

The Cumshaw Artist

“All damage control parties report.” Lieutenant Commander Cecilia Wooster pulled herself off the deck and poked at the searing pain along her forehead. Her hand came away streaked with blood, but she didn’t have time to be bothered with that right now. Warning horns blared, their screams competing for attention. The bridge itself looked as if it had been struck by a tornado; equipment and bodies were strewn about in haphazard fashion, while sparks from equipment shorts sprayed across the area. Her ship, the deep space destroyer escort NAS Vance, was in dire straits.

That last attack had just about done them in. Violent maneuvering had avoided the brunt of the energy strikes directed at them, but in their weakened state, even the edges did considerable damage. At least we were able to get off a volley of our Lance projectiles, she thought. The Santu commander had misjudged Vance’s condition, she guessed, and they had come in too close for the killing shot. That had given her the opportunity to fire their remaining Lances on a spread. The Santu weapons had hit them before they could evaluate their own strike.

Finally her bridge team, now up and manning their damaged boards, began shouting back ship’s status.

“Repair Party One reports multiple fires on the 01 level as well as hot spots on most of B and D decks. Proceeding to close off compartments while they fight Class One fires.”

“Repair Two reports hull damage aft of frame 29. The radio shack is destroyed and After Radio is too hot to man. Now dogging off all non-essential compartments and rerouting environmental systems. All fires under control but multiple hotspots confirmed.”

“Main Control reports Numbers One and Four propulsion systems down. Number Three severely damaged but capable of ten-percent power. Number Two still being evaluated but only able to safely operate at fifty-percent power. Request permission to secure...”

The Vance’s commanding officer dully listened to the battery of reports that confirmed her worst fear. With no propulsion, no weapons and no communications, they were sitting ducks. An expression from the old deep water Navy days came to mind: dead in the water. “Sensors,” she shouted, “are we blind?”

“Active is gone, but we still have passive.”

That was something, she thought. “What’s happening out there? I thought I felt some secondary shock waves. Did we do any damage with our Lances?”

The Officer of the Deck manipulated the board and stared intensely at the display before turning around. “They’re pulling away. We can sense some breaking up noises. It looks as if we scored a few hits, but not enough to destroy them. My guess is that they are damaged and are going off to lick their wounds.”

So at least we have some time, she thought. But how long? She knew from the preliminary damage reports that they had been wounded severely, perhaps fatally. Most of the ship’s casualties could be repaired only in a shipyard, and they were far from any Service Command facilities. The Vance was on independent operations, which meant the

nearest fleet units were at least seven jumps away, so no help was coming from that quarter. With the radio shack gone, they couldn't call for help anyway. Lieutenant Commander Cecilia Wooster slumped into her captain's chair and stared at the display board.

“Long-range sensors have picked up a contact bearing one-nine-five up fourteen. Range, 50, 000 KMs and closing. Contact designation is Echo.”

Wooster was jolted out of her reverie and leaped from her chair. “Speed?” as she crossed the bridge to the sensor panels.

“A little over two-thirds. She's coming on leisurely.”

Wooster's mind raced. “Are the Santus coming back so soon?”

“Nope. I still have them on our screens, still pulling away. This one just popped up. It must have just come through a seiche.” The OOD checked some more readings. “If it's one of theirs, then it's a class of ship we've never seen before.” He paused again. “That's strange.”

“What is?”

“There are no countermeasures coming from that ship. It's acting as if it doesn't care whether we know it's approaching.”

That's not a good sign, she thought. Not that it made any difference. They were defenseless against any attacks until they got some of their damaged systems back on line. She keyed her throat mike, set to Main Control. “Chief, can we get any power to run or at least energize our close-in weapons systems?”

“Sorry, Captain. I had to bring three of our units down. It would take at least ten minutes to perform a quick restart, and odds are a hundred to one that in their damaged

state we'd end up just blowing up the ship. On our remaining unit, I've just got enough to maintain critical life support and stand-by systems, but I can probably coerce enough additional juice to energize our active sensors and countermeasures systems on low. I can probably give you power to the Marshall Dillon too, for whatever good that will do."

