

The Martian Deception - A Captain Jack Houston Adventure

Written by Wojtek Sal 2012

Jack Houston created by Stacy Davidson / Warbird Games

“Good evening, Captain,” said the guard posted next to the gate.

Jack Houston nodded in response and took the offered identicard. Crossing the huge lobby in the direction of the turbolifts, he fastened the document with a strip of velcro at the lapel of his tailored synthsuit. As he passed acrylic racks holding various brochures and flexchairs, tastefully arranged around exotic plants, the beat of his steps echoed across the empty floor. The steady rhythm created an almost surreal atmosphere, which was intensified even further by the slowly fading light of the sun setting outside.

The offices appeared deserted after a long and busy day. The visitors were long gone and the staff had left hours ago. But this was just a clever ruse of course, thought the Captain, finally reaching the end of the hall. Even all these years after the Cold War the former spymasters still loved their little games, and some of those veterans were now holding leading positions at the corporation. So it came as no surprise that the security features were absolutely up to date. And who knows, they might prove to be right after all, he wondered as the pneumatic doors slid shut and a sonar compared his biometric data with his profile stored in the electronic brain of the facility. Hadn't there been some trouble lately, involving a group of communist nationalists? It was no secret that a few diehards still refused to acknowledge the fact that the former Soviet Union had joined the global democratic community, finally realizing the failure of their political system. Better safe than sorry, he figured.

The cabin, having confirmed his identity, set itself into motion. Jack imagined the smooth descent of the contraption more than he could really feel it, but he knew exactly where it was heading.

As far as the public was concerned, the Venture Aeronautics and Space Transportation headquarters were located in one of the many skyscrapers downtown. It wasn't the highest building in the vicinity, or the most impressive, but it was well designed, functional and elegant at the same time. Daily, myriads of workers, visitors and couriers swarmed all the various legal, logistic and public relations departments brimming with life like gigantic hives. But this wasn't the whole purpose of the establishment, only the official part, as much a facade as the steel and glass dividing the bureaus from the streets outside.

Almost as far as it rose towards the clouds the structure was rooted in the depths below. Hidden behind plain stairways and elevators was the true VAST. Here resided the various communication centers and laboratories, the science, research and

development sections and the hubs of command and power and high clearance, and those too restricted for Jack Houston to know their designation or purpose.

The lift came to a halt and released him into a long and winding corridor. Walking past the countless rooms positioned on both sides, he could sense people carrying out their duties everywhere around him. The sounds of humming generators, whirring punched card readers and bleeping electronic devices mingled with human voices, buzzing telephones and the clatter of typewriters. The Captain didn't hurry, enjoying the experience of being surrounded by this much activity and yet being alone at the same time. He suspected that this was what the eye of a hurricane must feel like. Finally, he approached one of the nondescript doors identical to all the others he had passed on his way.

He knocked but didn't wait for an invitation. The office he entered gave the impression of being as standardized as to be called bleak. Everything seemed to have been supplied straight from the factory, and there was no trace whatsoever of any use the place might have been put to. It was hard to imagine anybody actually working here. The layout was centered at a bulky desk and some flexchairs lined up in front of the solid furniture, but the only personal touch consisted of a few framed holograms and a genuine katana sword displayed on a sideboard.

Only then did the Captain notice the person casually stretched out in one of the chairs.

"Hiya," said the man, "No rest for the wicked, huh?"

"Hello, Pete." They shook hands and Jack sat down.

Lieutenant Peter Carter looked a lot like a younger version of Jack, even the style of his clothing bore a certain resemblance. He was a test pilot employed by VAST, currently being trained by the Captain to become his successor. They weren't exactly friends, but they were on the same wavelength and trusted both in each other's abilities. Though Jack had officially retired a few years ago, he never had been able to leave his passion for space fully behind. That was the main reason why he still took up assignments as consultant or instructor sometimes.

"Any idea why the Old Man wants to see us?"

