

THE PLANETARY ARCHAEOLOGIST

By

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The tiny ship slowed as it entered the solar system. While officially listed as the *Aeternus* in the Galactic Council's databases, over the years so many pieces had been salvaged from other ships for repairs that only around a third of the vessel was still original. One of those original pieces was its pilot: Jax Strabben, Planetary Archaeologist.

That was the title he preferred, but he had been called many things over his career. Scavenger. Looter. Culture Thief. Tool of the Leisure Class. That was one of his personal favorites. He felt it gave his job a certain gravitas it really didn't deserve. Even though it was true that anyone with the means could hire him, the majority of his clients were universities and museums. In fact, he would always say to people that if he really was a Tool of the Leisure Class he'd have a much nicer ship.

Not that he'd ever give up the *Aeternus*. They'd been through too much, together. He'd just restore her back to her original glory.

It just so happened, though, this trip out *was* funded by a private collector. Praxam Vole LXXIII was the CEO of Vole Mining. His family have been mining asteroids for nearly as long as ships have had the ability to land on those unpredictable rocks. He's also one of the few people left in the post-War universe who still openly proclaimed their human ancestry. Only those of a certain wealth or power stature could do so without fear of repercussions, and even most of those were too nervous to proclaim their true heritage.

Vole had found Jax the way most of his richer clientele did: Word of mouth. He prided himself on his work ethics, despite the fact that some of those private jobs might not be the most ethical, themselves. He considered each contract a promise and, if he couldn't uphold his end, he would offer his most sincere apologies to the client, along with returning every credit of his Retainment Fee. This had put him in the good graces of many of the universe's more elite, ensuring plenty of repeat business.

This was the first time he had been hired by Vole, or any of his family. "You come very highly recommended," he had said in their meeting. It was rare that a client ever mentioned the name of the recommending party. The rich were discreet, like that. "I understand you specialize in finding the 'hard to find.'"

Jax humbly shrugged. "I don't know if I'd say I 'specialize' in it, but I do have a knack. Top-of-the-line tools help a bit, too."

Vole opened a drawer on his desk and removed a data screen. He slid the clear, playing card-sized object across to Jax. After a cursory review of the information, the archaeologist responded, "Looks like you've done most of the work for me."

"I have spent several years researching these items. Those calculations should be within a half-kilometer radius for each, give or take."

When Jax got back on board the *Aeternus*, he plugged the data screen into his console, downloaded the coordinates into the Nav-Comp and started on the journey that brought him to where he was, now. At first, he really didn't think too much of this solar system. It was pretty average in comparison to many he had visited. The giant planet wreathed by a series of rings momentarily caught his eye, only because it's a phenomena that has fascinated Jax since childhood. Their dull color, though, served as an accent to just how average this system appeared to be. "You're nice," he said out loud as the planet passed, "but you're no Rings of Hyglon. Maybe try a little harder, next time."

After passing uneventfully through a sparse asteroid belt, it wasn't much longer until he could see his destination. The small, grey moon was almost completely blocked from the light of the system's sun by its planet. That meant very cold surface temperatures. Cold temps meant cranking the heat in his Excursion Suit, which translated into a couple extra breaks to switch out the Batt-Pack. This was definitely going to take the better part of a day.

Vole's research was amazingly accurate. There were several spots around Jax's ultimate destination that contained various pieces of junk and debris. Some of it sounded interesting, so he decided to do a little extracurricular exploration after all was said and done, if he felt he could risk it. He had reviewed the information during the first leg of the voyage, and had chosen a clearing that looked like a good landing spot. It should be fairly flat and empty of clutter, as long as there hadn't been too much activity on the surface since the last time anyone captured pics or vids of the area.

The *Aeternus* neared the clearing, revealing a good news/bad news situation. Landing wouldn't be a problem because the area was free of debris, due to the fact that a meteor had struck the spot. From above, the resultant crater appeared relatively small compared to some of the others pockmarking the planetoid's surface. Still, it meant more work to get to the dig sites. So much for exploring the rest of the leftover junk. He really needed to remember to pick up a couple more Batt-Packs next supply run.

