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First Contact

by Madi Haab

A starless spot was floating on the display screens of the bridge: no light, no rocks, just an inky blotch charred through the burning clouds of the Carina Nebula. I didn’t understand what I was looking at until a shimmering blue veil rippled over the surface of the alien vessel.

I jerked away from the screen. “What … is this?”

I was the first to break the reverent hush that had fallen over the bridge. The other three crew members of our mining ship were bent towards the display, holding their collective breath.

“This, Byrne, is history,” Commander Parker said. “Ain’t that the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

It was also the most *terrifying* thing I’d ever seen. My understanding of the universe had burst wide open, and my mind threatened to buckle under the weight. Of course, I knew the sheer odds were that we shared the universe with other life forms, but the proof hovering on the digital displays of the *Charybdis* was something else entirely.

I knew my brain was absorbing every detail of this moment, and that I would recall them ten, twenty, fifty years from now. There would always be a before and an after, like a crease folded down a piece of paper.

We were so small next to this. *Too* small.

Next to me, Khay pressed a hand to her mouth and sobbed. Tears slid down her cheeks and dropped to the canvas collar of her suit. “We’re … we’re not alone. Guys, we’re not alone in the universe.”

Ribeiro let out an incredulous, triumphant laugh. The alien ship would’ve been invisible were it not for the light rippling on its surface, reminding me of the glowworm caves of my native New Zealand. The light traced mesmerizing patterns on the fuselage of the alien ship, too regular and complex to be random: there had to be an intelligence behind the hypnotic swirls on the screen, paling to white, deepening to green, swelling into ice-blue blossoms again.

“Khay, attempt to make contact,” Parker ordered.

I noticed my fingers were digging into the cushioned back of Ribeiro’s piloting chair, and I forced my grip loose. Khay wiped her face and hailed the other vessel with a few clicks of the touchscreen. We were close enough that latency was negligible: all our comms array picked up was the low, continuous noise of space, but a few seconds later, the alien vessel responded with a new light pattern. The glow started to ripple from side to side like a … like a hand wave, if I didn’t know any better.

“I think they just said hi,” Khay said, smiling through her tears.

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Ribeiro floated back into the bridge with a bottle of cachaça I had no idea was on board. “Here you go, guys,” he said, fitting a suction tip on the mouth of the bottle. “To history.”

We passed the bottle around and each took a long swallow. It burned all the way down and the fumes rushed to my eyes, but it sanded off the edge I’d been feeling since the alien vessel had filled our display screens.

“All right, so what are our options here?” Parker asked after round two. A manic energy was seeping through his cool exterior: he kept cracking his knuckles as he spoke, and the pops were strangely loud over the purr of our engines. “We notify the station—”

“That would take *days*,” Ribeiro said.

“—or we take matters into our own hands and investigate ourselves,” Parker finished. Ribeiro whooped, then gave the bulkhead a light kick to somersault through the zero-g atmosphere.

“I can run those light patterns through the *Charybdis*’s computer,” Khay volunteered. A bright, expansive grin had replaced the tears, and the booze had gone right to her face, leaving her red-cheeked and bleary-eyed. “It might be our key to communicating with them.”

I only noticed I’d started chewing my thumbnail when I stopped to say, “Lights seem like an awfully inefficient way to communicate in space, though. They may be as meaningful as Christmas lights.”

“Ever seen a spaceship decked out in Christmas lights, Byrne?” Parker said, not quite concealing his annoyance. I rolled my eyes. “Clearly it wasn’t engineered to communicate with random human ships.”

“Maybe something went wrong and they can’t communicate otherwise,” Ribeiro said. He was upside down now, moving his legs in a pedaling motion. “And we’re obligated to respond to a distress call, right?”

“Correct,” Parker said. “I suggest we keep trying to make contact over comms while we make our approach.”

