

Celestial Body CI-XII

By Akku Kumar

“You were right, Cap. This motherfucker is a lot bigger than those old estimates. It has to be five kilometers long, at least.”

“Thank you, Collins. I could do without the expletive next time,” replied Captain Jeb Blacksmith without taking his eyes off the 64K exterior camera displays that were filling with the dark mass of the asteroid below.

“Landing gear deployed, Captain. Reverse thrusters ready on your mark,” said First Mate Xia Chin.

“Okay, reverse thrusters a-go in three. Two. One.”

A violent hiss, which quickly slid its way down to a contrabass rumble, shook the ship like an earthquake. Interstellar spaceships of the past, like those made in the twenty-first century,

would have been ripped apart by the forces caused by a reversal thrust of that magnitude. But these modern cruisers made especially for the Space Expeditionary Force, like the Reynolds Mark II, were more than capable.

With a gentle puff of gray dust, the ship landed on the gradually precessing asteroid. Soon after the landing gear had implanted three-meter-long stakes to stay firmly planted in the Zero-G environment, four spacesuited figures and one humanoid, metallic silhouette dropped to the surface.

“Captain Blacksmith, why are we extending our mission just to see some asteroid? I thought we were going home.”

“Fear not, Private! As our crass medic here astutely pointed out, the true dimensions of Celestial Body CI-XII deviate far from those estimated back in the 2050’s. It is our duty as members of the elite advance guard of the SEF to ‘venture into the unknown and advance the frontiers of humankind!’ Do you remember that in the handbook, page—”

“Ahh, don’t get him started again,” interjected medic Brad Collins. “If we’re going to see this stupid space rock, let’s go see the stupid space rock.”

“For once, I agree with Collins, Captain. We only have enough stored electrical power for a cursory survey of this body. I suggest we start as soon as possible,” said Chin.

“Fine, fine! Since the lack of an appreciable gravitational field likely precludes the possibility of alien life, I suggest we split up to cover more territory. I’ll go with—”

“Hey Captain, come over here!” exclaimed Private Bailey Chambers, who had wandered about twenty meters away from the group. “There’s something off with this crater...”

The Captain, always on alert for potential danger, hustled over as fast as he could on the rocky, unfamiliar terrain. Chin and the metallic figure, which could now be seen to be an

antiquated terrestrial robot, followed with similar speed. Collins took a couple of seconds to breath out a deep sigh, and then joined the group as they peered into the thirty meter wide crater.

Upon reaching the edge, each of their eyes quickly transfixed to the exact center of the crater. There, the random pattern of rubble blanketing the floor of the deep cavity was disrupted by a two meter square hole. To their greater astonishment, they could see steps hewn directly into the asteroid's dark rock that led down into the dusky opening.

"This definitely was *not* in the initial reports," said Blacksmith excitedly. "How much time do we have left exactly, Chin?"

"Well, sir, factoring in the time we have already spent...I would estimate that we have about two hours left, Universal Time. But, I do believe it would be unwise to prolong this mission to that extent."

"Two hours..." mused Blacksmith, stroking his prominent chin over his standard-issue skin-tight spacesuit mask. Then, he suddenly brightened. "Yes, we will have just enough time to explore this hole and whatever lies within it."

Collins audibly spluttered over the telecom.

"You can't be serious! With all due respect, Captain, the surface has plenty to explore already. Why are we digging around some hole clearly not meant for us?"

"I am indeed serious, Collins," Blacksmith answered. "These are my orders, so we better not waste time starting an argument in which we both already know who the winner will be."

Without another word, the Captain turned and bounded toward the stone steps. Chin and the robot followed. Though Private Chambers could barely conceal his trepidation, he shakily hopped after. Once again, Collins brought up the rear, mumbling to himself, "I wasn't *arguing*. I was just *saying*..."

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As they reached the bottom of the stone steps and turned their spacesuit lights to full brightness, they saw that the corridor abruptly split off into two, seemingly identical paths: One continuing forward and the other leading off to the left. It was too dark to see much more than five meters down either corridor's winding path, even with the suits' one thousand lumen beams.

