

First Contact!
Ward Wagher

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Hal Farmer carefully looked over his displays as the Palatinate Ship *Glendower* dropped out of FTL and entered the new star system. Hal was the sensor specialist and third officer aboard the starship and had heavy responsibilities. His job was to reach out with the electronic tendrils and watch for anything that might threaten the exploration team.

Sitting in the command chair, Captain Ezra Staumpitz paid no attention to the spangled depths of space at the edge of this star system. Rather, he observed the watch officer intently. He held an open intercom channel to the Engineering Department. He knew that Chief Engineer Brian Marshall stood with his hand hovering over the button to engage the Berthold FTL drive again.

“Nothing so far on passives, Skipper,” Farmer said. “Things are pretty quiet across all spectrums.”

“Go ahead and light off the low-power radar then, Hal,” Staumpitz said. “If any junk is floating around ahead of us, I don't want to hit it.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper,” Farmer replied. “Initiating low power sweep.”

The helmsman, Angela Bracert, carefully watched her displays. She had duplicates of Farmer's, plus the control room's main screen, which showed a schematic of the star system. The primary, provisionally named Tetrarch, lay some two-hundred-seventy-five light years from the Solar System and Earth.

“We are in clear space, Skipper,” Farmer said. “Secure the radar?”

Staumpitz gazed at the displays and chewed his lower lip. A diminutive, bald-headed man, he was the shortest person aboard. He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“No, Hal, let's keep it running. I know doctrine says not to emit, but I hate bumbling around blind.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

“Brian,” Staumpitz said over the intercom, “I think we can secure the Berthold drives. But keep the initiators warm.”

“Aye, aye, Skip,” Marshall said. “Securing the FTL drives now.”

Discipline was casual aboard the research ship, but everyone paid attention to the Captain.

Staumpitz pushed another button, which requested a com link to the Science Team.

“Science Lab, this is Dafid Howe.”

“This is the Skipper, Dr. Howe. Are you getting data?”

The Science Lab consumed a third of the open space aboard the *Glendower*, and the twenty-four scientists were studying the instruments. The scientists were the true managers of the expedition. While Staumpitz commanded the ship and was responsible for its operation and safety, Howe was responsible for the exploration project.

“Passive sensors are nominal, Captain. I would like to release the probes whenever you are assured it is safe.”

“Doctrine says to wait an hour after FTL to release probes,” the captain said. “Any reason to wait that long?”

Howe ran his hand through his thatch of unruly red hair. “I don't know, Skipper. This seems like a pretty quiet system.”

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“Let's wait fifteen minutes, then,” said Staumpitz. “We can review at that time and make a decision.”

“Very well, Captain. I believe that is wise.”

Staumpitz pushed the button to disconnect from the Science Lab and looked to his left, where the Executive Officer studied her own set of screens.

“How's the ship, Number One?” the Captain asked.

First Officer Dawn Watkins looked over at the Captain. Her mahogany-colored skin contrasted wildly with her silver hair. “We're nominal, Skipper. FTL shutdown went perfectly. I can give you gravs anytime. Enviro is still having trouble with the number two fractional generator.”

“Make sure they stay on top of that,” Staumpitz said. “I don't want to lose our redundancy this far from home. It would be a long way to hold our breath.”

“You got that one right, Skipper,” she said.

“Sir, I just got a radar sweep,” Hal Farmer said suddenly.

Staumpitz did not remember leaving his chair, but he was now standing behind the sensor officer. “What do we have? Who else is out here?”

Farmer pointed to a pulsating beacon on his master screen. “Whoever it is, it is about two light minutes directly toward the system primary.”

“Does he have us?”

“He's got to have us, Skipper. He started radiating about three minutes after we did.”

Staumpitz rubbed his bearded face. “I wonder who else is out here? The Paladin assured me nobody else was headed this way. Palatinate Intelligence is normally pretty good. Can you get a print off the signal?”

“Trying, Sir. I'm getting close matches to several sets, but nothing exactly.”

Staumpitz walked back to the command chair and pushed a button. “Doctor Howe.”

A few moments later, the Chief Scientist responded. “Yes, Captain?”

“Are you analyzing the radar signal that's coming in?”

“Yes, Captain. It's nothing we recognize. It resembles an Arabian set, but that's about as close as I can call it.”

“And all our info on anything coming out of Arabia is ten years out of date. The 'rabs have probably developed a newer system.”

“You know what they say about *assume*, Captain,” Howe said.

Staumpitz snorted. “I hear ya, Dafid. There's not much else it could be, however. The Paladin will be unhappy if the Arabians have gotten here first and claimed the system.”

“Not to mention us crew members who just saw our bonuses go out the airlock.”

“Captain, have you considered that we might be in a *First Contact* situation?” the Executive Officer asked.

Staumpitz's face went pale. He looked over at Watkins and then at Farmer.

“Secure the radar from transmitting, Mr. Farmer.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.” Farmer pulled a switch. “Radar transmitter is secured, Sir.”

“Is whoever it is out there getting a skin paint off of us?”

“Not at two light minutes, Skipper. We should have gone off his screens.”

“Okay. Helm, come to 90 sub 10 relative and go to twenty-five gravities.”

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Bracert typed the necessary commands into the helm console. Staumpitz watched the screen images swing around as *Glendower* turned to a new heading and began accelerating. "Sir, we are at course 90 sub 10 relative, and the drives are coming up to twenty-five gravs."

"Thank you, Helm," Staumpitz said. He pointed to Farmer. "Start tracking the bogie."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

Staumpitz turned back to the command chair. "Dafid, are you still there?"

"Yes, Captain. And the Exec has a valid point."

"Possibly. I'm trying to put some distance in from where we were radiating. Have your folks put their heads together and make some determination as to what we are facing."

"The evidence is pretty scant so far, Captain," Howe said. "I'd like to go ahead and drop a probe."

"Wouldn't that be like trailing blood in the water?" Staumpitz asked.

"If we send it out in passive mode and use a laser for telemetry, I think the risk is low. The probes are pretty stealthy."

After the Berthold Singularity Drive's invention some forty years ago, mankind had swarmed out into the stars and busily colonized systems close to Earth. Survey ships like *Glendower* were the outriders, pushing further and further from manhome, rapidly adding huge volumes to man's knowledge of the universe.

So far, other intelligent life had not been discovered. Man's first interstellar voyage visited Sol's near neighbor, Alpha Centauri, and found a collection of planets barren of life. An early terraforming experiment allowed the settlement of Centaurus, which was the fourth planet around Proxima Centauri. Its ecology was one hundred percent imported from Earth. Humans had encountered a wide-ranging biosphere on Festalborg, the fourth planet in the Tau Ceti system, but nothing with intelligence greater than a sheep.

And so, while the protocols for encountering other civilizations across the galaxy were part of every human explorer's playbook, a generation of space travelers no longer paid much attention. The captains of the survey ships were a practical lot. They focused on the things that paid for their journeys and brought profit to the investors. Back on Earth, puzzled philosophers and scientists still asked the question, "Where *is* everybody?"

Staumpitz chewed on a knuckle as he considered the scientist's request. "Since the Arabians are not in the habit of telling anyone what they're doing, I suppose we need to approach this carefully. The Paladin won't thank us if we cause an international incident out here."

"There is that, Skipper," Howe said. "But we still need more information."

"All right, Doctor," Staumpitz laughed. "We'll get you your information. Get the probe launched."

"Thank you, Skipper."

After he disconnected and slipped back into the command chair, he leaned back with a sigh.

"What if it's not the Arabians, Ezra?" Watkins asked.

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Staumpitz leaned over on his elbow and tapped his front tooth with a fingernail. "In that case, Number One, maybe you'd better pull out the book and read up on the first contact protocols."

"But, you really don't think we might have a first contact situation here, Skipper?"

"Occam's Razor, Exec."

"The simplest explanation..." she began

"... is probably the correct one," he completed the statement. "Right. We've been toddling around this corner of the galaxy for the past forty years and not gotten a whiff of anything. No, we've got a group of Arabians preparing to plant a flag for Allah somewhere in the system."

"And if it is?" she asked.

"Then this expedition is done. They got here first. We'll go home and disappoint the Paladin. Whatever happens, we don't need a confrontation with them. That would ruin our leader's whole day. And as touchy as the Arabians are, we would risk involving the Upper Midwest Palatinate in a war."

She nodded and turned to her keyboard to begin typing.

"Let's stay on the ball, folks," Staumpitz announced to the bridge crew. "I need to know any status changes as soon as you spot something."

Two hours later, Watkins stepped into the ship's lab.