I tore off a hangnail, and blood ran along the side of my thumbnail. “Wait,” I said with a wince, shoving my hands into my suit pockets. “We have no idea that they’re in distress. And even if they are, what are we supposed to do about it? Hope our first-aid kits and rations are somehow compatible with alien biology?”

Parker reached for the floating bottle of cachaça. The sleeves of his suit were tied around his waist, and the blue ink of a tattoo peeked under the t-shirt he wore underneath. “Come on, Byrne. Don’t you want to be part of this? Make history?” He took a swig and let the bottle float between us again. “Remember this likely goes both ways. They’re probably just as excited to make contact. I mean … my god, can you believe it? We’re the first humans—the first *aliens*—they’ve ever encountered.”

I resisted the impulse to start chewing my thumbnail again: instead I grabbed the bottle and took another long swallow. “I think it’s crucial we make a show of good faith in their presence,” Khay said. “We’re ambassadors of a sort, after all.”

Parker nodded. “Exactly what I was thinking. No weapons aboard their ship, for one.”

“If anything goes down, we’re dead anyway,” Ribeiro laughed.

I wasn’t sure when the conversation had shifted from whether to notify the station to actually *boarding* the spaceship, and I couldn’t believe how glib they were about it. We were grunts tasked with tagging asteroids with potentially high concentration of mineral ore: first contact with an alien species was several astronomical units above our pay grade.

“And what if they’re telling us to back the fuck off?” I said.

The other three looked at me like they’d forgotten I was there. “That pattern doesn’t look like a warning to me,” Khay said. “Does it?”

I’d avoided looking at the displays, but now I forced myself to. The black shadow of the vessel had grown slightly larger on the screen since we’d first spotted it, and the glowing ripples converged towards—what I assumed was—the front of the ship, steady as a heartbeat.

Khay was right. It looked like an invitation.

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Parker gave us eight hours to rest and get ready while our ship made its approach. Khay prepped a comms package to beam towards the space station, including footage of the ripples glowing against the pale swaths of the universe and Parker’s frantic explanation of what we’d seen. By the time they’d get it, in about seventy-two hours, we’d have made history one way or another.

Alone in the quarters I shared with Khay, I peeled off my suit and did my estrogen injection. The familiar sting and burn in my upper thigh cleared the boozy haze from my head, and I strapped myself to my thin mattress, hoping to get some sleep. The thrusters came to life briefly, nudging our course towards the alien vessel.

Staring at the bottom of Khay’s bunk, I was all too aware of the thin membrane of metal alloy that separated us from the uncaring abyss of the universe; years of space travel had inured me to the thought, but now waves of claustrophobic anxiety crashed down on me, like all I’d managed was to postpone the inevitable until the dam burst open. We were droplets of red water floating in a space so vast our tiny minds couldn’t even comprehend it.

And yet. Somehow our orbit had crossed another ship’s.

Against all odds, I slipped into a fitful sleep and dreamed of a night on shore leave a few years ago, back at the station. I’d always felt more out of place there than in the cramped quarters of a spaceship: too many people, too much noise, but Parker had insisted I tried to have some fun, whatever that meant, so I’d put on a dress, only to hide behind my Centauri sling at the station bar.

Despite my best efforts, someone sidled to the barstool next to mine and sat down. I looked sidelong at the newcomer, an attractive woman in station maintenance coveralls tied around her waist. “Wow, you’re so pretty I’d fall for you even in zero-g,” she said.

I wrapped my lips around the straw of my drink to hide my grin. “Does that line actually work?”

She shrugged one bare shoulder demurely. “You tell me. What’s your name?”

I licked my lips nervously and didn’t miss the way her dark eyes cut to my mouth. “Marama,” I answered. It was the first time I said out loud the name I’d chosen for myself: Maori, in a too-late attempt to connect with the heritage of my mother, who’d only ever known me as the name she gave me.

“Keyshia. Pleasure.”