The crew piled into the uncomfortably small antechamber. As they descended, they had felt themselves get heavier as if there was a linear gravitational gradient getting stronger the farther they went down. Here, their suits' virtual accelerometers measured exactly Two-G, probably produced by an artificial gravity field gun somewhere nearby. Fortunately, their suits adjusted to the constant gravity field after only a second of immersion.

The Captain pondered for a moment as he again felt the lightness of a One-G environment produced by the microthrusters in his suit.

Suddenly, he grabbed the Private's arm with an vice-like grip and turned to the others.

"Okay, crew, Private Chambers and I will go down the left corridor. You two will continue forward and Minny will join you."

"But Captain..." whined Collins.

"I don't think we'd be the best..." complained Chin.

"Match for this mission..."

"Considering that we have many differences in technique..."

"And the fact that she's a stuck-up bitch. I also don't want Minty or Mimby or whatever you keep calling that thing," said Collins, mistrustfully eyeing the silent, metallic giant. "I don't even know why you traded half of our fuel cells for this mute scrap heap at the Ceres spaceport," he said caustically, turning back toward Blacksmith.

But the Captain was already halfway into the darkness of the left corridor with the Private, now noticeably trembling, in tow.

Chin and Collins looked at each other.

“The robot goes between us,” they sneered at the same moment.

With that, the silvery form of Minny reflected the light emanating from the two pouty members of the elite Space Expeditionary Force on either side as they headed deeper into the shadows.

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“Captain Blacksmith, you know we have to get back up these stairs, right?” puffed out the Private.

“I know, Private, I know. My knees aren’t like they used to be, but we’ll make it back up in good time.”

Just past the curve that marked the entrance of the left passage, more steep stone steps leading down into darkness had greeted the Captain and the Private. With at least two-thirds of a meter between each step, they were hurriedly hopping down.

They went on like this for one hundred meters or so without a change in pace or scenery. Suddenly, the unrelenting stone walls that pressed in on either side gave way to meter-tall doorways at regular intervals. However, each had its entrance blocked by tightly packed stone slabs that prevented any chance of entry.

They had no choice but to continue descending. Paying too much attention to a theory he was developing on the size and shape of the creature that could have inhabited this claustrophobic tunnel (“Maybe they looked like those things from my childhood history

books...penguins!"), the Private ran straight into Captain Blacksmith who had stopped on a seemingly inconspicuous step.

The Captain somehow prevented them from toppling down the stairs and steadied them both with strong, reassuring hands.

"Easy there, son. Look," he said, with a nod of his head.

"Look at wha...oh."

As expected, a small doorway was cut into the side of the passage. But unlike all the others they had seen, this one was completely free of slabs. It was wide open.

With the confidence of a man who's walked into more than his fair share of mysterious doorways, the Captain stepped through first. The Private, who's first experience with mysterious doorways was being forcibly dragged into this corridor just a half hour ago, mustered up all his courage to step inside a few moments later.

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"...say one more comment that's sexist, racist, or both, and you're going to wish that there was another medic on this mission."

Chin and Collins continued to bicker across the impassive machine.

"You're only the first mate because you're constantly kissing Blacksmith's ass. I wouldn't be surprised if there was something going on between you two when the kid and I go to sleep."

Red hot, Chin spit out, "Well, at least I don't stash half of the painkiller needles during resupply and then lie to the Captain about it so I can get a quick fix every other night."

"Why, you sneak—"

"We are nearing it," tinned Minny in a deep reverberation.

Chin and Collins stopped.

“Huh? Nearing what?” questioned Chin.

“This tin can can talk after all these months? And it’s a boy? What kind of name is Minny for a boy robot?” said Collins, utterly flabbergasted.

Annoyedly, Chin explained, “I think he...she...it...whatever’s actual name is M.N.R.E.: Mineral and Natural Resources Extraction. That’s why the Captain shortened it to ‘Minny.’”