The landing was smooth enough, but the retrorockets kicked up clouds of the dust that covered the surface. Due to the minimal atmosphere, it took a long time for them dissipate. The air filters on his Excursion Suit were strong, but if there was no real need to tax them, why do it? While Jax was waiting, he gathered his equipment, giving every piece another thorough inspection. Once he felt the clouds had sufficiently thinned, he put on his suit and headed through the airlock. His equipment locker floated along behind, following the electronic tether on Jax's wrist.

The surface had a slick, unstable feel under his boots. The dust was so thick at points that it came up to his ankles. He hoped this was just a result of the disturbance caused by his landing, and not indicative of the entire moon. He made it to the crater's edge, sweating from the suit's internal temperature. He took a moment to make some adjustments to the heater settings, then he surveyed the wall of rock before him.

It was taller than it looked from the air, but not insurmountable. He sent the equipment up first, guiding it with the wrist remote. There was a camera on the locker's front, so he could use the display to see where it was going. While he could've used his own boosters to make it up the crater wall, he decided to climb, instead, preferring to save the boosters for an emergency. He

had fallen through a rotted floor or lost his grip on an outcropping too many times, and he wouldn't be here today were it not for his safety rockets.

The meteor responsible for this crater must've hit a very long time ago, because the wall was more solidified than he had expected. This made the climb faster than expected. At the top of the wall, Jax paused to take in the surroundings. He looked across the grey landscape to the planet looming beyond the horizon. The stories tell of how beautiful it was, once. Brilliant blues and gorgeous greens. All that's left are shades of brown, punctuated by the occasional dark red or, in a few specific spots, pitch black. He looked away, re-tethered to the equipment locker and continued on his journey.

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Several hours later, the *Aeternus* gracefully lifted off from the moon's surface. Vole had been correct in his calculations. Jax found both items within the projected radii, and they were now securely in his possession. By no means, though, was retrieving them an easy task. It would've been hard enough to find objects buried as deep as these were, but their size was no help, either.

He guided his ship back to the outer edge of the solar system. His proximity alarm sounded well before he received the message over the hailing frequency: "This is the Galactic Council Patrol. Please cut your engines and prepare to be boarded."

Every time he heard the message, it never failed to amuse Jax how polite they tried to be. He complied, the button pushes and switch flips completely ingrained in his muscle memory over the course of his career.

He kicked back in his chair, feet propped up on the console. The shape of the GC Cruiser appeared in the aft-side windows of the cockpit. Soon after, he heard their airlock extension thud into place as it connected to the *Aeternus*, followed by the buzz of the intercom. Without having to change his position, Jax brought up the external camera on one of the monitors. He knew who he'd see even before the airlock had docked.

Cluger.

The reptilian bulk of the GC Inspector Captain filled most of the screen. Behind him stood two GC Inspectors, a purple Bukik and a red-and-black striped Huffan, trying very hard to look official and confident. Still without adjusting how he was sitting, Jax pressed the intercom talk button. Using his most annoying sing-songy voice, he asked, "Hello? May I help you?"

"Open up, Strabben," Cluger growled.

"Mr. Jax is very busy today. What is this regarding?"

Cluger glared at the camera. "I know this is you, Strabben. Let us in. Now."

"I'm sorry? Who may I say is calling?"

Jax could see the anger rise in Cluger's face, but he took a deep breath and calmly stated, "This is Galactic Council Inspector Captain Cluger. We are here on official, warranted business."

Jax returned to his normal voice. "Oh, hey, Cluger! Why didn't you say it was you to begin with? Come on in." He unlocked the airlock door and the trio entered. He couldn't help the smug smile that spread across his face.

Jax was still smiling, as well as still sitting with his feet up on the console, when Cluger and his lackeys entered. He had even gone so far as to lock his fingers behind his head, so he looked extra relaxed. Cluger was visibly unamused.

