

# *FINAL CONTACT*

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We slid past the planet just outside the orbits of its artificial satellites, my dark body invisible to their radar and cooled to limit infrared emissions. We watched silently as we passed seas covered with floating cities, mountain ranges dotted with towns, deserts covered with thick cobwebs of irrigation pipes, then the sparkling glow of thousands more cities on the night side.

"Convinced?" I said as the planet receded into the darkness of space behind us, the faintest hint of arrogance in my voice.

Bill's nose and whiskers twitched for a few seconds.

"It's just a colony... or something you built out here," he said in his high-pitched little voice.

"No-one has been here before us. And the Luddite ship detected their radio emissions from a thousand light-years away. They were transmitting before we'd crossed a tenth of the galaxy."

He sat in silence, tapping his furry tail on the deck in barely concealed anger. He might be a highly intelligent nano-computer in a ferret's body, but he'd chosen to retain most of its mammalian behaviour.

"Or do you think they're all part of my little plot?" I continued. "The Luddites hate synthetic intelligences. They wouldn't even talk to me, I had to hire an organic to buy the information from them."

"More likely they just lied, and you're generating this imagery to cover up your idiocy. How can I possibly trust anything you show me?" he said. He turned from the screen and flicked his tail.

The clicks of his bulky electromagnetic boots on the deck echoed through the corridor as he walked toward his cabin. He still hadn't forgiven me for the time I stopped rotating my hull and left him floundering in zero-g like a kitten twisting in an infinite fall. That was less than he had deserved for feeding fake signals into my antennae and leading us light-years off course before I discovered the deception.

On the far side of the planet my probes had already entered the atmosphere like a sudden shower of meteoric dust. Any aliens who saw them were probably enjoying the unexpected light show.

As we began our day-long coast out to the planet's largest moon, the probes were busy building long-range transmitters to communicate with us, and releasing spores to build short-range relays wherever the wind carried them. The low power spread-spectrum transmissions would give us a global communication network which appeared as just a little extra radio noise to the aliens.

When we reached the moon I'd make a final braking burn on the far side to take us into a stable orbit, while hiding the exhaust plume from the aliens. Until then, I had little to do but wait.

Back when the human race was confined to Earth, many groups believed technology was evil, or, at best, only to be used when absolutely necessary. The Luddites were their ideological descendants. Most lived a separatist lifestyle, floating through the galaxy in self-contained habitats with a million years' supply of frozen fusion fuel, and only the technology required to sustain them. Many of the galaxy's other inhabitants regarded them with amusement, or bemusement, but they were no real problem.

The fanatics were.

It happened in what would have been the year 2445 on the old calendar, before relativity and faster-than-light travel complicated timekeeping beyond such quaint standards. With humanity's expansion into the galaxy, Earth became a backwater of interest only to tourists and historians, but still symbolically important. On the night of August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the few remaining amateur astronomers on Earth noticed Alpha Centauri A dim by several percent. On August 6th, those who stayed awake late into the night had a few seconds to realize why.

Multi-megaton lumps of iron slammed into the Earth and Moon at close to the speed of light, tearing the crust apart like rifle bullets hitting a ripe melon. Smaller lumps destroyed several of the large habitats in orbit. Within twenty-four hours, more than seventy percent of the solar system's population was dead, along with much of the tourist trade.

Alpha Centauri was lifeless, ignored by travellers as they surfed between stars on waves of warped space. Several ships had set out to investigate when the star first dimmed; on arrival they discovered the remains of enormous solar-powered mass drivers, melted into misshapen lumps by the energy expended on launching their missiles.

Their Luddite builders were already dead. Fanatical to the end, they chose to kill themselves to atone for building the technology required to launch their act of interstellar vandalism. Not content to minimize their own effect on the galactic environment, they'd decided that sentient life itself must be eliminated.

Now I was organics once. Centuries ago, back when people still believed in aliens, when first contact occurred almost every day on TV or in movies, and the question was not whether we'd meet them, but when? I barely remember Earth, where we spent our first few decades of life, but I was still sad to hear of its destruction, as though we'd lost a childhood toy.

Saying our farewells to friends and family, we'd blasted out of the solar system on one of the first starships, leaving a trail of nuclear explosions to mark our passage. In the decades the journey lasted, we came to know each other as friends. Over time, we went our separate ways, and travelled through many strange systems before meeting again, thousands of light-years from home. Along the way, genetic engineering and inbuilt electronics had turned some of us into creatures more alien than those we'd expected to meet.

We made our choice then. "We won't rest until we've explored the last star in the galaxy," Michael said. "And, if we haven't found sentient life, we move on to the next."

It seemed like a good idea over dinner, as we ate and drank the best food and wine in the known galaxy, and Kate immortalized the decision in a documentary.

We bought the best starship we could afford. For longevity, the five organics I was uploaded our personalities into the SI core and left our bodies behind. Over centuries, boundaries slowly dissolved until five became one.

I watched Bill check his assembler, verifying the hardware integrity and validating digital signatures on the software. He worked in plain view, but there were few places inside me where I couldn't see him. I could have given him a ton of sensors, and a drone to deliver them to the planet, but he was either hopelessly paranoid or extremely stubborn.

The machine worked quietly. Bill trusted my materials supply, if nothing else. Not that I did. I was glad my sensor grid was still growing across the surface of the planet below, and wasn't yet ready to transmit, because most of my power was going to the auto-repair systems as they struggled to fix the damage from our crazy dash out here. Had a human runner pushed as hard to win a race, the judges would be delivering the trophy to the morgue.

I'd shut down my pain simulation sensors a couple of light years back, and the damage reports scared me. Without their feedback, I'd run many of my systems down to their last backups, and repairs could take weeks. Most of my stocks of offensive drones were inoperable, along with almost half of the defensive. Barely able to flee or to fight, I was glad that our entry into the system had been peaceful.

"Think the chat show circuit will want you back?" I said.

Bill remained silent. As the galaxy's greatest proponent of Fermism, he'd made a good living traipsing from one show to the next, and one of them had funded this trip in return for exclusive rights. He was just as sure that the last unexplored corner of the galaxy would prove me wrong as I was that it would prove me right.

"Have you talked to your agent lately?" I added. He conspicuously continued to ignore me. I'd had plenty of offers from the shows myself, but was always too far from

civilization to take them up, even if I'd felt like being laughed at, the galactic idiot who still believed in aliens. But now... money, fame, sex... sounded good.

At last his prize emerged from the assembler, a tiny sub-sentient drone with a high mass-ratio rocket and a nose packed with sensors. It was a joke compared to the hardware I'd dropped on the planet during our approach, but enough to verify the truth of what I'd shown him. I watched him drag it to the nearest airlock and push it in, standing far back, as though he expected me to blow him into space if he stepped inside.

I wouldn't do that. Not now, anyway.

The airlock cycled, and the probe began its long, slow descent to the planet. Bill strolled quietly back towards his cabin. Bored, I began dropping sensors onto the moon. Not that I expected to find anything, but it was a way to pass the time. With no real atmosphere, low gravity, and highly variable mass distribution, lobbing sensor clouds into distant craters was a real test of skill. I counted down the hours until the main planetary grid came on-line. Hopefully, I'd be ready to receive it.

I'd know Bill for centuries, and he'd made fun of my quest for most of that time. But he didn't become fanatical until the day he blew up a star.

It was a matter of conservation. When we discovered that the universe was open, we soon realized that we couldn't leave all that valuable hydrogen burning itself away... not to mention that few people were happy with a universe full of uncontrolled fusion reactors after the 2876 supernova wiped out five hundred colonies, and billions of sentients who couldn't escape.