

BLANCHLAND

BLUES



TOM DELL'ARINGA

Smooth Jazz and Crash Landings

John MacAlister was about to crash.

Unaware of this fact, he was smuggling to the far side of the Moon what he hoped would finally be a profitable shipment—assuming nothing went wrong.

And lately, something *always* went wrong.

“This is far side approach,” buzzed an overhead speaker. “Delilah, turn left heading 3-2-0, descend and maintain nine thousand.”

Delilah was a stripped down cargo ship designed for the Earth to Moon run. The bridge contained a simple control console displaying data on flight operations and life support. Displays on the forward metal bulkhead showed the outer view of the ship and the cargo hold. There was a small kitchenette attached to the aft bulkhead that contained a zero gravity water feed and a food and beverage synthesizer. It had a light that was currently flashing red.

Grooveyard by Wes Montgomery was playing on AlloDisc and John was bobbing his head to the beat. A blue flight suit covered his tall, lanky form minimized by a defeated hunch. Sandy blonde hair overdue for a trim floated haphazardly in zero gravity. Two days’ stubble clung to a chin that was used to habitually grinding teeth.

Jazz was one of the few things that could drive away his melancholy moods, so he played it often. Much to the chagrin of his companion who sat next to him at the console, a worn and weathered robot commonly known as an ‘artie’ due to its highly advanced artificial intelligence. Like most arties, his outer construction was formed of advanced composites that mimicked the biped form of a human: rounded rectangle head, a barrel chest that narrowed into a small cylindrical torso, complex ball joints supporting movement, blocky (yet effective) feet and highly sophisticated hands.

He sported a single offset circular eye on the left side of the head next to a set of tiny sensors. A small rectangular display sat where a mouth would be, displaying a moving waveform. He had originally been painted in the blue and silver of Sol United, but much of the color had worn away.

“How about you turn off that awful music and answer approach before

something bad happens?" asked the robot.

John turned and frowned. "You'll never understand jazz, Alvis. You have no soul." He pressed a button.

"Dark side approach, Delilah left to 3-2-0."

"And something's not right here," said the robot. "The stabilizers aren't firing in the correct order."

"The *order* doesn't matter," said John, turning up the music. "I made some minor tweaks at our last docking to improve fuel efficiency and save us some units, which need I remind you at this point is *critical*. Besides, I can fly this thing with my arms tied behind my back."

"I'm sorry I ever agreed to be your partner," said Alvis. "My life is nothing but misery."

John laughed. "You didn't *agree* to anything. I bought you at a *junk* auction. And you're my *artie*, not my *partner*."

Alvis crossed his arms. "It was a horrible mistake. I shouldn't have been there. However, I've agreed to be your *partner* as it affords me a certain amount of freedom I heretofore lacked."

"Tell yourself whatever gets you up in the morning. My guess is your charming personality put you in that auction," replied John. "In fact, I'll bet people were *lined up* to stick you in a junk auction." There was a slight bump and John frowned, glancing over the readouts. "It's a choice I'm beginning to regret. I mean who doesn't like jazz? I wish I could afford one of the modern units. At least they do as they're told."

"Those can openers are nothing more than *actors*," said Alvis. "I'm as highly evolved as any human—*higher*, in fact. I'll have you know my development cost over \$3 billion units."

"Yeah, well your price tag at the junk auction was three *hundred* units. Depreciation, my friend."

"Three billion and *two decades*, mind you, only to be forced to support your pathetic smuggling career. It'd be one thing if you were any *good* at it, but you're the worst cargo smuggler in the history of cargo smuggling."

John stopped snapping and pointed at the robot. "Okay, that's not a

measurable statistic. And while it's true I've had some bad luck—"

"It's hardly *bad luck!* You're so dumb you can't even break the law correctly," said Alvis, waving his arms in exasperation.

"I was plenty successful at smuggling before I bought *you*. Geez, my other robot didn't *whine* all day."

"Oh, really? What happened to your other robot?"

John looked at the control panel and made a small adjustment.