"Clug!" Jax exclaimed. "How's tricks?"

"Cut the slag, Strabben. What are you doing out here."

"I had a little down time between jobs, and I like to travel. Especially to systems I've never seen, before." He gave a small wave toward the cockpit windows. "This happened to be next on my list. Why do you ask?"

"I think you know why."

"I honestly do not," he lied.

Cluger snuffed. "You expect me to believe that someone in your position would be completely unaware that this is a restricted system?"

"It is? I had no idea." Another lie, and you didn't have to work in Jax's profession to know that information, either. It was pretty common knowledge.

"Yes, it is."

Jax was having a hard time reading if Cluger was buying his innocent act, so he decided to just keep quiet.

"We tracked your ship all the way to one of the inner moons. What were you doing down there, as if I didn't know?"

"I didn't do anything, I just was flying around. Sightseeing."

Cluger's eyes narrowed. "Sightseeing, huh? Then explain to me why you spent approximately..." he consulted the readout on his Wrist-Comp, "...nineteen hours on the surface of that moon."

Jax finally swung his feet off the counter. He spun his chair to face Cluger. "Let me get this straight," he replied. "You're saying that you tracked my ship as it entered a restricted solar system, followed it until I allegedly landed on a moon, where you say I..."

Jax pushed the playback button on the console and Cluger's recorded voice filled the room, repeating, "...*spent approximately nineteen hours on the surface...*"

Jax continued, "Then, you waited until I was *leaving* to stop me. Is that what you're saying, Clug? Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that the exact opposite of procedure in restricted zones?"

The Huffan put his face in his hand and shook his head in embarrassment. The other Inspector turned away and tried to suppress his snigger. Cluger heard him, though, and spun on the men.

"Search the ship! Every millimeter!" The duo saluted and were off in an instant.

After they were gone, Jax said, "So, Clug, how's the family?"

The Inspector Captain ignored the inquiry, turning his attention instead to the shelves of knickknacks set into the wall. They were items that had no monetary value, just odds and ends

Jax personally found interesting. The kinds of things he had hoped to maybe discover among the extra debris on the moon, had he had time to search. Cluger fixated on a pair of white, dimpled balls resting in a specially designed display stand. He picked them up and started rolling them around in his hand.

Jax bristled whenever someone touched his things without permission, but he kept himself in check. "Tell me something, Cluger," he said after a deep breath. "Why do you have this incessant need to hound me?"

"Because, Strabben, you're a thief, plain and simple."

"Archaeologist."

Cluger snuffed. "Fancy word for it."

"No. I work to preserve the varied histories of this vast and wonderful universe, for those who wish to never forget. Thieves are only in it for the money."

"Oh? You're not in it for the money? Really? What about the jobs I know for a fact you take under the table? For those rich clients?"

"You've never had any proof I take those kinds of jobs..."

"I have proof."

"Then, you've never shown it to me, or used it to get me locked up. Fine, even if you had proof of those jobs, and any alleged involvement on my part, I would still make sure they meant something in the grand scheme of preserving historical heritage. They would never be purely about the money. *That's* what sets me apart from thieves and their ilk."

Cluger's grip on the balls tightened. Jax tried not to show his concern for the safety of the artifacts.

"You can talk to me all you want about your so-called *ideals*," the Inspector Captain growled, "but at the end of the day, if you aren't working for an accredited institution, and even sometimes when you are, what you are doing is stealing. And, one of these days, I'm going to nail your smart ass to the wall."

Jax stood up, confidently walked over to Cluger and stood face-to-face with him. He stared down the reptilian eyes of the Gorthon for as long as he felt he needed to drive his point home. Then he reached into Cluger's hand, took the balls back from him and said, "Today's not going to be that day."

He returned the artifacts to their stand, then returned to his chair.

They sat in silence for several more minutes, waiting for the Inspectors to return. The Bukik was the first and said, "All clear, Sir. Nothing starboard." He was quickly followed by the Huffman, who reported the same for the aft portion of the ship.

