

IN HER NAME: FIRST CONTACT

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DRAFT ONLY

FOUR

“Lord of All,” McClaren breathed as the alien gently shoved his naked body through the perfectly circular hole, about three meters across, that they’d cut in the side of his ship. He had thought at first that they were going to push him into hard vacuum through some sort of invisible barrier, for there was nothing visible between the *Aurora’s* hull and that of the enemy vessel that now stood very close alongside. But he had seen that there were warriors at a few spots along the invisible gangway that somehow linked the ships, and that had held his fear in check. Barely.

But my God, the view, he thought as he crossed over the threshold from the metal deck into the void, suddenly leaving the ship’s artificial gravity behind, his stomach momentarily dropping away into weightlessness. He could see down the *Aurora’s* flank, noting grimly where the enemy warriors had boarded his ship. And then there was the enemy ship - *huge!* - that didn’t look a thing like any spacecraft ever made by humankind. The smooth metal (he assumed it was metal) of the hull gleamed a deep but brilliant green, with contoured dark gunmetal-colored ports and blisters where he assumed some sort of hatches or weapons were mounted. Unlike a human ship, which was a patchwork of plates, the surface of the alien ship’s hull was as smooth as a still pond: he couldn’t see any joints or welds, rivets, screws or other fastenings as he got closer. It was as if the hull was one gigantic sheet of...whatever it was made of. The craft was all graceful curves, as if it were designed to fly in an atmosphere, with none of the boxy fittings and other angular projections typical of human ships. Looking forward, he saw that giant runes were inscribed along its raked prow, perhaps proclaiming the ship’s name, whatever it might be.

And all around him: the stars. As if his hand had a will of its own, he reached out to touch them. He knew they were billions of miles away, but they seemed so close. The alien sun burned brightly mere millions of miles away, and a star far brighter than the other stars proclaimed itself the planet the four warships had come from. He had been on plenty of spacewalks, but this wasn’t the same. Maybe it was the emotional exhaustion of the last hour or so since the alien ships had been spotted. So little time on the scale of his life, but an eternity for those who had lived through it.

The stars. Part of him knew that this would be the last time he would ever see them. He looked outward, and the unfeeling Universe returned his gaze.

He felt one of the warriors take his other arm, amazingly gently, he thought, to propel him onward to his destination. With one last heartbroken look at *Aurora*, he turned toward the open maw of the alien ship that awaited him.

Behind McClaren, the other survivors of the *Aurora* were ferried along, naked and still dazed from the emotional and physical experience of enduring the healing gel. Much like their captain, even though a number of them had performed spacewalks countless times they still gawked in awe at the great Void around them, and felt a deep tremor of fear at the huge alien warship that itself seemed as big as a planet.

The warriors watched them closely, but there was no danger to their prizes: the energy bridge they had extended from their own vessel would keep the aliens safely contained.

As McClaren approached the “hatch” of the alien ship, it reminded him of a biological sphincter. In fact, looking at the smooth petals of the material (he was less and less convinced that anything on this ship was *metal* as he understood it) that had irised open, he had no doubt that when this aperture was closed, it would be totally invisible against the hull. Or maybe the aliens could open an aperture like this anywhere, if needed.

His professional curiosity warred with the fear of what would happen to humanity if these creatures were able to trace the way *Aurora* had come. His failure to ensure the navigation computer core had been destroyed ate at him like a bitter acid in his gut. And with his crew now removed from the ship, any opportunity - *not that there really had been any*, he thought bitterly - to somehow break free of the warriors and destroy the core had been lost. His only hope now was that the *Aurora's* computer technology was sufficiently alien that they couldn't figure it out. But after seeing what the aliens with the goo did with his body, and the heart-stopping technology he saw in this ship, he knew that hope was truly vain. It was a disaster of literally stellar proportions, and he knew his name would go down in history as the one who had led alien invaders back to humanity. The thought was a crushing blow to his soul.

