

FLUENCY

Jennifer Foehner Wells



Blue Bedlam Books
Indiana

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Fluency/ Jennifer Foehner Wells. -- 1st ed.
ISBN 978-0-9904798-1-9

*To Harry, Charlie, and Mitch.
You believed in me and gave
me the time I needed.*

*To Ray Bradbury,
my first introduction to the infinite
worlds of Science Fiction.*

“For me, it is far better to grasp the Universe
as it really is than to persist in delusion,
however satisfying and reassuring.”

—CARL SAGAN

Jane strained against the harness as the capsule shuddered around her, craning her neck for a better view of the ship they were hurtling toward. The Target.

“It’s massive,” Tom Compton, the pilot, whispered.

Jane could hear the commander and the pilot flicking oversized switches, tapping consoles, communicating in terse bursts of NASA jargon. Every crew member’s eyes converged on the screen that displayed their destination, enlarging rapidly before their eyes. Jane was stuck in the tier of seats below the cockpit, though, her view fragmented by the footrests of the four people on the level above. At this stage in the journey, she was the least important person aboard.

“I’ll be damned...they just turned on the porch light for us, boys!” Walsh crowed. “Open up a channel to Houston,” he ordered.

“What?” Bergen demanded from beside Jane. Then he muttered, “Son of a bitch.”

Jane twisted, heedless of the straps digging into her flesh. She knew what the Target looked like. How could she not? It was the backdrop for every lecture in Houston. The blown-up pictures that Hubble and various Mars mission probes had taken of the city-sized ship over the last sixty-plus years

papered the walls of many of the non-public rooms at Johnson Space Center in Houston. Seeing it now, though...well, no photograph could have prepared her for it. It *was* massive.

From a distance, it resembled a hammerhead shark—a blunt head with a large tapering torso ending in a subtle ‘T’ shape, hanging in space. Its muted-bronze hull was intricate with extruded shapes, casting shadows upon itself, some areas gleaming more brightly than others. It was a beautifully moving study in texture, darkness and light.

A single asteroid hung in her field of view, some great distance away. Small motes of space dust caught the light between them as they drew closer, as the bulk of the ship filled the screen and the thrusters burned, pushing them toward the portal on the underbelly of the beast.

And there were lights, ostensibly for them to take aim at. If they’d seen those before, they’d have mentioned that at Johnson, she was certain.

A welcoming beacon? Jane tried to swallow, but her mouth had gone dry. She’d been told all the evidence pointed toward the Target being derelict.

She adjusted mentally to this development. She’d play the role of translator, then, presumably learning an audible language, rather than deciphering symbols and text left behind. It was the scenario she’d hoped for. A cold thrill coursed through her in a wave.

“You’re saying those just came on? Just now?” Bergen demanded. His brow was knit and he glared at the screen.

“Indeed, they did,” Compton replied.

Bergen turned to her. “Looks like they’re ready to meet you, Doc.”

She forced a tight, tolerant smile. It was the best she could do. It didn’t make sense that he called her “Doc,” because they were all PhD’s or MD’s. But, she guessed it was better than “Indiana Jane,” which is what he’d called her at first.

“Go ahead, Commander. Channel is open,” Compton said.

Walsh’s voice was even and cool. “Houston, this is Providence. We have eyes on the Target and they have lit up our proposed docking site to receive us. Docking procedure will initiate in T minus four minutes. Providence out.”

Mission Control would get the transmission in 26 minutes. It was comforting to know that even at this kind of distance Houston was still listening, though it took almost an hour to hear back from them.

