

Four's a Crowd

By E.S. Strout MD

On board Space Station Delta Echo. Tuesday 24 June 2081, 0730 hours. Commander Special Project's office:

The Officer booted up his desktop MagnaMac, touched the screen. Say your password, please.

He nodded. "Open the pod bay door please, Hal."

PERSONAL PASSWORD, VOICE PRINT AND DNA MATCH
ANDREW JACKSON SHAW, SPACE CORPS
COMMANDER SPECIAL PROJECTS
TOP SECRET CLEARANCE CONFIRMED
ACCESS GRANTED

General Shaw popped a recorder chip into the VideoTrac, pressed PLAY. For several minutes a kaleidoscope of shifting crystalline images flickered across the screen. Then a blink of gray haze, followed by uncompromising blackness. The screen was frosted with staticky snow when the recording ended. Shaw nodded with satisfaction as he voice-activated his COMM line.

"Muster the teams, Captain Andrews."

1.

"Attention on deck."

Five two-person crews dressed in Space Corps interstellar flight gear rose as one.

The Security Division NCO and his Corporal checked implanted I.D. chips with DNA scanners, then snapped to attention. "Good morning, General Shaw. All crews present and accounted for. I.D.'s verified."

The Special Projects C.O., a tall bespectacled black man, returned their salutes. "Thank you, Sergeant."

He entered the conference room, followed by his aide. “At ease, officers and mission specialists. Be seated.”

“Got your fingers crossed, Amy?” 38-year-old Astropilot Major Paul Broderick whispered to the young woman seated next to him.

She fidgeted, uncrossed her legs, and recrossed them. “I’m about to wet my pants. Think we have a chance?”

“Better believe it. We’ve logged hundreds of extra hours of FTL time, nailed every conceivable drill they could invent.”

Amy gnawed a fingernail. “Hmpf. So have the other teams.”

“Any guesses on the mission?”

“Top secret ride,” she whispered in her soft North Carolina drawl. “Can’t be star chart upgrades, colony census or belligerents surveillance. Something much bigger.”

2.

“Captain Andrews, final results, please.” The General’s aide handed him a printout.

“This selection has been based on an exhaustive evaluation of team performance. Only tenths of percentages have separated you all. There is no stigma attached to rejection. There will be other missions.”

The room’s hush was palpable. General Shaw adjusted his glasses, then unfolded the page and cleared his throat.

“Astropilot Major Paul Broderick, Mission Specialist Amanda Novacek. I envy you.”

“Yes.” The partners slapped triumphant high fives while the other crews offered muted congratulations,

“My office, Professor, Major,” General Shaw said.

“Security clearances verified. I’m authorized to give you final mission details,” General Shaw said as he loaded the VideoTrac chip.

“This recording is from an unmanned probe with cold fusion-boosted intergalactic FTL propulsion. It’s a tachyon enhanced transmission received at 0328 hours yesterday.”

His voice assumed a confidential hush. “We believe it represents the expanding rim of the universe.”

There were seconds of awed, gaping silence. “So it’s finite?”

”Best evidence we’ve had yet, Major.”

Dr. Novacek stepped closer to the screen. “This haze is unusual, more than just artifact. What does spectrographic analysis tell us?”

The General shrugged. “Not much. Readings are off scale. Our analysis folks are stumped.”

“And the starless blackness after the haze?” she asked.

Shaw nodded. “Split decision, Prof. Some of the eggheads say the probe deflected into a time warp, others say a wormhole. A few believe it passed through the rim and may have been destroyed. Take your pick.”

Novacek breathed a reverent sigh, grasped her partner’s arm. “Boundary of space, Paul. We’re gonna be the first.”

“We’ve got a GALILEO-class ship all gassed up for you. Same as the unmanned probe, refitted to carry a crew of two. Same upgraded hyperspace drive,” General Shaw said.

“Ultrasensitive VideoTrac cameras. Four hour recording chip. All state of the art,” he added.

Broderick nodded. “Sounds good to me, sir.”

Amy cleared her throat softly. “The downside please, General.”

General Shaw raised an eyebrow, smiled.

“Knew I could count on you, Dr. Novacek. This trip will be hazardous. The lost probe sent one transmission, which you’ve seen. It has failed to respond to repeated communication attempts. As I’ve told you, time and space parameters may have been altered in unusual ways.”

Dr. Novacek nodded. “I see. Terra incognita. A cosmic Bermuda Triangle, if you will.”

“All theory, of course,” General Shaw said. “We can’t guarantee . . .”

Dr. Novacek stopped him with a raised hand. “We volunteered, sir.”

Major Broderick raised a fist in agreement.

“Communicate by tachyon relay if possible. God go with you.”

“We’ll be in His back yard,” Amy said.

3.

3 days later. On board the probe Tycho Brahe. 1400 hours.

Major Broderick checked the aft view screen. Only bright diamond points of stars punctuated the stygian blackness of space. The solar system had faded from view.

“We’re clear, Amy.”

Dr. Novacek checked the instrument panels, gave Broderick a grin and thumbs up.

“Green board, all systems.”

“Roger that. Inertial dampers to max retro-G’s.”

She flipped a series of switches. “Maximum, check.”

“Impulse power shut down. Strapped in, Doc?”

“Affirmative. Let’s do it.”

Broderick keyed FTL PROGRAM START. There was a faint hum as the intergalactic drive engaged. Light faded to a dim red glow from the ship's status displays. He shook his head to clear away the FTL acceleration startup cobwebs.

"How do we look, Prof?"

She blinked, gave the status displays a careful scan, nodded. "A-OK, Major."

She slapped his extended hand. "We're in the pipe, five by five."