"He got stolen," he mumbled.

"Stolen? *You're* supposed to be the thief. How does a *thief* get his robot stolen?"

"I don't remember," said John. He pushed out of his chair and floated over to the kitchenette and grabbed a coffee packet. "Besides, I'm not a *thief*. I'm a *smuggler*. I don't steal. I'm just helping people navigate the system."

"Yes, let's split hairs over the category of your unsuccessful crimes. And tell me this, Sire of Smugglers, what are we hauling right now?"

"Illicit learning materials," said John, winking.

"You mean '*school books?*'"

John put his coffee packet in the synthesizer. "They're hard to come by on the Moon."

"No, they're not. You just let some woman talk you into using us as an elementary school book delivery service."

"We're delivering outside normal channels!" said John, banging the beverage synth.

"Please refrain from abusing the synthesizer," said the synthesizer. "This is your third warning. Further assaults will result in suspension of beverage privileges."

"You mean she *tricked* you into delivering them," replied Alvis, "at a cheaper cost than the normal Earth to Moon freightage."

"She was ... really persuasive," said John.

"You mean she was pretty and smiled at you, making your knees nearly non-functional. Are we even making a profit?"

"Of course!" said John.

“Including fuel *and* docking fees?”

“Well, that depends,” answered John. He pulled his coffee box out of the synth and attached a sipper.

“That means no.”

“We need cash flow,” said John. “If I can put us in a position to take on bigger shipments, things will turn around.”

John sipped his coffee and frowned. It was cold and tasteless.

“What’s the deal with this machine? I adjusted it yesterday.”

“Then that’s what’s wrong with it,” replied Alvis.

“You’re not seeing the big picture,” continued John, frowning at the synth. “It’s about building a reputation.”

“You mean a reputation like the one you got by blowing the rare-earth metals deal?”

“They loaded *holograms* in my cargo hold!” said John, pointing to the rear of the ship. “That’s foul play. How was I supposed to know?”

“Maybe by checking the cargo weight of a shipment before shelling out thousands of units to known criminals?”

“It would be great if my *partner* would *help* with some of these things,” said John. “Maybe if you were more cooperative, things would go smoother.”

“Coop—you never *listen* to me! I *told* you something was wrong and you said: ‘Shut up you talking tin can, the details of the shipment are my concern.’”

John turned up the music again.

“I’m sorry, what?” asked John, putting a hand up to his ear.

“You know, this kind of behavior is probably why Sandy—”

John whirled—well, as much as one can “whirl” in zero gravity. It was more of a shoulder jerk, followed by his torso and legs slowly following. It didn’t really have its intended effect, and he ended up glaring at the synthesizer—who didn’t appreciate it any more than being banged on.

He slowly turned back to point at the artie.

“Mention Sandy again and I will *space* you.”

“I’ve picked up on the chatter about your escapades on the docks. The consensus is that if the Moon Authority ever picked you up for smuggling,

there'd be no crime to charge you with. Maybe it's time you got a job."

John shoved his coffee into the garbage chute and pulled himself slowly back into his chair. "You *know* why honest work is hard to come by, so the job is smuggling."

"Then stop treating me like I'm an appliance," said Alvis. "You *know* I can do far more than just press buttons on the control console and perform SatNet searches."

John shrugged. "These are the jobs that need doing. You've been purchased to aid this human in *smuggling*. If my jobs are so bad, maybe—"

There was a loud boom and whine. The ship shook violently, causing John to bite his lip hard as the hull suddenly shifted.

"What did you do?" asked Alvis. "We're pitched 30 degrees and losing thrust!"

Alarms were sounding, drowning out the music. John was banging at the controls and making fast reads on the instruments. Blood floated from his mouth and bounced off his flight suit.

"Nothing!" he shouted. "I did nothing!"

The com blurted out, "Delilah, you've deviated from your approach path. Correct at once."

John mashed the com. "Whad'ya think I'm trying to do?"

There was another loud boom and smoke started pouring out of the ventilation screens.