He floated across the threshold into the alien ship, and a gentle artificial gravity gradient allowed him to land gracefully on his feet. There was a phalanx of warriors waiting for the humans to arrive, and a pair escorted McClaren down the connecting passageway that was so large that it could have easily accommodated a pair of elephants walking side-by-side. Like everything else about this ship, it was huge.

Just as on the *Aurora* after the aliens had attacked, the walls themselves seemed to give off a soft light. Unlike the dark blue glow on the *Aurora*, however, this was near the color humans viewed as normal sunlight, although tinged with magenta. It gave him the impression of an everlasting sunrise, a thought that struck him as supremely ironic given the very questionable nature of his fate.

The deck felt soft and warm to his bare feet, its dark gray surface pebbled to provide a superior grip. Just like the rest of the hull, he had the impression that this wasn't any sort of metal, and he was struck by the thought that perhaps the ship was semi-organic. It was a chilling thought.

By contrast, the walls and ceiling appeared to be nothing more sophisticated or high-tech than stone, perhaps a type of granite that was a very pale rose color. He thought for a moment of the ancient burial places like the Pyramids on Earth, where the walls and rooms of the dead were decorated with ancient writing. For that's exactly the way these walls appeared: there was writing everywhere in the form of alien runes, as if the walls and even the ceiling were part of a giant book that someone had written. Chancing that his guards wouldn't notice or perhaps care, he drifted to one side of the passageway and stretched out a hand to touch the wall's surface. While it could certainly be artificial, to his touch it felt like nothing more sophisticated than very finely polished granite. But how the aliens made it give off light to illuminate the passageway - and why they would have something like stone for the interior of a starship - he couldn't even guess.

Making sure he kept pace with the warriors, who seemed content not to harass him, he glanced back to check on the other members of his crew. Like him, each of them had a pair of warriors as escort. They were spaced out evenly behind him at maybe five meter intervals. Those who saw him looking gave him a nod and a brave look, but it couldn't conceal their fear. After the slaughter on the *Aurora*, there was no reason to think anything pleasant awaited them here.

Like the rest of the crew, Yao Ming had been appalled at the wanton murders of the rest of the crew. But unlike the other survivors, he had seen such horrors in his lifetime. The colony world on Keran where he had been born and raised had been settled by an unlikely mix largely made up of ethnic Chinese and Arabs. The two communities, while generally keeping quietly to themselves, interacted peacefully and expanded from the original towns they established on landing to intertwining cities and villages. While not a rich world compared to many, it was prosperous and generally peaceful.

But when Yao Ming was eleven years old, an ethnic Chinese gang that had been brutalizing the local Arabs and that local authorities in his town had been unable to control finally went too far: they kidnapped, gang-raped and murdered three young Arab girls. What turned out to be the final insult that made a violent confrontation inevitable was that they stuffed the girls' mouths with pork before they killed them.

Citizens of both communities were shocked and horrified. But a local mullah wasn't satisfied with the claims by the police that the gang would be brought to justice, since they never had before. He led the grief-stricken worshippers in his mosque - nearly two thousand of them, including the parents of the murdered girls - on a rampage through the adjacent Chinese district.

While the violence was localized and didn't affect the overall population, Yao Ming's neighborhood became a killing ground as the frenzied mob surged through the narrow streets. Armed with everything from fists and knives to assault rifles (authorities later determined that more than a few of the perpetrators had gone to the mosque bearing concealed firearms), they grabbed, mutilated, and killed anyone in their path who couldn't run away fast enough. They surged into shops, homes, and apartments, leaving a trail of bloody carnage: nowhere was safe. Some of the Chinese tried to stand and fight, but they were simply overwhelmed by numbers.

Yao Ming's parents were among the victims, caught in the local marketplace as they did their daily shopping. Both of them were masters of Tai chi, a skill they had been passing on to their only son, but even that couldn't save them from the mob. Just as Yao himself had told the midshipmen to run when he turned to face the aliens who had boarded *Aurora*, his parents had said the same to him that day before plunging into the seething mob, hands and feet flying. He never saw them again, and his escape had been a harrowing flight through blood-filled streets that still haunted his dreams.

