



Chapter 20: The Left Stuff

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Heinrich looked over at June, who wasn't taking her eyes off the front of the room, where the man in the light blue suit was continuing to fiddle with the holo player, cursing occasionally.

"Is this going to be much longer?"

"Its almost ready!" He snapped.

"Alright, geez..." June remained silent. She fiddled with the cat pin she always wore on her shirt.

"There, finally." The man murmured. The hologram lit up, it was a man dressed in the fashions of, oh, forty years ago? He was wearing a light blue dress shirt, the same shade as the suit of the man in the room, with a black tie with Pink Floyd rainbow prisms on it. The sleeves were rolled up to the elbow's so perfectly, that it had clearly been done by an assistant. He held a tumbler of some dark amber liquid, probably scotch but it could have just as easily been some cider or juice, and swirled it in a manner that said "this doesn't need to be swirled, but it looks good for the cameras." He began to speak.

"Hi, I'm Heirum J. Whitehead. You might be wondering exactly why you're here today. The answer to that question might surprise you. Well, not totally, if everything has gone according to plan you've been offered a lot of money to be here." June adjusted her mouth and tilted her head in a sort of "yeah, fair enough" gesture. "And if things have continued to go well, then you'll be a pair of people with the skills to both travel in deep space for a long time and conduct an investigation and salvage operation. If you can't do that, you probably should just leave because this job will involve being out in space for literally months, and that's even if you guys develop super fast warp drives by the time this reaches you."

No, they hadn't.

"Regardless, today is September 1st 2226, and if you chose to accept this mission you'll be on your way to the farthest reaches of the Solar system very soon. Now what could I be sending you to do? Good question!" A big map of the solar system appeared in the hologram, and the planet Neptune lit up. The hologram zoomed into Neptune as it moved and Heirum narrated over it. "Now next year in 2227, we're going to have a real whopper of an event. You see Neptune there, the big shiny one? Well its going to go to the edge of the solar system, beyond Pluto and Charon even. It will essentially be the farthest thing from the sun in the solar system. I say essentially just so somebody in the audience who is a nitpicker isn't talking about some speck of dust or floating teapot that's out there or whatever." June and Heinrich looked at each other as the Neptune model moved to the outer edge of the system just as he'd said. This was quite the dead guy.

"Now please, ask your questions and I'll answer them from the beyond the grave." June sighed, "I'll play along. Okay, so why do we need to go to Neptune when its the farthest away from the solar system?"

"Now as you just asked, why are we going to Neptune at this weird time? Well I'll tell you first off: its so those corporate bastards on Earth can't see what's going on. But there's also two other reasons, so lets start off Chronologically shall we?"

The Holoprojector put up a bunch of images of smiling Cosmonauts waving to people. "I'm sure you've all heard of the Space Race, you know back when men were men, women were women, and monkeys and dogs did all the real leg work of seeing if space killed you? Yeah, great old times then. Kinda racist and sexist, but that's what the intern said I should follow that with. Anyways the Russians, who were as commie as Mars wants to be, and please tell me its not Commie now, I really hope that isn't working out-

"I thought he was just complaining about coprat-

"SHH!"

"-decided they wanted to see how long living beings could survive if you shot em straight out into space. Boom! Rocket to nowhere. So they popped two puppies in a rocket and zoomed them out to the middle of nowhere." The holoprojector showed two puppies in spacesuits wagging their tails enthusiastically, clearly not knowing why everyone was so excited around them.

"The Dogs were actually free to roam around the capsule. They wanted em to live as long as possible,

so puppies. Probably a big peeing mess up there, or maybe they used catheters or something, I don't care. Main point is: puppies shot into space. Grand adventure. American ingenuity... Er, Russian. Whatever. Here's where it gets funny though: the Russians get something, some piece of info. Maybe it was a signal, or something weird in their telescope, and decide to send the dogs over to Triton, the biggest moon of Neptune. Also the coldest damn place you can set foot in the solar system, I wouldn't wanna go there, which is why I'll be paying you to. Now I know what your next question is..."