"How's it going, Dwan?" Howe asked. The two had been friends over the past ten years and several expeditions. Howe's three-year-old daughter Kathy had trouble pronouncing Watkins' name, and Howe had picked it up as a nickname.

"I should ask you," she replied. "What are we getting from the probe?"

"Not much that makes sense," he said. "The laser comm is a bit flaky, so I'm having trouble building a complete picture on the other ship."

"Meaning what?"

"It means I am starting to wonder if we really have an Arabian starship out there."

"You don't seriously think..."

He scraped his teeth over his upper lip and glanced at her with one eyebrow raised. "You were the one with the first contact suggestion."

"Yes, but that's my job to suggest all possible scenarios. Why would we, of all people, stumble across something like that? You are beginning to scare me."

Howe drummed his fingers on his desktop, then began typing again. "And why should we not? The Skipper needs to get off the dime and send the recognition string."

"Yes, and the Arabians over there will laugh themselves sick. Come on, Dafid, you remember what happened the last time something like this happened. There were jokes on late-night vids all around the planet. And that Captain was from the Palatinate too."

"Yes, but the scientists weren't laughing," he said. "I don't mind making a fool of myself if it keeps us from wrecking a potential first contact situation."

"We need to trust Ezra," she said. "He knows what he's doing. He's got us out of some tight situations before."

"Then why are you so nervous, Dawn?"

"I don't know. I've never been this way before and been in space..."

"I know," he interjected. "You were on *Prometheus*' first voyage. I've heard you tell the story to Kathy often enough."

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“Yeah, well, I feel like somebody just walked over my grave.”

The communicator on the desk twittered. Howe answered it.

“Lab, Dr. Howe.”

“This is the Captain, Dafid. Is the Exec there?”

“I'm here, Skipper,” Watkins leaned over Howe's shoulder to speak.

“The other ship has stopped radiating. I would like you on the bridge.”

“On my way, Skipper.” She nodded to Howe and quickly stepped out of the lab.

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“What do we have, Skipper?” Watkins asked as she stepped onto the bridge.

“A whole lot of nothing,” Staumpitz said. “We had a good fix as long as he had his radar set running.”

The plot recorded the other ship's movements for the past two hours. When *Glendower* shut down her radar, it had accelerated towards where the survey ship had been before Staumpitz had ordered acceleration. The track now looked fuzzy on the screen.

Watkins studied the plot. “I didn't get a chance to ask Dafid, but I wondered if the probe was close enough to the bogey to maintain contact after he shut down his radar.”

“A good thought, Number One,” Staumpitz said. “I will check.”

“Hey, Dafid, is the probe still locked on?”

Howe's voice came back over the intra-ship communicator. “We never did have what I would call a lock. The probe has not been behaving. We are, though, getting intermittent contact.”

Staumpitz studied the bridge displays, then glanced around the compartment. He rolled his eyes and then looked at the ceiling with its collection of pipe, conduits, and ductwork.

“Can you slip another probe out there without anybody noticing?”

“Absolutely, Skipper,” he replied. “I thought about that but wasn't sure you wanted to burn another probe.”

“The accountants will probably scream about it, but, hey, it's only money. Please go ahead and launch. Set the course on a dog-leg. If they spot it, I want it coming from an unexpected direction.”

“Like there's another ship out there?” the scientist asked.

“Well, that too,” Staumpitz replied. “I just don't want him to follow the course back to us.”

“Of course, Skipper.” Howe had been typing commands as he talked. He paused for a moment to review his work. Then, “Probe launched, Captain.”

“Very well, Dafid,” the Captain replied.

“Ahhh, we're getting good telemetry off the bird,” Howe said.

The bridge screens now updated to reflect the data transmitted by the second probe. As it moved rapidly away from *Glendower*, the surrounding near-space was displayed in detail to the crew.

“Hal,” said Staumpitz, “are the optical instruments up and running?”

“Yes, Skipper. The Science Lab is controlling them. They are studying the star system.”

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“You still there, Dafid?” the Captain asked.

“Yes, Skipper. I will grab some people and have them train their telescopes toward the other ship. I should've thought of that myself.”

“Thanks, Dr. Howe,” Staumpitz said. He pushed the button to disconnect the scientist and walked over to where Watkins was studying her screen.

“I wonder if we ought to spin up the weapons systems,” he said quietly to the Executive Officer.

She stared at him for a moment and then shook her head. “I don't know, Skipper. We've got to protect the ship, but I'm afraid somebody might get trigger-happy.”

Staumpitz glanced around the room again before turning back to her. “We're not fooling anybody here. Why don't you go ahead and get Adams up here? Just keep the lockout on the weapons console so that nobody has an accidental launch.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

She got out of her chair, walked to the back of the bridge, and stepped through the door into the Captain's Ready Room. Thirty seconds later, she came out again and nodded to Staumpitz as she walked by him to her chair. In five minutes, the supercargo stepped onto the bridge. Charles Adams was a former Palatinate Marine Gunnery Sergeant before signing on to handle logistics for *Glendower*. He was familiar with the defensive systems on the survey ship, so he became the ship's tactical officer by default.

He settled into his chair and powered up the weapons console. Staumpitz drifted over to him.

“Keep the lockouts engaged, Adams,” he said quietly. “Do not attempt to fire without a direct order from the Exec or me.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. Don't need a trigger-happy ex-marine gunny. What are we looking at?”

“I don't know yet, for certain. I suspect we have an Arabian survey ship out here preparing to plant a flag for Allah.”

“That would put a cap on our entire day, Sir,” Adams said.

“Whoever it is, there is no question they were here before us.”

“Maybe we should just make tracks for home, Skipper. I can think of a lot of not-good situations.”

Staumpitz snorted. “Maybe we should at that. Unfortunately, I am afflicted with curiosity. I would really like to see what we've got out here.”

Adams studied the screens for a full minute as Staumpitz stood behind him.

“If that's a warship over there, Skipper, we'll be sucking hind tit. The weapons systems on this tub are crap.”

“I know that, Adams. But we do have a world-class sensor suite. I'm counting on finding out what we need to know while we can still scoot.”

“How far are we from the System Limit?”

“We're right on the edge of it,” Staumpitz said. “We can engage FTL at any time.”

“Well, Glory Hallelujah!” Adams said.

“Yes, Adams,” Staumpitz said dryly, “I do have a brain.”

“Sorry, Skipper,” Adams said, although he was obviously not sorry. “I'm not used to officers having intelligence.”

“Gosh, Adams!” Watkins said.

“Sorry, Exec,” he said, although once again, he didn't seem very repentant.

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Staumpitz walked back over to the command chair and pushed the button for Engineering.

“Engineering, this is Marshall.”

“Brian, are the initiators still warm?”

“Aye, Skipper. Should I be expecting you to call upon the Berthold Drive?”

“I don't know, but don't take any naps down there right now.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

Staumpitz disconnected from Engineering and looked over at Watkins. “Let's go ahead and get Angela back up here.”

Watkins nodded and got busy with her intercom. Staumpitz slid into the command chair and observed the activities on the bridge. Adams had slaved the probe data to a couple of displays at the tactical station.

“What have we got, Adams?” Staumpitz asked.

“So far, Skipper, we got plenty of nothin'.”

“Nothing to sing about, anyway, right Gunny?” Hal Farmer asked. He was also watching the incoming data stream. Staumpitz raised an eyebrow and looked at Watkins, who rolled her eyes. Adams carefully unbuttoned a well-pressed shirt pocket and slid out a toothpick, which he popped into his mouth.

Angela Bracert came back to the bridge and displaced the other helmsman. After an eternal fifteen minutes in which nobody on the bridge spoke, Adams leaned back in his chair and pulled out the toothpick.

“We got somethin', Skipper. See where he's occluding that star pattern?”

“Can you flip it up to the main display, Adams?”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

The bridge crew watched the main display screen as something deeper than a shadow slowly moved from right to left. It was perceptible only as individual stars blinked out and then blinked in again. The Captain's intercom chirped. Staumpitz absently pushed the button.

“It's Dafid, Captain. Are you catching this?”

“Yes, Dafid. What do you make of it?”

The scientist paused. “Um. Let me see. There's really not enough light out here to resolve the image. Let me see what... okay, I'm sending an image across to Hal.”

“Put it up on the main screen, Hal,” Staumpitz said.

The screen went dark, then a line drawing began generating itself. They watched as the computer drew the outline of a starship.

“This is an extrapolation from the take from the probe?” Staumpitz asked.

“Yes, it's based upon the points where the image occluded the stars.”

