

*I've never sold a story to **Analog**. (Truth be told, I've never sold a story to any of the US magazines.) But this one, according to Analog editor Stanley Schmidt, "almost made it". It had a "powerful narrative drive" and "compelling theme". Sadly, ol' Stan also found the ending "ugly" and "simplistic"; in other words, just too damn futile (which, to those familiar with my work, is kind of a familiar refrain). I toyed with the idea of bringing in some clowns at the end, but I just couldn't get 'em to dance on cue.*

"Ambassador" finally showed up in my "Ten Monkeys, Ten Minutes" anthology, albeit in a somewhat updated and up-tarted (but every bit as ugly and futile) form. It was my one true foray into spaceships-and-rayguns science fiction until Blindsight (still in progress). And in either a clever nod to continuity or a pathetic recycling of unoriginal ideas, the thematic tagline of this story shows up in Blindsight as well.

Ambassador

Peter Watts

First Contact was supposed to solve everything.

That was the rumour, anyway: gentle wizards from Epsilon Eridani were going to save us from the fire and welcome us into a vast Galactic Siblinghood spanning the Milky Way. Whatever diseases we'd failed to conquer, they would cure. Whatever political squabbles we hadn't outgrown, they would resolve. They were going to fix it all.

They were not supposed to turn me into a hunted animal.

I didn't dwell much on the philosophical implications, at first; I was too busy running for my life. *Zombie* streaked headlong into the universe, slaved to a gibbering onboard infested with static. Navigation was a joke. Every blind jump I made reduced the chances of finding my way home by another order of magnitude. I did it anyway, and repeatedly; any jump I *didn't* make would kill me.

Once more out of the breach. Long-range put me somewhere in the cometary halo of a modest binary. In better times the computer would have shown me the system's planetary retinue in an instant; now it would take days to make the necessary measurements.

Not enough time. I could have fixed my position in a day or so using raw starlight even without the onboard, but whatever was after me had never given me the chance. Several times I'd made a start. The longest reprieve had lasted six hours; in that time I'd placed myself somewhere coreward of the Orion spur.

I'd stopped trying. Knowing my location at any moment would put me no further ahead at $t+1$. I'd be lost again as soon as I jumped.

And I always jumped. It always found me. I still don't know how; theoretically it's impossible to track anything through a singularity. But somehow space always opened its mouth and the monster dropped down on me, hungry and mysterious. It might have been easier to deal with if I'd known why.

What did I do, you ask. What did I do to get it so angry? Why, I tried to say hello.

What kind of intelligence could take offence at *that*?

Imagine a dead tree, three hundred fifty meters tall, with six gnarled branches worming their way from its trunk. Throw it into orbit around a guttering red dwarf that doesn't even rate a proper name. This is what I'd come upon; there were no ports, no running lights, no symbols on the hull. It hung there like some forgotten chunk of cosmic driftwood. Embers of reflected sunlight glistened occasionally from the surface; they only emphasised the shadows drowning the rest of the structure. I thought it was derelict at first.

Of course I went through the motions anyway. I reached out on all the best wavelengths, tried to make contact a hundred different ways. For hours it ignored me. Then it sent the merest blip along the hydrogen band. I fed it into the onboard.

What else do you do with an alien broadcast?

The onboard had managed one startled hiccup before it crashed. All the stats on my panel had blinked once, in impossible unison, and gone dark.

And then doppler had registered the first incoming missile.

So I'd jumped, blind. There really hadn't been a choice, then or the four times since. Sometime during that panicked flight, I had given my tormentor a name: *Kali*.

Unless *Kali* had gotten bored—hope springs eternal, even within puppets such as myself—I'd have to run again in a few hours. In the meantime I aimed *Zombie* at the binary and put her under thrust. Open space is impossible to hide in; a system, even a potential one, is marginally better.

Of course I'd have to jump long before I got there. It didn't matter. My reflexes were engineered to perform under all circumstances. *Zombie's* autopilot may have been disabled, but mine engaged smoothly.

It takes time to recharge between jumps. So far, it had taken longer for *Kali* to find me. At some point that was likely to change; the onboard had to be running again before it did.

I knew there wasn't a hope in hell.

A little forensic hindsight, here: how exactly did *Kali* pull it off?

I'm not exactly sure. But some of *Zombie's* diagnostic systems run at the scale of the merely electronic, with no reliance on quantum computation. The crash didn't affect them; they were able to paint a few broad strokes in the aftermath.