The capsule reverberated with the thunderous sounds of small bursts of booster firings as Walsh maneuvered it into position to dock with the other ship. Earth’s greatest intellects engineered the capsule painstakingly around the alien dock. Somehow they’d extrapolated exact dimensions from photographs of the thing. It was mind-boggling and filled her with doubt. *How could they possibly have gotten it right? What if it isn’t even a dock at all? What if they were about to connect to a waste-disposal chute?*

Her heart galloped in her chest. In minutes she’d be stepping up to do her thing with no idea whatsoever of precisely what or whom she’d be facing. Dr. Jane Holloway would be Earth’s ambassador. Why her? Because some accident of

birth, some odd mutant gene, some quirk of brain chemistry, gave her the ability to learn new languages as easily as she breathed. Did that mean *anything* once she'd left the safe embrace of planet Earth? She was about to find out.

She noticed the fingers of one hand trembling and gripped the armrests with determined ferocity. She'd maintained her dignity this long—she wasn't about to let go of it now.

The unending, stifling journey was over. The nightmare of sameness, of maddening confinement, of desperate loneliness and unrelenting, forced togetherness, done. They'd finally climb out of this fragile, aluminum/lithium-alloy sardine-can that had kept them safe from the vacuum of space for ten months. They'd actually made it there alive.

The capsule vibrated violently. Jane glanced at Bergen for reassurance. His hand hovered at the clip that would free him from his harness and he grinned wolfishly through his ragged, blond beard. He was the closest she could come to calling a friend on this journey—and that label seemed a bit of a stretch.

The crew thrummed with the tension of tightly controlled excitement. It was a far healthier kind of tension than what had often prevailed over the last ten months. There'd been many a heated argument over issues as immaterial as who was eating disproportionately more of the chocolate before it all suddenly disappeared.

Bergen's voice barked in Jane's ear, startling her from her distracted thoughts, his sharp features contorting, "Walsh! You're coming in too fast—lay off the thrust a little. We're gonna bounce off it and break wide open!"

Compton, the oldest, most experienced member of the crew, said softly, “Relax, Berg.” Compton’s voice sounded fairly convincing, but there was a tension there, too, that spoke volumes to Jane’s finely-honed senses. He wanted Bergen to be quiet, but he also wanted Walsh to slow down, she felt sure.

“Shut up, Bergen,” Walsh muttered. “I’ve done this thousands of times. I could do it in my sleep.”

“Let’s stay focused,” Ajaya Varma, the flight surgeon, admonished softly, from above.

Bergen slammed his chest into his straps. “Yeah, in simulations, you nut job! What if they got it wrong? Slow the fuck down, already! We didn’t come all this way to die on the approach!”

He looked a bit crazed. They all did. They all smelled terrible too. Microgravity did something to both olfaction and body odor that wasn’t pleasant. She’d ceased to notice it long ago except when she got too close to one of them. She put a lot of effort into avoiding that, though it was difficult.

It was bad enough they had to put water to their lips knowing that by now the lion’s share of it was recycled urine. There wasn’t enough water to do more than sponge bathe and even that was sparing by necessity. The men could shave their beards, and their scalps, if they chose, with a built-in vacuum-assisted electric shaver, but they’d given up the pretense of civilized grooming months ago. They didn’t look like they belonged in this 21st century, modern ship on its maiden voyage. They looked like some kind of Neanderthal thugs who’d hijacked it.

Jane licked dry lips and darted a glance at Bergen. “Dr. Bergen, we don’t actually have any technology that can tell us how many are aboard that vessel, do we?”

He dragged his eyes from the controls he monitored to send her a pitying, disdainful glance. “No, Doc. This isn’t the Starship Enterprise. We don’t have a life-signs detector.”

She nodded, annoyed that she’d actually put a voice to the question, but maybe it’d distracted him from Walsh for the moment. “Right. That’s what I thought.”

He huffed, muttered to himself, and sent her some kind of brief, mournful look. That *might* have been an apology. Or further scorn. She couldn’t tell and was too preoccupied to pay it much mind.

The capsule lurched. There was a metallic grating sound from the outer hull. Was the capsule supposed to make those sounds?

“Goddamn it, Walsh, try a little fucking finesse,” Bergen grumbled under his breath.

