well, Skyrise would be dragged into space by the counterpoise, and the great shaft that had connected it with Port Darby would disappear into the clouds.

The idea was to cut the Tube as close to the ground as possible, to minimize damage from falling debris. But the presence of the starship added mass and introduced an additional instability. I had been assigned to cut the ship loose, to get it into a higher orbit and away from the station.

"I think," said Lenny, reading my mind, "that we'd be better off, even now, to take our chances, and try to fix the tumble."

I sighed. "You probably wouldn't feel that way if you lived near the base of the Tube," I said.

He nodded. "I know. But you're putting the whole of Colian Age technology up where nobody will ever be able to reach it. I don't think anybody's going to thank us for this."

These are the engines. There are eight of them, although the ship only requires four. This one over here is believed to be the original unit installed in the ship at the time of its construction at Randipor. The star drive operated on a quantum principle that is no longer clearly understood. The ship did not actually cross interstellar distances. Rather, it traveled in the way that an electron does: it blinked out of existence here, and turned up there. Although there was no sense of the passage of time on the ship, the reappearance was not immediate, and the duration is known to have been a function of distance. A

sister ship, the Tau Kai, made the only intergalactic voyage, a flight to the Lesser Magellanic. What's that, son? Do they still work? We don't really know. The status boards say no, but the computers aren't reliable anymore. So if you're wondering whether we could launch the Venture, and travel, say, to Arkard's Star and say hello, the answer is, maybe.

"Jon, are you there?" Ann Tower's voice erupted from the sound system in a burst of static.

"I'm here, locked on, and ready to go."

"Okay. We are going to release the clamps."

I studied the screens. The thick hull of the starship projected from the center of the wheel like a missile that had struck, and become embedded in, its target.

Lenny sat down at one of the consoles. His expression was masked, but the blue eyes were intense.

"Board is going green," said Ann.

Two hundred twenty-some years had passed since the Venture had made port. And secured. They had not intended this to be a final landfall, but they had suspected it would be. As funds and energy dwindled, the ships had looked for homes.

"Okay, Jon. You're clear to go."

But I was getting a red light. Lenny looked at it, smiled, and shook his head.

"Negative. We are still berthed."

"Uh -- Hold on a second."

Lenny stowed the cleaning gear in a supply locker behind the door. "I'm surprised Singh committed himself to this. He really doesn't know whether it can be done."

Yes we do, Lenny. We're not idiots. "We ran tests last night. Did everything except fire the thrusters. We'll be fine."

"I hope so." He looked amused. "Singh guaranteed the ship would be away from the station, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said. "We should have done it earlier."

"I suppose. But I think everyone's reluctant to let it go."

"How's it read now?" asked Ann.

The red lights blinked. Flickered. Went green.

"Okay. I think we're clear."

Lenny watched, saying nothing. His face was a mask.

"Listen," I said. "I know this is hard on you."

His eyes cooled and became very distant.

I looked around the bridge. The first time I'd seen it had been in a picture in a third or fourth grade book. They'd had the positions marked, but I only knew a couple: helmsman there, navigation on the Captain's left, five more positions for God-knew-what, the wall-sized viewscreen (which had not worked during the lifetime of anyone currently on the station), a coffee cup which was reputed to have belonged to Ilena Cott herself.

Well, Lenny was probably right. Who today could build a shuttle? Goodbye, Venture.

"Is there anything else we need to move out of the ship?" I asked him. We had not tried to salvage individual pieces of equipment. No one understood how it worked, or the way it was strung together. Consequently, the decision had been taken to leave it intact. For some future generation.

"No."

There was something in his tone, something that caught my ear, and left me looking closely at the old man's features, to extract some hidden significance. Lenny stared back, vaguely defiant.

"Once it starts," I said, "we'll have five minutes to get clear before the ship moves."

"Okay."

I looked up toward the overhead. "Navigation: exit program. Execute."

