

“The Peacekeepers”

by

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The year is 2052 AD. The United Nations Interstellar Exploratory Committee has completed final tests on Earth’s first unmanned Jump Drive. This device, powered by the exotic element E-115, has given man the ability to travel vast spacial distances via an Einstein-Rosen bridge or Wormhole by folding space/time. Utilizing this new technology, physicist Dr. Amanda Price is set to lead a team of five: exo-biologist- Dr. Patrick Wolf, communications expert- Dr. Denise Fukata, mechanical engineer-Jason Lee, field medic-Alex Perez and security detail-Lt. James White-on an expedition to the Tau Ceti system, twelve light years away. A voyage that would take conventional sub-light vessels 48 years to traverse, the new jump drive has been hailed as man’s crowning achievement of the past 150 years.

The U.N. committee has retro fitted one of its three long-range tactical “Peacekeepers”- one of Earth’s most formidable Interstellar warships- a platform deemed to be secure to house the new system. Fitted with the Earth’s most advanced Artificial Intelligence, the vessel has been dubbed the first true ‘Smart Ship.’ Developed by a joint effort between DARPA, the premier agency for the U.S. Department of Defense and M.I.T, the world’s foremost academic think-tank-the A.I. was the brainchild of young Dr. Toby Preston, a celebrated child prodigy. Funded by the U.N sub-committee of Advanced Technology and overseen by the U.S. State Department, the Sentient Artificial Mainframe or “S.A.M.,” for short, will function as the vessel’s primary interface. It will also have the ability to interact with those on board in the form of a holographic construct, essentially a sixth member of the five man crew.

A single-star system, Tau Centi, is known to have five orbiting planets, with only one in the so called Goldie-Locke’s habitable zone, a world with a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere capable of sustaining human life. Dubbed Tau Ceti E by the U.N. and mainstream scientist, Dr. Price and her team have fondly renamed the planet, Eden 1.

Although publicized as an exploratory mission to survey the distant star system, the U.S. State Department has pressed the U.N. committee to utilize the heavily armed vessel due to inconclusive telemetry it had retrieved from a downed drone covertly deployed to the system. Believed to have suffered catastrophic systems failure during a low orbit approach to the third planet, the drone was able to transmit images of what appeared to be unnatural structures on its surface, moments before losing contact. While a manned mission to the Tau Ceti system had been in the works for almost two years, its scheduled mission was fast-tracked due to the new findings. Unbeknownst to most of the

civilian crew, the vessel's primary mission was now to retrieve or destroy the downed drone's advanced jump drive.

The current Mission Commander, Dr. Amanda Price was not the first choice to lead the team. A Lt. Nathaniel Gray, former USAF Special Missions Operative and war hero of the recent Colony Wars was tapped to command the crew. The soldier turned U.S. Military liaison, was the ideal choice for the mission due to his command experience, military background and exceptional piloting skills.

As the highest ranking members of the team, Lt. Gray and Dr. Price were briefed on the recent drone situation and were given new mission parameters. Ordered to conduct the operation in secret, their loyalties to the crew were tested. Working closely with the team for the better part of two years, each considered the other members close friends as much as professional colleagues.

In the early days of the mission prep, Dr. Price and Lt. Gray were quick to become professional rivals. Dr. Price represented the scientific community and Lt. Gray, the military interest in the quadrant. Recently forced to step down due to an injury sustained during a routine test flight, Lt. Gray was understandably upset at the Committee's decision to abruptly promote Dr. Price and replace him with James White, the mission's new security detail and pilot.

Lt. Gray and Dr. Price have intimate knowledge of the mission and are very competitive people. Unfortunately, this volatile mixture hasn't always served them well. They are sometimes quick to argue, but manage to keep their disagreements at a professional level. On a personal note, both are mutually attracted to one another but neither is willing to admit their true feelings. Fellow colleagues often hear them bickering over the smallest details, but occasionally see them exchanging flirtatious glances. However, fearing how a workplace romance may affect the team and subsequently the mission, neither had allowed their attraction to go beyond this playful exchange.

Launch day, Lt. Gray is present at the E.C. or Earth Command, the team's mission control. Still in crutches from his recent injuries and no longer a member of the flight crew, he is now tasked with monitoring the mission from Earth. On the launch tarmac, with emotions high, the team makes its final systems check. When it comes time to board the vessel, a simple embrace between Lt. Gray and Dr. Price become something more. Emotions kept under lock and key, surface, and in a final embrace, both agree to talk, upon the crew's return.