Now, walking through this alien ship, he had the honor of having not just two, but four warriors as escort. Unlike those escorting the others, these had their swords drawn and were exceptionally alert. Having killed three of them in close combat earlier, the first with his hands and the other two with the sword from the first one, Yao took some measure of grim satisfaction that they felt he was more of a threat than the others. But he had no illusions about what probably awaited them. Just like McClaren, he had taken a last longing look at *Aurora* before stepping aboard the alien warship, because he knew in his heart that he would never see her again.

After moving through what Yao estimated to be nearly half a kilometer of twisting and turning passageways, they came to a huge door. Like most of the other doors they had passed, this one was deep black in color, polished to a

reflective shine, with runes similar to those carved in the stone-like material of the passageway walls. These runes were much larger, and inlaid with a material similar in appearance to lapis lazuli.

The door stood partway open, and Yao's guards ushered him in, following the remaining human survivors. Inside, there was yet another group of aliens, apparently yet another caste. Like the ones who had applied the healing gel earlier, these wore robes - black, this time - and also lacked the lethal claws of the warriors.

This group, numbering perhaps fifty individuals, wasted no time carrying out their task. Two quickly approached each human and began to take measurements with what Yao realized was nothing more ominous than a tailor's cloth measuring tape. While these had no numbers or other markings that he could discern, they way the two aliens stretched it along various parts of his body left no doubt. After his parents had been killed, he had gone to live with his uncle - his father's only brother - who worked as a tailor and taught young Yao Ming his craft, along with continuing his education in Tai chi.

"Mister Yao..." he heard young Sato call to him quietly from off to one side.

"*Kazh!*" one of the boy's escorting warriors hissed. The aliens hadn't harassed the humans coming here, but they had refused to allow them to speak to one another.

Yao met the young midshipman's gaze and nodded, adding a wry smile as a small gesture of reassurance. Whatever was to come, he knew, he was sure they would at least not have to die naked.

The armorers worked quickly, as was their custom. While their caste was known for its great skill in handling the living steel from which their weapons were forged, they also created the other clothing and accessories in which their race was attired. Ignoring the strange coloring and pungent scent of the strangers, but welcoming the fact that they were amazingly similar to Her Children in form, they measured their bodies in the time-honored fashion. Like their sisters throughout the Empire, in all the castes, perfection was the goal toward which they strived from birth until beyond death, and they allowed themselves no room for error. Measuring several times, they left the main hall to a series of anterooms where their materials waited. The strangers would not receive any armor, for the warriors had determined that they did not wear such things, and thus would not be accustomed to it. The priestess had commanded that this be so.

Instead, the humans were given only the undergarments worn by all the castes, be it beneath armor or robes. Like virtually all things made by the hands of their race, it was the essence of perfection and would last indefinitely if given a

small amount of care. In the shapes that humans would recognize as close-fitting long sleeve shirts and long pants, the armorers fashioned clothing of a black gauzy material that was perfectly smooth against the skin. It would keep the wearer cool in the heat, and warm when it was cold, and this batch of the material had been specially prepared to accommodate the strangers' unique thermal requirements. Each piece would fit the individual wearer perfectly, tailored only for them. It would stretch effortlessly, but would never bind or lose its shape. Originally created to be worn under armor, it would never interfere with a warrior's movements when in combat.

Once they were finished covering the aliens' pale bodies, they turned to their feet. The traditional footwear of their race would have been easily recognized by the ancient Roman soldiers of Earth, as they bore a striking resemblance to the Roman caligae sandals. Formed from an open-lattice of a material much like leather but infinitely stronger, the black sandals were open-toed and wrapped up above the wearer's ankles, with smooth soles a hands-breadth thick that would grip well on virtually any surface. Like the clothing, the footwear fit each individual perfectly, like a second skin.