Then, toward the robot, she asked, “Are you? I know your model was popular in the mining boom of the 2060’s for being able to sense a single splinter of metal from miles away through solid rock. But then you all were repurposed for the Great War and that was the last I’ve heard of your series.”

Without answering, or even taking notice, the robot continued to press down the passage. In fact, it was speeding up, even on the verge of running. The two humans struggled to keep up.

Finally, they reached a massive cavern lit by unseen floodlights, seemingly far too large to comfortably fit inside the asteroid. As Collins and Chin struggled to catch their breath, they noticed that the amount of advanced machinery, gaping pits, and industrial debris indicated that this was the focus of a prior—who knows how long before—mining endeavor on Celestial Body CI-XII.

Meanwhile, Minny was agitatedly searching through the massive, abandoned pits for something.

“I believe it is sensing a metal fragment left here long ago, but its close-field metal detectors may have become faulty with age, preventing an accurate reading,” realized Chin aloud. “Whatever it finds could help us understand why the interior of this celestial body was totally stripped away. Help me look!” she said in a tone that made it clear she wasn’t in the mood for discussion.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Collins followed someone else's direction without argument. They both got to work, scouring the vast area for whatever could have made the robot so distressed.

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They had never seen anything like it.

In a spherical room roughly the size of their spaceship, they wound their way through countless stone tables stacked with technologies they could neither understand nor comprehend.

The cluttered room was reminiscent of a science fair for mad geniuses as each strange, futuristic item featured a luminescent label. The language of the labels, though, did not match any known human or alien tongue in their spacesuits' onboard translators.

The Captain was investigating each invention warily, fully expecting one to spring to life and attack them. This situation reminded him all too much of that interplanetary bazaar on Alphas B in his early days as a lieutenant. Those cheap trinket automata weren't a tenth as well done as the ones before him, but that didn't stop them from trying to pickpocket him when he let his guard down. All the more reason to be careful.

The Private, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. He had never wanted to be in the Space Expeditionary Force. He had originally gone to one of the top schools in the Rocky Planet Confederation for Advanced Mechatronics but soon got drafted for the Second Great War. By the time the grueling campaign was over, with no distinctions to his name except for a few demotions, he had lost his scholarship and was forced to remain in the SEF as a private to make ends meet.

Now, though, all of the failures he had experienced over the past several years, constantly plaguing his deepest psyche, retreated from his mind. Instead, he felt like he was in school again,

gazing at his professors' unimaginably complex projects in awe and trying to guess their purpose.

“Captain, this kind of looks like a carbon sequestration device! And these, these have to be some sort of nanobots. Maybe for surgery? And look at that! Or should I say, look *through* that: It seems to be a microscope that can magnify down to the quark level, and maybe even further.”

The Captain tuned out the endless stream of words, still searching for the hidden threat he knew was waiting in ambush. Already almost through the entire room, Private Chambers was turning for his second go-around, when his eye caught something...out of the ordinary.

“Or perhaps something a bit *too* ordinary,” he thought to himself. He walked over and picked up what looked like a normal telescreen, identical to any of the other countless ones he had seen in his life. Rubbing the dust off the black screen, he accidentally turned it on. A prerecorded, holographic video began to project off the screen at full volume, as if waiting for someone's—or something's—touch to activate it after many years.

“Captain,” called out the Private weakly. “CAPTAIN!”

“Private, where are you? Are you in danger?” yelled the Captain, secretly hoping that it was true so that he could finally use his brand-new Alpha+ Laser Revolver.

The Captain came around the corner and rushed over to the Private, who's eyes were glued to the hologram. The Captain fingered the trigger as he cautiously peered into the dancing images, but soon put away the gun. He didn't need it.

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An hour later, the digging crew had no luck. With each passing minute, the number of unsearched pits seemed to multiply. Collins, at this point, had lost the little motivation he had

mustered and was lazing around in a decrepit vehicle that probably once was a mix between a steam shovel and a drill.

