

and Samuel L. Jackson looked at me a little strangely, like I had just said something that didn't make any sense.

Do you have something to say?

Yeah, I have something to say, Samuel L. Jackson said. I guess you think it's easy getting to do what you do.

What? No, I don't think that at all. Just the opposite. It's not easy. That's my point. It's hard.

You work hard and you get rewarded. That's what you said, isn't it?

Yeah, that's what I said and that's what I meant. We all worked hard. This is the reward. We get to do something that's never been done before. We get to help build the first-ever human habitation module on Mars.

Huh, Samuel L. Jackson said. It was like an exhalation.

And I asked what he meant by it, and he said, You think *you* did this yourself, don't you.

What part of it?

Any part of it, he said.

I don't know why, but the man just had a way of getting under my skin. I knew what he was getting at. I'd read the dossier on him the moment it had come to my desk, so I knew about his history: that he had worked as an usher at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral; that he had known the Black Panthers; I knew all of it. But the only thing I cared about was the stuff that was relevant to the mission, and that meant, as far as Samuel L. Jackson was concerned, I didn't care about any of it at all.

Are you going to give me some kind of civil rights lecture now? I said.

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, Samuel L. Jackson said. Do you think that *mankind* meant you?

You're goddamn right I do, I said.

He's got a point, Charlie, Malcolm said. He was sort of draped over a bunch of boxes near the outer wall of the Bucky, and he looked like some big black cat there.

And then Ed Yu—Ed Yu, of all people—nodded in agreement and said, He does.

Seriously? I said. You too, Ed?

Hey, he said, I fit the stereotype but it's still a stereotype.

I just shook my head, then said, Not interested in this subject. At all. Then I moved off toward the door, my motion a series of small ungraceful leaps. I'm going back to the ship. Radio if you need anything.

I was hot. There's no reason to deny it. I sat in the ship and looked out over the planet, that endless wasteland of bright red soil, the carbon dioxide atmosphere, the distant flat white plane of the sky. It was about sixty below zero on the surface, and we knew there would be times when ice clouds would shift overhead, but now it was clear and quiet. I kept thinking that Samuel L. Jackson was from a different era and that he didn't understand that we had entered a new age. I kept thinking that Samuel L. Jackson didn't understand me at all.

Of course, it wasn't until we were ready to leave that I realized that the problem was just the opposite.

I probably should have noticed it when we were prepping the spacecraft for the return, but I didn't. Maybe I was just too busy or maybe I just chose not to. I've thought about it a lot, and I've gone back and forth. Honestly, I don't really know, but I consider it the only real serious failing of my command, although I also kind of think he's a hero now, in a way. I mean I guess he would have done it no matter who the captain was. I just gotta be honest with you here: I wish I had understood him better then. That's what I mean by a failing of my command. I just didn't get what he was trying to do.

Like I said, I should have noticed something was amiss when we did the final walkthrough of the Bucky's, but I didn't. In fact, I didn't even notice he wasn't with us until we were actually on the ship and were preparing to remove the tube. I know it sounds odd—there were only five of us to keep tabs on, after all, and the ship was tiny—but it's true. I just didn't notice he wasn't there until I did, and so we tried to radio in and got nothing, and finally I had Frenchy go back in to find out what was going on.

He says he's not coming back, Frenchy said when he returned.

What's that supposed to mean? I said.

Just that, Frenchy said. He says he's not coming back.

Holy shit, Ed Yu said. Mutiny on the Bounty.

Was he in that? I asked.

But Ed Yu only said, What?

And then I was really confused. Why'd you say that?

Because of what Frenchy said.

Then Malcolm asked Frenchy what he meant, and Frenchy said, I don't know what's confusing. He said he's not coming back to the ship. That's all.

VANESSA WOODS

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