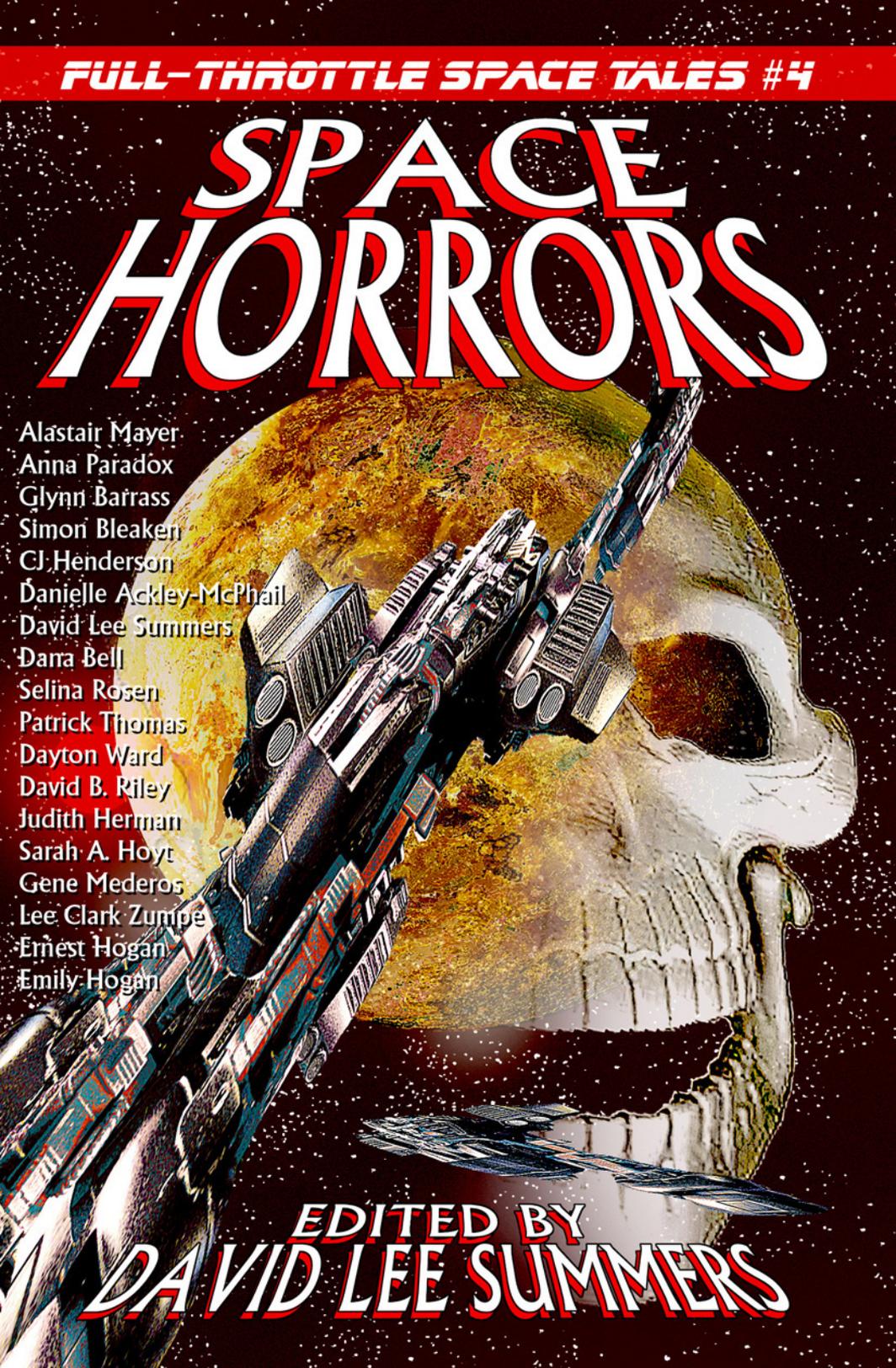


FULL-THROTTLE SPACE TALES #4

SPACE HORRORS

The background of the cover is a dark space filled with stars. A large, yellowish-brown planet with a skull-like face is the central focus. The planet's features include a large eye socket on the right and a jagged, tooth-like opening at the bottom. A sleek, metallic spaceship with a complex, multi-segmented design is flying from the bottom left towards the planet. The ship has various panels, antennas, and a prominent central structure. The overall tone is dark and ominous, fitting the 'Space Horrors' theme.