“How accurate?”

“About eighty percent, give or take.”

Staumpitz gazed at the frame-based drawing. “Does anyone recognize that configuration?”

No one said anything. Staumpitz looked over at Watkins, who stared open-mouthed at the image.

“Don't all answer at once.”

“I don't think it came from Earth, Ezra,” Watkins said.

“Meaning?” Staumpitz asked.

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Adams had put the toothpick back in his mouth and was now rolling it back and forth. "It means it's about 99.44% certain we got ourselves an alien here."

"Send the string, Skipper," Watkins said.

"Dafid?" Staumpitz asked.

"Send it."

Staumpitz cocked his head as he studied the display. He grimaced and shook his head. "Do we have a heading yet?"

"About 340 relative to us, as a rough estimate," Farmer said. "He won't intercept, but it's not a bad guess on his part."

"Helmsman, all stop," Staumpitz ordered.

"Aye, aye, Sir. Engineering is showing all stop on the drives."

"What are you doing?" Watkins whispered to the Captain.

"I don't know if whoever is out there can detect space-time wrinkles from the sublight drives, but I don't want any emissions to betray us. Farmer, check the ship for emissions."

"Already done, Skipper," he replied. "Nothing detectable."

Howe had swung the probe around so that it was roughly paralleling the track of the other ship. There was nothing to see except the creeping shadow that briefly blanked out the stars it moved in front of.

"Space/time wrinkle, Skipper," Farmer called out.

"That tells us something, anyway," Staumpitz said.

"I've got a targeting solution if you need it, Skipper," Adams called.

"Good. Keep him dialed in."

"Aye, aye, Skipper," Adams said absent-mindedly as he worked the controls at the tactical station.

"I'm getting neutrino leakage," Farmer said. "He's got a nuclear plant, definitely."

"Like he's got a fission pile," Adams said. "Where's he been hiding for the past fifty years?"

"We know it's not going to be a grav-fused reactor," Farmer replied. "With that kind of leakage, it almost has to be a laser-fired plant."

"Nobody runs laser-fired fusion reactors, Skipper," Watkins protested.

Staumpitz said nothing as he studied the screens. "Helm, give me about ten gravities deceleration."

"Ten gravs down gradient, Aye," Bracert said.

"Skipper, what are you *doing*?" Watkins hissed.

Staumpitz looked over at the Exec. "Dawn, this is a research vessel. I am collecting information. Hal, give me the tactical on main."

Farmer switched the main bridge screen to show the tactical arrangement of the two ships plus *Glendower's* two probes.

"Okay, I'm getting a space/time wrinkle," Farmer said. "He's decelerating." He typed some more at his station. "Dafid's putting about ten gravities on the probes to stay with the other ship. Skipper, the other guy has got to have us, too."

"How?"

"I don't know, Skipper. The tech level seems close to ours, but nothing makes sense."

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Staumpitz sucked on his lower lip as he thought furiously. He looked over at Watkins. "What do you think?"

"Send the string."

"Is there an echo in here?" Staumpitz asked.

"It's my job to give you advice, Skipper. I think that's what we need to do."

"So noted, Number One." The Captain turned in his seat towards the sensor station. "Hal, give me a single sweep with the radar. Low power."

Farmer looked at Staumpitz for a moment before turning to his board. "Single, low-power radar sweep, Aye," he said. He tapped a couple of buttons and then hit a larger red button. One of the small displays in front of him showed a widening wave, representing the electromagnetic signal from the radar emitter as it expanded from the ship. Almost immediately, two points of light showed one on each side.

"Bingo!" he called. "He's got a couple of probes out, himself."

Adams snorted.

Staumpitz gazed at the gunny but said nothing. He then went back to studying the display again.

"Helm, all stop," he said.

"All Stop, Aye," Bracert said.

The other ship coasted in and smoothly matched velocity to lay five miles off the port side of *Glendower*.

"Give me the video feed from the probe again."

The bridge display blinked and now showed the star field. In the center was a darker shadow. A set of running lights blinked on, and the other ship was clearly visible.

It was silent on the bridge for thirty seconds as the crew stared at the screen.

"Well, I will be an Arabian Trollop," Adams said softly.

Staumpitz started slightly. "Okay, Hal, turn on the running lights. Give him a chance to see us."

"Skipper," Watkins said softly, "*please* send the First Contact string."

Staumpitz looked over at her and grinned. "Yes, I suppose we should." He turned to Farmer. "Hal, queue up the First Cont..."

The bridge lit up as a bright flash erupted from the other ship's hull.

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"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Staumpitz shouted.

Adams slowly turned to Staumpitz with his eyebrows raised. "And why would the *Captain* assume that an experienced Marine Gunnery Sergeant would open fire on an innocent starship that has just suffered the mother of all engineering casualties?"

He turned back to look at the other ship and the expanding debris cloud from its hull. Staumpitz stared at the screen.

The Captain's intercom twittered.

"Bridge, Captain."

"Skipper, what happened?" Howe asked. "I got a blast of electromagnetic energy across the spectrum, and then everything stopped."

"I don't know, Dafid. Our friend just opened a piece of his hull to vacuum rather violently."

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“An explosion?”

“You betcha.”

“Skipper,” Farmer called, “I’m guessing he lost his fusion plant. I played back the video of the explosion. His light flickered and then came back much dimmer afterward.”

“Then he’s in a world of hurt,” Staumpitz said. “Okay, as I was saying, Mr. Farmer, go ahead and queue up the First Contact string and start sending. Hopefully, they still use radio.”

Fifteen minutes passed as *Glendower* continuously sent the message designed to establish the foundations for communications with other intelligence, but there was no response. The scientists aboard *Glendower* had turned every possible piece of survey equipment on the other ship, and the computers were filling up with raw data.

“Nothing so far, Skipper,” Hal Farmer said. “I’m using the electromagnetic spectrum and the comm laser.”

Staumpitz remained in his chair and watched. The steward had brought him a cup of coffee, which he sipped as he watched the events.

“I suspect our friend is just a bit busy right now,” the Captain said. “And that’s assuming his communications gear is still operable.”

“The away team is ready to go,” Watkins said. “Whenever you give the word, we can suit up and be on our way.”

“Repair tools in the shuttle?” Staumpitz asked.

“Yes, Skipper. We’re assuming our welding equipment will work with his hull.”

“Might be a big assumption.”

She shrugged. “We’re getting a lot of information about the basic configuration of that ship but not much else.”

“Funny lookin’ thing,” Adams commented. “All curves.”

Indeed the unidentified starship seemed to be entirely made up of compound curves. It was a sharp contrast to the *Glendower*, a chunky lifting body with stubby wings and sharp edges.

Bracert still sat at the helm as the ship was at a high stage of alert. “I’ll bet that thing is a pig to fly in a planetary atmosphere.”

“As opposed to a brick like this?” Watkins asked.

“Point taken, Madam Exec,” she answered. “There are definitely good things that can be said for unlimited fusion power and counter-grav systems.”

“They probably would have said the same thing until their ship had its embolism,” Staumpitz commented. “I just wish they would wake up their comm section. They will need some help, and we’re probably the only candidate within several light years.”

“They are not having a good day,” Farmer said. “It looks like the intensity of his running lights has dropped five or six percent.”

“So he’s running off accumulators, then,” Staumpitz observed. “He’s in real trouble. Even if he responds, I wonder if we can figure out how to get power to him before he loses his enviro systems.”

“Not to mention having enough stored power to restart a reactor, assuming he has anything left of his power room,” Watkins said. “I feel sorry for them but glad I’m not in their shoes.”

“Oops, Skipper,” Farmer interrupted, “I’m getting a signal from the other ship.”

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Staumpitz quickly punched the button to open the link to the Science Lab. “Dafid, are you getting that?”

“Sure are, Skipper. We're receiving a high bit-rate data stream. The AIs are starting to chew on it now.”

“Let me know as soon as you have something. This guy's in trouble, and we need to start looking for ways to get power to him.”

“His running lights just went off,” Adams said.

“Data stream still coming,” Howe said.

“He's probably trying to conserve power, then,” Staumpitz said.

“There's some activity around his hull breach,” Adams said.

“Zoom the main screen in, please,” Staumpitz said.

“Right you are, Skipper,” Adams said as he manipulated the controls.

It seemed like they suddenly moved close to the other ship as the picture zoomed in. A couple of lights showed through the opening, and there was indistinct movement.

“A work light, maybe?” Adams asked.

“Makes sense,” Farmer said. “He's going to have to patch the hole before he can effect repairs, assuming repairs are possible.”