The bay doors close and the crew secure themselves to their stations. The countdown starts. The ship's horizontal thrusters ignite and in moments, it lifts the 30 ton vessel aloft. At 100 feet, its hypersonic scramjet engage and in a instant, the ship roars into super-cruise. The heavily armed vessel, along with man's best and brightest, jets off into the blue and within minutes the eager team leaves the confines of Earth. In the deafening silence of space, the low hum of the new drive echo through bulkheads and

cramp corridors as the ship prepares to jump. The crew takes and holds, a collective breathe and in an instant, a blinding light envelops the vessel.

At the E.C., an army of engineers pause to confirm the operation. Mars Base is the first to receive its telemetry and radio to authenticate-citing visual confirmation of the space fold. There is a momentary sigh of relief, but when one, two, then three agonizing minutes pass with no communication from the ship-Lt. Gray and the engineers become concerned. All ears turn to the comm Suddenly, a voice echoes over the radio, "Earth Command. This is Dr. Amanda Price of Terran vessel EC-187B. Space Fold operation was a success. We're here." Mission control erupts into cheer.

The team at Earth Command and the ship's crew confirm the vessel's spatial coordinates as Lt. Gray and Dr. Price privately discuss their mission on a secure channel-when the vessel's proximity alarm sounds. Over the comm, Denise Fukata, the ship's Communication officer somberly whispers, "Oh God. What's that...?" Within seconds, the sound of an explosion rumbles through the comm All communication becomes lost to static. Earth Command goes into a frenzy as all personnel attempt to re-establish radio contact with the vessel. All efforts to do so fail.

Three months after the event- still no confirmation of the crew's fate. Due to the vast distance, a search and rescue mission was deemed impractical. Lt. Gray, now recovered from his injuries, has repeatedly petitioned the U.N. and the U.S. State Department to allow him to retrofit one of their two remaining interstellar Peacekeepers, with a similar drive, so as to conduct a search and retrieval mission. All inquiries were denied-shut down by the top brass-citing a possible threat to global security. Elaborating that if an aggressive party did attack the ship and her crew-an additional human presence would potentially provoke a conflict with a superior force, Earth could not hope to best. Although such a position could not be substantiated, the circumstantial evidence-they affirmed- validated their decision.

Soon thereafter, the project's funding was cut and the facility was moth balled. Lt. Nathaniel Gray, Dr. Toby Preston and the team of engineers who had worked on the Tau Ceti project were dismissed and given a week to clear. The ship and her crew were officially classified as lost. Lt. Gray, unwilling to accept the resolution, approached Dr. Preston questioning him about the likelihood of the team's continued survival. Dr. Preston reluctantly replied-there was none.

Several nights later, on the launch tarmac during the final walk through of the facility, both Lt. Gray and Dr. Preston witness an ominous flash of light in the night sky. It was a sight they had seen many times before. As the men scan the shadowy horizon, the familiar rumble of a Peacekeeper class vessel is heard off in the distance. Within moments, the ship is overhead and begins to part low hanging clouds as it starts to descend. Soon, the delta shaped craft perches itself not too far from where they stood, hovering a few feet above the tarmac.

The vessel's markings read "EC-187B." It was the lost ship. In disbelief, the two men round the craft, still steaming from its atmospheric re-entry. There are tall tale signs of a firefight and extensive damage to both sides of the craft. Also evident is crude repair work on its starboard side. There is no sign of the crew. Then without warning, the aft bay doors open and the boarding ramp lowers. A female voice bids them enter. They comply and cautiously enter the vessel. Both are surprised at the sight of the command module-altered slightly, but still recognizable. In a blink, the vessel's holographic A.I. flickers on and welcomes them aboard. In its original form, the S.A.M. hologram was a humanoid figure with no discernible gender-now an exceptionally attractive human female. In disbelief, Dr. Preston waves his arms through the figure. S.A.M. flickers and says irritably, "Please don't do that." Lt. Gray abruptly questions the hologram about the crew's whereabouts. Just as she's about to respond, a voice from behind says cheerfully, "Greetings Earth-icans." Almost immediately, Lt. Gray turns and reaches for his sidearm strapped to his right leg. Startled, Dr. Preston jumps back into S.A.M., who begins to flicker again and exclaims, "Do you mind?" Dr. Preston apologizes.