Jack knew that the question was purely rhetorical, and that Peter didn't expect an answer. He had the habit of thinking aloud when facing circumstances he wasn't prepared for. It seemed to assure him that he was at least partially in control of the situation. But now he didn't even try to hide his anxiety, fiddling around with his zippo instead to keep his hands busy.

"Think it got anything to do with that Mars rocket?"

Jack shrugged. That mission had ended mere days ago, but already the newspapers were speculating about supposedly groundbreaking discoveries. So far no claims

had been made as to their exact nature and no official statements released. As for the Captain, he always preferred facts to rumors. He refused to concern himself with the whole affair until he was presented with some actual information, and tended to his own assignment instead. Even if this meant returning to his workplace not half an hour after having left the premises. Unlike the Lieutenant he was patient enough not to mind waiting, and had no doubts that he would learn of the reasons for the gathering soon enough.

As if on cue the door opened and General Grant entered the room. Neither his immaculate uniform nor crisp haircut offered any indication of his age, but he had been Head of Space Exploration at VAST for as long as Jack could remember. His posture suggested military accuracy and precision, a personality trait that carried over into his style of leadership. He exuded the same air of calm self-confidence he always did, regardless of any trouble he might encounter.

“No need to stand up, gentlemen,” said the General in his booming voice as soon as he had reached his desk.

“First, I'd like to apologize for having to summon you here at this late hour. You're probably keen to learn what this meeting's about. Well, I'll come straight to the point.”

Grant pressed a hidden switch and a wall panel slid open revealing a huge cathode ray tube.

“As you already know we have sent an unmanned probe to our neighboring planet Mars. Two days ago the spacecraft has returned to Earth. Our science division is still analyzing the data, but we can already assume that our boldest expectations have been exceeded. What I am about to show you now is the unedited footage brought back from the mission.”

The General produced a data crystal from a pocket and placed it in a slot inserted into the tabletop. Jack had read about these new storage devices but never actually seen one before. They had a capacity of almost a thousand Kilobytes, enough to fit an entire library or several movies onto the tiny cube.

A listing of cryptic names flashed up on the screen.

“Interpret visual file MR-1,” requested Grant.

The projector confirmed the command with a short beep, selected the title and started playing the digitally encoded film. The picture flickered for a few seconds before being replaced by a cover of dirty gray. Blurred shapes were drifting by, and just as the Captain began to wonder if the lens had gotten damaged during the journey, he realized that he was looking at dense clouds. Finally the rocket broke through the haze, which parted like a curtain.

It took the camera a moment to focus, but then a strange landscape came into view. Clearly visible in the thin atmosphere was strange terrain. Bizarre rock formations

rose straight from bottomless canyons and pockets of dust swirled across barren plateaus. A mountain ridge appeared in the distance, quickly closing in. The probe automatically adjusted its height and velocity to avoid crashing into the steep cliffs. It barely slid over the peaks and once again began its descent toward the surface.

The Lieutenant drew in a sharp breath. A slope appeared covered by moss and grass, but that wasn't the most amazing sight. A regular jungle stretched out as far as the camera's field of vision would allow. As the foliage drew near however, it became obvious that the scenery was unlike anything found on Earth. Gigantic tree-like forms towered over impossible plants and colorful steam rose from bubbling swamps. Then, deep within the dense undergrowth, something stirred.

Suddenly the display and every single source of light went out. Darkness flooded the room with the force of a shockwave, so black as to feel almost tangible.

"What the..." stammered Peter. His words were cut short by an explosion, muffled by layers of ceilings and walls. The whole floor trembled and shook as if hit by an earthquake.

Then the backup generator kicked in and emergency lamps cast the office in a dim red glow. Only the oversized screen remained powered off. The General activated his personal communicator, an appliance no larger than a watch.

"Grant here!" he shouted into the transmitter strapped to his wrist. "Status report! Now!"

A voice responded sounding slightly distorted through the miniature speaker.

"Sir, we have a security breach. The attackers are heading your way. We think... We think they're targeting the main laboratory!"

Grant was already rushing out the door. He turned back toward Jack and Peter.

"Protect the scientists at all cost!" he ordered and ran off.