I don’t remember what we talked about after that, if anything. Keyshia was bold enough for the both of us, and we were making out before I’d even finished my drink. In my room, she shed her coveralls like a chrysalis, baring the smooth skin beneath, and straddled my hips. Then she rode me like a wild horse, spine arched and head thrown back as she rippled on top of me, her skin sizzling with the icy blue glow of patterned lights—

I woke up in a cold sweat, a rare, incongruous boner tenting my underwear. “Byrne,” Parker was saying over comms. “Get your ass over to command or you’re staying behind.”

“Coming,” I responded. *Pun not intended*, I thought, shaking the image of Keyshia’s luminescent body from my head. I slipped on my canvas suit on top of my underwear, tucking (pun *definitely* intended) away any incriminating evidence, then gathered my hair into a ponytail before floating to the bridge.

The alien vessel had grown much larger on our displays and now filled most of the screens. It was *gigantic*. Its light pattern had also grown more regular, and the ripples converged towards what I assumed was the front of the ship, where the hangar would be.

The other three were already there. “There you are,” Parker said, not even glancing away from the screens. “Khay has been trying to get in touch with them, but no response so far.”

“I’ve been trying various encryptions and signals, but maybe their technology can’t pick them up,” Khay said. Her bob floated around her face in a platinum halo.

“Or maybe ours can’t pick up their response,” Ribeiro chimed in, strapped into the pilot chair.

“Or that,” Khay conceded. “I sent them some basic diagrams and data about the human race, so hopefully that will convey our good intentions. A virtual handshake of sorts.”

I gave myself a light push off a bulkhead and floated closer to the displays. The rhythmic pulses of light drew me in, like I was standing on the edge of a cliff and felt the call of the void below. I turned away, a little dizzy.

Parker rubbed his hands excitedly. “So, are we doing this?”

“Hell yeah,” Ribeiro said, without looking up from the image of the alien vessel on our displays. His eyes were red-rimmed and wild, like he’d just spent the past few hours with his nose stuck to the screen instead of sleeping.

“Byrne, you’re with me,” Parker said. “Grab some sampling kits. Ribeiro, Khay, you two stay here to—”

“What? No, I’m coming, too,” Ribeiro said. “You need someone to pilot the shuttle, right?”

Parker shook his head. “At least two of us should stay on the *Charybdis* as contingency.”

“Then either you stay behind or *she* does,” Ribeiro said, cutting a sharp glance in my direction. Ribeiro—kind, funny Ribeiro—was usually the one dispelling any nascent wisps of tension, but the air curdled with it now. “Any one of us can scrape stuff into a vial.”

“Fuck you too,” I retorted. Fine, my work mostly consisted of pressing a button and waiting for the computer to analyze the composition of mineral samples, but I took pride in it. Keeping samples properly labeled and uncontaminated wasn’t the no-brainer people thought.

“Guys, come on,” Khay said.

Ribeiro’s outburst must have taken Parker aback, too, because he relented. “Byrne, are you okay with staying behind?”

“No. No way. I’m coming. Someone has to babysit you two.”

My own words took me by surprise. The perspective of boarding an alien ship terrified me, but staying aboard the *Charybdis* seemed inconceivable. Parker sighed and turned to look at Khay almost pleadingly; it struck me then that the source of his authority was our compliance, not any innate leadership on his part.

“I’ll be fine,” Khay said with a smile and a wave. Had to hand it to her: I knew she was disappointed to be left behind, but unlike *some* people, she didn’t let it get the better of her. Ribeiro still refused to look at us, but the tips of his ears had turned red. “I’ll go over any data you guys send back and keep an eye on comms.”

Worst-case scenario, she could key the station coordinates into the auto-pilot module and let the ship fly her back home, but nobody mentioned it. The rest of us suited up and made our way to the airlock, where Khay made sure our helmets and oxygen tanks were fitted properly. *Last chance to turn back*, I told myself while the airlock cycled, but I couldn’t bring myself to back out. The pressure gauge blinked green, and the shuttle hatch unlocked.