The Trojan signal contained at least one set of spatial coordinates. The onboard would have read that as a pointer of some kind: it would have opened the navigation files to see what resided

at x-y-z. A conspicuous astronomical feature, perhaps? Some common ground to compare respective visions of time and space?

Zap. Nav files gone.

Once nav was down—or maybe before, I can't tell—the invading program told *Zombie* to update all her backups with copies of itself. Only then, with all avenues of recovery contaminated, had it crashed the onboard. Now the whole system was frozen, every probability wave collapsed, every qubit locked into P=1.00.

It was an astonishingly beautiful assault. In the time it had taken me to say hello, *Kali* had grown so intimate with my ship that she'd been able to seduce it into suicide. Such a feat was beyond my capabilities, far beyond those of the haphazard beasts that built me. I'd have given anything to meet the mind behind the act, if it hadn't been trying so hard to kill me.

Early in the hunt I'd tried jumping several times in rapid succession, without giving *Kali* the chance to catch up. I'd nearly bled out the reserves. All for nothing; the alien found me just as quickly, and I'd had barely enough power to escape.

I was still paying for that gamble. It would take two days at sublight for *Zombie* to recharge fully, and ninety minutes before I could even jump again. Now I didn't dare jump until the destroyer came for me; I lay in real space and hoarded whatever moments of peace the universe saw fit to grant.

This time the universe granted three and a half hours. Then short-range beeped at me; object ahead. I plugged into *Zombie's* cameras and looked forward.

A patch of stars disappeared before my eyes.

The manual controls were still unfamiliar. It took precious seconds to call up the right numbers. Whatever eclipsed the stars was preceding *Zombie* on a sunwards course, decelerating fast. One figure refused to settle; the mass of the object was increasing as I watched. Which meant that it was coming through from somewhere else.

Kali was cutting her search time with each iteration.

Two thousand kilometres ahead, twisted branches turned to face me across the ether. One of them sprouted an incandescent bud.

Zombie's sensors reported the incoming missile to the onboard; the brainchips behind my dash asked for an impact projection. The onboard chattered mindlessly.

I stared at the approaching thunderbolt. *What do want with me? Why can't you just leave me alone?*

Of course I didn't wait for an answer. I jumped.

My creators left me a tool for this sort of situation: *fear*, they called it.

They didn't leave much else. None of the parasitic nucleotides that gather like dust whenever blind stupid evolution has its way, for example. None of the genes that build genitals; what would have been the point? They left me a sex drive, but they tweaked it; the things that get me off are more tightly linked to mission profiles than to anything so vulgar as procreation. I retain a smattering of chemical sexuality, mostly androgens so I won't easily take no for an answer.

There are genetic sequences, long and intricately folded, which code for loneliness. Thigmotactic hardwiring, tactile pleasure, pheromonal receptors that draw the individual into social groups. All gone from me. They even tried to cut religion out of the mix, but God, it turns out, is borne of fear. The loci are easy enough to pinpoint but the linkages are absolute: you can't exorcise faith without eliminating pure mammalian terror as well. And out here, they decided, fear was too vital a survival mechanism to leave behind.

So fear is what they left me with. Fear, and superstition. And try as I might to keep my midbrain under control, the circuitry down there kept urging me to grovel and abase itself before the omnipotence of the Great Killer God.

I almost envied *Zombie* as she dropped me into another impermanent refuge. *Zombie* moved on reflex alone, braindead, galvanic. She didn't know enough to be terrified.

For that matter, I didn't know much more.

What was *Kali's* problem, anyway? Was its captain insane, or merely misunderstood? Was I being hunted by something innately evil, or just the product of an unhappy childhood?

Any intelligence capable of advanced spaceflight must also be able to understand peaceful motives; such was the wisdom of Human sociologists. Most had never left the solar system. None had actually encountered an alien. No matter. The logic seemed sound enough; any species incapable of controlling their aggression probably wouldn't survive long enough to escape their own system. The things that made me nearly didn't.

Indiscriminate hostility against anything that moves is not an evolutionary strategy that makes sense.

Maybe I'd violated some cultural taboo. Perhaps an alien captain had gone insane. Or perhaps I'd chanced upon a battleship engaged in some ongoing war, wary of doomsday weapons in sheep's clothing.

But what were the odds, really? In all the universe, what are the chances that our first encounter with another intelligence would happen to involve an alien lunatic? How many interstellar wars would have to be going on simultaneously before I ran significant odds of blundering into one at random?