"Fire on the bridge," said Alvis.

"Ya think?" said John, fastening his safety harness.

More alarms lit up on the control board. Through the front display John could see warehouses on the surface coming up fast. The ship veered away from the landing pads.

He rapidly tapped a few buttons and the alarms went quiet. There was another jolt, and John grabbed the stick.

"What are you doing?" asked Alvis. "I'm working with the systems to correct —"

"No time!" John was wrestling with the stick, but the ship continued to pitch.

“Have you lost your mind? You can’t *manually* maneuver this close to base. It’s illegal! Let me—” began Alvis.

“I’m getting us away from that warehouse—there might be people there!”

“I can—” began the robot.

There was a final bang and the ship pitched beyond 90 degrees. John flipped upside down, hanging from the safety harness. His hand slipped off the stick as the bridge jolted. The warehouses were approaching rapidly.

“Impact imminent,” said Alvis.

“Son of a—” began John.

Darkness.

Flashing lights bloomed in the darkness while multiple alarms sounded.

John looked across a stark landscape with wreckage of both his ship and what looked like parts of a building, some of it on fire. People were rushing to the scene. Someone was shouting and waving.

Everything spun, and suddenly there was no sound. His peripheral vision was blurry and dark, his focus centered on his ship burning where it impacted the colony’s central dome.

Wait, he wasn’t anywhere near the dome.

But then this wasn’t the Moon.

Muffled voices were shouting frantically, and the scene shifted again. He found himself facing a medic in a white tent.

How did he get here so fast?

Is she okay? He thought to himself.

He turned and saw the medic taking off a bloody glove.

“She’s *dead*,” he said.

He jerked wildly as he felt that horrible falling sensation when one becomes reoriented with the present.

In his foggy state, John turned and was briefly aware of a bright light in the darkness which he thought might be his ship on fire. His flight suit must have automatically implemented impact protocol and sealed him up before they

crashed. Someone was flashing a light through his faceplate. He weakly shoved at the person, who made a hand gesture and suddenly John felt himself lifted.

Darkness again.

And then there were beeps.

His eyes opened and a nurse was looking at him. He was in a sterile, white room. His head felt like someone filled it up with cement and then broke it apart, and his stomach was jumpy.

He winced at the light.

"I'm sorry, you'll likely be sensitive to the light for a bit due to the concussion. Other than that, you're surprisingly fine. Your suit did its job and the safety features of your bridge kept it intact allowing you to be easily rescued."

The nurse was a man of Indian descent in orange scrubs with a shaved head. "Rohit" was stitched on the left breast. He deposited the light in a pocket.

"Did," John began and then cleared his throat. "Did I miss the warehouse?"

The nurse nodded. "Yes. You were the only one hurt."

"Only one?" he asked. He began to reach up, but his arm was constricted by an IV and cables. "Did Alvis...?"

"Is that the artie? Don't worry, your friend is just fine."

"He's not," he began, "my...friend..."

Darkness.

Something warm shot through him and he woke.

"I'm sorry, Mr. MacAlister but we want to keep you from sleeping for a bit. Also, the Moon Authority needs to speak to you about your arrest."

It was the nurse, Rohit.

"Wha," he mumbled, his throat dry and head pounding. He turned his wrist and squinted at his bracelet. 1836 hours. He must have been out for a while.

"Arrest?" Whatever they shot him with was waking him up fast. He began to sit up, then quickly reconsidered. "What do you—"

"The woman from the MA will explain."

John took a moment to look around. He was in the medical center in Apollo

Complex. An IV was attached to his right wrist and there were various hospital-like sounds coming from monitors above and behind him. They had turned down the lights and the walls sunk from a stark white into a dull gray. A holo display hovered near the opposite wall displaying his vitals. The nurse entered some information, swiped off a task and exited the room.

Seconds later, a woman stepped through the door in a shiny gray suit. Her black hair was pulled tightly back exposing pale features. She smiled curtly.