The Marshall Dillon was a laser-based system that was good only at close range. It was a weapon of last resort and rarely used. "Thanks Chief. That will have to do." She turned to her OOD. "Jim, try to at least jam their fire control."

"We're not getting any readings, Captain. I can't jam anything unless I've got some kind of analysis on what kind of active sensing they use for their fire control."

"Just slide across the frequencies used by the ships we just engaged." She went over to the captain's panel and looked at overall systems status. The entire board glimmered with lights of various shades of orange and blood red, signifying that practically every system on her ship was either completely down or in various levels of reduced capability. She ran a hand through her hair in exasperation.

"Sixty seconds until they're within weapons range at present speed." The standard report from the sensor operator was meaningless since they had nothing to fight back with. But it gave them a rough idea when they could expect to see an inbound weapon.

"Boats, pass the word to stand by for weapons strike." She and the others on the bridge knew that another direct hit would likely destroy the ship and, with it, all hands aboard. She noted that with this announcement, as per training, they all smoothly began putting key equipment in standby: professionals to the end.

What else could she do? As the seconds ticked away, she wracked her brain.
“Mister Jones, prepare the ship’s log for dispatch.”

Nodding gravely, the Officer of the Deck stepped to a side panel, took off a protective cover and manipulated some dials. He turned back to Wooster. “Log is standing by for dispatch.”

The bridge was quiet, save for the whir and hum of damaged equipment, still struggling to perform. It was standard operating procedure for the commanding officer to send off the ship's log when the vessel faced imminent destruction. This small data disk was much like a flight recorder in the old days of airliner travel on Earth, but it contained more massive amounts of data. Within its protective projectile was an encrypted homing device that Fleet could retrieve and gain intelligence about the action. The crew on the bridge knew exactly what the captain’s order meant.

“Contact Echo within weapons range.”

She should have released the log at that point. “Jerry, do we have any fire control readings from that contact yet?”

“No, ma’am. Nothing our sensors can pick up.”

“Hmmm.” She stared at the data screen, thinking furiously. If this unknown vessel was going to attack, it should have lit them up by now. It was either foolishly waiting to come in closer before launching its weapons or...“Hold up on dispatching the log.”

“Aye, Captain.” They all looked at her, waiting.

“Hansen, do an active sensor sweep on the approaching contact.”

“Captain, we don’t have the power for fire control.”

“I didn’t say fire control. I said a general sweep.”

Everyone on the bridge turned, startled. An active, general sweep with the enemy in weapons range would give the other ship’s fire control system a better weapons solution. But the sensor operator immediately complied. He studied the displays for a moment. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“What, are they using countermeasures?”

“No, ma’am. There are no countermeasures being used whatsoever, which is strange in of itself, but I’ve got a good readout on them; I just can’t make sense of the readings. The shipboard system is analyzing now.”

“Contact is slowing,” came the call from the other side of the bridge. “They’re coming within range of our Marshal Dillon, Captain.”

Wooster stood silently staring straight ahead.

The others on the bridge exchanged nervous glances. Had the Captain lost it? Finally, the OOD approached. “Commander Wooster. If we give our close in battery a ‘weapons free’, I think we’ve got enough juice from the propulsion units to get off a shot. It’s worth a try.”

She looked intently at her young junior officer. He was right. By logic, it was the only chance they had. But why hadn’t the other ship fired on them from farther out? “Stand by the batteries. Hansen, tell me if you detect any fire control emissions from that contact.”

“Aye, Captain. So far nothing. And it continues to slow. It looks as if it’s going to come along side.”

Another voice, tinged with excitement. “Ship’s systems have completed their sensor analysis. There are no matches to anything in our databases. System is classifying Echo as an unknown species and setting up a new record.”

“So we’ve come across some new aliens. At least we know they’re not the Santu.” Another thought occurred to Wooster. She turned to find her Bos’n of the Watch. “Chief, pass the word to stand by to repel boarders. Muster your gang with weapons on the cargo deck. That’s where they’ll come in.”