Amundsen wasn't sure what bothered him more, the overt advanced technology such as the ship, or the application of the almost supernatural level of craftsmanship to everything they seemed to do. The clothing in which he now found himself, as the humans were once again herded down the labyrinthine passageways, fit - literally - like a custom-made glove. He had owned tailored clothes, but they were nothing like this. The material itself would be worth a fortune for its clearly advanced properties, but the fit was astonishing. The footwear, in particular, felt like part of his body. This was no small achievement, for Amundsen had a slight deformity in his left foot that required custom-made shoes. But, like his tailored clothes, they were nothing compared to this.

The reason it bothered him was that these aliens seemed to do what they did, be it healing or making clothes, almost by instinct. They did it perfectly, seemingly every time, apparently without the assistance of anything he could recognize as technology as he understood it: there were no machines, no computers; only simple tools like the cloth measuring tape. From the looks he had exchanged with the other members of the crew, particularly the captain, it was clear that everyone else was equally awed by the clothes they now wore. Most of them even wore smiles at the incredibly pleasant feel of the garments, at least until they remembered how they had come to be here.

The warriors, certainly, had more advanced technology available to them, such as whatever device they used to stun a number of *Aurora's* crew. Yet their

preferred weapons would have been at home on any battlefield on Earth before the widespread use of gunpowder weapons.

That and the biological differentiation between the warriors and the robed castes made him think that this species was likely far older than humanity. Yet how much older, and how much more advanced, he couldn't hazard a guess.

His internal analysis on this topic reached a depressing low when the humans were again herded through a massive door, far larger than the others. Inside was a gigantic compartment that reminded him a bit of an amphitheater, although there were only a few concentric rows of steps for spectators to stand on, so those behind could clearly see what transpired on the "stage" below.

The humans were herded along the last row, behind two other rows of perhaps three dozen aliens. Spaced wide apart in a semicircle around the stage, these aliens also wore robes, but they were of a dark blue color. Amundsen wasn't quite sure, because the lighting in here was quite dim compared to the passageways. The aliens stood erect, staring at the stage, holding their hands out in front of them as if they were pushing something away. While he couldn't read their body language, it was clear that they were concentrating hard on whatever was happening below.

As he looked down at their point of concentration, he quickly discovered that the stage wasn't a stage at all. It was more akin to a giant swimming pool whose surface had been completely still when they first walked in, with whatever it contained merely mimicking a solid surface. He had a difficult time estimating how large it was because there was nothing beyond the control area to give him perspective. But he had the impression that the focal area where the liquid - or whatever it was - resided was far larger than he had at first imagined.

Suddenly the material in the pool below began to morph, no doubt under the control of the blue-robed aliens, and he watched it take shape with growing horror.

"That's impossible," McClaren breathed as he watched the apparition begin to rise and take shape in the alien cauldron that lay below. He tore his gaze off of the thing and looked first at Amundsen, then to Yao. Both of them were staring at him, eyes wide with shocked disbelief.

McClaren, in what was a major act of will, turned back to look at what was taking form before his eyes.

It was the *Aurora's* central computer core. And next to it was the navigation core. Just like with the healing goo, this material was being used as a

matrix to create whatever the blue-robed controllers willed. The components were still taking shape, with the various assemblies supported by tendrils of the shimmering black material of which it all was made. McClaren had no idea how the aliens did it, but they must have made an incredibly detailed scan of his ship, probably as part of whatever happened to the electrical system. And now, just as humans could model a three-dimensional object in a computer and have a machine produce an exact physical replica, the aliens were recreating it here. He realized with a sinking feeling that it wouldn't have mattered if they had blown the computer hardware to bits. They aliens already had what they needed. And he no longer entertained any hopes that they would have difficulty interpreting the computer data. They would get whatever they wanted, and there wasn't a bloody thing he could do to stop them.

Before his eyes, the systems continued to take shape. While he only saw the exterior of the components, he knew with cold certainty that the memory crystals, which were custom grown in a zero gee environment, were forming inside, and that the data held in their matrices would be completely intact. Threads of the black substance connected to the extruded human technology where optical links and power conduits entered the system, providing power and input/output streams that the human design could interact with. The aliens had no need of the primitive control panels and voice interaction that the humans used, so none formed from the seething material below.