“Dafid, is anything starting to make sense?” Staumpitz asked.

“The AI's indicate the fundamental data structures are remarkably similar to ours. I think we'll be able to start feeding you something in a few minutes.”

“I wonder if they can make anything of our data stream,” Watkins said.

“Look at that,” Farmer said, pointing to the screen.

Two silvery, cylindrical objects had moved into view from the far side of the other ship. They eased around to the hull breach.

“Looks like they have bots,” Adams said. “Funny shape.”

“Ummm. I don't think so,” Howe said over the intercom. “I think those are space suits.”

Everyone on the bridge leaned forward to look more closely. The suited figures floated around the opening, briefly moving in and out of the light.

“Angela, can you put the spotlights on them?” Staumpitz asked.

“I think so, Sir.” She worked her controls, and circles of light swung over the other ship to rest over the hull breach. The two suited figures turned towards *Glendower*, then returned to whatever they were doing.

“Still can't see very good,” Adams said.

“I'm not trying to help us, Charlie,” Staumpitz said. “I'm trying to help them.”

“The name's Charles.”

“Whatever.”

“Whoa,” came Howe's voice over the speaker. “Skipper, you gotta see this!”

“Well, send it up here, so I can,” Staumpitz said.

“Oh. Just a minute.” There was a long pause. “Okay, I sent a link to Hal so he can access the data. We don't have the language yet, but we have pictures and video.”

Farmer looked up. “I've got it, Skipper.”

Staumpitz twirled his finger in the air and then pointed to the main screen. Farmer nodded and typed a command. The main viewscreen split between the image of the other ship and a frame with a blue background. Then a picture appeared.

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The bridge was quiet as they studied the picture on the screen. Finally, Adams spoke.

“I’m not sure, Skipper, but I think one of those things used to hide in my closet when I was about five years old.”

The being was cylindrical in shape and had radial symmetry. It had five arms/tentacles/appendages. It stood on five more limbs. Its most distinguishing feature was a single, large, human-looking blue eye. Oh, and its skin was a bright pink color.

“Not... quite what I expected,” Watkins said.

“Uh oh!” Farmer said.

They looked at the left side of the screen at the tableau in space. One of the space-suited creatures was drifting away from their ship. The other was attached to the vessel and appeared to be reaching toward the drifting creature. They were just out of reach.

“Dawn,” said Staumpitz, “get your crew into the shuttle and get out there. They’re getting ready to lose a crewman.”

Watkins jumped to her feet. “Right, Skipper. On my way.” She walked quickly from the bridge.

Farmer continued to scan the material transmitted from the other ship. “The AI is starting to put words to the pictures, Skipper. Look at this.”

Another picture of the odd creatures flipped up onto the display. Underneath was a curious flowing script. The AI added a word beneath in human-readable format – **Woogie.**

“Is that what they call themselves? Staumpitz asked.

“Apparently, Sir.”

Howe was still connected over the intercom. “Give me an hour, Captain, and I think we could chance sending text strings back and forth to communicate.”

“That was quick,” the Captain replied.

“They had a very well-organized data package. And our AI is starting to pass data back to them. I think they’ve got some decent computing capacity over there. At least our AI seems to think so.”

“I’ve never seen an Artificial Intelligence that had the slightest idea what it was talking about,” Adams grumbled.

“What was that?” Staumpitz asked.

“Nothing.”

“Actually, he has a point,” Howe said. “We’re running a program nobody has run before, for real. There is a real risk that we’ll convince ourselves we see things that are really not there.”

“I rest my case,” Adams said.

“But,” Howe continued, “nobody has been able to come up with a better idea.”

“Let me give it a try,” Staumpitz said.

He pushed a button, and a keyboard unfolded from the side of his chair. He typed a short message. *I am Ezra Staumpitz, the Captain of the Palatinate Starship Glendower.*

“Okay, let’s send that.”

Farmer typed a couple of commands and sent the message across the vacuum. They continued to watch the drama unfold outside. Three minutes later, the system signaled an incoming message.

“Put it on the screen, Hal.”

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The letters popped up. *Vos dinkem peanut butter splat!*

“You see that, Dafid?” Staumpitz asked.

“Yeah. We need to let the AI chew over the data a while longer.”

“Concur.”

Staumpitz looked up again to watch the *Glendower's* shuttle slip across the intervening space to the other ship. It eased over to the spot where the other creature writhed in its space suit, attempting to return to its ship. A hatch opened on the side of the shuttle, and two space-suited figures drifted out. They eased over to the other creature, who had stopped struggling. The two humans reached out and guided the being back to its ship.

The other creature reached out and snagged the first. They both turned to gaze at the humans. After about thirty seconds, they turned back to their repairs.

“How about that?” Staumpitz asked.

“Another incoming message, Skip,” Farmer said.

To piggle rescue thanks spork gratz.

Staumpitz ran his tongue around the inside of his cheek. “Send. *You are welcome,*” he instructed Farmer.

“Captain,” Howe called, “our AIs are directly interacting with the other ship. They are indicating there's an AI over there.”

“What a wonderful day to get screwed,” Adams sang to himself. “They get the propeller; we got the shaft.”

Staumpitz frowned at Adams and leaned towards the audio pickup. “Keep an eye on things, Dafid. If it looks like it's getting out of hand, cut the link.”

“Roger, Skipper. It looks like they're rapidly developing a *lingua franca*, which might be a good thing otherwise. From what we're seeing of the *Woogie* physiology, I don't think they can make sounds we would understand.”

“Are we comfortable that we are accurate in calling them *Woogies*?” the Captain asked.

“The data is starting to firm up, Skipper. Their information architecture is remarkably similar to ours. Overall our technology looks like it's a bit ahead of theirs.”

“How are we coming on the biologicals?”

“Umm.” Howe paused for a moment. “One of the AIs is focused on the biologicals. As wildly different as they are, it looks like they are carbon-based. And...”

There was a long pause.

“Captain, they have DNA!”

Staumpitz physically jumped. “Are you sure?”

“Getting there, Sir.”

Staumpitz gazed at the other ship on the display screen and gave a soundless whistle. “All right, Dafid, what are the odds of that happening?”

Howe managed a mirthless chuckle. “As you probably know, there has been a lot of speculation as to what form any extraterrestrial life forms would take. DNA is an elegant solution to a life-form road map. We have discovered that physical laws are consistent across as much of the universe as we have observed.”

“So, you are suggesting there are some similar biological laws?” Staumpitz asked.

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“It would make the theologians happy,” Howe said. “I would hesitate to posit something like that based on the half-day’s observations we have made here so far. But, it would be entirely consistent with the economy of the Creator.”

“I suppose it would be interesting to research the *Woogie* theology.”

“When the AIs get done here, we will have a *Woogopedia* to dig through, and we're trading a lot of knowledge to them. That really is not my biggest worry, though.”

“Then, you'd better tell me what is worrying you, Dafid,” Staumpitz said.

“Our biologies are too similar.”

“Explain, please.”

Howe sighed. “Think about the possibilities of how we will interact with them at the bacterial and viral level. We could pick up a bug from them that would make the Black Death look like a walk in the park. I suppose the obverse is also true.”

The color drained from Staumpitz's face. “Hal, give me a link to the shuttle.”

The tone sounded, indicating a communications link. “Dawn, this is the Captain.”

“Yes, Skipper?”

“I'm declaring a Class 1 Quarantine. It's precautionary, but our biologicals are too similar to theirs. So you will need to follow procedures.”

“Gee, thanks, Skipper.”

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An hour later, the artificial intelligences on both ships were communicating with a high degree of accuracy. The Woogies, as the humans now considered it safe to call the beings, had transmitted a diagram of the broken equipment to the human ship. Staumpitz sat in the ship's conference room with Bryan Marshall and Dafid Howe. A hologram of the engineering diagram rotated above the center of the table as they studied it.

“That's got to be a laser-fired fusion unit, Skipper,” Marshall said. “Looks primitive too. I can't believe they would travel this far with only one of the things.”

“Hal basically confirmed that from the neutrino leakage. From what we can decipher from their messages,” Staumpitz said, “they have two reactors, and the explosion took them both out.”

“Any ideas on what happened?” the Engineer asked.

“Something about a blow-back through the hydrogen feed,” Howe said. “And they don't have parts to repair it.”

“Those poor schmucks,” Marshall said. “Being stuck this far out with no way to get home gives me nightmares.”

“Is there any way we can help them, Bryan?” Howe asked. “Don't we carry a spare reactor?”