Standing before the two is a non-terrestrial figure- male in appearance and approximately four feet tall. Non-aggressive, the figure was covered in smooth grey skin with various features of its face and hands highlighted in off-white. It had humanoid features- arms, legs, hands, two forward facing eyes, a nose and mouth. Its defining feature was a finlike structure that began at the base of its nose and extended beyond the back of his head. Bipedal and clothed in white overalls padded at the shoulders, elbows, knees and chest- the creature slightly resembled what could be surmised as an evolved bipedal porpoise or shark. Slightly jarred yet focused, Lt. Gray requests that the creature identify himself. The alien waddles to a nearby station, struggles to take a seat and calmly responds, "My name is Olaric"

Olaric tells Lt. Gray and Dr. Preston that he is a Grey Gill, and that his people are a nomadic race of traders a bit more advanced than humans and that they communicate with others through echo linguistics, a form of telepathy. He goes on to say that he found the vessel in an asteroid belt just beyond the Tau Ceti system, after it was set adrift-explaining that there were no signs of the crew when he came upon it. Believing it a derelict, he planned to salvage the vessel by making a few structural repairs using parts from his own ship so as to eventually trade it off. However, when he managed to reactivate some of its systems-bypassing its rudimentary safeguards, he gained access to its interface which included S.A.M.'s holographic subroutine. When the original hologram came online-he found the image less than pleasing and readjusted its visual parameters and created the new S.A.M. image using a visual file he had found in its retrievable memory. He went on to say that he also added a personality algorithm to the program, giving her the colorful disposition she now has. Olaric continued, what he did not do, was initiate the jump back to Earth. He explains that to do so, would require Earth's spatial coordinates which he did not possess. Furthermore, he had no idea such a primitive vessel would even be capable of such a feat, much less fly in its current state.

Unsure of Olaric's account, Lt. Gray turns to S.A.M. as if to corroborate the story. S.A.M. responds,"Dr. Price initiated fold operations prior to the shipwide systems failure.

When propulsion was restored, the drive automatically made the jump.” Lt. Gray then asks, “What happened to the crew?” S.A.M responds, “Lt. James White is dead. Dr. Price and the others were taken...” Just then, a visual recording of the ship’s log begins to play on all functioning monitors. On them, they see Dr. Price, visually distraught-bruised and bleeding from the right side of her forehead. There is a deep gash above her squinting right eye- slightly concealed by her golden locks. A thin river of blood flows around her brow, down her cheek and pools at the base of her chin before it steadily drips to the console below. She is frantically trying to record a distress call as electrical conduits short out beside her. Behind, three members of the crew are trying to stabilize the ship as Alex Perez; the team’s medic is seen performing CPR on Lt. White. Dr. Price pleads at her station, “If anyone can hear me, this is Dr. Amanda Price, Earth vessel EC-187B, in the Tau Ceti System. We are under attack by an unknown vessel. We require immediate ...” The recording abruptly ends in static-a blue screen with a date stamp of July 18, 2085 appears for a beat before fading into black. Dr. Preston murmurs, “That’s the launch date.”

Lt. Gray, charges at Olaric and forcefully grabs him by the arm, his weapon pressed up against his temple and demands, “Where are they?!” With Lt. Gray’s chest still heaving in anger, S.A.M interrupts, “He is telling the truth! He doesn’t know.” Lt. Gray removes his vice like grip, then turns to S.A.M. and somberly replies, “What?” S.A.M. continues, “He did as he said. He is not the aggressor. Before he found me, we were attacked. We tried to flee the system. The other ship pursued and easily overtook us. I attempted to make a jump back to Earth but my systems were compromised- the activation sequence stalled. We were boarded.” Concerned, Lt. Gray mutters, “Who attacked you?” S.A.M answers, “He calls himself Bah-Nier...,” Olaric springs from his seat and interrupts-exclaiming, “The hunter?! This is bad, very, very bad!” Lt. Gray and Dr. Preston turn to Olaric for answers.

