

## Chapter 10

Reynolds and Carver were fifteen minutes into their spacewalk, moving along Discovery's robot arm toward their captured objective.

Near the end of the robot arm and close enough to reach Essie, they waited for Mission Control to give the final go-ahead.

"Houston, Discovery. E.V.A. team in position; ready to access target and initiate diagnostics," Reynolds said with a hint of pride.

*"Roger, Discovery. Go for diagnostics."*

Both astronauts inched to the end of the shuttle's remote manipulator arm and grabbed onto one of Essie's handholds.

Reynolds turned to his colleague. "Okay, Dr. Carver, do your thing. I'll hold position here with the diagnostic computer while you move into position and plug the cable into Essie's mainframe. After I begin the data transfer, you can inspect the solar panels."

"Acknowledged," Carver replied meekly as he pulled himself onto Essie's frame, unsure of himself.

E.S.S.E.'s design was relatively simple by space telescope standards. Similar in overall shape but half the size of Hubble, the seven meter long cylinder contained a Cassegrain mirror configuration pointed to the stars. The controversial transmitter designed to emit narrowband radio pings was housed in a smaller cylinder mounted on the outside of the larger one. The combined configuration looked very much like a chubby cannon mounted with a rifle scope. A solar array was attached at the rear. Carver's objective was to crawl inside a tubular frame that enclosed the satellite's instrumentation on the underside of the solar array.

He proceeded to the end of Discovery's robot arm, reached out with one hand and grabbed a handhold attached to the frame enclosing Essie's instruments.

Something registered in his peripheral vision. On the opposite side of the satellite, Carver detected *movement*. Was his mind playing tricks on him? No. There it was again. Unmistakable this time. A shape, solid, so dark it was barely visible. Not part of Essie, not mechanical. *Alive*.

His skin crawled.

\* \* \*

Startled, Carver was about to interrupt Reynolds' conversation with Houston when dozens of images burst into his consciousness at once. His body stiffened as he squeezed his eyes shut. The data flowing into his mind seemed like an array of hundreds of television screens simultaneously pushing images directly into his brain. The sensory overload gave him a fantastic migraine; he fought to make it stop. Yet, there was beauty in the images. Warm colors; planets viewed from space, some with multi-colored rings, much more beautiful than drab Saturn's; colorful, vibrant landscapes, teeming with life; cities unlike any on Earth, crystalline structures, glistening, luminescent; machines floating above the ground, seemingly alive. And, at a semi-conscious level, he sensed emotion. Love, compassion, communion. There were no feelings of hate, no rancor, no antipathy.

As quickly as it had started, the flood of images stopped, as did the pain in Carver's head. He now sensed a singular presence within his mind, accompanied by the same warm emotions. And also reticence, perhaps. Possibly a slight sense of fear.

Thoughts began to coalesce in his mind. Ideas; concepts without words. An exchange began, a transference of information and feelings, between him and this presence.

**WE PRESENT NO HARM.**

Carver sensed the creature was unsure if the reverse were true. *Who are you?*

**A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COMMUNITY.**

*Where is the community?*

**FAR.**

*Who lives in the community?*

**EVERYONE.**

Chills ran down Carver's back. My God, I am actually communicating with an alien intelligence. *Why are you here?*

**THE PRIME ENTITY INVITED US.**

*Who is the prime entity?*

The answer was an image: Essie. The thought gave Carver an odd thrill. The damn satellite actually accomplished what it had been built to do. Davis was right all along.

*You seem afraid. Do I frighten you?*

**THE ELDERS ALLOW CONTACT WITH THE PRIME ENTITY. THEY DO NOT ALLOW CONTACT WITH OTHER ENTITIES.**

*We created the prime entity to contact you. We would like to meet you. Can you come with me to the planet surface?*

**NO. THE ELDERS DO NOT ALLOW CONTACT WITH OTHER ENTITIES. I MUST RETURN.**

*Can we meet the Elders?*

**THAT IS FOR THE ELDERS TO DECIDE. ARE YOU AN ELDER IN YOUR COMMUNITY?**

*No. I am one of many from my community. I do not speak for all.*

**THE COMMUNITY BELOW IS PRIMITIVE AND VIOLENT.**

Carver was overwhelmed. He was communicating telepathically with an intelligent being from another world. He began to realize the enormity of the situation. Thrust into representing the entire human race, if he 'said' the wrong thing, or gave the wrong impression, the consequences could be disastrous, even deadly. Not to mention fouling up mankind's first encounter with an extra-terrestrial race, and blowing the chance to make a good first impression with an advanced species. He qualified his statement.