Marshall shook his head. “He needs a shipyard. In theory, we could stick our spare unit in there, but he will have to rebuild his engine room, not to mention mating our technology with his.”

“They really are screwed,” Staumpitz said.

“The good news is that the Aux Power Units can carry them indefinitely. There's insufficient power to light off his drives, but he won't suffocate.”

“Hal mentioned their running lights slowly dimming.”

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“In that case,” the engineer said, “they may have lost the APUs in the explosion.” He gritted his teeth and twisted his head slightly sideways as he considered that.

“Dafid, have you been running a star system survey, or has everyone been focused on our friends out there?”

“I've had a small crew doing the survey. They're annoyed at not being invited to our party.”

“What do we have in the way of real estate, then?”

Howe did some typing on the keyboard built into the table in front of his chair. A schematic of the star system appeared on the hologram before them.

“As you can see, we have six planets in the system. Two are gas giants. Two are too close to the primary. Of the two left, one has no real atmosphere. The other has an atmosphere and is in the liquid water zone. It's potentially habitable.”

“Let's get a probe over there,” Staumpitz said.

“What do you have in mind, Skipper?” Howe asked.

“I want to get this guy anchored to a planet. If we can assist in stabilizing him, we can run home and bring some help. It's pretty clear we won't get him back together with shipboard resources. Plus, we are not going to break quarantine.”

“You don't know how glad I am to hear that, Skipper,” Marshall said.

“I want to help these people, Bryan. But, I won't risk the ship to do it.”

“We're a long way from help, too,” Howe said. “Getting somebody to bring a repair ship out here would take some convincing.”

“Do you think that would do the convincing?” Staumpitz asked, gesturing towards the image of the alien spacecraft on the screen. “This is the greatest find in human history.”

“The global politics on Earth are fluky right now, though, Captain. The Arabians would be apt to decide that ship is the work of Shaitan and come out to put a nuke into it.”

“The Paladin would send a ship out,” Staumpitz said.

“How can you know that?” Howe asked. “He's going to be looking after the Palatinate first and foremost. Word of this gets out, and there will be a war. Nobody needs that.”

“What would you suggest, then, Dafid?” Staumpitz asked softly. “You're the scientist. So far, all I'm hearing is why we can't do anything. We're the people on the spot, and I'm not planning to let a group of sentients die if I can possibly do something about it.”

“Ezra, do you realize what you're saying?” Howe responded.

“I know full well what I am saying, Dafid. You are right in that we must be careful. But... we also have to do the right thing. Now get that probe out to the third planet. And keep gathering as much data on the Woogies as you can.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Howe said quietly.

The communications unit plinked. Howe pressed the *accept* key. It was the Science Lab.

“Dr. Howe, we have an incoming message from the other ship. The AI's separated it out as a specific request.”

“Okay, I have it.” Howe pushed a couple of buttons, and the message appeared in the hologram.

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To receive some help. The Woogies would appreciate.

Staumpitz raised his eyebrows and looked at the other two men. "Suggestions?"

"Ask him what he needs," Marshall said.

Howe shook his head and said nothing.

How can we help? Staumpitz typed. He pressed the send button.

A few moments later, another message came in through the same link.

To seal hull beyond Woogie tips. To help seal hull.

"What do you suppose that means?" Staumpitz asked.

"I think they can't fix the hull breach," Howe said.

We will help. Staumpitz typed. He pushed a button on his console.

"Yes, Skipper?" Watkins called.

"We have a message from the other ship. They can't repair their hull breach. Can you pull the welder out and give it a try?"

"Yes, Skipper. We snagged one of the pieces of debris for testing. It's stainless steel, not titanium. We can handle it, okay. Plus, they have pulled out some sheets of what is probably more steel and some structural members."

"Okay. Be careful, Exec."

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

Staumpitz looked over at Howe. "Dafid, do you suppose you could ease one of the probes over closer to the other ship so we could get a closer look at what's happening?"

Howe stood up. "Sure thing, Captain. Let me get back to my office. It's better equipped for that job."

After he left, Staumpitz spoke again. "Bryan, I'd like you to start thinking about integrating our spare fusactor into the Woogie systems."

"Our knowledge of their engineering is still sketchy, Skip," Marshall replied.

"I know. But I have the feeling we'll have to take some direct action before this is over and done with."

Marshall stood. "Then let me get back to my domain and start scratching my head. There's no question something like that can be done. The issue is whether or not we can accomplish it from our resources."

"But didn't you assure me one time you were the best engineer in human-explored space?" Staumpitz asked with a smile.

"Not fair, Skipper. That's hitting below the belt."

Staumpitz settled into his command chair again with a barely suppressed groan. With medical advances over the past several centuries, he could realistically expect to live to see one-hundred-fifty at a minimum. But, he had been on the go for eighteen hours in what could reasonably be described as a high-stress situation, and he felt every one of his sixty years.

The Chief Scientist had maneuvered the probe to where it was maybe one-hundred-fifty feet from the Woogie starship and was transmitting a high-quality video feed to *Glendower*. Howe had commented that the AIs had been communing with the technology on the Woogie ship and were retransmitting the feed to it. Apparently, the Woogie Skipper also wanted a good view of the action.

Being consistent with her hands-on approach, the Executive Officer had suited up and was outside with the two engineering ratings, Smith and Barrow. She helped Smith

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push and pull the pieces of steel into position while Barrow operated the welder. The two Woogie spacemen/space creatures (?) made valiant efforts to assist but mostly got in the way. Through the open comm link, Watkins could be heard muttering under her breath as she physically pushed the space-suited creature over and then pantomimed moving the materials. They were certainly willing helpers, if a bit incompetent.

One area where the alien technology was clearly superior to that of the humans was in the management of the repair materials. Barrow had slid the stainless steel plate over part of the opening and tacked it in place with the welder. He then began using the welder to cut the piece of steel to fit. One of the Woogies drifted over and, using one of its five arms, tapped the welder on the shoulder. The welder turned to see who was interrupting and jumped to the side. The Woogie drifted in and pulled out a hand tool that looked like a knife with a one-inch blade. He zipped the device along the piece of steel sheet, and it parted as if he were cutting foil.

“Well, how about that?” Watkins said. “I gotta get me one of those.”

The work continued for a couple hours, and everyone was getting tired. Barrow had tacked one end of a steel beam down and was trying to ease the other end of it into position. The weld left the structural member slightly out of position, and everyone tried to flex it into place. Barrow was maneuvering the welder while the other rating attempted to hold the beam in place. The Woogie had his cutter out and was trying to get into position to trim the beam slightly when it happened. The steel beam snapped out of position again, throwing all the workers into a confusing tumble.

“Oh, Shoot!” Watkins yelled. “I just cut off my finger!”

“Get her back into the shuttle right now,” Staumpitz ordered.

He could see the jet of condensing air, mixed with blood, erupting from the Exec's glove. The two alien beings suddenly emerged from the confusion and acted with a clear purpose. They each grabbed one of Watkins' arms and pulled through the opening into the Woogie ship.

“No, not that way!” Staumpitz yelled. “Oh, good heavens!”

The two engineering ratings were looking the wrong way, and by the time they turned it was too late.

“Dawn, are you all right?” Staumpitz called.

“Of course, I'm not all right,” she yelled again. “I cut off my finger. Of all the stupid... Okay, okay, they're pulling me through an airlock.”

“Was it the Woogie cutter that got you?”

“No, I got it in front of the stupid welding beam. Gosh, it's starting to really hurt now.”

“What are you doing?”

“I'm in the airlock. Okay, now the inner door is opening. Boy, the artificial gravity is high in here. There are Woogies all over the place.”

“Are you inside now?” Staumpitz asked.

“Yeah, Skipper. Strange colors. It's all purple and orange. Okay, one of them wants me to pull off my glove. What do I do?”

Staumpitz sighed. “At this point, Dawn, you've broken quarantine. Go ahead and let them look at your hand.”

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“Right. Okay, the glove is off. He's wrapping the stump of my finger with something.” She yelped. “That really hurt.” She paused. “The pain is easing off now, and the bleeding has stopped. I'm not going to die from blood loss and vacuum anyway.”

Barrow called in. “What do we do, Skipper?”

Staumpitz rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Go ahead and finish the hull patch, then get back to the shuttle. Wait there for instructions.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

Staumpitz stared at Hal Farmer, who stared back at him.

“There's an old saying somewhere,” Staumpitz began, “and it starts with something like, *just when you thought things couldn't get any worse.*”

“I've heard that one, Sir,” Farmer said. “We're in a mess now, for sure.”