“Captain, the Marshal Dillon.” The OOD’s eyes held the question.

“Hold off until you get my command. Don’t target them; don’t even train it on them. I’ve got a feeling it would only make them mad. Call it a hunch.” She hesitated only long enough to ensure that he understood her instructions. Then she hurried off the bridge.

She made it to the cargo hold in two minutes and went through the hatch just as she received a call from the bridge. The contact had indeed pulled up along side and was matching their track about five hundred meters off their port quarter. There were still no indications that it was about to fire on them.

The small cargo bay was a frenzy of activity as crewmen broke out pulse-projectile rifles and checked their operation. The Chief Bos’n bawled out orders as he directed operations from the weapons locker. Wooster reached his side and was about to receive a status report when there was an intense humming, which immediately began increasing in pitch. Chief Roberts began to deploy his division. Armed sailors rushed to their positions, forming a rough semi-circle facing the outward bulkhead that held the main hatch.

The humming now emanated from the hatch and the space within the bay became charged with ozone. It briefly reminded Wooster of childhood evenings on her grandparents' farm in Michigan as a storm approached. The outward bulkhead began to change color and swirl as if the metal had become liquefied and was being stirred. A milky haze, which obscured the bulkhead but did not advance toward them, emanated from the hatch. She glanced at the warning panel just to the right and saw four solid green lights. Bulkhead integrity had not been breached; this mist was coming right through the Vance's hull. She heard several bolts click into place by nervous crewmen.

“Hold your fire, Chief.”

Roberts repeated her instructions in coarser terms.

Even as her Chief went up and down the line calming his men, she could discern a form taking shape out of the mist. It was about six feet tall and seemed to be human in proportion, although body details were not yet defined. If she was witnessing transformation, then the vessel outside represented a level of technology far above anything on Earth.

The entity before them was now identifiable as a man wearing the uniform of a North American Service Command officer, but the facial details continued to change and shift in and out of focus. It appeared to Wooster as if it couldn't decide who or what it wanted to become. She stepped out of the line and approached the apparition, more out of instinct than by any conscious thought. As she did, the facial details sharpened and became clear.

She stopped, startled. “Mike, is that you?” Mike Imeson had been the commanding officer on her last ship, the billet she had before being assigned her own

command. Like most ship's captains, she often thought about how her predecessors handled themselves in difficult situations. Because Lieutenant Commander Imeson had been her most recent CO, she thought of him often, had been thinking of him now. But it couldn't be him; he was on another ship light years away from here.

She saw several crewmen raise their rifles. She stepped forward and held up her arm, signaling her crew to hold their fire. She held her eyes on the apparition before her. "Mike?"

As she approached, features on the Mike creature came into focus. It raised its arm, copying Wooster. "Please do not be alarmed. I apologize for not saluting your vessel earlier, but I couldn't find the protocol for your race in my log. You must be new to deep space flight."

The voice was metallic and without feeling. She knew now that it wasn't her former commanding officer but a facade of him, his image borrowed from her mind and recreated for their benefit. That made sense, she thought. Wooster briefly wondered what the alien before them really looked like.

The cargo bay was silent except for the hissing and clicking of damaged cable runs. The Bos'n mates nervously held their arms at the ready. She could think only of the obvious question. "Who are you and why are you on my ship?"

The Mike creature blinked several times and eyed the assembly before him. "I am Rohr from the system..." He paused. "It wouldn't have any meaning to you. I am an independent trader. Has your vessel been visited by any representatives from the..." The image hesitated, blurred, then snapped back into focus. "I'm afraid that expression does not translate well to your language."

“Well, I can say that we haven’t seen the likes of you before, nor has anyone else from my race I dare say.”

The Mike creature smiled and made a slight motion. “Wonderful, then I’ve found a new source.” As he said this, additional images began to form out of the mist. Soon there were dozens of small dogs yapping and scurrying about the deck. The Bos’n mates raised their rifles again, barrels swinging about trying to cover these new potential threats. “Don’t be alarmed by my helpers here, they won’t cause any damage to your vessel.”