The flight felt much longer than it was. The alien ship filled the silica panes of the windows as we hurtled towards it, and my head throbbed like the dark shape was growing inside my skull and not outside the shuttle. This close, the lights almost hurt to look at. Their pale blue glow bathed the inside of the shuttle in a sickly, wavering hue; I started feeling nauseous, but couldn’t tear my eyes away until Khay spoke.

“Wow,” she said over comms, her voice tinny and scratchy with growing distance. “Look at that.”

I waited for my headache to abate before looking at the alien vessel again. The fuselage was all in slick, black curves, and the pulsing luminescence traced the contours of its many wings. As we made our approach, it opened the gate to its hangar, and Ribeiro guided the shuttle inside without waiting for Parker’s okay.

“We’re in,” Parker said.

“Be careful, guys. Take lots of pictures.”

I snorted. “See you soon, Khay.”

No landing strips, no berths, none of the things we would normally expect. The hangar was nothing more than a cavern, lit by the same luminescence that was tracing patterns on the exterior of the ship. I’d half expected a welcoming committee of little green men, but as best as I could see, we were alone. Our presence had been registered, though. The displays indicated that the composition and pressure of the atmosphere outside the shuttle was changing rapidly, until it finally stabilized to near-Earth conditions.

“*How?*” Ribeiro said.

I unstrapped myself and leaned forward between Ribeiro’s and Parker’s shoulders to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. “Must be the data packet Khay sent earlier. Holy shit.”

“Who’s game for taking off their helmet?” Parker asked.

“If you start glowing in the dark, we’re leaving you behind,” I said. He laughed.

“That’s … incredible,” Khay said into my ear as I exited the shuttle. Maybe the footage transmitted from our helmet cameras afforded enough distance to let her speak, because I was speechless. I thought once again of glowworm caves: the walls were covered in millions of luminescent strands weaving in a breeze I couldn’t feel, slow and mesmerizing. I blinked back tears, hoping no one could hear me sniffle over comms.

“Is this all … organic material?” Ribeiro asked. He brushed the glowing filaments with his gloved fingers, and the lights scattered away from his touch before returning to their initial spot. “Grown for food or fuel, maybe?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said. I extracted a vial from my pack, then collected a few strands along with the fluid that gathered at their base. They glowed dimly inside the glass for a few seconds, then went out. Guilt twisted my insides.

“Maybe they’re the intelligence behind this ship,” Parker said.

“Not helping.” I stored the samples, then looked up to see the idiot taking off his helmet. “What the fuck, Parker? I thought you were joking!”

He tucked his helmet under an arm and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Well, seems we should be gracious if they’re willing to accommodate us to this extent. *Especially* since our ability to communicate with them is limited.”

Khay sighed Parker’s name, and even Ribeiro stared at him wordlessly. I could only hope our med unit could scrub any pathogens he might bring back, but I supposed the damage was done already. I pictured Parker packed with glowing strands like a straw man, blue light shining out of his eyes and filling his mouth whenever he spoke.

The filaments started to waver at the edge of my vision. My mouth filled with saliva, and I forced myself to take deep, steady breaths. The last thing I wanted was to hurl inside my helmet.

“Byrne? Are you okay?” Khay asked. “Your vitals are picking up.”

“I’m … yes. No. I feel sick.”

“Head between your knees,” Khay said. “Deep breaths.”

Ribeiro chuckled. “Or take off your helmet. Maybe some fresh air will help.”

I ignored him and followed Khay’s advice, leaning forward with my hands on my knees for balance. I was lucky there *was* gravity to pull the blood back to my brain. The luminescent strands still shone inside my head even with my eyes closed, a glowing blue sea that dimmed and brightened with each of my breaths. At last their sickly glow dissipated, and I stayed there in the comforting dark of my shut eyes, picturing myself as the sun-browned, sun-bleached girl I wasn’t until a few years ago, skipping barefoot on the floor of a glowworm cave.

