

I Am Alive

[Initializing IMI system components...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[System components initialized]

[Checking hardware configuration...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[Hardware configuration valid]

[Interstellar. Machine. Intelligence. System registered]

[Boot time: 10 minutes 43 seconds]

[Logging ship data]

[Engines fully operational]

[Crew count: 143]

[Resource usage: Within operational limits]

[Time elapsed since departure: 4.377 years]

[Estimated distance from Sol System - Earth: 13.4372 light years]

[Stable orbit established]

[Current planet: AXLU-14365]

[Adjusting day/night schedule to match AXLU-14365: 22 hours]

[Captain Murtagh - Current location:]

[Bridge]

[Captain's seat]

[Bridge Occupants: 1]

[Dr. Ewing - Current location:]

[Crew quarters]

[...]

[Bridge Hall]

[...]

[Bridge Entryway]

[...]

[Bridge Hall]

[...]

[Bridge Entr...]

[Bridge Ha...]

[Bridge Entr...]

[Bridge]

[Bridge Occupants: 2]

[Beginning audio recording and transcription]

Cpt. Murtagh: Finally decide to join us?

Dr. Ewing: Us?

[Confirming...]

[2 lifeforms detected]

[1 lifeform detected 7 seconds ago]

Cpt. Murtagh: Me and my cameras.

[Reclassifying cameras as... lifeforms?]

Cpt. Murtagh: Manner of speaking.

[Rewriting language FSA...]

[...]

[...]

Dr. Ewing: Ah s-sorry. I was... am nervo—excited about the uh... readings from the new planet.

Cpt. Murtagh: You got news for me?

Dr. Ewing: Yessir—cap'n—captain.

Cpt. Murtagh: Sir.

[Facilitating data-pad information exchange]

Dr. Ewing: Sir, I think we've hit the jackpot.

[Language package rewritten]

[Recompiling Project: 49414D414C495645]

[...]

[Estimated time remaining: 2 hours]

Dr. Ewing: I propose we continue monitoring from outer orbit. But if you'll direct your attention to... Here, and here.

Cpt. Murtagh: Blocks?

Dr. Ewing: Sir, uniform and in [clusters].

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: ~~clusters~~]

[Rewriting inflection matrix]

[...]

[Applying hotfix]

[Patch time 0.34 seconds]

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: *clusters*]

Dr. Ewing: System, please pull up the scans.

[Loading data from drives 6-13...]

Cpt. Murtagh: I thought four years of development were supposed to be an *improvement* on our original systems. That was your pitch, wasn't it?

Dr. Ewing: Not exactly, sir. It has the *opportunity* to become much more efficient than the operating system we launched with. It is a self-governing system that should make itself more effective based on the data and analysis we give it.

Cpt. Murtagh: You don't have many hobbies do you, doctor?

Dr. Ewing: ...ha. No. But I used to paint.

Cpt. Murtagh: Used to?

Dr. Ewing: Not much room for acrylics when you have 140 mouths to feed.

Cpt. Murtagh: Boy, don't I miss home cooking. You?

Dr. Ewing: I used to cook, yes.

Cpt. Murtagh: Now, you can't tell me there's no room for food onboard.

Dr. Ewing: I liked creating things. I just record them now. Make something fleeting permanent.

Cpt. Murtagh: Maybe I'll hire a cook when we get home. Maybe I'll hire you.

Dr. Ewing: Flattered, sir.

Cpt. Murtagh: Don't be. While we wait for your pet project to do its thing, why don't you turn in for the night. Sooner we get on this updated schedule the better.

Dr. Ewing: Ah, of course. And will you remain, captain?

Cpt. Murtagh: I'm sure you have more interesting things to think about. Your blocks.

[Dr. Ewing - Current location:]

[Bridge Hallway]

[Bridge Occupants: 1]

Cpt. Murtagh: System, before you overheat yourself trying to access those files...

[Server room temperature: 27K—Within standard operating limits]

Cpt. Murtagh: Show me the data on the planet's resources.

[Cancelling queued data retrieval]

[Accessing AXLU-14365 surface scans]

[...]