The screen at the navigation console snapped on. Lights at several positions winked. The figure 5:00 appeared on the board and began a countdown.

I got out of the chair. "Okay," I said, "let's go."

This is C3, the Combat Control Center. The Venture was built during the height of the Dragon scare, when people thought an actual invasion was under way. The Dragons, apparently, were just passing through, but they were unrelentingly hostile to everything they met. What's that, son? Oh, no, they weren't really dragons, but they came out of the Draconian cluster. Actually, we never found out where they really originated. The Venture was with the Fleet at Korman Point and in the Gap. It was hit several times, and some of the burn marks remain to this day. You can see discolored metal at the forward weapons clusters, for example. The captain at that time was Ilena Cott, whose somewhat fictionalized story has been recounted in W. T. Bolden's celebrated frontier novels. Several excellent histories have been written about this period, and about the Venture's role in the war against the Dragons. Most are available in the station bookstore.

We stepped through the hatch into the jetway. The change from ship's gravity to the station's spin-weight always affected my balance, and I hated it. I took a moment to orient myself, while Lenny closed the airlock.

Two minutes.

I disengaged the jetway, which was the last physical link with the starship. "That's it," I said.

He nodded, and touched the cold gray hull. The first number of her fleet designation, a five, was partly visible, cut off by the sealing ring.

I'd worked with Lenny a long time, but I'd never seen him like this before. He was moody, and sometimes downright cranky. But he had subsided into a weather-beaten silence that I didn't like at all. "You okay?" I asked him.

"I'm fine," he said.

I'd have liked to throw an arm around him, reassure him, tell him everything would be okay. But his manner deflected any thought of commiseration. Later, I decided. On the way down.

"Jon." The voice came out of the P.A. It belonged to Radley Haines, the last security guy left on board. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I hear you."

"Good. Is Lenny with you?"

"He's here."

"Okay. You two should get down here as quick as you can. As soon as we're all here, we'll clear out."

The trip to the surface would require three hours and ten minutes. Separation, which would be accomplished by blowing the Tube apart, was three hours and forty-four minutes away. Not a big safety margin, but it was decent.

We reached the end of the jetway, slipped through another hatch, and entered the station. Lenny seemed to be breathing hard, so we slowed down. "We've got plenty of time," I said.

He nodded. "I know," he said.

The broad, sterile corridors were empty. There had been a time when they'd been filled, crowded with tourists and travelers, people who'd wanted to say they'd been here, had seen this wonder of the old world. But they'd stopped coming when the strains had begun to show, when the first warnings had appeared in the newspapers. Six months ago, the Parks Department had shut down all non-official travel.

I counted off the last of the five minutes, standing in front of The Mixed Bag,

which had been a shopping emporium when I'd first come to Skyrise. Its M hung sideways. "Okay," I said, "that should be it. The Venture is on its way."

Lenny nodded. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

When I was sure he was all right, we started again down the long arcing corridor. We came across Bill Kuiperman, dragging his luggage. And Maura Tenley, her arms folded, staring gloomily out at the velvet sky. All three moons were visible, floating tranquilly among the stars.

I gave Bill a hand with his bags, and Lenny drifted close to Maura, whispered something to her, and pulled her away. A minute later, we rounded a corner and had a clear view of the Terminal. Several people waited in the corridor.

The group's mood was generally upbeat. They were glad to be getting out, and were annoyed that they'd been kept on Skyrise until the last possible minute. Two were talking sports.

"Jon." Ann's voice. Flat and cold. "Jon, wherever you are, answer up, please."

"I'm at the terminal, Ann. What's wrong?"

"We have no movement. The thrusters didn't fire."

My mouth went dry. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The car that would take them down the tube waited, cool and gleaming, in the boarding area. Two cargo loaders were at the rear, and a technician stood by the cockpit with a checkoff sheet.

Son of a bitch. Everything had gone like clockwork last night. "Okay," I said. "I'll go back and try again."