He chanced another glance at Yao. Even in this light, the brilliant petty officer's face was ashen. Yao would know better than anyone, even Amundsen, the implications of what they were seeing. None of them were good.

In but a few minutes, the entire array of hardware and necessary peripheral systems had been created. McClaren heard a series of soft clicks, and then the telltale lights on the core casings flashed on: the system was booting up.

The priestess watched silently from the shadows, invisible to the aliens, as the builders performed their work recreating the alien ship's control system. While primitive, she nonetheless granted them respect for the achievement of creating systems that took them to the stars, and courage for relying on such simple machinery to take them there.

The matrix in the formation pool below was an analog of the symbiont used by the healers. Advanced as it no doubt appeared to the aliens before her, it was a feat achieved in what were now very ancient times, and was one of the many examples where the lines between technology and biology had become blurred. The builders - those who created that which the Empress required, from underwater cities to planets like the nursery worlds - no longer used the interfaces

that were once required to control the matrix material. Evolution, as these aliens might see it, was shaped by the will of the Empress over the ages, and the power to control the creation of inanimate objects was now an effort of will, guided by the mental vision of what was desired. Like the healers, the minds of the builders could grasp the totality of a thing, or see its construction on a subatomic level. Her race did not use computational devices - computers - as the aliens might understand them, for her people had no need. The use of such things had long ago faded into the Books of Time.

But that did not prevent the builders from understanding and creating what was needed. The alien machines quickly took form, and the matrix was guided into providing the necessary electrical input and other connectivity. The major challenge the builders faced was to recreate it exactly as they had memorized it when the alien vessel had been scanned, and not to improve upon it. Otherwise they would have finished much more quickly.

The system activated, and they monitored its initiation sequence. In their perception, time was variable: they could slow down their perceptions relative to the actual timescale. In this way they analyzed each function undertaken by the machine. They did not learn the language the machine used, exactly, but they understood on a fundamental level how it worked, much as the healers understood the aliens' bodies after they had been treated with the healing gel. Following the machine's glacial processes was a laborious, excruciatingly painstaking experience, but the builders excelled at such things. And with the priestess looking on, her Bloodsong echoing strongly in their veins, the builders' usual obsession with perfection was taken ever higher.

At last they understood what they needed to know about the machine and the data it contained. Others would be required to interpret most of it, but one thing they could show the priestess now...

“Oh, *fuck*.”

McClaren heard the words, but didn't know or care who said them. He wasn't a man who used foul language, but in this case the words exactly fit his feelings.

Above the pool, where the ghosts of the ship's computer systems hummed with unnatural life, a stellar chart began to form. It was some sort of hologram - incredibly realistic - that spread across the entire breadth of the huge theater. At first displaying the series of waypoints backtracking *Aurora's* path to reach this system, additional data began to appear for each waypoint. Much of it was visual, with realistic representations of the system stars and planets, but some of it was also being translated from Standard into the aliens' language, judging

by the runes that began to appear next to a number of the systems and waypoints.

He thought his sense of horror couldn't get any worse until he saw the first colony world on the Rim, the last friendly port of call before *Aurora* had leapt into the unknown, appear in the rapidly expanding backtrack the ship had taken. A lot more data in the aliens' language suddenly appeared next to it, suspended in the darkness above the renegade computers. Then onward to the next, and the next.

Finally, there was Earth itself, the home port from where they'd sortied months ago. Home for most of them. The home of Mankind for all of them.

And then came the final insult: the navigation trace shifted to show Earth at the center, and outward from there every single human colony and settlement was displayed. The aliens might not have everything sorted out yet, for a great deal of information was stored away in files that they would have to learn Standard to interpret, but McClaren had no doubt they would: among its other wonders, the computer contained a complete educational library. And then every single human being would be at the mercy of these monsters.

He turned again to look at Amundsen and Yao, but instead caught a fleeting glimpse of a towering figure detaching itself from the shadows along the wall at the rear of the theater. Clearly a warrior, and the largest he had seen, by far, she silently disappeared into the passageway, her black cloak swirling behind her.