

Hellfire Van Winkle and the Aliens

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Hellfire Van Winkle sped toward Edith of Scotland, the smaller of Henry I's two moons.

"So you thought you could hide here?" he muttered aloud as the alien encampment showed up on his sensor screen. "Hell, if I could find the last Landship in the jungles of Peponi, I can sure as hell find a military outpost on a dead moon."

He fell silent again, the current moment less real to him than the past. He remembered the sights and smells of Peponi, the feel of the thornbush as it scraped against his safari jacket, the taste of cold pure water on a hot afternoon, the thrill of the hunt, the adrenaline rush when he finally got a Demoncat or a Sabrehorn or a Landship in his sights.

What the hell was he doing here, fighting aliens he'd never seen in a ship he hadn't adjusted to in a section of the Frontier that hadn't even been mapped when he was a young man? He was not only half a galaxy away from where he wanted to be; he was millennia away.

Time hadn't so much passed him by as played a nasty trick on him. He didn't fit here, didn't belong in this era, wasn't comfortable anywhere except perhaps the Outpost, where he could rub shoulders and swap stories with other misfits. But misfits though they all were, none fitted in as awkwardly as Hellfire Bailey. (Make that Hellfire Van Winkle, he corrected himself with a grimace; one more example of Time thumbing its nose at him.)

Yes, he'd outlived his time, no question about it. Now he had to prove that he hadn't outlived his usefulness as well.

The problem was that he was tired of outliving things. He should have been dead and buried 4,700 years ago. He hadn't enjoyed the past dozen years, and he didn't anticipate enjoying the next dozen either.

So if I survive this battle, what will I do with the rest of my life? Just sit around remembering the past and feeling cheated because it was taken away from me before I was through with it? That's no way for anyone to live.

His mind made up, Hellfire Van Winkle yelled out a "Geronimo!" that no one else could hear, aimed his ship at the very center of the military encampment, and increased his speed.

Just before he hit, he idly wondered if the explosion would be visible all the way to the Outpost. He was not surprised to discover that he didn't really give a damn.