Wooster recognized the breed and wondered which one of the deck-apes behind her had a pet Yorkshire Terrier back home and why he would think of it at a time like this. She took another step forward. “You haven’t said why you are here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought it was obvious. I’m here to trade.”

“Trade what?” She noted with alarm that the dogs had moved to the bulkheads. Before she could object, they had all disassembled and disappeared into seams. “And where are they going?”

“Please do not be alarmed. My helpers are merely conducting an inventory of your vessel to see if there is anything we would like to trade for. We will not damage anything and they should be completed in a short time.”

Wooster looked around the cargo bay. All of the dog creatures were gone, so there wasn’t much she could do about them now. She turned back to the Mike Creature. “Look, whoever you are, we are a North American Service Command war ship on active deployment and currently engaged in a combat situation. I am going to have to ask you to leave this vessel immediately.”

The Mike creature stood motionless for a beat and then nodded. “I am sorry, but it appears as if there isn’t anything on your vessel that would be of any value to me right now. One of my customers collects sitting furniture and I might have interested him in some of the pieces in the chamber where your crew takes its food and drink. But I won’t see him for a great while and I do not have the room.”

Wooster shrugged and said sarcastically, “Well at least you don’t want our weapons, sensor systems and propulsion units.”

The Mike creature gravely shook his head. “Oh, no. I have more of that type inventory than I know what to do with. And your systems are primitive and poorly maintained.

Chief Roberts bristled and stepped forward. Wooster held up her hand to stop him. “You have weapons aboard your ship that can be traded for?”

“Oh, yes. Weapons, sensor units, propulsion units, food preparation systems, entertainment halos, environ...”

She cut him off. “You have weapons and propulsion units more advanced than ours?”

The Mike creature seemed perplexed for a moment, as if he had not heard the question correctly. “Yes, of course. We wouldn’t trade for systems as crude as you have here, unless those items were of some value to a collector. And it would be difficult to replace entire systems in this hull design, too inefficient. I would recommend system upgrades; we have many modules available that can be retrofitted on a design even as odd as this one. My assistants could do the installations.”

Wooster’s head was spinning. “You can fix my ship?”

“Significantly upgrade its capabilities. Most of your equipment isn’t worth fixing.”

“Well, do it!”

“What do you have to trade?”

Wooster ground her teeth in frustration. “My leaders will give you a fair price once I communicate to them. But I need the upgrades now. We are under attack.”

The Mike creature twitched his face again and paused. Some of the small dogs began to reappear only to scurry to the hatch and vanish. “We’ve completed our inventory of your vessel and I’m afraid that there isn’t anything on board that is of any value to me. I can’t be of service to you. Sorry.”

“Nothing?” Wooster’s mind convulsed. This alien was her only hope. The Vance couldn’t take another attack. “There must be something. Couldn’t we give you a promise of future payment?”

“I’m sorry, but I have a busy schedule to keep. I can’t take the time for such a transaction. We have to trade for something now and unfortunately, you do not have anything I want.”

“Christ,” Chief Roberts muttered as he lowered his rifle. “This guy is just a cumshaw artist.”

The Mike creature snapped his attention to the Chief. Roberts and the other crewmen jerked up their rifles in response. Wooster raised her arm again to prevent any premature firing. “Please do not take any offense at that comment.”

“Offense? I don’t understand that term. But what your assistant said of me, Cumshaw Artist? That is a very pleasing and interesting title. Are you the owner of it?”

“Huh?” Roberts lowered his rifle. “That’s just an old fleet term that means...”

“Yes!” Wooster stepped forward. “It is a rare title that belongs to the NAS Vance. I have authority over it as Master of this vessel.”

“I would like to have such a title for my own. It is very intriguing and would bring great value to my enterprise. Perhaps we can do some business after all. What would you like to trade for?”

Wooster stepped forward, rubbing her chin and looking doubtful. “Well gee, I don’t know. This term is a valuable possession of our ship and I don’t know if we can afford to part with it. What have you got?”