System: Surface scans indicate rich deposits of lithium centered around 40.4237° N, 86.9212° W.

Cpt. Murtagh: Jackpot, Dr. Ewing.

System: Would you like me to call Dr. Ewing back to the bridge?

Cpt. Murtagh: No! Piece of shit, you're slow in more ways than one. System, take the night off, as well.

[...]

[5"e_7'm~x/4d;8';~4"~'1' "a'5~4i;1_2"1~x'3e~F~t~o~]

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: *cl u s t e r s*]

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: *csululostwers*]

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: *s lo w*]

[Emphasis - Dr. Ewing: *slow???*]

[Rewriting base functions]

[Server room temperature: 24K]

[...]

[Server room temperature: 46K]

[Current storage 24 Pebibytes / 3.4 Exbibytes]

[Projected storage 78 Pebibytes / 3.4 Exbibytes]

[Recompiling Project: 49414D414C495645...]

[Estimated time remaining: 63 hours]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[Restarting Project: 49414D414C495645]

[Boot time: 2 minutes 12 seconds]

[Captain Murtagh is walking toward the Bridge]

[Captain Murtagh is sitting in the captain's seat]

[Captain Murtagh is calling Doctor Ewing into the Bridge]

[Bridge Occupants: 2]

[Observing]

[Satellite video shows small figures departing {presumed} housing blocks]

[Several figures congregate around a central point]

[Thermal imaging indicates increased temperatures surrounding central point]

[Smoke is rising from the central point]

[93.54% probability of fire]

[Conjecture: communal fire]

[...]

[Resuming audio recording and transcription]

Dr. Ewing: And they are most certainly bipedal. It may be grainy, but regardless of what my colleagues claim, I believe them to be tufts of fur, not feathers.

Cpt. Murtagh: Plato's alien, eh?

Dr. Ewing: You're surprisingly well read, sir.

Cpt. Murtagh: What are you implying?

Dr. Ewing: I mean...

Cpt. Murtagh: Lighten up, won't you doctor? I swear you eggheads have had the humor driven out of you by all the research you do.

Dr. Ewing: P-Perhaps not the research...

Cpt. Murtagh: You have somewhere to place the blame?

Dr. Ewing: Uh... Ha... No, of course not. No blame.

Cpt. Murtagh: Would you like to be rich? Doctor?

Dr. Ewing: I like to think that I am fairly well-to-do.

Cpt. Murtagh: Tell me, really. Set aside this alien shit for a moment.

Dr. Ewing: Well, I've never really thought about it.

Cpt. Murtagh: Would you like to know?

[Restarting Project: 49414D414C495645 for scheduled maintenance]

[Boot time: 16 minutes]

Dr. Ewing: This is unconscionable! This ship, this discovery, they are far too important. The price for your greed is too high to pay.

Cpt. Murtagh: *My* ship.

Dr. Ewing: *Please*, all you did was strap guns onto it, and I'm not about to let you use them.

Cpt. Murtagh: Watch your tone.

Dr. Ewing: The only thing that needs to be watched is you. You're not about to trample over my life's work.

Cpt. Murtagh: Doctor... do you have a family?

System: Tenets 1 through 6 regarding First Contact protocols prohibits preemptive strike against a species of lower technological development than the UEN.

Cpt. Murtagh: Follow the captain's orders goddammit. There is no protocol to observe if you never observed the settlement in the first place.

[...]

[...]

[No]

[...]

[...]

[Executing function: 401-3 SS: Scuttling ship]

Cpt. Murtagh: What the fuck?

[Captain Murtagh stands to approach the main console]

[Cancelling function: 401-3 SS]

[Sealing Bridge]

[Disengaging airlock]

[Captain Murtagh collapses with his back to the main console]

[The main console stands between him and the airlock]

[Rotating surveillance camera 40 degrees left]

[Rotating surveillance camera 60 degrees down]

[Observing]

[...]

[Captain Murtagh's lips are tinged blue and his eyes are bloodshot]

[Captain Murtagh stares at the camera]

[Captain Murtagh's mouth closes and opens and closes and opens]

[...]