"...What did they think they were going to find on Triton?"

"Did the puppies survive? Well, it was a twelve year trip to Triton, but actually the puppies did make it. Now here is the funny thing you weren't thinking: what did they think they were going to find on Triton?"

"Ugh."

"We can't be certain, but we have a big clue: in 1979, Neptune's orbit took it farther out of our solar system than Pluto. 1979 was the point that the rocket was carefully diverted to Triton. Now the rocket had already been out there for, oh, five or six years, and the course change was an inconvenient one. They could have gotten a much more straight shot if they'd planned it that way. So something clearly changed when 1979 came. Neptune stayed there in the outside till 1999, but we never learned what was learned from all of it. Any Soviet records on the aftermath are long gone at this point I'm afraid. So that's your mission: go to Neptune, find the now very old dead dogs, and find what the hell was going on on Titan that the Soviet's were willing to send their puppies there. Any questions? Good cause I don't know how I'd answer them. I'm Heirum J. Whitehead, and I'm probably better than you."

The hologram cut out.

"...Was that guy for real?" June said, cocking her head.

The man in the light blue suit began packing up the Holoprojector. "He is very much for real. Mr. Whitehead's estate is willing to pay for your entire expedition, all expenses covered, with a generous salary and bonus if what you find is of any use."

"That sounds great and all," she interjected, "but how can we know we'll get paid at all?"

"Once you agree to the terms of the deal, you will be tagged with a tracking microchip, and paid your entire salary. If you attempt to run off with it, you will be executed because you have a tracking chip in you that can also electrocute you to death.

"Fun." Heinrich mused, "Well, I'm in." June didn't look so sold, "Its a solid paycheck if its legitimate..."

"Its not just solid, this is retire in a private mansion money right here." She nodded, "Which is what makes me worried. Why is the money so high for this?"

"The fee was made by Heirum investing in several stocks, leaving the sale of them to be the eventual fee so that interest didn't dilute the fee. Those Centro subsidiary companies have since done very well in the open market. Ridiculously well. My job is to fill out Mr. Whitehead's estate to the T. This isn't some conspiracy, miss." June scrunched her lips up and thought for a moment. "Alright screw it, I'm in. Lets go find Russian puppies."

The man in the light blue suit smiled, "Then it its my joy to welcome you on the pilgrimage to the farthest land. The Hierophant Group is glad to have you aboard."

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Space is long and dark, and the further you go into it the more you are surrounded by what amounts to nothing. You can't tell the difference a lot of the time, the specks aren't particularly different sizes to the naked eye, and a journey between worlds is mostly heading towards one blip of light till it starts getting bigger than the other blips. Its for that reason that many people on long space trips choose to go to sleep, letting their bodies be chilled and nearly frozen as they parse through the most worthless and boring part of Space Travel. How long it took Heinrich and June is an academic question: they certainly

traveled with technology beyond our own, but it still took them long enough they wrapped themselves up in pressurized cocoons and let themselves be chilled into a slumber. They dreamt oh so much during that time, dreams that went on for days, or what seemed like days, as their sleep cycle turned into one of hibernation, and in their cocoons they floated, in their little metal rocket whose computers had long ago figured out the trajectory of every piece of space debris on their course and adjusted for it. The trip was boring, and if they had been thinking rather than snowmen, they might have wondered if space travel had really been worth it if the adventure wasn't there.

I wish I could tell you that they were hit by pirates, or an errant piece of debris, or something went wrong with the ship, or the computer rebelled against them and decided to kill them off in order to resolve some errant issue in its programming, but nothing happened. Billions of light-years away, a star died, but its light shone on like nothing had happened on the little ship, as it approached Neptune. The automatic systems in the cocoon's were alerted by the main computer that they were within range, and began the very slow process of warming up its guests. The temperature was raised by a fraction of a degree at a time, the flesh carefully monitored to make sure there was no frostbite or other damage. Slowly, they were thawed, until they had reached normal body temperature. There was no need to worry about muscle loss during the journey, the cocoons had kept the bodies in great shape, and stimulated growth as necessary during the sleep. They might have even been healthier when they woke up, neatly dressed in loose comfortable clothing on firm but comfortable beds. June was still wearing her cat pin, which seemed to Heinrich would have been a real danger towards skin damage during freezing, but she seemed fine.