“Feel well enough to talk?” she asked. She initiated her Personal Holographic Display (commonly known as a “holo”) by tapping on a smart bracelet. Various screens of data formed an arc in front of her face.

“Not really. What’s going on? The nurse said something about my arrest? Balls to that, I had a ship malfunction and crashed. What the hell?”

“I’m sorry about your crash, Mr. MacAlister. I’m glad you weren’t seriously hurt. I’m Kimberly Benton, Special Assistant to the Chief Prosecutor for the Moon Authority. Charges have been filed against you for negligence of ship maintenance and illegal manual flight within an inhabited zone, resulting in reckless destruction of property.”

“That’s crap,” said John as controlled as he could manage. “I just went through inspection a month ago. My artie ran all the necessary checks.”

“We have records stating otherwise. And even if that weren’t the case, there’s the issue of usurping control from the onboard flight systems, and not allowing your artie to work with said systems—”

John leaned up on his elbow and pointed. “The damn robot wouldn’t have been able to miss the warehouse. My ship is...complicated. There were probably people in there. You know we *train* pilots for a reason, I—”

“Yes, I’ve read your file. It seems this isn’t the first time you’ve taken matters into your own hands.”

John tried to interrupt but the woman continued.

“There’s also a Mrs. Washington asking about some books. You have an arraignment in the morning.” She pulled up a form on the holo and directed it toward John. “Sign to acknowledge you understand the charges.”

“I was just in a damn accident, you plonker, and I saved whoever was in that

warehouse, regardless of your precious laws,” said John. He winced and grabbed his head—maybe a bit more than necessary.

She sighed. “You’re medically cleared to appear in court. And the warehouse was *empty*, Mr. MacAlister. Please sign the form. An officer will accompany you to your hearing.”

This is unreal, thought John. But his head hurt too much to argue, and he didn’t know what more he could say. He wrote his signature in the air.

“Feel better,” said the woman.

She walked out the door.

Next morning John was transported across the dome to a small courtroom.

He was brought before the judge, a mature woman with short salt and pepper hair and sharp features, and sworn in. She nodded to the bailiff who read the charges, and John was asked to enter a plea.

“Not guilty,” he said.

He was asked if he wanted court-appointed counsel. Since all his money was tied up in his wrecked cargo ship, he nodded. The judge set a date for the preliminary hearing and began swiping through screens. She looked over and sought John’s eye.

“It says here you were a Star Corps officer.”

Wonderful. Now this is going to come up.

“You were a good officer, but liked to flaunt the regulations,” said the judge.

John decided silence was likely golden.

“And now this on a simple approach. Were you drinking or hooshing?”

“No, ma’am,” replied John. “Absolutely not.”

The judge nodded. “Blood was taken, so we’ll know for sure.” She made a few entries into a display on the bench and then returned to her holo.

“You haven’t done too well since your discharge. Sporadic employment. A couple of run-in’s with the MA.” The judge looked up. “Smuggling is pretty far down the ladder from the Star Corps.”

John wasn’t sure acknowledging his smuggling career in a court of law was a good idea. He shrugged uncomfortably. “Yes ma’am.”

“Okay,” said the judge, “bail is set for 50,000 units. Dismissed.”

He was going to jail.

A guard stepped forward and grabbed him by the arm unceremoniously and led him through a long hallway in which they passed numerous other people busy with their non-incarcerated lives.

They turned into one of the wider passages that connected domes and outbuildings called a “tube” (due to their curved wall construction) that ended with a heavy door whose sole purpose in the universe was to hide people like him from humanity.

The guard placed his hand on the door which was quickly accepted as proof that the person owning the hand could actually come out again.

They walked up to a bored looking guard who sat in an alcove drinking coffee. He was surrounded by screens showing the status of various cells. The guards grunted at each other.

“Six B,” said the guard in the alcove. John was led down a narrow orange hallway where they stopped at a clear microalloy door that automatically unlocked. John looked up and saw Alvis. Neither of them said a word.

“Go on,” said the guard.

John walked in and the door clacked shut behind him.