Olaric walks towards the men and side-steps a fallen bulkhead and begins seriously,”Bah-Nier is someone-is something, you do not wish to cross. He is a Cyphen-a creature of living metal. He and those like him have traded their mortal bounds for nano-tech meta-machinery. They are more machine than flesh, able to convert themselves into various forms of mechanical death. They are ruthless butchers, without emotion, without fear and only crave the upgrade. Cyphens would gladly give what remains of their twisted souls for the next fix. And as it is, they only work for the bounty to quell their endless lust for new technology.” Visually disturbed, Dr. Preston steps back and stumbles to the ground. Lt. Gray turns to look then back to Olaric and asks, “If he was after technology-and ours obviously less advanced-what did he want with us?” S.A.M. answers, “He was not after technology. He was sent to collect the crew-and wanted the bounty they’d fetch.” “What bounty?” he asks. S.A.M responds, “I will explain. At the onset of the attack, the power supply that feeds my multi-layered firewalls were compromised and momentarily, Bah-Nier was able to gain access to my systems before I could transfer my interface to my mobile Construct. However, for that instance, I was able to do the same with his ship’s computer. The bounty he aims to collect is from the Mari High Command.” “Who are the Mari?” Dr. Preston asks. Olaric replies, “They are an advance race of space faring reptilians. They are very large, bipedal, exceptionally fast

and incredibly strong. Not typically aggressive towards other species in that sector-but I know them as having an intense, almost illogical mistrust of all mammalian species, but even more so, to species like yours. They harbor an intense hatred of all simian races.” Dr. Preston jumps in, “Simians?! We’re not...” Lt. Gray cuts him off, gives Dr. Preston a look and says, “Olaric, please continue.” Oliarc resumes, “The Torca, the primate species that once shared their evolutionary homeworld of Terula, forced the Mari off their planet almost two millennia ago.” S.A.M. adds, “Yes. Although now the Mari inhabit several other worlds in different star systems and maintain a vast empire-it is only on Tau Ceti E, with its unique atmospheric make-up and ideal climate, similar to that of their ancestral homeworld, that they can properly incubate their young. The planet we call Eden 1 is the most guarded in all the Empire-a world known to them as The Great Nursery. It is sacrosanct and revered, and rightly so, as there are only two known worlds that can breathe life into their new generation.”

Olaric waddles to another station and begins as if recalling old memories, “Many have lost their lives, entering their space-intentionally or otherwise. When doing so, you mean to court your own death.” Dr. Preston exclaims, “But we never got a chance to explore the planet. And I’m sure there’d be warning buoys everywhere warding off vessels to keep their distance.” S.A.M turns to Dr. Preston and interrupts, “That’s not entirely true.” S.A.M. then turns to Lt. Gray, who then mutters, “We sent a drone. I mean the U.S. authorized a drone be sent to the planet. It wouldn’t have been able to discern the buoys from normal space debris. We believed it crashed, but hearing all this, it probably got too close to the planet. Shot down.” Lt. Gray crosses his arms and reflects, “It was a recon mission by the U.S. Defense Department, sent to assess the planet’s strategic importance. They wanted to establish a base in that sector. Part of our mission was to retrieve the downed drone if possible. If not, destroy it before any un-friendlies could get to it.” Dr. Preston outraged, “Why wasn’t I told. Did anyone else on board know about it?” Lt. Gray replies, “The mission was classified. Amanda and I were the only ones who knew about it. But when I got injured and was taken off the mission, Lt. White replaced me.” Dr. Preston struggles with what he hears then says, “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you and Amanda would...” Lt. Gray firmly retorts, “Preston, you can’t be that naïve. The State Department bank rolled the entire project- the drive, a ship-a Peacekeeper for god’s sake!” Dr. Preston gives him a look. Lt. Gray continues, “What, you think I wanted this? For this to happen to the crew, to Amanda?! Lt. Gray turns his back to Dr. Preston and quickly turns to face him again, and says apologetically, “We were both under orders. Neither of us were comfortable with the situation. I mean you guys are our friends. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything.” Dr. Preston takes a deep breath and reflects before replying, “I know. I’m sure if I were in your position I’d have done the same.”

S.A.M flickers for a moment, as if processing the information she gathered from Bah-Nier’s ship and continues, “When the drone entered orbit, it was immediately tracked. Warned, then fired upon. Not much of the drone remained; portions of the hull, segments of its super structure, a few power relays. However, the Mari were able to retrieve the drone’s power supply.” Lt. Gray exclaims, “The jump drive, do they have it?” S.A.M looks to Lt. Gray then replies, “No, only the case that housed the element was

reported. However, they did open it.” Dr. Preston fearfully mutters, “That’s not good.” S.A.M. continues, “Without its housing unit to convert the unprocessed isotope, the element’s raw form destabilized when it came in contact with the atmosphere. There was a massive explosion. Hundreds were killed. The drone was deemed an attack.” All eyes are now fixed intently on S.A.M. as she goes on to say, “The Mari High Command was notified. All remaining debris from the drone were collected and closely examined. However, its scientists were unfamiliar with our technology or the markings on the drone and could not deduce the vessels point of origin. As a result, the High Command took the only course of action left to them—they offered a substantial bounty to anyone who could apprehend those responsible. Many answered the call, consequently Bah-Nier was the first to apprehend the crew. I believe the Mari mean to go to war over this.”