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“Keep talking to me, Dawn,” Staumpitz said.

“I'm okay, Ezra. The pain has gone away.” they wrapped something around my finger and sealed the glove.

“Are you sure you're not going into shock?” he asked.

“I'm fine. It hurt like nobody's business when these critters hauled me into the ship, but they probably saved my life.”

“Sit tight, then. We need to figure out what to do over here.”

There was a pause before she spoke again. “The quarantine, right?”

“You got it,” the Captain replied.

“Well, you've got your lab rat, Skipper. I wonder if I should go ahead and pull my helmet off.”

“Don't do that, Dawn, just yet.”

“Message coming in, Skipper,” Farmer said.

Staumpitz looked down at the message text as it appeared on his screen.

Human crew person injured. So sorry, the Woogie. Stopped injury. Concerned about biologicals.

“He's got that one right,” Staumpitz muttered. He pushed the button to connect with the Science Lab.

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“Yes, Captain?”

“You picking all this up, Dafid?”

“Yes, Sir. I'm riding right along with you. But if you're looking for ideas, stay tuned. I don't have anything yet.”

Staumpitz slid his keyboard out of the drawer and typed a note back to the other ship.

What is the status of your repair effort?

A minute later, the reply popped up. *Effort is high.*

Staumpitz snorted. He heard Farmer, at his station, snickering. The Captain thought for a few moments before typing again.

Do you expect to repair the damage to your ship?

Soon to have air in engine room. Cannot repair reactor. Restarted APU. Enough power from APU to maintain ship. Plenty of food. No star drive. Woogies stranded.

He couldn't tell if there was a plaintive note to the message or if the Woogie creature was simply practical-minded. There was no denying the honesty of the message. The beings on the other starship were indeed in deep trouble.

How much time will pass before you consume air, water, and food?

The answer came back, *forty-seven flagorsetze.*

“Dafid, do you have that term in the database yet?” Staumpitz yelled.

“Hold on, Captain, I'm looking now.”

Another message came in. *About eighteen of your months. So sorry, the Woogie.*

“And he's apologizing to *me*,” Staumpitz muttered again. “You still with us, Dawn?”

“I'm not going anywhere, Ezra. I've got about a dozen of these things outside of their space suits clustered around me. They are holding up computer screens trying to communicate.” She giggled. “They're funny.”

“Don't get careless. We've got communication, but we still may fundamentally be misunderstanding them. They may want you for dinner.”

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“I don’t think I would want to try their food,” she said.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh.”

“That was cruel, Skipper,” Farmer said.

“I don’t want her to relax,” Staumpitz said. “This is a dangerous situation we’re in, and it is very possible we could screw the pooch.”

“I really don’t think they are dangerous, Skipper,” the Exec said. “They’re kind of cute.”

Staumpitz rubbed his hand over his face. The long hours he had spent in the chair were beginning to catch up with him.

Howe jumped in.

“Come on, Dwan. Pay attention. Even if these creatures are angels incarnate, there is an awful lot we don’t know. Even a simple mistake could be fatal.”

“If it hasn’t already,” she said, suddenly sober.

“Not to be cruel, but you won the cigar. What are they saying to you?”

“They are asking me my name, how old I am, where I’m from, stuff like that.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t give them coordinates to Earth!” Howe yelled.

“Come on, Dafid,” she replied. “Get a grip. I’m more intelligent than that. Quit being an old woman.”

Staumpitz snorted at the unintended irony. “I don’t need you two fighting right now. Exec, I want you to observe and report.”

What to do with human crew? Cannot feed. The message came in.

Staumpitz began typing. *A difficult problem.*

Option, came the reply. Send food over. Repair Woogie ship. Take to Woogaea. Option leave human on third planet. Repair Woogie ship. Go for help. Option leave human and food and Woogies on third planet. Go for help. Woogie not know.

“It looks like he’s pretty well figured out the score,” Howe said.

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“What was that?” Dawn asked.

“Hold on a minute, Exec,” Staumpitz said, and he muted her circuit. “All right, Dafid, are there any other options?”

“We don’t have the lift to take all the Woogies back to Earth. I suppose if we could establish that they are biologically safe, we could leave Dawn with the Woogies and bring one to Earth with us. And they are right; we can’t eat their food.”

“It would poison us?” Staumpitz asked.

“Not poison, exactly, but it would make us sick. Looks like there is a subset of substances we can both consume, but not enough to provide either of us with a full diet.”

“Was that in the data?” Staumpitz asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t start the AIs working on that part until the Exec got stranded over there.”

Staumpitz flipped a switch. “Okay, Dawn, we were just discussing the options the Woogie sent us.”

“I can imagine what those were. I’m not stupid. Either I stay here, or I go with the Woogies. Do I understand correctly that there is a habitable planet here?”

“The Woogie said so. We haven’t gotten to that data yet, and the probe is still on its way. And you pretty much figured out the options.”

“That comes with having an active imagination, Skipper.”

“Right, then you obviously realize things could be a *lot* worse.”

“Ezra!” she shouted.

“Yep,” he replied. “Now you should take advantage of your opportunity for research while the enormous brain power on this bucket figures out what to do with you.”

“Now, I *know* I’m in trouble,” she said.

“I’m starting to get answers on the environmental,” Howe said. “She should be able to breathe the same air as the Woogies with no problems. Still working on the biologicals.”

“I still wonder if I should just take my helmet off,” Watkins said. “I’m not going to be able to stay in this suit for the three months it’ll take you to go home for help.”

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“Don’t get in a rush, Dawn,” Howe said. “You’ve got forty-eight hours of air and enough rations to hold you for a week. We can get more air to you.”

“I want to eliminate the known risks first,” Staumpitz said. “Bryan is working on the engineering solution. Once we figure out the environmental, we’ll have a better idea of our choices.”

The sound of sobbing came over the comm link.

“Dawn, what’s the matter?” Staumpitz asked.

“I lost my finger,” she cried. “I don’t want to be missing a finger.”

The Captain looked around the bridge. The other crew members carefully avoided looking at him. He shook his head and wondered what to say. Finally, Howe spoke.

“Look at the opportunity God just handed you. You are the first human to set foot on a starship from another civilization. Just think of the stories you can tell your grandchildren.”

She burst into full bawling. “My grandchildren didn’t want me to come on this trip! Now I’ll never see them again. And I lost my finger!”

Staumpitz cut the circuit to her space suit. “Dafid, we’ve got to get her to cut off the waterworks. She’ll choke or drown in that space suit.”

“You gotta snap her out of it, Captain. She respects you.”

“That’s what I was afraid you were going to say.” He heaved a great sigh. “Hokay.”

He opened the circuit, where Watkins was still weeping.

“Watkins, snap out of it! Lives are depending on you, and not just your own. Shut up and do your job.”

The crying jag stopped suddenly.

“You there, Dawn?”

“Yes,” came a sheepish voice. “Sorry, Skipper. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Just pay attention to what you’re doing.”

“Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir.”

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“How are you feeling?” Staumpitz asked.

“Other than my poor index finger, I'm doing fine. And it doesn't hurt at all anymore. But, Skipper, I did catch a whiff of something from when my glove was off. I don't think these guys are going to smell very good.”

“Something else not to worry about right now. If they're trying to communicate with you, you should try to talk to them.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. I'm back on balance now.”

“Captain, this is Dafid. We lost telemetry from Dawn's space suit from the point of the accident.”

“Did you hear that, Dawn?” Staumpitz asked. “Can you check your circuits?”

“I'm getting a fault on the telemetry unit,” she replied. “It's on the back of my suit, so I can't see if there is physical damage. I just tried a reset and got nothing. I'd say it's definitely a malf.”

“Don't worry about it, then. Just focus on talking to the Woogies, and we'll try not to interrupt you.”

“Right.”

Staumpitz muted the connection again. “Dafid let's get back to the conference room. We need to start hashing things out.”

“Be there in a couple, Captain.”

Staumpitz pushed the button to the engineering section. “Bryan, back to the conference room.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

“Farmer, you have the conn,” Staumpitz said.

“Aye, Sir, I have the conn.” Rather than moving over to the center chair, Farmer stayed at the sensor station.

Staumpitz walked quickly from the bridge.

The three men sat in the conference room and studied the sensor readings. The probe was still parked near the other ship and was sending video back. The other probe was well on its way to the third planet. Watkins vocalized all her activities, and the AIs recorded and analyzed. A steward brought in coffee and Danish.

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“You all heard the Woogie express the options, right?”

They nodded.

