1400 words

Until They Come

By Trina Marie Phillips

“What do you think of this pose?” Kindra asked. Her arms were stretched out in front of her and her weight was back on her legs that were tucked in a ready-to-spring position, as if she would dive off the platform into the depths of space that extended lightyears away from them. If it weren't for her magnetic feet, Mack might have been worried she would actually drift off.

“You're really going to hold that for a thousand years?” he asked, though he knew she would. That had been her game for the last dozen millennia, to come up with a pose that would shock the humans when they returned.

“What's wrong with it?”

If she were actually human the pose might have been indelicate, reminiscent of waste excretion before indoor plumbing; but to a mechanical it was no different than any other posture. “Nothing.”

“Then this is how they will find me. It will happen this time, I can feel it.” Kindra paused and looked over her shoulder at him. The gentle glow of the platform's forcefield cast a blue tinge over her architectural facial features. Her eyebrow arched like the entrance of a seventeenth century cathedral. Their designer had a penchant for historical eras. Mack's head was patterned after a slanted, conical, twenty-third century industrial building, geometric and efficient, if not elegant.

“Do you not want me to pose?” she asked.

Mack looked out at the lifeless rock that had been the Earth and into the solar system beyond. “You always go dormant when you do that.”

“Only for the last couple hundred years. I know you'll wake me if they come.”

He looked back at her. She was excited about the pose. He paused and decided he didn't want to ruin that. “You're right, I will.”

If they come. The humans knew they had doomed the Earth. They discovered an easy way to tap into its geothermal energy and took it too far. Traveling near the speed of light, they left, with a promise to return when they could fix the planet. Mack and Kindra had been charged with watching over the genetic material from every species of flora and fauna that remained before the humans left. The past and future of Earth was all contained in a hundred meter long storage unit suspended beneath the platform on which they stood.

It had been twenty thousand years since the humans left, and seven thousand since the slightest communications blip. As Kindra locked into her pose, Mack wondered if they'd been forgotten.

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Eight hundred and twenty-two years passed before Kindra went quiet in her meditative, diving posture. For no other reason than the repetition of their conversation they had spoken little in the last century; but having her be unavailable was different. Of course he could wake her any time, but then she might move and not make her thousand-year pose. Then he'd have to hear about it for a decade.

Even though she wouldn't like it, Mack attached an energy-tether to her right ankle. The shield was always deflecting bits of space debris. He didn't want to find out how much force it would take to exceed her magnetic grasp and turn her pose into a real detachment. Even in the empty times it was a comfort having her there.

They could leave. Take the materials to create a new Earth and hope to find one elsewhere. But the years would be just as endless and the outcome even less certain. One toxic or out of balance element on a planet and the ecosystem wouldn't function. There might not be a suitable planet in the entire galaxy and the emptiness would be the same.

It wasn't a decade marker, but he sent out a comm burst anyway. Did the humans still exist, or had they figured out how to destroy themselves in the far reaches of space? Had they forgotten the pledge they made to their home? To the lives that were awaiting their return? Origins were important, they had said. Had they lost their way?

And if they didn't, was Mack losing his?

He stood at the railing and thought about these things for a century. Then he closed his eyes in despair, and slept.

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Mack woke to a system alarm. It took a moment to orient himself before he turned to

the control panel. Kindra was already there, working.

“What's happening?” he asked.

“Comm signal.”

The screen filled with characters and unintelligible sounds emanated from the speakers. Whatever the signal was, the computer couldn't interpret it. Mack noted the chrono quickly and realized he'd been asleep for fifteen hundred years. He glanced at Kindra, then around the platform. Nothing had changed. How had she felt, alone all that time? Why didn't she wake him up?

Mack told the computer to interpolate between this language and all of the known languages from Earth. After twenty-two millennia this could be an evolution of known communication. They looked at each other while they waited for the analysis.

“I'm sorry, Kindra.”

She smiled sadly at him. It was a very human expression but they couldn't escape their creators' idiosyncrasies. “I figured it was your turn to check out for awhile. I'd done it enough over the years.” She hesitated and the windows of her eyes saddened. “I didn't realize.”

Her simple acknowledgment made up for all the empty time. “I could have at least come up with a creative pose,” Mack said, and smiled. That brought some of the cheer back to her face.

The computer finished faster than he expected.

No known or interpretable correlation.

“I don't know what it is, but something is coming our way,” Kindra said, her voice tinged with excitement.

She was right. Each blip of the signal was getting closer. It was still thirty lightyears distant, but creeping in just below the speed of light. Mack watched the display. Were they human, or was there something else out there?

Kindra nodded toward the console. "What do you think?”

Mack shook his head. “We have no idea what, or who it is. What if it's an enemy? Or an alien race? Think about what we're responsible for.”

“Aliens could still have a worthwhile cause. They could be scientists,” she said.

“But what are the chances they're coming to restore the Earth?”

“They could be human. It's been a long time. Communication changes.” Kindra was always the optimist. Her hopeful words lit a small flare in his core. After all the disappointment...could it be?

Mack looked at the signal. It taunted him. Friend or foe?

“We could hide," he said. "Take the platform and drop just below Venus' thermosphere. Should be able to stay there long enough to determine their motives.” If they started looting the dead satellites and debris in Earth's orbit it would certainly be a tip off they were scavengers. A deep survey of the system might indicate a scout or scientific ship. Maybe with proximity the platform's computer could get a better read on who was inside.

“If they don't see us they might leave,” she said.

And then there was that.

What were the chances this was what they'd been waiting for all this time? When Mack went to sleep, he had lost his faith. And while he still hadn't found that, with Kindra by his side, he had found hope. But was that enough to risk the future existence of all Earth's creatures? If

they didn't take the risk, was there any hope at all?

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Mack set the platform's beacon to broadcast on every wavelength and in every spectrum. Then he struck his pose in the middle of the platform, arms out to his sides and a wide stance looking like an upright starfish. Kindra climbed up. When her feet were set astride his shoulders, the magnets locked her into place. She put her arms out like he had and they stood tall. Ready for anything.

Thirty years was going to be easy.

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