They were jostled again. Walsh announced the docking procedure was underway. There was a coarse, clicking sound and then a couple of loud metallic thuds. Those sounds repeated themselves.

Bergen was nodding, features tense.

The clicking sounded again, and again, followed by a duller, more hollow thud. The ship moved slightly, boosters firing in second-long increments, accompanied by a scraping, warping-metal sound that had Bergen scowling. There was more clicking and another dull thud.

Walsh let out a string of florid curses. Bergen unlatched himself and pushed off toward the level above. He’d led the

docking design committee, knew the system better than anyone on board.

Things apparently weren't lining up as they should. Jane gathered that one of the four docking clamps was skewed and wouldn't fully latch.

Bergen exclaimed, "Three of four is enough! The system was designed with redundancy in mind."

Walsh continued to sputter angrily. Jane was sure that Walsh knew Bergen was right. This conversation wasn't about docking the ship safely. It was about the opportunity to twist the knife, to highlight the failure in the design.

Bergen turned away, rolling his eyes and remarking, "I don't know what else to tell you. It's simple geometry. Three points of contact is enough to maintain a seal. Test it. This is far from the worst-case scenario. It's time to board the damn thing."

They tested it. Apparently, Bergen was right.

And that was it. It was time to suit up.

Jane's extremities tingled. She'd been preparing for this moment for almost two years—the others for many more. Now that the moment had finally arrived, it felt far removed from reality, dreamlike.

She released the harness and began to strip down, slipping out of the royal-blue nomex flight suit and the gravity-loading countermeasure skin-suit. That left her in panties. She'd given up on bras long before—they were meant to fight gravity, after all, which was pointless in space.

Modesty was long-since gone. They were six people stuck in a container no larger than a small RV. Even the vacuum-

assisted toilet was only a cubby with a small curtain tethered at both ends of the entry.

Ajaya opened the locker containing Jane's LCVG. "I'll assist with yours, if you'll lend a hand with mine," she offered in her lilting, softly-accented voice.

The LCVG was essentially a union suit overlaid with a network of water-filled PVC tubes, worn for the opposite purpose. It kept an astronaut from sweating to death inside the space suit—literally.

She started to put a foot into the spandex leg of the LCVG.

"Jane, don't forget the MAG," Ajaya reminded her patiently as she shoved one toward Jane.

Jane caught the MAG out of the air and froze. "Oh, God, really? I thought these were just for launch and re-entry?"

"We have no idea how long you'll be in there. The suits can support us for 150 hours, Jane. How long can you wait?"

Jane stared at Ajaya. She wasn't joking. Of course she wasn't.

Jane's eyes wandered and there was Bergen, wearing nothing but a MAG, shoving a leg into his LCVG, his clothing floating around him. His eyes met hers and he looked amused. He'd heard the conversation, of course.

Then his eyes traveled down and his expression darkened. He clearly liked what he saw. He seemed to come to himself with a guilty start and turned away to busy himself with his gear.

Jane's lips twitched. She covered the almost-smile with a sigh, peeled off her panties and pulled on the MAG. The cooling suit slid right on, a testament to how much mass

she'd lost en route. Next came the puffy suit. She eased into it from behind and shrugged into the arms. Ajaya zipped it at the back and settled the Portable Life Support System onto Jane's back, connecting the umbilicus to the suit itself.

Jane loosened her ponytail and pulled the white snoopy cap over her head, her arms swiveling smoothly in the disc-shaped shoulder joints of the suit. She felt every pair of eyes on her as she surged toward Walsh and Bergen at the hatch. They thoroughly checked the life support modules on every suit and depressurized the capsule.

She was up. It was time for her part of the show to begin.

Jane's breath echoed in the domed helmet, coming faster, shallower—the sound of her own anxiety haunting her. She reminded herself there had been men of some kind inside the ship that crashed in Roswell in 1947—not monsters—no scary fangs and claws. Everyone assumed that small ship originated with this larger one. She fervently hoped they were right.