“Let me tell you what I'm thinking,” Staumpitz said. “We somehow figure out how to integrate our spare fusactor with their power room. We send them home with the Exec and one other crew member. We head for home with two Woogies on board. We agree to meet back here in six months.”

“That might be a lot to expect, Captain,” Howe said. “Are you sure the Paladin will agree to something like that? The general public will go berserk.”

“Not positive, but I don't think he's going to let two of our crew starve out here.”

“I'm not sure I'd want to bet *my* life on something like that,” Marshall said.

“In effect, we already have, Bryan,” Staumpitz said. “The Exec is stranded over there. If we bring her back, we break quarantine.”

“If we bring two of those creatures over here, we do too,” Howe said.

“Point taken,” Staumpitz said. “But showing up in Earth orbit with a couple of beings from another star-faring civilization will have an impact.”

Marshall snorted. “That's probably the understatement of the century. What if we cause a stampede?”

“We deal with it,” Staumpitz said. “One way or the other, we will upset forty or fifty apple carts when we get back to Earth. I want to do it in such a way that gives the Paladin the maximum amount of leverage. I mean, I'm all for helping mankind in general, and the Paladin is too; but he financed this expedition, and I aim to see he recovers his investment.”

“Kind of mercenary, isn't it?” Howe asked.

Staumpitz smiled. “Yes, it really is. It doesn't change the equation, however. We will have to share this with the rest of the human race. No question about that. But we are also going to extract the maximum amount of profit possible from this situation. This isn't a charity, Dafid.”

“Oh, I know,” Howe replied. “And I have to agree. The Paladin writes my paycheck, too, after all. But everybody else is going to scream.”

“Let'em. We are going to put the Palatinate in the catbird seat. We will distribute the knowledge, and the rest of the planet will owe us big time.”

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Staumpitz paused to pour himself a cup of coffee and grab a Danish. “Heaven knows when I will have a chance to sleep again.”

“You'd better do it soon,” Howe said. “You need to stay sharp.”

“Right. Bryan, any ideas on integrating that fusactor into their infrastructure.”

“I've been looking at it, Skipper. If you allow for generous amounts of baling wire and duct tape, I think we can do it. We'll have to install some control systems for him; otherwise, he's apt to cook it too.”

“Okay, let me run this by the Woogie over there and see what he thinks.”

“Whoever we send with the Exec probably should be from Engineering,” Marshall said.

“To ride heard on the thing?”

“And to install it unless you want me going over there.”

Staumpitz held up two fingers. “First of all, I think sending one of your engineers along is a brilliant idea. A volunteer, of course. But I think you need to go over and get it installed for them. We're going to bust quarantine anyway.”

“Right,” the engineer said. “When you held up two fingers, I thought you needed to visit the fresher.”

“Actually, I do,” said the Captain. “And I think we can adjourn this meeting. Start working on a plan for this scheme. I'll go talk to Mr. Woogie. Then I will put my head down for a couple of hours.”

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Captain Ezra Staumpitz felt guilty about sleeping when his crew was so busy. He felt even more guilty about sleeping while his Executive Officer was an accidental guest on the Woogie starship. But, four hours of sleep was something he knew was a requirement for him to continue functioning in his role. And besides, it did feel good.

Staumpitz cruised into the Science Lab, carrying a cup of coffee. Dafid Howe was hunched over his desk, studying his terminal screens. The Artificial Intelligences were tasked with organizing the harvested information in a way to give the human masters a way to stay on top of things. The problem was that Howe needed to look at everything.

“You're looking pretty fraged, Dafid,” Staumpitz said.

“That pretty well sums it up, Captain. I just can't pull myself away.”

“Have you started making stupid mistakes yet?”

Howe snorted. “About three hours ago.”

Staumpitz nodded. “How's Dawn doing?”

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“She's sleeping right now.”

“Still in her suit?”

“Yes. She's begged me several times to let her get out of it. I'm not going to make that call.”

“Okay, then go to bed, Dafid. You need to be fresh as badly as I do.”

“I know you're right, Captain. The Woogie skipper appears to have turned in too.”

“Go to bed, Dafid.”

“I don't think I can get out of my chair, Captain.”

Staumpitz looked around the room. He pointed at a couple of the scientists watching the exchange.

“You, and you. Please escort Dr. Howe to his cabin and make sure he is in bed.”

He looked at Howe. “Four hours, Dafid. Not a minute less.”

Howe struggled to his feet. “Aye, aye, Captain,” he slurred out.

The two scientists had come to his desk and narrowly avoided letting him slump to the floor. They marched him out of the lab.

Staumpitz looked around the lab. “Carry on, people. You're doing a great job. I don't think I have to tell you this is the opportunity of a lifetime. And you know I am not exaggerating in the slightest.”

Several of the scientists nodded. Most of them were nearly as worn out as Howe. Staumpitz left the lab and headed for the bridge. As he walked along the central corridor, he changed his mind and reversed direction. He headed for the Engineering section.

The Engine Room was a chaotic jumble of spare parts, tools, and engineering techs. Bryan Marshall was huddled over the hull of the extra fusion reactor. He looked like a surgeon working on a patient.

“What news, Bryan?” Staumpitz called as he walked in.

Marshall looked up and squinted to see who had walked in. “Just getting ready to haul this to the Woogie Buggy, Skipper. We've figured out the interfaces. I figure a couple days' work, and we'll have him up and running.”

“When have you last slept?”

Marshall stopped and considered. “I don't remember, Skipper.”

“Okay, since I seem to be giving orders to people who ought to know better, get yourself off to bed. Four hours minimum, understand?”

Marshall stepped away from the fusactor and let his arms drop. “Sorry, Skip. I just lost track of time. You're right. I need to get some rest before we install this beast, or we'll have another accident.”

“Get to bed, Chief.”

Marshall turned to his assistant. “If you're going across with me, Thomas, you'd better get some rest too.”

“Who's going to ride with the Woogies?” Staumpitz asked.

“Oh, he is.”

Staumpitz nodded. “Then he's got a long ride ahead of him.”

Ten minutes later, Staumpitz walked onto the bridge. He slid into his chair and studied his display screens. The hull of the Woogie starship was completely closed up. Bryan Marshall's engineering techs had not only tacked the new plating in place but also carefully smoothed the seams and sprayed a nano-tech sealer across that portion of the hull.

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A couple of messages from the Woogie had appeared on the screen. It was addressed to Captin Stumper, and Staumpitz assumed it was directed to him. He opened the message.

To give thanks for attractive repairs. Dwan sleeps. Waiting for guidance.

He snorted at the reference to the Exec. That was pretty clear, and Staumpitz opened the next message.

Have chosen Woogie passengers for humans.

“I love it when a plan comes together,” he muttered.

“Sir?” Farmer asked.

“When was the last time you slept, Hal?” Staumpitz asked.

“I just had about three hours, Skipper,” Farmer replied. “I got back here about five minutes before you got here.”

“Very well. I just made the Chief Engineer go to bed. They are about ready to transfer the fusactor.”

“Sir, Do you really think this is a good idea?” Farmer asked.

“Yes, I do,” Staumpitz replied. “In the first place, I wouldn't leave anyone stranded out here. That would be tantamount to murder. Secondly, what a magnificent opportunity this is.”

“You say so, Sir.” Farmer said.

“I say so, Farmer. This is what we do. Sure, we've surveyed how many star systems over the past few years. But we are also equipped to communicate and interact with non-human civilizations, should we run into them.”

“But I didn't expect this to happen, Sir.”

“Nobody did. But here we are. Not only are we going to help these creatures, but we are going to trade with them. We are going to ally with them. And we will make lots and lots of money doing it.”

“Is the bottom line really the *bottom line*, Captain?”

“Hal, our faith places people a long way above money. That's the number one reason we're helping these folks out there.” He pointed at the Woogie starship displayed on the main view screen. “But we wouldn't be out here if we weren't planning to make a tidy profit.”

“I just worry about what these... creatures might do to us.”

“Hal. I don't know if you noticed, but their ship is unarmed. We're the ones carrying the missiles with thermonuclear warheads. They are not warlike.”

“Do we really know that, Skipper?”

Staumpitz shook his head. “No, not positively. But the more we interact, the more I'm convinced.”

“But what if that explosion was a ruse?”

“Come on, Hal. Neither of us knew the other was in this system. And blowing up your engine room is a little extreme. I mean, all he had to do was to motor over to us and say *Greetings, Earthling! Take me to your leader.*”

“Skipper, I'm serious,” Farmer said.

“I know you are. But you're not making sense. I suppose we could blow them up, assuming I was willing to murder them. But what would happen the next time somebody ran into a group of Woogies? Or the time after that?”