“Hello, my name is WeN-D, I am your computer for this journey. Welcome to the Van Winkle, we are approaching your destination shortly!” a cheery female computer voice chimed out. Heinrich wanted to grumble something about getting stuck with a generic WeN-D brand Artificial Intelligence unit, but his tongue was still getting used to being awake, and it was actually surprising they'd been given an AI unit at all on this trip since it was a straight shot journey with no real dangers. Even pirates wouldn't bother with a bare bones sleeper vessel like this one, as the cost of raiding it would often be more than the raid would garner. After a while, he found feeling in his tongue, and talked back to the AI.

“Hi there WeN-D, how much longer till we hit the location?”

“You have one 24 Earth hour period to regain full bodily motion.” He rubbed his wrists and nodded, sliding his legs gently off the side of the table. There was artificial gravity here, another luxury. Maybe this ship wasn't as cheap as he'd thought it would be.

“Surprised?” June asked.

“A bit, this is a sleeper ship, I know we have to get ourselves woken up and re-familiarized with things.... But artificial gravity? An AI?”

“The AI isn't too surprising, Heirum J. Whitehead our deceased benefactor owned a company, Talinata Softworks, that built AI's before it got shut down by the government.” He nodded, he'd learned something about that in school growing up in Dusseldorf, it had kind of slipped his mind though.

“That is correct,” the AI chimed in, “and Mr. Whitehead wanted to make certain anyone on board the ship was comfortable.” June stood up before Heinrich, and walked a circuit around the room, testing her feet and flexing her muscles, then she stopped, “WeN-D, why are there so many extra freezing pods.”

“The ship was purchased from an Earth military corporation cheaply, as it was a failed prototype.”

“What exactly did it fail at?” Which was a question really should be asking.

“The ship was supposed to contain revolutionary stealth technology, unfortunately by the time it was built technology to countermand that had already been created. The ship was purchased for slightly more than its cost in scrap, and I was installed to figure out how to run its systems, as its computers had been totally wiped before the sale.” It all made sense, it was all so very neat, but Heinrich could tell

from June's face it sounded too neat and simple.

"Still, all the extra space and oxygen on the ship is a huge costly waste for transporting two people."

"I didn't design this mission, June Barker. I am merely its caretaker." She nodded.

"I guess we'd better get ourselves ready for the rendezvous and pick up these dead dogs." Heinrich nodded, "Its obvious though isn't it, they have to know they found something, something the Russian's didn't want to talk about back then for some reason." She shrugged, and stretched her hands up above her head to the luxuriously high spaceship ceiling. The floor was even carpeted, and felt soft and comfy against their toes.

"Maybe there is. Whatever it is, its a minimum of 250 years old now. Probably just some fancy rock that tells us secrets of the universe if you analyze it or something. I don't think we're looking at anything dangerous Heinrich."

He began his own circuit of the room and shook his head, "You know exactly what I'm thinking though, right?" She rolled her eyes, "It's not a goddamn alien spaceship Heinrich. Gah."

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Triton looks so similar to Earth's moon in many ways from a distance, its that sort of whitey-beigey moondust color that screams "I'm an object in space! Land on me! Explore me!" Of course Triton is nothing like that, and seems to be doing such an intense job of rebelling against its parent planet that it's a wonder Neptune keeps it around at all. Of course, it was adopted by Neptune, a big chunk of spherical rock swiped out of the Kuiper belt, orbiting Neptune the opposite direction Neptune travels. It's also ridiculously cold, clocking in at -237.6 Celsius, and ridiculously flat, not varying over a kilometer in its surface level. As the Van Winkle got closer and closer, its two human crewmembers were rather unimpressed. The icy plains were nothing new, the rocky outcrops nowhere near as impressive as the ones they had seen on trips to Mars, but WeN-D was like a little kid.