They could see him disappear around a corner, barking commands into his communicator. Both pilots looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon. The Captain took the katana from its stand and passed the sword to Carter. He watched him tentatively thrust the sword a few times, getting a feeling for its unfamiliar weight. Nothing else appeared to be suitable, so they left the room.

All the bureaus were closed off, the personnel prepared for such an emergency by periodic drills. But despite all that training they weren't secure, not by far. Even the most accurate plan could never take every single detail into account, and life almost always preferred to defy the expectations instead of confirming estimates.

But sometimes you just got lucky, mused Jack as he noticed a cabinet housing fire safety equipment mounted to the wall. He ripped an extinguisher and an axe from

their moorings and clenched both tools closely to his chest to better distribute their weight.

Finally they reached the elevator. He laid the fire axe at his feet and positioned himself and the extinguisher right at the doors, facing them at a steep angle.

The blinking lights next to the turbolift indicated its imminent arrival. The cabin came to a halt and released a bunch of robots. These were cheap, clumsy models built for household duties, but Jack wouldn't make the error of underestimating them.

Apparently somebody had put a lot of work into reprogramming them, and every single unit was carrying a heavy duty atomiser. He recognized those as old Soviet army surplus, battered and tarnished, but lethal nevertheless.

Without hesitation Jack sprayed the intruders with bubbling foam. The chemicals scrambled their sensors and the automatons froze momentarily, assessing the newly arisen situation. As the Captain grabbed the axe and launched himself at them, Peter fell into line. Both pilots tried to remain as close to the machines as possible to prevent them from using their ray guns.

The robots seemed to regard Jack as the greater threat and concentrated their attack on him. He fought like a berserker, swinging the blade in a wide arc. The improvised weapon dented metal and chopped off whole limbs, and the other man's katana was laying waste as well.

Then it was over. Breathing heavily the two men were standing amidst the carnage. Suddenly Peter's communicator crackled, startling them both. As a mere contractor Jack hadn't been issued one of the devices, so he listened in.

"Carter! Houston!" called the General. "We have cleared the lab. But it seems this has been a diversion. Head for my office immediately! I'll join you with reinforcements as soon as possible. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative, sir!" confirmed the Lieutenant and looked at his instructor, as if awaiting further orders.

Jack motioned for him to follow. They stormed off and didn't pause until having arrived at their destination. The Captain grabbed the sideboard and struggled to shove it toward the entrance.

"Damn, give me a hand here, Pete," he hissed through clenched teeth. "We have to barricade..."

"Sorry. Can't do."

Something didn't feel right. He stopped pushing and turned to face the younger man. The Lieutenant had drawn a taser from the inside pocket of his jacket and was pointing the weapon at his superior.

"Nothing personal, Jack." He smiled coldly. "It's only business."

And then the bolt of blazing electricity slammed into the Captain.

Nothing. No time, no space, no thought. Just... Nothing. Then something. Pain? Jack held onto that sensation, that rope, that safety line. He used it to pull himself out of the nothing, into the something. Slowly his sight returned, distorted at first, then fixed at... The ceiling? He was lying on the floor, his left shoulder was hurting. Carefully he flexed his arm, and examined the injury. His synthsuit was heavily singed, but the artificial fabric seemed to have absorbed most of the blast. His skin showed only minor lacerations, though they were still stinging like rows of tiny needles piercing his flesh.

The Captain rose to his feet, gripping the edge of the tabletop to steady himself. He noticed a hole burned into the wood. Apparently, he had instinctively dived for cover behind the desk when Peter attempted to kill him, and the massive piece of furniture had probably saved his life.

Peter! Jack shook off the last remains of his stupor. Hastily he examined the reader slot, but it was empty. The data cube was missing, and he knew exactly who had stolen it.

How long had he been unconscious? The General hadn't come back yet, so it couldn't have been longer than a few minutes. Perhaps Carter still hadn't fled from the premises, perhaps it was not too late to prevent him from escaping!