A screeching barrel of noise filled my helmet. My calming heartbeat spiked up again, and after a second or two I recognized the distorted sound as a shout.

“Parker? Ribeiro?” I called, but all I got in answer was grunts and panting breaths. I thought I could catch a few words (“mine,” “worthy,” “not you” or maybe “not yours”), but no one responded. Then the noise cut off abruptly. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

“Byrne, what’s going on?” Khay said, keeping her voice low. “I lost visual contact with the guys.”

I swallowed, hard. “I don’t know. I don’t see them.”

“Turn back. Please.”

“I can’t leave them here,” I replied before I knew what I was going to say. I realized I had already started moving deeper into the alien vessel, towards the mouth of the tunnel where Ribeiro and Parker had most likely gone.

Khay was quiet for a moment. The mic caught the very end of her sigh. “Be very, *very* careful.”

I wish I could say it was courage and the duty to help my fellow crew, but it was something else entirely. The luminescent filaments everywhere around me still made me dizzy, and the blurred tunnel of lights made me feel like I was falling forward—falling into it—with no other choice but to follow the descent to its inevitable end. I continued forward, deeper into the vessel.

I found Ribeiro’s helmet a few paces away. I inspected it, but all I found were glowing mucus streaks left on the visor by the same strands that covered everything else.

“Is that …” Khay said in my ear. I started: I’d forgotten she was seeing everything I did through my helmet cam.

“Ribeiro’s helmet, yeah.”

I followed the tube—and why did I think of the tunnel as a tube now?—and noticed for the first time a slight pulse beneath the luminescent strands, like contractions guiding my steps onwards. I found the rest of Ribeiro not long after: his face was a bloody, pulpy mess, and what was left of it was stuck in a teeth-baring snarl. I looked away, but not fast enough. This image would forever be layered over the years of memories I had of him.

In my earpiece, Khay inhaled sharply. “Byrne, get the fuck out of there.”

But something else had caught my attention and guided my steps deeper into the tube. Parker’s large flashlight, which would be invisible amidst the glowing strands if it weren’t for the flickering beam casting a crude, white light on the pulsating wall of the tube. I took the flashlight to examine it and was not at all surprised to find the cracked case and lens covered in blood. Had someone—*something*—taken it from Parker and used it to kill Ribeiro? Or—

“I think … I think Parker killed him,” I said.

A strangled sound escaped Khay. “Byrne … Marama. Please come back.”

I couldn’t, though. Not yet. I swept the blood-stained beam in front of me; feeble though it was, it carved a pocket into the sickly glow of the strands, and my nausea receded a little. I made my way deeper into the bowels of the alien vessel. Another shape lay inert on the ground not far from there: one of Parker’s gloves. I found its twin a few steps away, followed by a boot, then the other, like the universe’s most uncanny breadcrumb trail.

His spacesuit was next. Then the canvas suit he wore underneath, *Neil Parker* neatly stitched on the breast pocket. Khay sobbed. “What the fuck is going on?”

I should have gone back, then. I had no hope of helping Parker anymore, and I knew whatever I found at the end of this tube would change me forever. But I needed to *see*. “Khay, I need your help. Keep talking to me. Say something to distract me.”

She sniffled. “What do you want me to tell you?”

“Anything. Anything at all.”

She told me about growing up in Cambodia. Houses on stilts painted pink and teal, running barefoot along thin planks balanced above the water, paddling in a large plastic tub to run errands for her mother. I focused on the beam of the flashlight, not letting my eyes stray past its watery edges, and clung to her every word. I imagined the smell of the fish her father caught, the sound of the waves lapping at his boat, the colours of the floating market where he sold his catches.