Lenny moved up next to him. "You're getting a little short of time," he said.

This is typical of the quarters assigned to members of the settlement teams. Two persons would have occupied this space. You'll notice they're somewhat snug. There are more than a thousand accommodations of this type on board the Venture, enough to carry a complete outpost, with all its equipment. Among the more celebrated settlements launched by this ship were Brandiput, the appropriately named Devil's Beach, and Vikry. Vikry, by the way, is known to have survived well into this century and was still in communication as late as 1163. Yuri Kassa started his pilgrimage in one of these units; Ronda Sateen made the last of her Voyages in this compartment; and Michael O'Brien developed his lightbender technology here. The marines who saved Morningside and Korman Point were quartered here.

You can't run all out down those passageways. The gravity created by spinning the station ring is always off center, and is also less than ground-normal. But

I hurried as fast as I could, and I crashed into a few walls enroute. I concentrated on the procedure, rerunning the steps I'd taken, trying to think where things might have gone wrong. I had to stop at the entrance to the jetway to get the hatch open, and I became aware of footsteps hurrying behind me.

It was Lenny, and he looked, I don't know, determined, upset, frustrated. All those things.

"Go back," I said.

"You'll need help."

I spotted a callbox and got through to Singh. "I'm not sure we can do this under the time limit," I said. "Can you get a delay?"

"I'll try." He sounded worried. "But they've told us there would be no extension."

We were into the jetway now and running. "Do what you can," I said. And, to Lenny: "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Ship's old, Jon. If the problem's with the thrusters, there might not be anything we can do. You were using a direct computer link. The ship has a central C&C function, Command and Control. We can try going right into that, and let the ship manage things. That might bypass the problem."

"Can we get it to work? Do you know how to do it?"

"Maybe." He pulled up to catch his breath, and I almost collided with him. "I need you to go back to the station."

"What?"

"To my quarters. There's a stack of ship's manuals in the bookracks. One of them's Command and Control Functions. I need you to get it for me."

"Dammit, Lenny. I can't go running off at a time like this."

"Then you're going to have to figure it out for yourself."

Son of a bitch. That was a terrible thing to ask me to do. Lenny had arrived at the airlock and was punching in the code.

I stood and glared at him. "What will you be doing?"

"Trying to get us started." The door started up. "We don't have much time to debate this."

I must have whined something because he clapped me on the shoulder and told me to pull up my socks. Then he was trundling ahead, moving more easily in the ship's artificial gravity field. The crew lived in a section called the Blue Zone. It was several minutes away from the airlock, and up two levels from the main promenade. I sprinted back through the station, goaded by pleas from Ann

and Singh to get the ship moving, and from Haines to get back to the terminal. By the time I'd reached Lenny's compartment, Haines's cries had turned to dire threats that he was not going to hold the car, could not hold the car, and that we were cutting severely into the safety margin.

I'd spent a fair amount of time in Lenny's place over the years. We'd enjoyed drinking and speculating on why Star Harbor had stopped broadcasting in the middle of a transmission, or whether Inkasa had ever shaken off its totalitarian government. Whether we'd ever hear from any of them again. Whether our own government could be funded into supporting the construction of a transmitter that might communicate with the far worlds. There had been landscapes on the walls then, and pictures of the Venture orbiting a star or taking a shuttle onboard. Lenny had also owned a small library of about two dozen books. Paper books were rare on the station, but he'd been accumulating them for years. They'd been neatly stored on two shelves of a small bookcase.

The room looked sterile now. Abandoned.

And the shelves were empty.

I opened doors, peered into closets and bathroom. Delivered some choice invective. Felt a warm panic bubbling up in my stomach. I stumbled back out into the corridor and opened a channel to the bridge.

"Lenny."

"Here, Jon." He sounded painfully calm.

"Lenny, where are they? I don't see any manuals."

"Aren't they on the bookshelf?"

