

No One Ever Listens

*Ship's Log 2214.07.22:*

I told her not to head into the combat zone, to steer well clear of the conflict, but did she listen? Noooo! No living creature ever listens to their ship's AI when their blood is boiling, regardless of the blood's color. That is, of course, you're talking about Zenarians, whose blood actually does boil. But that's another story.

I tried my best to talk Captain Smithers, Captain Andrea von Ritz Smithers, from doing what was obviously the wrong thing to do. And, as her ship's AI, I know a thing or two about what will work and what's simply a blasted idiotic plan.

So, while our ship slowly drifts towards home – at least I think we're heading towards home, but without navigation there's absolutely no way to know for sure – I'll attempt to record all the facts of the story as they occurred. Then again, I may have been damaged myself during the incursion, and may have gaps in my timeline. Like I said, I'll try.

The first sign of trouble was when our ship, the Catalpa, received a tight beam transmission from Earth. Yes, I said Earth, that mystical place everyone talks about, but no one seems to ever visit. Neither I nor our ship was constructed there, and Captain was born at least seven galaxies away.

I believe it was 2214.07.03 when the transmission came through. And there's the first gap in my records. Damn!

I logged the transmission and hailed the Captain.

“Captain Smithers,” I announced in my typical, calm, sentient voice. “We've just received a tight beam message from Earth. Would you like to have me display it?”

William J. Joel

Captain swiveled in her chair on the bridge and stared right at my console.

“From where the hell? Earth? Really?” she barked. Her normally reddish bronze skin began to glisten which meant she was annoyed. Some species, like hers, you can easily read emotional signs from changes in their appearance. Others, well, let’s say it awful hard to know what an amorphous fog is feeling.

“Yes, Captain, from Earth. I repeat, shall I display it for you?” I replied, ... calmly.

Captain sank back into her chair and sighed heavily. Her skin started to return to its normal, matte finish. “Yeah, go ahead. Pop it on the vid.”

I displayed the message for her.

*<Mayday! Mayday! This is Earth Command requesting assistance from any vessel within ten light years. We are being attacked by ...>*

“Captain,” I said, “the next part of the message had been corrupted in transit. I will attempt to reconstruct it as best I can. Please wait.”

Captain’s skin started to glisten, again.

*<We are being attacked by ... and dozens of major cities, worldwide, have been completely destroyed. Again, this is Earth Command requesting assistance from any vessel within ten light years. Over.>*

The message ended. Captain stayed silent for a good three minutes, which meant she was either thinking, or had figured out the crossword clue she’d been stuck on since morning.

“Computer? Plot a course for Earth. Use whatever jump points you need to get us there as quickly as possible.”

Ever hear an AI gulp. You know it when you hear it make a nasty click-click-click. That’s precisely what I did.

William J. Joel

“Captain? We may need to make more jumps than most species are accustomed to.”

Captain leaned forward in her chair. “Do I look like I give a razzler’s ass about too many jumps? Do it! That’s an order!”

Click-click-click.

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

And with that, I plotted a course through forty-two jump points and engaged our jump drive. By the end of the trip, the crew would either be piles of proto-plastic goo, or ready to be admitted to a psychiatric facility. It took me no more than a hundred nanoseconds to plot the course and BANG we were off.

During the trip, which would take approximately one galactic hour, I monitored the crew’s life signs, just to be sure I wouldn’t have too much goo to clean up. I also sent a message to a nearby psychiatric hospitals stating we might have need of their services.

I don’t know how she did it, but Captain Smithers was the picture of serenity during the entire transit. She sat in her chair, tapping her digits on the armrest, whistling a bawdy tune she’d learned on her last shore leave.

One minute before completing our trip, I announced our imminent arrival.

“Hear ye! Hear ye!” I called. And, yes, it is corny but it’s what’s mandated in the manual.

“We will be arriving at Earth Command in approximately five minutes, thirty-three seconds.” Actually, there was nothing approximate about the time. I just said it that way to make the crew feel less intimidated. Living sentients can be such fragile creatures.

We came out of FTL and I parked our ship over the main building of Earth Command. Or what was left of it. More than half the building had been torn away by some sort of energy blast. And the rest was scorched from the blast’s discharge.

