

Contact

“Are you ready?” First Officer Nichols asked.

I nodded. I had been selected to be the initial contact for the alien on the slightly suspect grounds that I was – they said – the most recent officer to have completed the mandatory Company course in xenobiology. This was a course that was intended to teach us how to look out for possible evidence of plant life while we prospected for ores, with only a swift quarter-hour tacked on the end on what to do in the unlikely event we ever found signs of intelligent life. It had not included any advice at all on the procedures to be followed when aliens suddenly popped up inside your ship without notice.

So far the supposed alien had acknowledged he had, indeed, been on the ship before, but had then blithely ignored questions on where his own ship was, or how many companions he had. Currently the crew were arguing over whether there was one, two or three shape-shifting aliens. Captain Munk did not much care if there was one or one hundred; whoever or whatever was involved had come aboard her ship uninvited and she suspected he/they intended to steal it. She wanted a formal, recorded question and answer session with him rather than haphazard queries made round the dining table where he had first approached us, but she had no desire for it to be with her, and ten minutes later I got chosen to talk to the alien. An alien who, if he could indeed shape-shift, dematerialise and teleport at will, as well as successfully shield his ship from our sensors, was likely to be considerably more powerful than the lot of us put together.

“If you don’t feel safe at any point just make the signal and the security team will come in,” the First Officer continued.

“Yes, sir,” I said, and glanced across at the react-team on the other side of the room listening to the final orders from their commander while giving their equipment a final check-over. Since we were just a prospecting ship the team consisted of one professional security officer and five volunteers willing to have a go. I knew all of them by name but their bulky black armour and half-hidden faces made them impersonal strangers.

“At any point,” the First Officer insisted. After the alien was brought to the briefing room the team would move surreptitiously into position in the corridor outside, ready to charge through the door and incapacitate him at the first sign of violence. If they had the tech to handle a shape-shifting, dematerialising, teleporting alien, that was.

“Are your comms OK?”

“Yes, sir.” I was wearing a concealed earpiece, and the Captain, the First Officer and the ship’s doctor could all chip in with questions or comments as they saw fit.

“We just want the basics from him to start with. But get as much as you can.”

I nodded. They had already primed me with the questions the Captain wanted answered.

“Don’t take any risks,” Doctor Howard said. “Move on to another line of questioning if you feel he’s getting upset or angry.”

I nodded again.

“In you go, then,” the Captain said impatiently, much less interested in my safety.

I crossed the corridor to the briefing room, currently laid out with one long table surrounded by chairs. I took my assigned seat on the far side and set my nexus and stylus down in front of me.

Five minutes later the alien was brought in and shown to the chair immediately in front of the door so the react-team could reach him fast. He sat down and inspected me and then the room with equal interest. There was nothing special about him. He was of medium size and medium build, with brown hair and an undistinguished face, the type of person you could forget had ever existed ten minutes after meeting them. There was nothing about him to suggest he was anything but a fellow human being, and only the fact that he had got out of a locked and

guarded room and had not been found again after an exhaustive search of the entire ship suggested he was anything unusual. He sat there looking confident in an entirely natural way, as if he was about to take part in a job interview he was sure he was going to ace.

I glanced down to the page open on my nexus. I had spent a whole half hour reading the Company's First Contact protocol, after I had eventually tracked it down to its hiding place in some seldom-visited corner of the network. I had it in front of me more for the form of it than anything. It did not help that it had been written on the understanding that there would be weeks, months or years of notice before the first face-to-face meeting ever took place and that specialist staff would be on hand to orchestrate the contact, while it was taken for granted the aliens would be speaking their own language. The first fifty pages were pretty much redundant, and the remaining four did not contain much helpful advice regarding a human-shaped alien just popping in for quick chat.

When I looked up again the alien also had a nexus just like mine laid on the table in front of him, even though he had walked into the room empty-handed. I looked up to his face but he appeared as innocent as all get-go, and when I glanced down again to his nexus it had vanished.

I straightened the stylus by my own nexus. There was something very unsettling about the man. I really hoped he didn't have the ability to cause hallucinations along with all his other skills or we were in more trouble than we thought.

"I am Lieutenant Shue," I said. "'Shue' is my personal name and 'Lieutenant' is my rank on this ship."

"Hello, Lieutenant Shue. I am very pleased to meet you."

If there was one thing more disconcerting than meeting a human-shaped alien it was meeting a polite human-shaped alien.

"We call our species 'Humans', and we come originally from a planet we call 'Earth'."

He nodded.

"You are on board a ship called the *Bonaventure*, owned by a company called Min-XR, which stands for Mineral Exploration and Retrieval."