The Captain grabbed the fire axe and sprinted down the corridor. Luckily he didn't encounter any more of the robots until he nearly stumbled over the pile of destroyed machines. He replaced his blunt weapon with one of the still functional ray guns strewn among the mangled mechanical parts. The turbolift seemed to have withstood the previous attack without taking serious damage, but he pushed the button over and over again, as if trying to speed up its arrival.

"C'mon..."

The ascend to the first floor seemed to take an eternity. When he finally arrived at the lobby he found it transformed into a battlefield. Corrosive fumes were rising from melted furniture, whole chunks of the the walls had just disappeared, and smoldering plexicast, plastic and steel was scattered around the hall. Heavily armored guards and medics were tending to the injured, and the dead. At the front, where not even an hour ago Jack had gotten through the security checks, an enormous crater was gaping like an open wound.

This was where the explosion had hit, he thought as he approached a grunt aimlessly milling around.

"You! Do you know where Lieutenant Carter is?"

"What..." stammered the watchman, apparently still in shock.

"Lieutenant Carter!" The Captain had no time for being subtle. "Where is he?!"

“Carter? He was... He has just left... I think...”

Jack stormed off. Nobody paid the slightest attention to him as he ran out of the building. In the meantime, night had fallen over the city but the downtown was shining as bright as day. Neon and billboards illuminated the streets, and spotlights danced among the streamlined skyscrapers. Dirigibles, jet cars and planes buzzed through the air like angry insects, while the low clouds were reflecting the electric glow streaming from below.

As soon as the Captain had reached the landing lot he began searching for the traitor. What he discovered instead was a robot standing at his vehicle. Its optic detectors spotted him immediately, and the machine raised its atomiser. Jack's instincts took over and he jumped as far as he could, barely evading the energy ray. He rolled off and fired back, hitting the attacker straight in the chest. Sparks erupted from its torso as the automaton swayed and crashed onto the hood, engulfing his sky craft in flames.

Just a few rows further away the Captain could see Peter's jet car rise and smoothly disappear into the night.

He swore, watching his only means of catching the Lieutenant literally go up in smoke. For a few moments he watched the flames before returning inside. The sentiment of being defeated and deceived bore down on him, but left him more disappointed than angry. He knew that he should be furious, yet he was more frustrated by the fact that he had let himself get cheated by Carter than by the actual betrayal itself.

There were people everywhere already starting to clean up. Exiting the turbolift he saw scientists leaving their offices. Some nodded at him and murmured their thanks. He might have had saved some lives today, but he still felt as if he had lost the battle. An armed guard, positioned in front of the office, stood aside to let him pass through.

The General was busy examining his badly marred desk as Jack entered the room. Looking up, he pointed at the flexchairs.

“Please, take a seat,” he said in his confident voice.

The Captain sat down and felt a wave of fatigue wash over him. He hadn't noticed how exhausted he was before, but now his final reserves of energy simply melted away. His arm was hurting and he felt it begin to stiffen as he attempted to rotate his shoulder. “Are you injured?” asked Grant without a hint of emotion. “You should let someone take a look at that.”

Jack couldn't imagine how he managed to stay so calm.

“The Lieutenant...” he started to explain.

"I know." The General cut him short. "We have suspected a mole in our ranks for quite a while. Until now we just couldn't be sure who he was, and who we could fully trust."

"But the data crystal!" yelled the pilot, growing increasingly irritated. "Carter has..."

"Yes, exactly as we had planned," stated Grant matter-of-factly. "What I told you before wasn't the truth, Captain. Or at least not the whole truth. You see, we launched more than just one rocket."

It took Jack a second to process this information.

"So the jungle we have seen was only a bunch of special effects? We haven't encountered any extraterrestrial life?"

"Oh, we did. Just not on Mars, as our friends the communists were led to believe."

Suddenly all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"You mean..."

The General smiled, the unaccustomed expression giving him the appearance of a friendly shark. "Exactly. You, Captain Houston, are going to Venus."

And Jack realized that the real adventure was yet to begin.

A big thank you goes to Pollo Diablo for correcting the story.

Please support Jack Houston and the Necronauts!