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Three hours later, Lieutenant Commander Wooster strode onto a bridge engulfed in a cacophony of excited voices. “Officer of the Deck. Have Main Control ring up all bells. All stations report status.”

“Main Control reports all units lit off and ready. Power output is off the charts. Chief Engineer is recalibrating instruments to measure new capabilities.”

“Sensor stations all up and functional. And Captain, I’m getting all four of the Santu ships even though they are far beyond normal sensing range. In fact, I’m getting interior details. We should know exactly where to strike when we get within weapons range.”

“All fire control systems up and ready. I’m getting a fire control solution on those ships already.”

“Weapons systems active and ready for weapons free. Our rail guns have five times the kinetic capacity as before and ten times the rate of firepower. Lances are slewed out and ready for launch. Time to rock ‘em.”

Wooster cocked her eye at this break in official reporting protocol, but couldn’t help smiling for the first time since this action had started. She was excited too. Those helpers of the Mike Creature had been busy little beavers for the past three hours. She walked to the center of the bridge and sat down in her Captain’s chair. The rest of her bridge team looked at her, expectation in their eyes. She swung her gaze across faces that only recently had been resigned to their own deaths.

The OOD approached, smiling. “All ship’s systems are in the green, Captain. We’re just waiting for the final solution.” He shook his head. “When the techies at Bureau of Ships reverse engineer what we have here, their eyes are going to pop. And to think we got all this for nothing.”

Wooster frowned. “Not for nothing, Jim. We traded for this equipment.”

“You just told them they could use an old Navy slang term. I’d say that’s nothing. You made the best deal of the century.”

Wooster stared at the bulkhead, stroking her chin, thinking. “I guess it depends on your perspective. We can’t presume to know what an alien culture might find valuable. After all, they’re traders: probably as good a cumshaw artist as any Chief in the fleet. I have a feeling that right now those creatures are sitting around laughing about the back-system rubes they conned out of valuable intellectual property in exchange for some worthless junk. Like buying Manhattan for a handful of trinkets.”

“Well, thank God for worthless junk. These trinkets are going to save our butts.”

A voice called out. “We have final solution, Captain.”

She rose off the Captain’s chair. “Very well, Chief. You have weapons free.”

She turned to her OOD. “Okay, Mister Jones, standard attack run. Let’s get back to business.”

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In the Spring of 1971, as a newly commissioned Ensign, just graduated from the United States Naval Academy (Annapolis), I found myself assigned as the Electronics Material Officer aboard an old World War II destroyer just a few years away from the scrap heap. It was a great ship with a great crew, and part of my job was to maintain all of the ship’s electronic gear: radars, communications and the like. Being a 30+ year old ship, much of our equipment was old and out-of date and parts support was minimal. Fortunately, I had a Chief Petty Officer who was skilled at working outside of the official naval supply system (where necessary repair parts had long lead times or they were simply unavailable) to get the items we needed to keep the electronics working (most of the time). He did this by horse trading with an amazingly extended number of his “friends” (Chiefs on other ships and in the supply depots) using extra parts we had and/or cans of coffee or bottles of scotch as currency. People like my Chief were called “Cumshaw Artists” (an old navy slang term) and I soon appreciated his unique skills in keeping our ship up and running. All of the material he procured this way never entered the official navy supply listings and were stowed in what the fleet referred to as “Goodey Lockers”.

Often, my Chief would find critical component parts for our equipment that I thought were impossible to find and when I would ask him what he had to trade, he would mention some old stuff that we had an excess supply of: items I had sometimes considered throwing away. When I chided him for getting the better end of the deal, he would solemnly tell me that the other ship really needed the material we gave them. And I remember thinking that you never could tell what someone might find valuable for whatever reason. The old saying about one man's trash being another man's treasure really was true.

My Chief got transferred the next year, but by then I had become something of a Cumshaw Artist myself, and it was a skill and mindset I made good use of during my entire career, even after I left the Navy.