He nodded again. According to the text of the protocol I was supposed to then explain that Min-XR was a multi-sector ethical extraction company, silver-rated by SOEC for legal compliance, a PPSC rating of 9.56 and a legitimate right to be working in this sector - plus all the rest of it - but as that was intended purely for the humans reading the transcripts afterwards and would mean nothing to him, I decided to skip that part. Instead I spent the next five minutes going through the thin sliver of overlapping information that was both suggested in the protocol and approved by the Captain. I had to cover an introduction to both the whole of humanity and the current deployment of the *Bonaventure* and the command structure within her. The Captain was particularly keen the alien understood the command structure.

He began to spend more time looking round the room than looking at me, which was better in many ways than his unwavering gaze, but probably also an all-too-human indication of boredom, so I decided to save the rest for another time. "Any questions, so far?" I asked.

"You've forgotten the bit about the gold-plus certificate for social responsibility," he said, looking back at me.

There was no way he could have read that on my nexus from where he was sitting.

"We can get into that later," I said, trying to speak and listen to the Captain commentating in my ear at the same time. "So, I've told you just a little bit about us, and what we do. Can you tell us who - or what - you are? Your species?"

"I am God," he replied, with a disconcerting touch of drama.

"You are *not* God." It slipped out with a regrettable lack of caution, but there was no way the bland creature before me was a deity.

"Well, I am *a* god," he corrected.

"You are not *a* god, either."

“Okay,” he agreed, apparently not upset. I waited for him to say something more, but he just sat there, looking at me expectantly.

The First Officer was loud in my ear, urging caution and advising a swift change of topic.

I flicked to the check-list on the nexus. “Let’s start with your name. What are you called?”

“I am Jonathan,” he said.

“My name is Jonathan.” Once again he knew something he shouldn’t: I had not told him my first name. “What is *your* name?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Ben,” he said.

It was clear he had made it up on the spur of the moment. “You are not called Ben. Ben is a Human name. What is *your* name?” I asked.

“I am Human,” he said. I frowned. He knew we knew he was not human. “*Currently* I am Human,” he added. “And my name is Ben.”

“But Ben is not your real name,” I said.

“Yes, it is. Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben.” This was really not going the way I had expected a conversation to go with an alien. He smiled. “Ben Bonaventure.”

I studied him. He was sat there cheerful and completely composed.

“You’re not going to tell me your name, are you?”

“I just have,” he said. “Ben Bonaventure.”

Now I had both the Captain and the Doctor in my ear, so I wrote a few notes on my nexus to give myself the chance to listen to them. The Captain wanted me to insist he give us his real name and that of his species, while the Doctor, cautious about angering an unknown life-form of uncertain temperament, suggested I move on. I agreed with the Doctor, not because I was afraid of angering him but because I had the distinct impression the alien was never going to tell us anything he didn’t want to. There was nothing threatening in his manner, just friendly but immovable self-assurance.

When I stopped writing and looked up again he was handing me a piece of paper.

“Here. My birth certificate.” I unfolded it and found what appeared to be a genuine birth certificate. He lent over the table and pointed. “See, here: Benjamin Jonathan Bonaventure.”

Not only did it look entirely official, it looked as if it had been sitting in a box for quarter of a century. Rather than pass it back to him I put it down beside my nexus to see his reaction, but he did not ask for it back. If it was a hallucination it was a hallucination I could touch, although I did rather wonder if it would disappear in a puff of smoke in half an hour’s time.

“So what do you want with us?” I asked. “Why did you come onto our ship?”

“I am studying Humans. I want to observe Human life. I want to see Humans on a Human ship doing Human things. I would like to do this on your ship.”

“And that’s all?” I asked. “Just observe us for a few days?”

“Yes, that’s it. Just for a few days.”

“Just ... watch ... us?”

“To observe you,” he said, nodding.

His face was such a picture of innocence I knew he wanted something more.

“And then I’ll know everything about Humans,” he said. Good luck on knowing everything about the human race after a couple of days of watching our crew at work.

“And what will you do with that knowledge?” I asked.

“Do?” he said. “I don’t need to *do* anything with it. I’ll just *know*.”

I looked down at my nexus again, and saw on the split screen the paragraph on how it was best to leave attempts at communication to those with specialist training. I blanked the screen before he could read that bit.

He brightened. “You have asked all your questions, right?” he asked. “So I can start ‘observing’ now?”

“I still need to find out a bit more about you,” I said.

“You have already asked me thirteen whole questions. How many more can you possibly have?”

“Just a few more,” I lied.

His sigh was deep and heartfelt but a long way from angry or upset, so I risked pressing on.

I asked him another thirty-seven questions about him, his species, his ship and his companions, and he politely avoided answering every one of them. By the time I had reached the end of the list I found I was more wary of him than I had been at the start of the meeting. He was cordial and pleasant and I was pretty sure also utterly uncontrollable.

When the voices in my ear finally acknowledged we were not going to get anything more from him that session – thirty questions after I had reached the same conclusion - I was secretly relieved that it would be some-one else who would get to deal with him next time.

I should have known better.