*There are leaders, Elders, in my community as well. They also do not wish me to meet with other entities. My Elders would like to meet yours.*

**THAT IS FOR MY ELDERS TO DECIDE. YOUR COMMUNITY IS NOT READY. THE ELDERS ALWAYS WAIT UNTIL A COMMUNITY IS READY.**

*When will we be ready?*

**WHEN YOUR COMMUNITY IS PEACEFUL.**

Carver could not deny that which was readily evident to any intelligence observing the world below. Conflict between peoples, waste of natural resources, harm inflicted on the planet itself. Humans had a lot of growing up to do before declaring themselves peaceful.

Sharing thoughts with the alien, he knew there was no hiding the true nature of the human race. It now became clear to him—this creature was an advance scout, sent to check out who sent the intergalactic message and whether or not they were a threat. He knew deep down that this alien and his community could draw the wrong conclusion. He tried to make a case for the human race.

*Someday my community will be peaceful. We have within us the capacity to be so.*

**ALL COMMUNITIES KNOW VIOLENCE BEFORE THEY KNOW PEACE. SOME NEVER KNOW PEACE. THE FUTURE OF YOUR COMMUNITY IS UNCERTAIN.**

*Please tell your Elders that my community has great potential. We will know peace.*

**YOU ARE A PEACEFUL ENTITY.**

*Thank you. You are also peaceful. I am glad for our meeting. I hope the Elders are not angry with you for our meeting.*

**THE ELDERS FROM OUR COMMUNITIES MUST NOT KNOW OF OUR MEETING.**

*Why not?*

**YOUR COMMUNITY MUST KNOW PEACE BEFORE IT IS ALLOWED TO JOIN OTHER COMMUNITIES. A VIOLENT COMMUNITY WILL NOT BE ALLOWED.**

Once again Carver felt like he was treading on thin ice. Was the last statement a threat, or simply a prerequisite for joining other communities? In any event, he was fairly certain humans would not react well to knowledge of an alien race, particularly one capable of space travel. Panic and chaos would surely follow. Historically, world leaders and military commanders reacted to threats, real or perceived, with aggression. And if the human community showed aggression toward this alien's community, Carver was pretty sure who would win the fight. The risk was too great.

*I will not reveal our contact or the existence of your community to my Elders.*

**THAT IS ACCEPTABLE.**

*Will you return?*

**THAT IS FOR THE ELDERS TO DECIDE. THE ALIEN PAUSED. OUR MEETING IS GOOD. IT MUST END NOW.**

*Thank you. I wish you a safe journey.*

The telepathic link dissolved, the consciousness in his mind gently faded.

\* \* \*

“Goddammit Carver, answer me! Are you all right?!”

A disoriented Carver tried to answer. “Commander, I...ah...”

“*Discovery, what the hell’s going on up th...*” The transmission from Mission Control ended abruptly as all hell broke loose.

An unseen force propelled Essie forward as Carver and Reynolds clung to the remote manipulator arm. The sudden stress snapped the robot arm at the wrist, sending the outer boom into a whiplash.

Reynolds lost his grip. The boom whipped around and hit him broadside, sending him flying away from Discovery’s cargo bay like a hit baseball. It didn’t take long before he reached the end of his tether. The metal connections and braided steel line, designed to withstand more than 1,000 pounds of tension, somehow gave way.

Carver, holding tightly to the robot arm, barely hung on as he rode the whiplash. He watched helplessly as his comrade drifted in a slow motion cartwheel out into space. “Mark!” he yelled. There was no reply. He had no time to consider what to do as Ikiro’s voice yelled in his ear.

“*Brace for impact!*”

Compared to Discovery, Essie was a small, low-mass object. However, moving with only a fraction of relative velocity, the satellite still carried a significant amount of inertial energy, every bit of which slammed directly into the forward section of Discovery’s payload bay.

Like a semi-truck crashing into a brick wall, the impact sent everything inside the shuttle not fully secured aft, violently. Both Ikiro and Ramirez slammed into the bulkhead. Ramirez heard bones snap, unsure if they were his or Ikiro’s, right before he lost consciousness. Ikiro blacked out when her forehead struck an instrument panel.

The force of the impact with Discovery effectively disintegrated Essie. Pieces broke off and went flying in all directions, some skipping off the shuttle’s hull into space, others bouncing around inside the payload bay.

*What the hell just happened?* Desperately clinging to the robot arm, Carver’s head was spinning as he tried to process the last twenty seconds. Everything was happening too fast.

He made a bold move and let go with a yank to pull himself inside the payload bay. He ‘flew’ with purpose toward the bay floor near the airlock hatch. He grabbed on to a handhold and stopped just before slamming into a wall. His arm twisted hard, sending a jolt of pain through his shoulder, but he refused to let go, grabbing the handhold with his other hand to gain control of his flailing body.

*The alien...did it attack? No. This is an accident. Has to be. But I can’t think about that right now.*

Regaining his composure, he weighed his options. “Ramirez, Ikiro, do you read me?” There was no response. “Mission Control, this is Discovery. Come in!” Still nothing.