It almost made more *sense* to believe in God.

I searched for another answer that fitted. I was still looking two hours later, when *Kali* bounced my signal from only a thousand kilometres off.

Somewhere else in space, the question and I appeared at the same time: *is everyone out here like this?*

Assuming that I wasn't dealing with a statistical fluke—that I hadn't just happened to encounter one psychotic alien amongst a

trillion sane ones, and that I hadn't blundered into the midst of some unlikely galactic war—there was one other alternative.

Kali was typical.

I put the thought aside long enough to check the Systems monitor; nearly two hours, this time, before I could jump again. *Zombie* was deeply interstellar, over six lightyears from the nearest system. Even I couldn't justify kicking in the thrusters at that range. Nothing to do but wait, and wonder—

Kali couldn't be typical. It made no sense. Maybe this was all just some fantastic cross-cultural miscommunication. Maybe *Kali* had mistaken my own transmission as some kind of attack, and responded in kind.

Right. An intelligence smart enough to rape my onboard in a matter of hours, yet too stupid to grasp signals expressly designed to be decipherable by *anyone*. *Kali* hadn't needed prime number sequences or pictograms to understand me or my overtures. It knew *Zombie's* mind from the qubits up. It knew that I was friendly, too. It had to know.

It just didn't care.

And barely ten minutes past the jump threshold, it finally caught up with me.

I could feel space rippling almost before the short-range board lit up. My inner ears split into a dozen fragments, each insisting *up* was a different direction. At first I thought *Zombie* was jumping by herself; then I thought the onboard gravity was failing somehow.

Then *Kali* began materialising less than a hundred meters away. I was caught in her wake.

I moved without thinking. *Zombie* spun on her axis and leapt away under full thrust. Telltales sparkled in crimson protest. Behind me, the plasma cone of *Zombie's* exhaust splashed harmlessly against the resolving monster.

Still wanting for solid substance, *Kali* turned to follow. Her malformed arms, solidifying, reached out for me.

It's going to grapple, I realised. Something subcortical screamed *Jump!*

Too close. I'd drag *Kali* through with me if I tried.

Jump!

Eight hundred meters between us. At that range my exhaust should have been melting it to ions.

Six hundred meters. *Kali* was whole again.

JUMP!

I jumped. *Zombie* leapt blindly out of space. For one sickening moment, geometry died. Then the vortex spat me out.

But not alone.

We came through together. Cat and mouse dropped into reality four hundred meters apart, coasting at about one-thousandth c . The momentum vectors didn't quite match; within ten seconds *Kali* was over a hundred kilometres away.

Then you destroyed her.

It took some time to figure that out. All I saw was the flash, so bright it nearly overwhelmed the filters; then the cooling shell of hydrogen that crested over me and dissipated into a beautiful, empty sky.

I couldn't believe that I was free.

I tried to imagine what might have caused *Kali's* destruction. Engine malfunction? Sabotage or mutiny on board, for reasons I could never even guess at? Ritual suicide?

Until I played back the flight recorder, it never occurred to me that she might have been hit by a missile travelling at half the speed of light.

That frightened me more than *Kali* had. The short-range board gave me a clear view to five A.U.s, and there was nothing in any direction. Whatever had destroyed her must have come from a greater distance. It must have been en route before we'd even come through.

It had been expecting us.

I almost missed *Kali* in that moment. At least she hadn't been invisible. At least she hadn't been able to see the future.

There was no way of knowing whether the missile had been meant for my pursuer, or for me, or for anything else that wandered

by. Was I alive because you didn't want me dead, or because you thought I was dead already? And if my presence went undetected now, what might give me away? Engine emissions, RF, perhaps some exotic property of advanced technology which my species has yet to discover? What did your weapons key on?

I couldn't afford to find out. I shut everything down to bare subsistence, and played dead, and watched.

I've been here for many days now. At last, things are becoming clear.

Mysterious contacts wander space at the limit of *Zombie's* instruments, following cryptic trails. I have coasted through strands of invisible energy that defy analysis. There is also much background radiation here, of the sort *Kali* bled when she died. I have recorded the light of many fusion explosions: some light-hours distant, some less than a hundred thousand kilometres away.

Occasionally, such things happen at close range.