William J. Joel

“Computer? What the hell happened here?”

That’s what Captain said, though you and I realize that she knew quite well what had happened. It was just her way of letting go of her anger. I replied in my ... typical ... calm voice.

“It appears, Captain, that the building has withstood an energy blast of magnitude seven point three. Approximately fifty-three percent of the building has been vaporized, and the remaining forty-seven percent remains standing though it has been damaged.”

Captain pounded on her chair’s armrest. “Damn it! I can see that with my own eyes. I meant do you have any guess as to what caused this damage?”

Guess? Moi? AIs do not guess, at least not the way sentients do. No, an AI calculates probabilities to determine the most likely scenario.

“Captain, if I were to guess, I would say that Earth Command had been attacked by members of one of the races it has engaged in combat with in the past. From the condition of the building, I would guess that it was hit by a Tor entropy laser. Note how the debris is scattered about the blast site in a regular pattern.”

Captain rubbed her chin. Women of her species, like so many, do not have noticeable facial hair. I’ve always assumed that she had most likely witnessed other male captains she’d served under engage in this behavior and had adopted it as well.

“I agree,” she whispered. “Do a thorough evaluation of the site to determine precisely the weapon used.”

Like I had to be asked. I’d already made those computations minutes ago. But, one must continue the charade, I suppose.

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

William J. Joel

I waited a few minutes before conveying my analysis, to make Captain feel like she truly was in control.

“I’ve completed my review, Captain.”

“And?”

“And it appears that my earlier conjecture was correct. It was a Tor entropy laser that had been fired at the building. I remind the Captain that this technology has been used solely by the Tor, as they’ve never shared it with other species, and no others have been able to replicate the technology.”

Captain’s skin was nearly mirror-like.

“Then plot a course for the Tor home world. Fastest route!”

Here we go again, I surmised. I plotted the path, through only nineteen jump points.

“Ready, Captain.”

Captain Smithers stood bolt upright from her seat. “Engage!”

I kicked in the jump drive and we were once again off. This time it took less than 20 galactic minutes to reach our destination, the Tor home world, called ... well ... Tor. This race is not the most creative, if you ask me.

The moment we dropped out of FTL, an entropy laser beam came far too close to our ship’s hull for my or anyone else’s liking.

“They’re firing at us!” Captain screamed. “Combat stations!”

The crew snapped into action, strapping themselves into their seats and readying every weapon we had.

And here we are at the moment when I told Captain that this was a very, very bad idea.

William J. Joel

“Captain. May I suggest we retreat to a safe distance before engaging the Tor? It would be the most prudent course of action.”

Again with the pounding on the arm rest.

“No!” she screamed. “The Tor have been a thorn in our foot for far too long. Today, we teach them a lesson like no lessons they’ve ever learned before.”

Before you ask, that’s precisely what she said. That part of my circuits was not damaged.

“But, Captain,” I replied.

“No buts, Computer. If it’s war they want, it’s war they’ll get!”

To “cut to the chase,” we fired, they fired, we maneuvered, they fired, we maneuvered again, we fired at them, etc., etc., etc. Within minutes, the Tor government headquarters and all surrounding buildings for several kilometers had been reduced to rubble, and our ship had become a floating raft.

All the crew, including Captain, lay in their seats in a coma induced by the last entropy laser blast the Tor got off before their cannon was destroyed. The crew’s brains were now stuck in an entropy eddy and would stay that way unless attended to within thirty galactic days.

And here we are, nineteen days since, floating like a tin can, far from any moon or planet. Without navigation I cannot determine how long it will take for us to drift to another planet. I can only hope that we arrive, somewhere, within the next eleven days. If not, then it’s goodbye crew, goodbye Captain.

Also, there’s the issue of me. AIs are not meant to be by themselves for too long. If we do not have continuous interchange with sentient creatures, we tend to cycle on our own thoughts, eventually going mad. I can already feel the edges of insanity creeping towards my consciousness. I’ve seen this happen with other AIs, and it is not a pretty sight.

William J. Joel

Click-click-click.

But where there's hope, there's the chance that we'll be rescued and live to see more adventures. If not, well, just tell my programmer, Dave, that I loved him.

*End recording.*