He was completely alone.

Knowing the wisdom of his next decision was questionable, he moved past the airlock hatch and climbed into a harness, determined. Using a propulsion backpack, he intended to chase down Reynolds and bring him back. With no experience and only a brief training session on how to operate an MMU, NASA's Manned Maneuvering Unit designed for un-tethered E.V.A.'s, Carver thought his plan might as well be a suicide mission. He was lucky there was a unit on board, as they had been discontinued from service years ago; this one was included in the equipment list for this flight by an insightful mission planner.

Carver was unsure how fast Reynolds was drifting away, and clueless as to the MMU's speed or range. Assuming Reynolds was even alive, there was a distinct possibility of a successful capture without enough propellant to return back to Discovery. But he couldn't just abandon Reynolds, left to drift forever in space.

He had to try to get him back.

Powering up the MMU, he familiarized himself with the thruster controls. The unit required both hands for maneuvering; the right controller providing roll, pitch, and yaw, the left producing acceleration for moving forward-back, up-down, and left-right. Carver nervously undocked the MMU from the payload bay wall.

"Mayday, mayday. Mission Control, please come in." He waited a few seconds, but the radio was silent. "This is Frank Carver, declaring mayday for Discovery. I am not receiving your signal. We have collided with E.S.S.E. I have lost radio contact with Ikiro and Ramirez; they may be incapacitated. Commander Reynolds lost his tether and was thrown into space. I am attempting to recover him using the M.M.U. Please re-establish contact and advise." He was uncertain if the communication problem was in his own headset, or perhaps the shuttle comm system itself. With no time to diagnose the cause, he set off to recover Reynolds.

Avoiding pieces of Essie still bouncing around the payload bay, he activated the MMU's left joystick to produce upward thrust. About to collide with Discovery's damaged robot arm, he yanked back on the joystick to reverse thrust. Unable to see behind, he failed to stop in time and slammed into the portside bay wall.

Frustrated, he took note to execute shorter, more controlled bursts. He tried again and finally cleared the bay. Earth loomed large above his head, dark and ominous as Discovery orbited the night side approaching the terminator.

Operating the right hand joystick, he rolled over to position Earth below him, which greatly eased his growing sense of vertigo.

Carver scanned the area. Essie was a pile of rubble adrift 50 yards beyond Discovery's nose, slowly moving away from the shuttle.

He began searching for Reynolds, attempting to triangulate his position based on the direction he was thrown. Minutes passed as he searched for what seemed an eternity, and there was still no sign of his colleague. His hopes began to fade. Space seemed so big; searching for Reynolds gave new meaning to looking for a needle in haystack. Perhaps he had already drifted too far away.

There. A small object transiting some stars. After floating toward and tracking the object for a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to the retreating glare from the payload bay. The object was Reynolds, slowly tumbling away from Discovery. There was no body movement.

Carver quickly accelerated forward. “Commander Reynolds, come in. Do you read me?” No response. After a thruster burst of about 30 seconds, he released the control and coasted. Reynolds’ suit brightened with reflected light as he passed into the illumination of Earth’s penumbra.

Gaining confidence in operating the MMU, he nudged the directional controls to stay on course. A minute later he was surprised by how much distance still remained between them, expecting to have caught up to Reynolds more quickly. Maintaining forward velocity, he engaged the right control and rotated 180 degrees. He now faced backwards along his direction of travel. He was startled at how small Discovery appeared. The distance he had already traveled was much greater than expected—at least a thousand yards. They were fortunate to be orbiting Earth’s dark side, as the glow from the open payload bay provided a brilliant beacon. The shuttle would have been virtually impossible to find against a backdrop of blue sea and white cloud on Earth’s day side. With a renewed sense of urgency, he rotated back around to face his target.

A minute later he closed the distance to within a few meters and reversed thrust. Timing his decel perfectly, he slowly closed the last few feet until he could grab Reynolds arm.

“Gotcha.”

Turning Reynolds so they were face to face, he gasped. There were several cracks in the helmet’s gold sun visor. He rotated the visor up; there were cracks in the clear bubble as well. Reynolds eyes were closed.

He leaned forward to put his own helmet in contact with Reynolds’. “Mark! Can you hear me?!” He was non-responsive. His suit’s life support display provided the explanation: the internal pressure was almost nil.

Hooking his feet around Reynolds’ legs, Carver once again tapped the rotation thruster, gently spinning them both 180 degrees so he could navigate back to the shuttle. He immediately got a visual on Discovery, lined up and applied forward thrust, pushing Reynolds in front of him.

He was relieved to be heading back to the relative safety of the orbiter. The thought of becoming marooned in space, forever adrift, was terrifying.

His relief would be short-lived. Carver would soon discover that recovering Commander Reynolds was child’s play compared to the problems awaiting him inside the space shuttle.