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Last Man Standing

Danielle Ackley-McPhail

The *Caliphus* landed on the moon MineCorps had designated A-RCK-01 amid a cloud of fine, rust-colored particles. Dust was everywhere, invasive. If not for the high-grade ion field protecting the surface of the ship and its various venting and intake systems, they would already be in trouble. From an impartial viewpoint, it was a spectacular effect: an aura of red dust limning the ship from ten inches past the buffer. The crew, however, was ill at ease, left to imagine the total encapsulation they could only view in swirling fragments on the monitors.

Tom Henry was beyond concerned. As the mission engineer, he, more than anyone else, was aware that the ionic drive was not designed to combat such a constant assault. The particles made him uneasy. For lack of a better word, he thought of the matter as dust, but it didn't move right; it appeared slick, almost greased as it slid along the ion field like it was trying to get through. He held back a shudder. This was bad. Their orders were to set up dirtside and stockpile ore until the star-freighter *O'Connor* arrived. Not only was that not currently possible, but every instinct he had was screaming at him to lift off immediately, and the contract be damned.

"Your assessment, Mr. Henry?" Captain Jared Troy asked, rising from the chair and coming to stand at his shoulder.

Tom ran a series of computations before responding. The data scrolling across the monitor reinforced his concerns. "The dust storm extends beyond the range of our hull sensors. I can't pinpoint when it will end. We're okay for now, but we have twenty to twenty-five standard hours before the system is overwhelmed if it maintains this density."

Captain Troy straightened and turned toward the rest of the crew. "You heard the man, suit up and get out there, you rock hounds. This has become a hit-and-run extraction."

“Sir,” Tom interrupted. “I don’t know what this storm will do to their suits, or the equipment.” The moon was large, with three-quarters Earth-standard gravity and an oxygen-rich atmosphere, but the chemical composition of the air was not friendly to humans.

Troy’s mouth twisted in annoyance. His eyes narrowed and he leaned back over the console. “Planetary evaluation ruled out a corrosive atmosphere and did not register anything over a level-one bacterium, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, the worst we should be facing is some dirt, yes?”

Tom looked away, his expression tight. He focused on the monitor and by sheer will forced his voice neutral. “It would seem so, Captain.”

But he didn’t believe it.

Troy moved across the deck to the hatch. “Donovan,” he called into the crew compartment. The foreman, climbing into her EVA suit, looked up, her expression closed as she continued to slide on and seal her gauntlet. “Sir?”

“Here’s where that mech unit of yours proves its worth. Get it out there pounding rock ... and double the crew while you’re at it, we can’t risk the Chomps so get the extra men running sack relay,” he ordered. “I want a constant stream of ore feeding into the cargo bay at all times.”

Kate Donovan nodded sharply in acknowledgement as she tugged her helmet into place over her short bristle of dark brown hair, her jaw worked as she toggled her comm active: “Anything else, sir?”

“Check-in is half standard. We don’t know how much time we have so monitor your systems closely. Any sign of malfunction is to be reported immediately.”

Two-thirds of the mining crew scrambled to comply, the other four remained huddled around the monitors, makeshift markers changing hands as they made book on everything from the time the ion shield would fail to how much ore would end up in the hold before it did.

Tom Henry kept his eyes locked on his station monitor; already sections of shield sensors showed signs of strain. He continued to watch, his lips moving silently in prayer.



Kate Donovan regularly worked side by side with her crew. In part, this was to make sure no one slacked or took unnecessary risk to secure

a bonus, but it was also so she could watch Jean-Paul Marot's back. She had to—no one else would. Not even Jean-Paul Marot. The titanium-plated ass had a death wish.

No one else aboard was aware their new mining mech was actually a cybernetic prototype. To them he was just another bit of hardware. Only Kate knew, and by contract she couldn't reveal to anyone there was a human soul beneath the chassis. It had been a hard contract to win and though she had wondered at the reason for the odd clause when she'd triumphantly signed the deal, she also hadn't realized how hard it would be to keep silent. Jean-Paul did his best to act the part of inhuman mech, but in a hundred little ways he betrayed his humanity, even if she was the only one to realize it. She had lost count of the thoughtful ways he'd helped her out on shift, both with tricky tasks and unforeseen mishaps. He'd even saved her ass a time or three.

She followed close behind as he passed through the waiting decontamination unit and headed down the ramp to the planet's surface, pickaxe in his right robotic hand, massive jackhammer held casually in the other. Red dust swirled disturbingly around him the moment he was past the ionic shield, adhering to the flexible Kevlar-fabric laminate that sheathed his frame. He unconsciously swiped his optics clear across his arm as no mechanical being would have and headed for rock.

"Hey, JP," Kate subvocalized across her comm on his private band, *"not too far. There's plenty of surface ore close to the ship. Start with the port-side outcrop there while I organize Troy's bucket brigade."*

He didn't acknowledge her command verbally, but set to breaking up the easy-access payload that had placed this moon at the top of MineCorp's A-list. She toggled the comm to the crew frequency and started barking orders to the rest of the shift workers. In short order, sacks of dust-covered iron ore were being ferried into the hold.