"No. There's nothing on the bookshelf." I could hear the crackle of static in the circuit.

"Maybe it won't matter. I think I've got it figured out."

"Good." I started back. Hesitated. "You sure?" I was reluctant to leave the apartment without doing a more thorough search.

"Probably."

"Okay. I'm on my way."

"No. We're out of time, and there isn't really anything you can do here anyhow. You might as well go back to the Tube. I'll meet you there."

But I wasn't going to allow that. I ran through the crew's quarters, down to Main Level, around to the jetway entrance. Haines's voice caught me there. "Jon, please." He sounded almost in tears. I glanced at my watch. If the car left now, they would reach the terminal eight minutes before the bombs went off.

"Hang on," I cried. I don't know what that meant.

The airlock into the Venture was shut. I literally went to my knees, wondering what the damn fool was thinking of, and poked in the code. The door rose.

"Don't come in," said Lenny.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't been able to bypass the system. But I can override it."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I can take the ship out manually."

I froze. "You can't do that. You won't be able to get out afterward." "If I don't do it, she stays in the cradle."

I looked back at the airlock. Down the long jetway. And opened a channel to Operations. "Singh?"

"I'm here. I've been listening."

"What do we do?"

I could visualize him standing over the console, headphone in place, the sleeves of an immaculate white shirt rolled onto his forearms. "Jon," he said, "do what it takes. But find a way to kick the Venture free."

"I'm not sure we can do it."

"Jon. That's all that matters."

Lenny's voice: "I need the airlock closed."

I stared at the open hatch.

"Lenny," said Singh, "Thanks."

"No, Lenny." It was the worst goddam minute of my life.

"Close the airlock," Lenny pleaded. "Stay or go. Whatever you want. But close the lock. We're out of time."

"For God's sake, Jon," said Singh. "Do it."

The shining interior of the starship seemed to lose definition. "Lenny --"

"Go on. Get out. There's no point in everybody staying."

Something went wrong, and the Venture arrowed out of orbit, and sailed into space. Otherwise, the separation went smoothly, which is to say we wiped out a goodly array of hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and assorted tourist traps on the ground. But we'd evacuated them and nobody got killed.

Astronomers were able to keep the ship in view for about six months. Then it simply passed into the dark.

A lot has been written about Lenny's heroism during those final moments. And I don't sleep as well as I used to. People reassure me that there was nothing I could do, no reason for me to sacrifice myself, no reason to shoulder blame.

Maybe I got out of there a little too quick. Maybe I felt too relieved when the airlock closed behind me, and sealed me off forever from any possibility of riding with him.

There was talk for a while of going after him with one of the old shuttles. But none could be found that seemed to offer even a remote chance. And, although there was no shortage of volunteers, in the end nothing came of the plan.

He talked to us occasionally. Told us not to lose sleep over him. Said he had plenty of food and water. No one quite understood where that had come from, but fortunately the ship was well-stocked. And he announced that he was satisfied. That he was with the big ship, and that she was not alone.

That remark, or variations of it, were repeated several times. They caused some to suspect that Lenny had gone over the edge, and project managers were pleased when, without warning, the broadcasts stopped. Several days later, the ship drifted beyond the range of our telescopes.

Port Darby, which might have been the recipient of the entire structure had it been left to come down, scheduled a Day for Lenny. Cities along the equator, which also recognized him as a common benefactor, staged parades in his honor.

But something odd happened. Or didn't happen, rather. His luggage never showed up. Nor his books, which he would never have wanted to leave behind on the station. I think about that, and the missing manuals, and how the thrusters didn't respond when I tried my luck. And the fortunate circumstance of the stocked larder. And it's pretty clear what really happened up there.

There's only one real question in my mind, and it concerns his motivation. Is he drifting through the dark now in a ship that he couldn't bring himself to leave?

Or is he out somewhere getting firsthand answers about Star Harbor and Bernham's Swift?