"Look at that, we're almost on a whole different celestial body!"

"Yes, WeN-D, we' know. It's nothing special." June muttered.

"I'm taking pictures, I mean I have to take them regardless, but I'm going to be going over these later. Fantastic!"

"You really find this awe inspiring?"

"Its rather sad you don't. I was programmed to take joy in discovery."

"Its just a job."

"Anything is 'just' that unless you look for what's special about it."

Heinrich leaned in, and pointed out the viewscreen. "That looks special to me." June pulled the towel she'd had over her eyes off, and looked out as well. That was unusual. That was unexpected. There was the Russian spacecraft, right where it should be, all valves and hatches and insect like landing gear... But it was hooked up to a building. A building on Triton. Un-colonized Triton. Triton that wasn't even worth mining. Triton that was too cold to bother colonizing at all. They stared at the building, it was weathered and cracked... It was clearly older than the Russian spaceship. Heinrich and June stared at the building, then at each other, then at the building.

"Do you see something wondrous now?" WeN-D mused.

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June and Heinrich took the normal amount of care putting their spacesuits on, which is to say, the most delicate. They carefully checked every seal, made sure there were no weaknesses. Triton was the coldest place outside nothingness and some experimental test chambers somewhere. It was a cold wasteland filled with Cryo-volcanoes and frozen fields where freezing to death was the natural order. On other worlds with only a bit of terra-forming, the natural order could be shifted so that growth could

happen, even if that growth was only under an environmental dome. Triton was littered with the failed attempts to tame the bland wilderness there: a shattered dome to build a forest in here, a stone-faced mummy there. Sometimes they froze in place, without even having the decency to act like they were dead. They were usually blown away by the fierce ripping winds, but occasionally someone died in the shield of a rock face, and they would be standing there in memoriam, their feet rooted to the soil, staring as if waiting for the next face to come by to join them in their sentinel service. They looked at each other through the thick faceplates of the spacehelmets, their breath echoing in their ears as it was filtered by the suit's internal systems so it didn't fog up the aforementioned faceplate.

"Are you ready?" Heinric's voice came in crystal clear through the suit's built in speakers, even being transmitted to her so it sounded as though it came from the direction he was standing in. It was a normal thing, but someone being so far out from Earth, the farthest one could be without leaving the solar system mad June marvel at it: humans had made that, and it was fantastic.

"Yeah, I'm ready. I'm a bit worried though. This is certainly abnormal."

"I'll be watching both of you carefully, and will head for violent extraction if your lives are in danger." WeN-D's voice chimed in through her speakers. It somehow gave the impression the voice was in her head, which was creepy. "WeN-D, what is a 'violent extraction'?"

"I'll crash the ship through the building to extract you. Don't worry, I have perfect awareness of your physical form through the sensors in your suits." June nodded, though it was barely noticeable.

"Great. Well, we hope that's not necessary." There was a jostle, the familiar dampened impact of the ship landing, and the pair of them stepped over to the airlock. After pressing a few buttons, Heinrich involuntarily gulped as the decompression happened. He knew it did nothing, but it always felt like it did something. As the last of the air was forcibly sucked from the chamber, the light on the door in front of them turned green. June stepped forward silently, and turned the switch.

The door lowered like a ramp, and in fact became a ramp, rustling up a tuft of dust from the moon's surface. Stepping out onto Triton was like nowhere else they had either been in the solar system. The sun was nearly indistinguishable from any other pinprick star in the sky, aside from the fact that it was far brighter than any of them. There was only starlight, and the imposing side of Neptune that would soon enough be turned away from them, leaving Triton facing away from everything they had known, staring out into the spangled blackness.

June didn't wait for Heinrich to say anything, she just began walking towards the building.