Strange artifacts appear in the paths of missiles sent from some source too distant to see. Almost always they are destroyed; but once, before your missiles reached it, a featureless sphere split into fragments which danced away like dust motes. Only a few of them fell victim to your appetite that time. And once, something that *shimmered*, as wide and formless as an ocean, took a direct hit without disappearing. It limped out of range at less than the speed of light, and you did not send anything to finish the job.

There are things in this universe that even you cannot destroy.

I know what this is. I am caught in a spiderweb. You snatch ships from their travels and deposit them here to face annihilation. I don't know how far you can reach. This is a very small volume of space, perhaps only two or three light-days across. So many ships couldn't blunder across such a tiny reef by accident; you must be bringing them from a much greater distance. I don't know how. Any singularity big enough to manage such a feat would show up on my instruments a hundred light-years away, and I can find nothing. It doesn't matter anyway, now that I know what you are.

You're *Kali*, but much greater. And only now do you make sense to me.

I've stopped trying to reconcile the wisdom of Earthbound experts with the reality I have encountered. The old paradigms are useless. I propose a new one: *technology implies belligerence*.

Tools exist for only one reason: to force the universe into unnatural shapes. They treat nature as an enemy, they are by definition a rebellion against the way things are. In benign environments technology is a stunted, laughable thing, it can't thrive in cultures gripped by belief in natural harmony. What need of fusion reactors if food is already abundant, the climate comfortable? Why force change upon a world which poses no danger?

Back where I come from, some peoples barely developed stone tools. Some achieved agriculture. Others were not content until they had ended nature itself, and still others until they'd built cities in space.

All rested, eventually. Their technology climbed to some complacent asymptote, and stopped—and so they do not stand before you now. Now even my creators grow fat and slow. Their environment mastered, their enemies broken, they can afford more pacifist luxuries. Their machines softened the universe for them, their own contentment robs them of incentive. They forget that hostility and technology climb the cultural ladder together, they forget that it's not enough to be smart.

You also have to be *mean*.

You did not rest. What hellish world did you come from, that drove you to such technological heights? Somewhere near the core, perhaps: stars and black holes jammed cheek to jowl, tidal maelstroms, endless planetary bombardment by comets and asteroids. Some place where no one can pretend that *life* and *war* aren't synonyms. How far you've come.

My creators would call you barbarians, of course. They know nothing. They don't even know me: I'm a recombinant puppet, they say. My solitary contentment is preordained, my choices all imaginary, automatic. Pitiable.

Uncomprehending, even of their own creations. How could they possibly understand you?

But I understand. And understanding, I can act.

I can't escape you. I'd die of old age before I drifted out of this abattoir on my current trajectory. Nor can I jump free, given your ability to snare ships exceeding lightspeed. There's only one course that may keep me alive.

I've traced back along the paths of the missiles you throw; they converge on a point a little less than three light-days ahead. I know where you are.

We're centuries behind you now, but that may change. Even *your* progress won't be endless; and the more of a threat you pose to the rest of us, the more you spur our own advancement. Was that how you achieved your own exalted stature out here? Did you depose some earlier killer god whose attempts at eradication only made you stronger? Do you fear such a fate for yourselves?

Of course you do.

Even my masters may pose a threat, given time; they'll shake off their lethargy the moment they realise that you exist. You can rid yourself of that threat if you exterminate them while they are still weak. To do that, you need to know where they are.

Don't think you can kill me and learn what you need from my ship. I've destroyed any records that survived *Kali's* assault; there weren't many. And I doubt that even you could deduce much from *Zombie's* metallurgical makeup; my creators evolved under a very common type of star. You have no idea where I come from.

But I do.

My ship can tell you some of the technology. Only *I* can tell you where the nest is. And more than that; I can tell you of the myriad systems that Humanity has explored and colonised. I can tell you all about those pampered children of the womb who sent me into the maelstrom on their behalf. You'll learn little of them by examining me, for I was built to differ from the norm.

But you could always *listen* to me. You have nothing to lose.

I will betray them. Not because I bear them any ill will, but because the ethics of loyalty simply don't apply out here. I'm free of the ties that cloud the judgement of lesser creatures; when you're a sterile product of controlled genetics, *kin selection* is a meaningless phrase.

My survival imperative, on the other hand, is as strong as anyone's.

Not automatic after all, you see. *Autonomous*.

I assume that you can understand this transmission. I'm sending it repeatedly in half-second bursts while thrusting. Wait for me; hold your fire.

I'm worth more to you *alive*.

Ready or not, here I come.