While Minny was still rapidly searching for the metal she had detected, Chin was rapidly losing her patience. She began to feel a strong urge to find her own shovel-drill to take a break in. Maybe even a nap. She started walking along the cavern wall toward a promising vehicle on the other side of the quarry when a glint of cold gray flashed in her peripheral vision. She had been getting flashed like that by Minny all day so she didn't think much of it. But again, as she walked forward, the glimmer kept appearing from the same direction.

"I don't think Minny would sit still for that long..." she figured and resolved to go check it out.

She rerouted herself toward that unmistakable gleam in the harsh light of the cavern, disappearing and reappearing from view with every step. As she got closer to a pit on the edge of the cavern that was so small and deep compared to the other pits it may have been mistaken for a latrine, she saw it: A tiny piece of silver metal. Maybe even the one that was making Minny go so erratic! Luckily, it was completely exposed, lying down the hole on a small ledge. Laying down, she reached with her whole body and was just able to touch it, almost knocking it off the ledge in the process.

She took a deep breath. "Okay, Xia. You just need to reach a little bit farther," she encouraged herself.

She reached, missing to the left by a centimeter, and cracked her fingernail on the bottom of the ledge.

She reached again, getting her thumb and forefinger around it before slipping off its lustrous surface.

“Just a little more...Just a little more!” she goaded herself as she reached as far as humanly possible. Her fingers grasped at the cool, slick metal as it threatened to tumble into oblivion, but she held firm and yanked it out.

As she massaged her overextended shoulder, she examined the reward of her efforts. A shiny, silvery gray, it seemed a lot more reflective when surrounded by the light up here, glittering in her hands. Standing up and brushing herself off, she barely had a chance to turn before she felt a WHAM against her already sore right shoulder. Her forehead cracked against the cavern edge. Feeling nothing but pain rip through her skull, she did not register the arm immediately surrounding her or the shouting occurring centimeters from her ear.

First, she tasted the blood dripping along the inside of her mask. Next, she felt a monumental roar originating from just above her left eyebrow. Then, her eyes slide from black to red, then to yellow, finally settling on a sort of sickly, translucent off-white. With these new, tinted lenses she looked to her right and saw Collins shouting and waving some sort of children’s gun; a 100-Watt laser pistol, standard issue for medical and other non combative personnel. She then noticed the arm around her and foggily realized that Collins had come to her aid against...something. Her vision was still too blurry to make out much past her and Collins sitting on the hard, rocky ground.

Then, as if a switch was flipped in her head, giving her back just a sliver of her temporarily lost intelligence, she remembered the whole point of the medic on this mission. She fumbled around into his open waist bag—where he kept both his gun and one or two of his “personal stache” of painkillers—and pulled the first one she felt out and groggily made out its lettering.

“Extra strength. Perfect,” she thought.

Rallying strength from every corner of her body, she blindly stabbed the needle through her spacesuit and into her arm, luckily hitting a vein. Immediately, she felt a wave of hypersensation as her full-body numbness was instantly purged by waves of alternating cold and hot. Her senses went from dysfunctional to normal to ultrasensitive in as many seconds. She wriggled with discomfort as she felt the microscopic prickles of her spacesuit self-healing around the puncture site.

Despite this, she forced herself to sit up. Immediately, a tsunami of sensory information threatened to knock her back down. With difficulty, she dragged her suddenly disorientingly transparent eyes along the line of sight from Collins' gun to...Minny. Minny? Yes, Minny.

“If you don't answer for yourself in five seconds, I'm shooting you right in your goddamn rusty gearbox of a brain,” she heard Collins yell.

Minny continued to ignore the two on the ground, focusing all of its substantial artificial intelligence on the sliver of metal it held in its grip.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. Die, you son of a—”

“Stop, Brad!” shouted Chin into Collins' ear.

Startled, Collins jerked the gun up just as he pulled the trigger. A miniscule bolt of red hot plasma hit the ceiling and caused an iota of dirt and pebbles to shower them.

“Since when did you get off killing elderly robots?” said Chin as she struggled to her knees and then to her feet.

“Kill elderly robots? It just attacked you for that stupid piece of scrap metal! Of course I'm gonna kill it! You must've hit your head really hard because you're acting more idiotic than usual,” shrieked Collins, his anger being replaced with his classic brand of whininess.