"Impossible," Cluger spat. "Did you check for particulates?"

"Yes, Sir," the Huffman replied. "The entire ship is clean. Not a speck."

"Even his Excursion Suit is clean," chimed in the Bukik.

Cluger spun around and glared at Jax.

"Do you think I'd be stupid enough to re-enter my ship without a full decontamination? Too many Unknowns can be carried in from a planet you aren't familiar with, especially the uncharted ones."

"So you *do* admit to being on the moon!"

"That's not what I said. All I admitted to was doing a full decon every time I re-enter. I never said I went exploring recently, let alone where."

Cluger clenched both fists. His eyes narrowed to slits. The two Inspectors took a step back.

Jax cocked his head, looking at the angry Gorthon inquisitively. "Was there anything else?"

The Inspector Captain stood like that for a very tense minute, before his fists opened back up and his breathing slowed. Without saying a word, he turned and pushed his way past his Inspectors. They gave each other nervous looks, then followed.

Jax knew that if he'd been able to, Cluger would've slammed the airlock door as they left the *Aeternus*. It was a thought that made him smile.

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Jax set the display stand holding the two white, dimpled balls on the desk. Vole reached for them with slow, measured reverence and pulled the stand closer. He turned on his desk lamp, moving the display into the light. He leaned closer to them, to begin with, before picking them up and turning them over and over, examining every millimeter. Jax thought the man might've actually been holding his breath.

"They are... exquisite," Vole whispered.

Jax didn't reply. They didn't look like much to him, yet he knew from experience to keep his opinions to himself around the client. Their plain appearance, though, had made his knickknack shelves a perfect hiding spot. Whenever he didn't have to use his various secret holding compartments, the better, just in case a savvy Inspector were to stumble upon them. Those situations were very hard to talk his way out of, and the bribe usually cost more than he was making for the job.

"What exactly are they, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Of course not. They are part of a game they used to play back on Earth," Vole replied, once again showing his wealth and power through his words. No one dared say the E-Word, anymore. "Apparently, from what I could gather in my research, they used special long sticks to hit them, trying to get them into a hole."

"Sounds like a few games and rituals in other cultures I've encountered, both ancient and modern." Jax always found it interesting how beings separated by light years could end up with such similarities. "Was it a rare game, or reserved for the elite? Is that what makes these balls so important?"

Vole shook his head. "As far as I could tell, it was pretty common. Yes, the elite usually were the ones who excelled, but it could be played by anyone who wanted. No, these balls are only special to me and my family."

The mining executive fell silent, his gaze once again fixated on the artifacts. Jax just let him have his moment.

"A very distant relative," Vole finally continued, "was one of the men who helped the humans of Earth finally reach the stars. That moon was their first destination. They made several

trips to it. My relative was on the third or the fourth – the materials I could find on the period had a number of gaps – but third or fourth mission to land on the moon, during which he hit those two balls as an experiment."

"That must've been something to see. There isn't much gravity there."

"Which is what made my calculations so difficult. Tell me, how close did I get?"

"You were very close on one, within half a meter. The other was a bit further from your projection, but still within the half-kilometer buffer."

"Good, good. Any other troubles?"

"The usual. Nothing I couldn't handle."

"I'd like to thank you, Mr. Strabben, for your fine work in retrieving these, as well as your... discretion."

"Not a problem. Glad to be of service."

"I might have additional need of your services, in the future. Who knows? In the meantime, though, I will not hesitate to recommend you to any of my friends."

"Thank you. That will be greatly appreciated."

"You will find that payment has been sent. Once again, thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Vole." Jax rose from his chair, but saw that Vole had returned to his fascination with the gaming balls. So, he began to leave without a parting handshake.

Just before he reached the door, Vole called out, "Mr. Strabben? One more thing." Jax turned back to face the wealthy mining executive. "Earth. How did it look?"

The Planetary Archaeologist replied, "Desolate. Destroyed."

He paused to find the right word.

"Sad."

The End