Jane clumsily pressed her comm to activate it. She hesitated. She couldn't stand up any straighter, because she wasn't standing—not that anyone could perceive her posture through the marshmallow suit. That hardly mattered when it was herself she needed to convince. So, instead, she squared her shoulders and said, "Look, I know it's been drilled into everyone. We've gone over every scenario imaginable, countless times—"

It came out more timidly than she'd hoped for. She'd thrown herself off when she'd heard her own voice coming through the comm. Walsh gazed at her with a cool expres-

sion. Bergen was intense, as usual, with a hint of an impish smile.

She lifted her chin and forced herself to put resolve in her voice. These things had to be reiterated. “Once the hatch is open, follow my lead. They may look or act very strange and we have to be ok with that. Stay calm. Remember your training. No sudden movements, no loud sounds—no matter what happens. Hands open, at your sides. Do not react. I’ll do the talking.”

Walsh nodded once. “Compton, let’s send another transmission to Houston.”

Compton’s voice came back steady over the speakers resting against her ears. “Channel is open to Houston, Commander.”

“Houston. Providence. We’ve successfully docked with Target. Three of four ZTS-clamps are functional and holding. The fourth could not lock. We’re about to open the hatch.” Walsh paused and seemed, for a moment, to be struggling.

Jane felt a burst of sympathy for him. She was certain he was feeling pressure to say something profound. He’d had months to think of what to say, but maybe none of it sounded appropriate to him now that the moment was actually here.

“Compton, activate the hatch’s video feed.”

“Video feed transmitting, Commander.”

Walsh grabbed a handhold and pivoted to look at the camera behind them. “We’ll do our best to make humanity proud,” he said firmly, then swung back around and smoothly unlocked the outer door. He braced himself

against the footholds and handholds placed strategically for this purpose, and, with Bergen's help, swung open the hatch. Then, he and Bergen pushed back, assuming positions behind her with Ajaya and Gibbs. Compton alone remained in the cockpit.

The Target was mere inches away, its metallic surface pockmarked, each dimple dulled by the smoky sheen of space dust. Was it textured by design, as a result of its journey, or by battle?

Blood rushed in Jane's ears. She noticed a humming or buzzing in her head, barely perceptible at first. The pitch started as a soft, low clamor, climbed slowly, then crescendoed in a high-pitched, frenzied crash that would have knocked her down if she'd been holding herself upright against gravity. As it was, she just floated there, bewildered.

Was that panic, fear, or...what? She darted a glance back. Bergen wasn't smiling anymore. Walsh stared straight ahead and didn't meet her gaze.

Minutes went by. Nothing happened. Had they come all this way for nothing? Were they snubbed at the door? Still, they waited. No one spoke.

She felt drowsy. Thoughts burbled slowly through her brain, not quite reaching their logical conclusions. How long had they waited? Jane's eyes drifted shut and she jerked, sending herself spinning. She scrambled to make it look like it was intentional.

Bergen extended an arm toward her, his brow furrowed. "Steady, Doc."

She wrapped her fingers around his arm and squeezed. She knew he couldn't actually feel it, but that didn't seem to matter.

She heard a rumbling, metallic creak and righted herself quickly. What had appeared to be a solid wall, parted into seven or eight subdivided, swirling pieces, retracting before she could count them. Inky blackness extended before her, with no hint of anything visible, no sound.

"They have a flair for the dramatic, I'll give them that," Bergen muttered.

She should have shushed him, reminded him of his training, but she was held captive, breathlessly waiting for something to happen.

One tiny light flickered to life above her head, just inside, casting a pale, greenish glow. She watched, transfixed, as another one came on just beyond it, then another and another, slowly illuminating, one by one, beckoning down a long, wide corridor.

She gasped involuntarily. Space. She wanted to run through that space like she'd run over beaches and fields and forest floors as a child. That was her first thought. Fast upon it, came her second.

There was no one there.