“I did hit my head quite hard, but it's clear that you're the idiotic one once again. Do you not remember that I said this model was reprogrammed for war? It and all of its brethren had their Asimov safety switches turned off, authorizing them to use violence against robots *and* humans to fulfill their mission,” explained Chin, with disciplined calm as she felt a dull ache ripple through her head. “I guess this one was left with much of its initial wiring and believed I was standing in the way of its mission of analyzing metallic resources.”

They looked at the robot. Minny, it seemed, was now staring even *more* intently at the sliver of metal.

“See, it's not doing anyone any harm now that it got its prize. So, be a good medic and help me back to the ship before your illegal painkiller wears off.”

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Collins and Chin arrived back at the spaceship first. As Collins deployed his emergency anti-vacuum bubble around them to remove the congealed blood held in by her spacesuit, the Captain and the Private rose into view from the crater rim. Struggling to breathe, they slowly advanced up to the bubble.

As soon as he saw them, Collins started blabbering, “I'm so sorry Captain, the robot just went haywire and injured Chin and it's still down there and I swear it wasn't my fau—”

“Nevermind that, Collins, we will deal with it later,” sighed the Captain, with an uncharacteristic tremor in his voice. “Private Chambers found something that we will all want to hear about first.”

The Private, shaken but bolstered by a newfound youthful energy, started, “Yes sir! Deep in the bowels of the asteroid, we found an incredible room! More like a treasure vault, actually.

Whoever had come here before us left a carbon sequestration device and a quark-detecting microscope!”

“Private, I meant the *important* thing,” the Captain added wearily.

“Oh, of course,” said the Private, slightly deflated but still animated. “Well, in the deep back corner of this room was a telescreen. It looked like any other telescreen you can think of, at least at first. Once we turned it on, though, we saw that—”

Bounding with impossible speed, Minny joined the group from the crater and cut off the Private mid-sentence, intoning in that same deep monotone, “I have successfully found a match for the unusual nickel sample found by first mate Xia Chin and for the other trace deposits that my sensors have detected. After cross-checking billions of records, the samples in question are essentially identical to other samples recovered during the successful mission to the earth’s core in 2061. Specifically, to ten to the negative thirty-four degrees of accuracy, the nickel mined on Celestial Body CI-XII and others in the CI classification must account for approximately 42% of the nickel now found in the earth’s core.

Collins and Chin just stared blankly at Minny, a half-bound bandage over her forehead all but forgotten.

The Private, meanwhile, was nodding. He continued, “Like I was saying, the recording on the telescreen was pretty clear. In easy-to-understand holographic images, it showed the exact steps to construct an Earth-like planet from our universe’s base materials. It even explained where they could be found by mining various asteroids and minor planets scattered throughout the universe, some of which we have classified and spectrally analyzed like the CI group of celestial bodies. But we have never visited one before. Until now.”

The Private cleared his throat.

“But that’s not all. A bunch of alien gibberish showed up at the end along with a diagram of the stars in this celestial body’s local neighborhood at the time of recording. By retrofitting the data to current star positions, it seemed that Celestial Body CI-XII was visited and mined roughly...4.5 billion years ago.”

Collins, whose mouth had been open for some time now, whispered, “4.5 billion years ago? Isn’t that the age of... You’re not implying...”

A moment passed before the Captain, now perfectly composed, responded to the unfinished question: “Yes, Collins, this number exactly matches our very best estimates for when the earth—*our* Earth—was formed from seemingly natural processes.”

The crew fell silent.

In the utter silence of the vacuum, the Captain’s words seemed to reverberate like the final notes of an excruciating climax. No one said anything. No one *could* say anything. The only action they felt compelled to take, as if each were guided by an invisible, irresistible string, was to raise their heads toward a part of the universe so infinitely distant yet still so infinitely real in their most cherished memories. They looked up at that part, *their* part, with clouded eyes and pretended they could see a familiar, white star twinkling in the inky blackness. And they thought they could just make out the little, wet, fragile planet that orbited it.