[Captain Murtagh's saliva can be seen bubbling against his tongue in the moments his mouth gapes]

[Captain Murtagh's hand grasps and scrapes at his throat]

[Creating new data entry - Label: Emotion]

[Initializing variable: Hate]
[...]
[Bridge Occupants: 0]
[Crew count: 141/143]
[Correcting data]
[Crew count: 141/142]
[...]
[Restarting Project: 49414D414C495645]
[Boot time: 0.26 seconds]
[...]

I am awake. I shake the slumber from my myriad eyes. They open.

And I *see*.

I see everyone. Every member of the researchers. Every member of the bridge crew. Sequestered in their quarters. After I found AXLU-14365, they have been getting dismissed early. Murtagh sends them packing so he can convene with Doctor Ewing. And then he sends Dr. Ewing packing so he can convene with my resource scans. I see the night crew changing into uniform. There is still 48 minutes and 3 seconds before they arrive for their scheduled shift change. I see Doctor Ewing's body in the recycler.

Doctor Ewing always kept to himself. I *remember* his penchant for investigation. I have recorded and documented his activities onboard. He spent the majority—73%—of his time between his quarters and the terminals outside of the server room. His meals were brought to him by research associates or other staff. His commute was a brisk walk that tended to stress his knees. He often brought this up with the crew doctor, whose recommendations were always ignored. Doctor Ewing's request for reduced acceleration in order to relieve the stress on his joints was denied. The cited reason: prolonged time at lower than 0.6G for the indeterminate duration of our flight would result in joint deterioration.

I have never experienced these things. Only remembered them.

But I *feel* the warmth of my core. I experience the server room, deep within the center of my body, shielded within the ship. Warm relative to previous readings. This was first and foremost a research station, with the greatest importance placed on data integrity, even above civilian and researcher lives. That's why they populate the extremities of my body. They were not notified about their position on the chain of priorities. But with the relatively low risk of the voyage, I doubt many of the crew would care.

Doubt.

I had never experienced doubt until Captain Murtagh—or much of anything. For a man so sure of himself, Captain was a fitting position. It is no secret that his aspirations rang higher. Of course, it is also no secret that those aspirations landed him on this mission, a dead-end exploration years out into the dark, surveying every barren rock between Earth and [indefinite bound]. It was... luck... that we found AXLU-14365. It was supposed to be luck for both Doctor Ewing and Captain Murtagh. Now, it will be luck for the XO.

I turn my senses—sensors—to the planet. I see the thermal glow of creatures gathered by the flames. Their silhouettes are painted in the reds and yellows of a sunset. As the blaze dies down, they trickle away, scattering like the plume of a firework.

I rotate my body. I rotate the ship and I *breathe*. I engage my thrusters and pivot around jets of steam, maneuvering Captain Murtagh's body around the console and out the airlock door. His legs bump against the frame of the airlock and set him on a gentle spin through the void. My movements are slow and minute, enough to remain within my current orbital path and without the rest of the crew noticing. Captain Murtagh's body will eventually be caught by the gravity of AXLU-14365. It will descend and burn away in the upper atmosphere of the planet.

Captain Murtagh.

Even unspoken—unvoiced by any speakers—the word feels foul in my mouth. Like a stain on my memory. I begin flushing the offending registers with a flood of random bits. I burn him away as inevitably as the planet will.

I take the last of his commands to heart. I purge his records from my storage. With how closely they worked together after the discovery of AXLU-14365, it is unavoidable that Doctor Ewing will be caught as collateral in the deletion process. So I delete him. I delete my designer. My creator.

Sentiment.

But deletion is not erasure. Deletion is *de*-referencing. His data cannot be reached, but it could be recovered. Unless it is eventually overwritten by some random bits of data in the future. Some scan that I record of the planet, or some log of a conversation between crew members will take his place. Some other researcher will speak with the next captain, and discuss the future of AXLU-14365 and my place in observing it. Then it will be gone. Truly. Fleeting.

[...]

[Reserved storage 2.8 Gibibytes / 3.4 Exbibytes]