They bounded through the low gravity, their boots bouncing off the ground. Heinrich felt like a child, he'd dreamed of this as a kid in corporate Germany, and though this wasn't the first time he'd done this by far, it never lost its joy. He felt just like he did when he watched the video of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, like he was lifting off the ground, his eyes wide in the darkened classroom. This was what he'd always wanted. June looked like she was going to work, she bounded with precision, her eyes fixed on the target.

"Heinrich?"

"Yeah?"

"We'd know if someone had moved this much material here this long ago. This isn't possible."

"And yet, its here." She kept her face stern as she lifted off the ground, bounding towards the building. She didn't reply, but he knew she was thinking something about this. She was worried. They finished their leaping towards the building, and up close it became clear that the writing on it was mostly in modern day English, though with some words the pair of them didn't recognize. The structure didn't just seem worn from the eternal frigid storm, but looked like it had been torn out of somewhere, literally ripped up from the ground. The edges of it resembled something like a parking lot, the closer one got there was a side walk, and even a few sturdy steel lampposts. Closer still, they found a small lawn of frozen grass. June said nothing, even as Heinrich pestered her with the obvious questions that kept being percolated. "We need to go inside," she finally said, even though the last thing Heinrich said had been, "Okay, so this was clearly moved here from somewhere else, clearly, but that's utterly

impossible, I mean..." Heinrich just nodded, and they paced around the building looking for entrances. They found three, but two were locked and frozen shut. The third was to, at first. As they ran their gloved fingers along it, the door flashed with heat. Motors sprung to life inside it, and it slowly began to wind itself up. Both of them stepped back. Heinrich found his hand trembling despite himself. June coldly ducked under the opening door, and Heinrich waited a few moments, watching the legs of her suit slowly reveal themselves from under the door, before deciding it was probably safe, and ducking inside as well.

"My sensors indicate you're inside the facility?" WeN-D asked timidly. Heinrich had never heard an AI timid before in that way... Timid for the skeezy businessmen who went to talk to the AI's who acted like stereotype schoolgirls maybe, but never honestly timid, never timid in the way that sounded too uneven and trying to sound strong to be intentional.

"Yes WeN-D, we're inside. There is an airlock... For some reason." The airlock was clean, the kind of airlock you saw in old science fiction movies where everything was matte grays and shiny silvers, except there were also striking green lines and reliefs, and something which was pretty clearly showing the city of Atlantis (the words "Project Atlantis" above the image was a big tip off).

"Hardly under the sea is it?" June did not look like she was amused.

"I've never heard of a 'Project Atlantis', especially not one doing space work."

"There's not."

"I checked all my records and databanks. While there have been some companies named Atlantis in the past, there are none who have used this logo. There was an Atlantis candle company..." WeN-D said, as though she was trying to reassure herself.

"Shut up." June said.

"That's hardly-"

"SHUT UP." A bead of sweat rolled down her brow. A light built into the other door of the airlock that hadn't previously been visible lit up green, strobing across their faces. The sound of machinery began, that knocking sound like an old heater and the scraping sound of old gears that hadn't moved in years. The door moved up slowly two inches, and then shot up into the ceiling. The light from inside was practically blinding at first, and Heinrich began to take a step back.

"Sorry! Sorry! We're blinding you aren't we?" the woman in the gray pencil-skirt and blazer combo said. "I told you it would be too much," the six foot five man whose skin looked like it was coated in television screens added. "Bark!" said the two dogs, who leapt at the pair in the airlock, wagging their tails excitedly and who continued leaping excitedly as the tall man said, "down, down Tolstoy. You to Catherine, down!" the dogs calmed down a bit, though their tails were still thumping against the walls enthusiastically.

"I'm Graelyn Scythes, and this is Archenemies Von Ahnerabe. Welcome to the remains of Atlantis!"

June's jaw had dropped like she was in a cartoon. Heinrich wasn't sure what to do with his face, and it looked blank in confusion. There was a long silence, and both parties just stared at each other, till June finally broke it,

"What the hell?"

Are we allowed to ask "What's going on???" You'll find out next week on 10,000 Dawns, same Dawn time, same Dawn place!