

Just a Matter of Time

“Bud” Tompkins was careful to follow the checklist and double-check every reading as he performed the final systems check. So far this had been a textbook mission. A perfect landing, two months exploring a virgin planet, and a flawless liftoff. In a few minutes the guidance system would confirm that his course was correct and signal him to enter suspended animation.

Bud had worked like a dog during the last two months. He left no stone unturned in his quest to determine the age, composition, climate, radiation, and other details of the planet. The cargo bay was filled with carefully documented samples that he was sure would please the Planetary Exploration Commission. He suspected the Commission would decide it would be too difficult to re-engineer the planet to support humans, but that did not detract from his work. Most importantly, he had been able to confirm that no form of life currently existed on the planet and, barring the unexpected discovery of a fossil in his samples, there never had been life on this planet.

It was important to keep the Commission happy, as Bud wanted to be selected for future missions. For the most part, that was just a matter of keeping your nose clean. Bud had read that in the early days of space exploration becoming an astronaut was extremely competitive, and that only a select few ever flew on a mission. Things changed when the primary mission became planetary exploration. Even with space warping, it still took 80 to 100 years to complete a mission. Most of that time was spent in suspended animation, of course, but when you returned to Earth the friends and family you knew when you left were long gone. Very few people wanted to volunteer for a mission like that.

For Bud, space exploration was a perfect job. He had no family. He made friends quickly and forgot them just as quickly. From his perspective, a 100 year mission only took a few months. It was like he was sleeping the rest of the time. Work a few months, get a six month paid vacation, and then work a few months. And every time you returned to Earth you got a fresh start, in a world with exciting new developments. You were well paid during your vacation, and you could blow it all because everything you needed would be provided during your next mission.

Actually, as Bud looked back on his last vacation, he realized he had blown more than just the money he was paid. He had gone deeply into debt to some very scary people. They were closing in on him, too, but fortunately they didn't know his real name or occupation. Astronauts didn't make the news any more, and it was easy to develop a fake persona that would hold up for a few months. There also were a few women looking for him when he disappeared. When you're only in town for a few months it's easy to make promises you don't intend to keep. He'd actually gotten engaged to two of them, hadn't he? Or was it three? He drank a lot during that six month vacations, and some of the details were fuzzy. Oh well. From their perspective, he had simply disappeared from the face of the Earth. They'd get over it, and eventually they'd die. It was just a matter of time.

A beep from the annunciator drew him out of his memories. The display screen showed he was on course and on schedule. Nap time. He strapped the biometric sensor array to his wrist, checked to make certain his restraining harness was snug, placed the breath analyzer under his nose, and plugged himself into the medication dispenser. Then he felt himself gently falling into a warm darkness.

"Wake up, Bud!" A technician leaned into the capsule and gently shook his shoulder.

Bud opened his eyes and immediately shut them because of what seemed like a glaring light. He'd been through this before. It would take a few minutes for the effects of suspended animation to wear off. He knew where he was, and he remembered where he'd been. That was a start. He tentatively opened one eye just a crack, and then the other. As they got used to the light he turned to the technician, who was still gently shaking his shoulder.

"I must still be pretty groggy," he said. "You look just like the guy who belted me into this thing, many years ago."

"I am" the technician laughed. "I'm Kevin Woodrich. A lot has changed since you left. For one thing, they cured aging."

"Cured aging?" Bud wasn't certain he'd heard this correctly.

"Well, pretty much. People live for hundreds of years now, and in good health. I don't feel any older than the day you left."

Bud started searching for the release buckles on his harness. "I gotta get outa here" he said. "This is crazy."

"Easy now, Buddy boy." Kevin put his hand over the release buckle. "You need to take your time and wake up. My job is to make sure you're bright and cheery before you meet the press."

"The press?" Bud asked incredulously.

"You're big news!" Kevin grinned. He swept one hand through the air, like a headline on a giant skyscraper. "Last astronaut returns from space. One hundred year mission a success!"

"Last astronaut?"

"You're the last one" Kevin answered. "After you left they developed robots that were intelligent enough to handle planetary exploration missions. They can make decisions and explore on their own, well beyond the range of communication with Earth."

"I don't want to talk to the press" Bud said.

"Then you should have read your contract before you signed up for this mission" Kevin said. "The press helps ensure funding for the Planetary Exploration Commission. If you don't make nice with the press, there's no six month paid vacation. You never had to do it before because nobody was interested. But now, you're the last astronaut! You're big news! These guys are going to make you

famous. Your face is going to be on every news screen on the planet, at least for a couple of days. Then they'll move on to the next new thing."

Bud shuddered when he realized his loan sharks and jilted fiancées would be looking at those screens. "I want to go on another mission" he declared. "I'm ready to leave now."

"No can do" Kevin replied. "No more manned missions. Robot missions are cheaper and more effective." He paused for a moment when he saw the shocked look on Bud's face. "Come on, now," he said. "You must have known this gig was too good to go on forever. It was just a matter of time."