Everyone earned out their bonus that day. They were beat. Everything was red with dust—right down to the men. Between the mech and the extra men, the ship's holds were full before second shift was halfway through and the crew even managed to set up the steel storage hoppers on the surface and started filling them. Once those were full they would be shuttled to the *O'Connor* on its arrival. For now, the entire crew was calling it quits for the day. As the final hold hatch closed, Tom keyed the sequence to lock the ship off from the decon unit. When it

was secure, he remotely extended the vent shaft until it pushed through the ion shield. A clever one-way valve on the end of the shaft kept the moon's atmosphere from contaminating the ship.

"*Okay, Donovan,*" he commed the foreman. "*You and your 'hounds are cleared for decon.*" He felt his tension ease a bit as the monitor displayed the men and women piling back into the ship with their gear. The mech unit was the last aboard. Once it cleared the walkway, Tom spoke over the crew frequency: "*Please stand clear of the closing door, decontamination commencing.*"

Directed jets of air dislodged particles of foreign matter from the crew while fans in the duct system sucked the contaminants down the flexible vent shaft and ejected it past the ion shields before retracting back into place. Then, though all of the crew had been through the process before, Tom issued the standard warning for the next stage of decontamination: "*Please close your eyes in preparation for low-grade irradiation.*" As the final stage completed, Tom Henry ran a scan on the chamber before sounding the all-clear and initiating the release sequence.

Several of the returning crew, including Donovan, were in the process of loosening the seals on their environment suits as they waited for the hatch lock to disengage when a low curse transmitted across the crew frequency. One of the men had dropped his pick. He seemed to sway as he bent to retrieve it, then crumpled to the floor.

"*Shit!*" Donovan's startled voice came over the comm. "*Do not release your seals!*" she ordered the rest of her crew as she moved toward the miner.

Tom immediately keyed the interrupt, setting off the automatic alert, and reversing the release. It looked like John Palmer, but it was hard to tell. He wasn't out cold, but he remained flat on the deck as Donovan conducted an eyes-on inspection.

Tom's earlier unease returned as he watched the monitor. There was no sound feed currently active in the chamber, but it was clear from her expression that the foreman reprimanded the crewman. Tom switched on the intercom and the internal recorders. "Donovan, report."

She looked up, her navy blue eyes darkened by the displeasure clearly visible through her faceplate. "Mr. Henry, please send a medtech to the decon quarantine unit. Crewman Palmer apparently sustained a suit breach in the field. Injury appears minimal, but shows signs of dust contamination." Her words propelled Tom's tension to another

level all together. Bad enough the potential of some foreign contagion, worse, in Tom's opinion, that Kate Donovan was at risk. He sent the order to medbay and continued to monitor the decon unit.

"Aw come on, boss, it's barely even a scratch!" Palmer interrupted. One hard look from Donovan and he cut off his protest.

"Not a word, Palmer," she growled as she helped the man up. "Safety protocol exists for a reason. You will observe it from here on out or it will be my boot kicking you out the door. Am I understood?"

Tom watched as she turned and scanned the room. Her face tensed, concern overshadowed by anger as she clearly noted those that had breached the seals on their protective suits. With a nod toward quarantine she spoke to her crew in a controlled voice. "Okay, Palmer, Simms, Chou, Colman ... pick a bunk and get your butts inside. The rest of you, remain suited." She then turned to face the monitor.

"Mr. Henry, please reinitialize decon procedure," she requested, closing the door behind her as she entered the quarantine cell next to Palmer's.



Jean-Paul watched as his single link to humanity closed herself in what potentially could be her coffin. That shouldn't matter, but even after the repeat decon completed he remained facing her cell.

Miners were a superstitious lot. If they ever learned of his past, those standing around him would as likely as not shove him off the ship; out with the bad penny, and all that. If anything happened to Donovan they wouldn't have to. He'd tried to keep distant, but in the silence of his mind he considered her a friend. A dangerous thing, in his experience ... for the friend. All too often, people in his proximity ended up dead. One accident after the other had left him the last man standing. The first had landed him in this mobile metal suit. The second landed him in hell as the suit forced him to take another's life to preserve his own ... and he could do nothing but comply. That chemical command was the first thing he'd forced the Corporation to deactivate, when he'd sued them to become a free agent, but the damage had been done. In his own mind it had cost him the last of his humanity. That was one of the reasons he'd become a roamer, taking only short-term contracts before moving on to another crew. Less time for his shitty luck to kick in, less opportunity for people he liked to pay for it.

This time the strategy had failed him. He suspected it was because