Lt. Gray mentally steps back and assesses the situation. For a time he ponders both the U.N. and the State department’s stance on the matter- with regards to an additional human presence in the sector. Then, dismissing all its logic he asks, “S.A.M, is there anything else you can tell us about what happened to Amanda and the team?” S.A.M. turns to him, looks him over and says, “Not very much. But logically, they should still be alive, if that’s what you mean.” Lt. Gray replies, “How do we know that?” S.A.M. responds, “Two reasons. If Bah-Nier hesitated to dispatch Lt. White in his initial attack, as he did, and took the remaining crew back alive, the bounty would have stipulated as such. Bah-Nier is not known for giving quarter to anyone. And secondly, I surmise that if the Mari were previously unaware of humans and the Earth, they’d need to keep the team alive, at least until they extract the location of their homeworld from them.” Lt. Gray interjects, “They don’t have our coordinates?” S.A.M. responds, “If they did, it’d be a Mari battle cruiser at your doorstep, and not a Peacekeeper. Remember, they hold all human’s accountable for the apparent attack.” Dr. Preston interjects, “And if Bah-Nier’s ship failed to extract Earth’s coordinates from you during the attack, he wouldn’t have them either. So they could still be alive!”

For a moment Lt. Gray recalls all that’s been said, turns to S.A.M and asks, “Earlier you mentioned a Construct. What’s that?” S.A.M replies, “Give me a moment while I change into something more comfortable.” S.A.M. turns to Olaric and the station he is seated behind begins to slide to the right-revealing a small hidden chamber below. Cylindrical in shape, the compartment houses a standing figure, humanoid in appearance. The pedestal beneath lights up and illuminates a metallic form unmistakably feminine. Steadily, the bottom begins to rise revealing the sensual form of a female construct. Standing beside Olaric, the S.A.M hologram flickers then disappears. Instantaneously, the figure’s eyes begin to glow from a soft azure hue to a bright blue, as the floor levels. Fully revealed, the construct is the perfect female form: tall, well-endowed, and curvaceous. Although metallic, the android appears almost alive. Suddenly, the figure arches its back as if to take a deep breath-then briefly examines itself, admiring its own form. The figure gracefully steps off the platform as the station slides back into place. The android turns to Dr. Preston and says sensually, “You did an excellent job Toby. I can see you put a lot of love into me.” Dr. Preston blushes as Lt. Gray inquisitively exclaims, “S.A.M.?” She replies, “It’s all me Nathan. And might I add, you’re not looking half bad yourself handsome.” Lt. Gray is taken aback by the off color comment,

and silently begins to mouth to Dr. Preston, “What’s wrong with her?” Dr. Preston shrugs his shoulders. Olaric’s eyes are lit up, very pleased with the female form he sees and asks, “So, I found the ship. Does that mean I get to...?” Both Lt. Gray and Dr. Preston turn to Olaric playfully and give him a look. Embarrassed, Olaric turns and walks off and says under his breath, “Never mind.” Lt. Gray turns to Dr. Preston and asks, “You built her? I wasn’t aware Peacekeepers had physical constructs?” Dr. Preston responds playfully, “You have your secrets. I have mine.” Lt. Gray rolls his eyes and smirks.

After everyone recovers from S.A.M.’s transformation, Dr. Preston asks, “So what do we do now Nathan?” Lt. Gray puts his hands on Dr. Preston’s shoulders, walks towards the head of the command module and turns to face the others, “I assume we’re fully stocked, heavily armed and still good to fly?” S.A.M. responds, “You know it handsome.” Lt. Gray in a commanding voice, “In that case, we’re gonna save our friends!”

S.A.M. closes the bay doors and prepares the launch sequence. She then turns to Lt. Gray and says, “I love a man who knows what he wants.” Lt. Gray replies, “Not now S.A.M.! Get us out of here!” The vessel begins to rise-shoots up fifty feet and jets off into the horizon.