Khay’s words kept the horror at bay while the flashlight beam hit the rest of Parker’s clothes. His t-shirt, his underwear, even his socks. Then the tube opened up into another large room, except this time the filaments stopped at the very edge of its mouth, teasing the darkness inside like glowing cilia. Parker’s flashlight did little to dispel the shadows, but as soon as I stepped in, I knew I wasn’t alone anymore. The cave felt distinctly *alive*, and the temperature climbed on my helmet display, soon hitting low forties. I was glad for my suit’s temp regulation.

Parker cried out. I stumbled in the direction of his voice, following his moans and sweeping the beam from side to side until it caught his shape.

It took me several seconds to make sense of what I was seeing. Dread had filled my head with nightmarish images—Parker being tortured, Parker being eaten alive, Parker being vivisected—but reality was both more benign and ghastlier than anything my mind could’ve come up with.

He stood naked against the wall of the cavity—yes, *cavity*, not room: the walls were puckered, pulsating flesh dripping with ooze, and the lower half of his body moved against it obscenely, hairy buttocks rocking a slow rhythm as he—as he—

*oh my fucking god oh god oh fuck oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*

—as he *fucked* the wall.

“Parker,” I choked out. My stomach clenched in revulsion, yet arousal stirred in the pit of my belly. For a split second I pictured myself stripping off my suit and claiming part of the cavity for myself, but I shut my eyes hard and thought about Khay waiting for me on the ship. “Come on, Parker. We’re getting the hell out of here.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he let out a low moan as he came. The wall clenched around his lower body, as if it were sucking—*milking*—him dry. Then his eyes widened in something like horror; his hips resumed their thrusting motion, and I wondered if he was in control at all.

“I … I can’t,” Parker said. “Byrne, help me.”

Arousal and disgust still warred in the pit of my belly; my skin crawled at the idea of touching him even from inside the hermetic bubble of my spacesuit, but I had to try. I grabbed his shoulders and pulled, trying not to imagine the moist warmth of his skin under my gloved fingers. He didn’t budge. I pulled again, putting my weight into it this time.

A squelching noise, and Parker started to scream. I let go and fell on my ass. He hung above me, his spine arched back, his head lolling upside down. Strings of melted flesh hung from his skull, exposing the muscles and bones beneath, the lidless eyeballs. I understood then: the ship—entity? *Creature?*—had started fusing him to itself. Now Parker existed only as its extension.

“Byrne ... Byrne, please ...” he kept saying, while I crawled away from him, helpless.

“I’m sorry, Parker,” I managed between sobs. There was nothing I could do for him. His limbs were partially melted already, throbbing, purplish veins joining his muscles to the wall of the cavity. “I’m sorry.”

I grabbed the flashlight, and as the beam caromed around the walls of the cave, I saw. Dozens, *hundreds* of creatures attached to the walls just like Parker was, some bipedal, some quadrupedal, others so alien I couldn’t even make sense of the configuration of their bodies. But all were pumping, pulsating with the walls., gathered across galaxies to be milked like cattle. A large tube collected their ooze, and I followed its contractions with the beam of the flashlight until I saw pearlescent dollops of sperm covering what could only be a clutch of eggs, luminous in the dark.

“Marama,” Khay said in my ear, “what’s all this? What’s going on?"

I swallowed. “Khay ... Chenda. This isn’t a ship.”

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Blinded by tears, I stumbled all the way back to the shuttle and shoved myself inside. As I strapped myself in, I noticed for the first time that my suit was stained with the pink foamy remains of Parker’s flesh. I was so hysterical by then that Khay had to talk me through the controls. When at last the shuttle lifted, the relief was such that my teeth started to chatter violently.

The mouth (not a gate *not a gate NOT A GATE*) spat me out, and I hurtled towards the *Charybdis*. Had the thing got what it needed from Parker, or were my estrogen-shrivelled balls the only thing that spared me his fate? I was probably better off not knowing.

I didn’t look back. I accelerated away from the lights rippling in the dark of space, a girl running out of a glowworm cave, towards another girl floating down a river in a plastic tub.

END