Broderick rose, stretched and stepped to the narrow forward viewport. "Our personal laser light show," he said in a reverent whisper.

Amy stood by his side watching the cacophony of coiling, glittering multicolored streaks.

"Galaxies, Major. Billions in an eye blink. Like Dave Bowman's trip through the stargate. You know, 2001. A Space Odyssey. Movie chip from the Golden Oldies file."

"One of my all-time favorites, Amy."

4.

"I've got increasing thermographic readings," Broderick said as he scrolled data on the Command CRT screen.

"Fits my predictions to a tee. We're gettin' close to the edge. I can feel it. Primordial galaxies, mostly gaseous. Their light won't be seen on Earth for billions of years. Our system will be in the dustbin of history by then, Unless . . ."

The Major grinned. "But you astrophysics geeks know something I don't, right?"

Amy poked a finger at his chest. "Geeks, my Tarheel butt. Twentieth Century physicist Stephen Hawking predicted the universe would be finite. Nobody's proven him wrong. If space folds on itself at the rim like our calculations indicate, we'll return to our starting point in a nanosecond. You can't blink your eyelids that fast. And we'll have everything on VideoTrac."

He gripped her shoulder. "If your Tarheel theories work out, drinks are on me at the O Club when we get back."

She gave Broderick a coy grin. "I won't forget, you know."

Seconds later a soft, insistent hissing sound surrounded them. Dr. Novacek adjusted a screen, stared.

"Elemental particles bouncing off the shields. Trillions of 'em. It's the VideoTrac haze. We've found the rim."

Broderick rubbed his eyes, blinked as the haze faded to absolute blackness. "Oh wow, Amy. There's nothing."

She stared at the NAV CRT screen. "Good God. It's gibberish."

Dr. Novacek mopped her brow with a sleeve. "I've got no credible data input. No reference points. Where the heck are we?"

Major Broderick triggered an index finger. "You're the navigator, Prof."

"Rhetorical question, Major. I'm tryin' to calculate now." She pressed keys, viewed multiple overlapping screens.

There was a sudden whine of deceleration. She winced, covered her ears. "Is that what I think it was, Paul?"

"Inertial dampers. We just went sublight."

"Thought so. Command computer's programmed to return us to normal space when we . . . Wait one. Are you seein' this, Paul?"

Major Broderick brushed a thin film of frost from the viewport with a fingertip. "Oh, wow. The stars are back."

The NAV computer came back on line with a sharp ping. Dr. Novacek viewed the new graphics with satisfaction. "Look at this."

Broderick peered at the tactical readout. “Wow. These are twenty-first century Milky Way galaxy constellation configurations.”

Amy cracked a smug grin. “Switching to visual. Check this out.”

Broderick gaped. “Space station Delta Echo.”

“You get it? Hawking was right. So there.”

“The old physics geek? The nanosecond thing?”

“Hush now. Show some respect. Hawking theorized that if the space-time continuum became infinite, time would cease to exist as we know it.”

Amy batted a stray blond lock from her face. “We’ve just confirmed it. When we broke through the rim, we became infinite for less than a nanosecond. When the FTL drive shut down, the rim passed us and we were finite again.”

Broderick gave her a stare of incomprehension. “We became infinite?”

“Yes, Paul. Space folded on itself and time stopped, just for that infinitesimal blink.”

Paul shrugged. “All I know is, we’re back.”

5.

Major Broderick keyed a secure channel. “Control, this is Broderick-Novacek probe Tycho Brahe. I.D. Sierra tango foxtrot. Over.”

No response.

“Weird.”

“Special Projects doesn’t answer either. Like you said, Paul, Weird.”

Broderick peered through the view port. “Check this out, Amy. Docking Bay One. The missing GALILEO-class intergalactic probe.”

“I’m impressed,” she said. “General Shaw’s guys found it and brought it home.”

Amy batted her eyelashes. “We’re home too, Paul, Major sir.”

He gave a sigh of acquiescence. “Okay, I owe you a drink. Lots of drinks. Mooring stations please. At least the docking crew guys are home.”

6.

“They didn’t seem too happy about our arrival, Major.”

“Didn’t expect us. The military is like this, Amy. Top secret security, need to know, all that. The docking crew doesn’t have our level of clearance. All they know is securing Delta Echo arriving ships.”

She nodded. “Guess we interrupted their lunch break.”

“Why no welcoming committee,” Broderick wondered.

“Yeah,” Amy said. “Where’s the champagne?”

“Let’s go find the General.”

Shaw was not in his office.

“Try the conference room,” his secretary said. “Some kind of special event.”

Two Security Division NCO’s were stationed at the entrance. After they scanned the implanted DNA I.D. chips, the senior man gave them an odd look. “Sir, aren’t you . . . ?”

“Problem, Sergeant?” Major Broderick asked.

The man fidgeted uneasily, shook his head. “Just a glitch with the I.D. scans, sir. An overlap with a prior entry. I’ll check . . . “

Broderick put a finger to his lips for silence. “At ease, Sergeant. Go ahead, Professor Novacek.”

Amy cracked the door and watched as General Shaw's eloquent voice resounded:

This selection has been based on an exhaustive evaluation of team performance. Only tenths of percentages have separated you all. There is no stigma attached to rejection. There will be other missions . . .

Novacek's eyes grew wide. "Oh my God. We're . . . It's . . . "

"What is it, Amy?"

She mopped perspiration from her brow. "It wasn't that unmanned probe in the docking bay."

"Say what?"

"Got that mission video chip, Paul?"

He patted a breast pocket. "Right here in its security pod."

She gave him a resigned smile, took his hand. "Let's go in. We're gonna save ourselves a trip."

The End