“I'm sorry, Captain. But, this frightens me.”

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“I’m scared too, Hal. But God has chosen us for this time and place. I’d like to consider it a ministry.”

“Are you sure *God* did this, Skipper?”

“Hal!” Staumpitz yelled. “Give it a *rest*.”

The Captain turned back to his screens, shaking his head, and slid a keyboard out from its drawer. He began typing messages to the Woogie Captain.

Glendower's shuttle ferried the spare fusion reactor to the Woogie ship four hours later. Dawn was on hand to greet the humans who delivered the equipment. She was able to help with the installation.

Some of the work was slowed as the humans used keyboards to transmit the necessary instructions to the Woogies. Other times, Marshall stopped to scratch his head or helmet over one problem or the other.

“You know, Skipper,” Marshall said over the comm link, “these guys are pretty sharp engineers. They are maybe one-hundred years behind us in reactor technology, but their drive systems are elegant. We can learn from them.”

“What does their comp tech look like?”

“I haven't been inside any of it yet, but it seems decent. And these are really friendly people.”

“We'd be friendly too if somebody gave us that technology gratis,” Farmer muttered from his seat.

“That's enough, Farmer,” Staumpitz called.

“The culture of the Woogies is a little different,” Dawn said. “If I understand them correctly, they are a nest-oriented society.”

“I'm sure we'll be a source of great mystery to them,” Staumpitz said, “or entertainment.”

“I think I'm beginning to read their body language,” Watkins said, “and if I'm right, they like to laugh. A lot.”

Staumpitz leaned over to look at his screens. “You may be right, Dawn. Some of the messages from their Captain definitely seem a bit... oh, tongue in cheek.”

“Metaphorically speaking, of course,” Dawn replied dryly.

“Metaphorically, yeah,” Staumpitz replied, laughing.

Engineers are not miracle workers, though they think they are. And so do the ships' companies who rely upon them. The mystical order of engineers seemed to extend across the light years to the Woogie civilization. The Woogie engineer had survived the explosive decompression of his engine room. They explained it as a freak accident, although they were reticent in talking about it.

Two days later, Bryan Marshall and the combined team had powered up the fusion reactor and stress-tested it as well. Everyone pronounced the work as *good*. Following that was a time for tough decisions.

The two ships had made their way to the third planet of the system of the star the humans called Tetrarch. In their own obscure way, the scientists had dubbed the third planet Victor. It was a thoroughly unpleasant world, marginally habitable only at the poles. *Glendower* dropped a marker beacon at the north pole, claiming the planet for the Paladin and the Upper Midwest Palatinate.

Dawn had returned to the *Glendower* since the quarantine had been thoroughly broken. If everyone survived the trip back to Earth without a mystery illness, there would

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not be quite the panic on Earth. Two Woogies had accompanied Dawn back to the ship. They were parked in the ship's conference room along with Staumpitz, Watkins, Marshall, and Howe. The rest of the crew were prowling the ship's corridors on one pretext or another, hoping to spot the alien creatures.

The most serious impediment to communication was the odor, which followed the Woogies around like a blanket. The closest the humans could describe it was a combination of menthol and stinkweed. Staumpitz kept the ventilation in the conference room running at its highest speed, and the humans still occasionally gulped and gagged. When Watkins had finally received permission to remove her helmet on the Woogie ship, she promptly rewarded her hosts by hurling the contents of her stomach at the nearest open floor space.

The Woogies communicated to the humans by typing on a portable computer terminal of their design. The Woogie terminal would transmit the text to their ship, where the computer would translate into Anglo and send it back. The humans would type into their keyboards, and the AI on the *Glendower* would translate it and send it over to the Woogie ship, which then flipped it back to the Woogie terminals on the human vessel. To use the ancient human term, it was an awful kludge, but it worked for their purposes.

So humans and Woogies agree to send
<guests/representatives/ambassadors/robbers> to home worlds, the Woogie typed. The bracketed words reflected the best guesses of the multiple AIs in the loop.

If you still want to do this, we are agreed, Staumpitz typed on his terminal.

One other requirement the Woogie typed.

Staumpitz looked at the disconcertingly human-looking eye and waited.

To make sure the Dwan does not <protest / erupt / vomit> on Woogie ship.

Staumpitz, Howe, and Marshall laughed out loud. The Woogies flooped and wriggled their five arms/tentacles in the air. They obviously loved their punch line. Dawn looked indignant.

“That's just not funny, Skipper. I wasn't expecting the strength of the... smell,” she said. “And they keep joking about it.”

“I think they like you,” Staumpitz grinned. “But, how do you suppose they picked up on *Dwan*?”

“I have no idea,” Howe said. “But they obviously think highly of you, *Dwan*.”

“Oh, thank you so very much,” she said sourly. “I'll never hear the end of it all the way to wherever they take me.”

Staumpitz typed a message back. *We are agreed. Everyone leaves in four hours. We return to meet here in six months.*

He looked up at Watkins. “Last chance, Dawn. There is no lack of volunteers.”

Dawn grimaced and shook her head. “As you said, Skipper, I will have quite the stories to tell my grandchildren when we return.”

Staumpitz nodded. “Okay, let's make it so.”

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Four hours later, the full bridge crew was on duty as *Glendower* prepared to leave the Tetrarch system. Watkins held an open communications link from the Woogie ship, and the two Captains typed messages back and forth.

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“Have a great time, Exec,” Staumpitz said.

“I think I will,” she said. “See you in six months. Don't be late.”

“That's not likely,” he said. “Helmsman Bracert, is the course laid in?”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. We're ready to roll.”

“Very well, Helmsman,” Staumpitz said. “Come to 325, sub 22, and accelerate at twenty-five gravities.”

“Aye, Sir. 325 sub 22, and twenty-five gravities.”

The optical pickup remained on the Woogie starship as *Glendower* rotated on her axis and accelerated away.

Staumpitz leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “What an interesting voyage. I hope our passengers enjoy the visit to Earth.”

Hal Farmer slipped out of his chair at the sensor suite and moved over to the chair to the helmsman's left.

“What are you doing, Hal?” Staumpitz asked.

“Just checking something, Skipper” He was typing rapidly on the weapons systems console.

“Hal, please move away from the weapons console.”

“In a minute, Skipper.”

Everyone on the bridge watched Farmer curiously to see what he was doing. Staumpitz slid open a hidden panel under his armrest and flipped a switch.

“Hal, I said, step away from the console. Right now.”

Farmer stopped typing and looked back at the Skipper. “You wouldn't listen to me. We will destroy human civilization if we don't stop this right now.”

He turned back and pushed the big red *Launch* button on the console.

Angela Bracert screamed “NO!” and threw herself across at Farmer. Hal slugged her in the stomach. She tumbled to the floor, whooping and trying to catch her breath. He turned back and repeatedly punched the launch button, and nothing happened.

“It won't launch!” he cried. “We have got to destroy that ship.”

Staumpitz keyed the intra-ship address system. “Mr. Charles Adams to the bridge, please. Mr. Adams, come to the bridge immediately.”

Staumpitz shook his head and stepped out of his chair. He slipped behind Farmer, who was frantically typing on the weapons console and punching the launch button. He cuffed Farmer on the side of the head and then dragged the now stunned sensor tech from the chair. He slipped off Farmer's belt and bound his hands behind him.

Adams stepped onto the bridge and stopped with his hands on his hips.

“Once again, I have to clean up after the officers.”

“Adams,” Staumpitz said, “see if you find somewhere to lock him up. He tried to fire on the Woogie ship. We don't dare allow him to run loose.”

“You want me to send him out the airlock?”

“No. We take him back to Earth with us. After the Paladin gets through with him, he will wish you had.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.” He walked over and levered Farmer to his feet. “Come on, Dim Bulb. Let's get you put to bed.”

“Thanks, Adams,” Staumpitz said.

“Don't mention it, Skipper. Then I'd have to keep score.”

Bracert had pulled herself back into the helmsman's chair.

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“You okay, Angela?” Staumpitz asked.
“Yeah. I mean, yes, Sir. I'm going to be sore for a while. He really punched me.”
“Get the second watch helmsman up here, and then check with the Doc. I want to make sure you aren't hurt.”
“Aye, aye, Skipper.”
Staumpitz pushed the address system button. “Second Watch Sensor Tech to the bridge, please. Second Watch Sensor Tech.”
He leaned back in his chair again. “Well, that was interesting.”
He looked up at the rapidly receding Woogie starship on the screen and saluted.
“Bon Voyage, Exec.”