



## **A Matter of Magnitude**

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*When you're commanding a spaceship over a mile long, and armed to the teeth, you don't exactly expect to be told to get the hell out ...*

The ship, for reasons that had to do with the politics of appropriations, was named Senator Joseph L. Holloway, but the press and the public called her Big Joe. Her captain, six-star Admiral Heselton, thought of her as Great Big Joe, and never fully got over being awestruck at the size of his command.

"She's a mighty big ship, Rogers," he said proudly to the navigator, ignoring the latter's rather vacant stare and fixed smile. "More than a mile long, and wider than hell." He waved his hands expansively. "She's never touched down on Earth, you know. Never will. Too big for that. They built her on the moon. The cost? Well ... "

Swiveling his chair around, Heselton slowly surveyed the ship's control room with a small, satisfied smile. The two pilots sitting far forward, almost hidden by their banks of instruments, the radar operators idly watching their scopes, the three flight engineers sitting intently at their enormous control consoles, and, just behind, the radio shack—its closed door undoubtedly hiding a game of cards. For weeks now, as Big Joe moved across the galaxy's uncharted fringe, the radio bands had been completely dead, except, of course, for the usual star static hissing and burbling in the background.

Turning back again to his navigator, Heselton smiled modestly and noted that Big Joe was undisputedly the largest, most powerful, most feared, and most effective spaceship in the known universe.

As always, Rogers nodded agreement. The fact that he'd heard it a hundred times didn't make it any less true. Big Joe, armed with every weapon known to Terran technology, was literally the battleship to end all battleships. Ending battleships—and battles—was, in fact, her job. And she did it well. For the first time, the galaxy was at peace.

With a relaxed sigh, Heselton leaned back to gaze at the stars and contemplate the vastness of the universe, compared to which even Big Joe was an insignificant dot.

"Well," said Rogers, "time for another course check. I'll ... " He jumped back, barely avoiding the worried lieutenant who exploded upon them from the radio shack.

"A signal, sir! Damn close, on the VHF band, their transmission is completely overriding the background noise." He waved excitedly to someone in the radio shack and an overhead speaker came to life

emitting a distinct clacking-grunting sound. "It's audio of some sort, sir, but there's lots more to the signal than that."

In one motion Heselton's chair snapped forward, his right fist hit the red emergency alert button on his desk, and his left snapped on the ship's intercom. Lights dimmed momentarily as powerful emergency drive units snapped into action, and the ship echoed with the sound of two thousand men running to battle stations.

"Bridge to radar! Report."

"Radar to bridge. All clear."

Heselton stared incredulously at the intercom. "What?"

"Radar to bridge, repeating. All clear. Admiral, we've got two men on every scope, there's nothing anywhere."

A new voice cut in on the speaker. "Radio track to bridge."

Frowning, Heselton answered. "Bridge. Come in radio track. We're listening."

"Sir," the crisp voice of the radio track section's commander had an excited tinge. "Sir, Doppler calculations show that the source of those signals is slowing down somewhere to our right. It's acting like a spaceship, sir, that's coming to a halt."

The admiral locked eyes with Rogers for a second, then shrugged. "Slow the ship, and circle right. Radio track, can you keep me posted on the object's position?"

"No can do, sir. Doppler effect can't be used on a slow moving source. It's still off to our right, but that's the best I can say."

"Sir," another voice chimed in, "this is fire control. We've got our directional antennas on the thing. It's either directly right or directly left of the ship, matching speed with us exactly."

"*Either* to our right or left?"

"That's the best we can do, sir, without radar help."

"Admiral, sir," the lieutenant who had first reported the signal came running back. "Judging from the frequency and strength, we think it's probably less than a hundred miles away."

"*Less* than a hundr ... "

"Of course, we can't be positive, sir."

Heselton whirled back to the intercom. "Radar! That thing is practically on our necks. What the hell's the matter with that equipment...?"

The radar commander's voice showed distinct signs of strain. "Can't help it, Admiral. The equipment is working perfectly. We've tried the complete range of frequencies, twenty-five different sets are in operation, we're going blind looking. There is absolutely nothing, nothing at all."

For a moment the bridge was silent, except for the clacking-grunting from the overhead speaker which, if anything, sounded louder than before.

"It's tv, sir!" The radio lieutenant came running in again. "We've unscrambled the image. Here!" The communications screen on Heselton's desk glowed for a moment, then flashed into life.

The figure was clearly alien, though startlingly humanoid—at least from the waist up, which was all that showed in the screen. A large mouth and slightly bulging eyes gave it a somewhat jovial, frog-like demeanor. Seated at a desk similar to Heselton's, wearing a gaudy uniform profusely strewn with a variety of insignia, it was obviously Heselton's counterpart, the commander of an alien vessel.

"Hmmm, looks like we've contacted a new race. Let's return the call, Lieutenant." A tiny red light glowed beneath a miniature camera on Heselton's desk and almost at once the alien's face registered obvious satisfaction. It waved a six-fingered hand in an unorthodox, but friendly, greeting.

Heselton waved back.

The alien then pointed to his mouth, made several clacking-grunting sounds, and moved a hand on his desk. The scene switched to another alien standing in front of what looked like a blackboard, with a piece of chalk in his hand. The meaning was clear.

"Lieutenant, have this transmission switched to the linguistics section. Maybe those guys can work some sort of language." The screen blanked out. Heselton leaned back, tense, obviously worried. Hesitantly, he reached out and touched a button on the intercom.

"Astronomy."

"Professor, there's a ship right next door somewhere that should stand out like King Kong in a kindergarten."

"I know, Admiral. I've been listening to the intercom. Our optical equipment isn't designed for close range work, but we've been doing the best we can, tried everything from infra-red through ultra-violet. If there is a ship out there I'm afraid it's invisible."

Beads of sweat sprinkled Heselton's forehead. "This is bad, Rogers. Mighty bad." Nervously, he walked across to the right of the bridge and stood, hands clasped behind his back, staring blankly out at blackness and the scattered stars. "I know there is a ship out there, and I know that a ship simply can't be invisible, not to radar *and* optics."

"What makes you sure there is only one, sir?"

Heselton cracked his fists together. "My God, Rogers, you're right! There might be ... "

The intercom clacked. "This is fire control again, sir. I think we've got something on the radiation detectors."

"Good work, what did you find?"

"Slight radioactivity, typical of interstellar drive mechanisms, somewhere off to our right. Can't tell exactly where, though."

"How far away is it?"

"I don't know, sir."

Heselton's hands dropped to his sides. "Thanks," he said, "for the help."

His desk tv flashed into life with a picture of the smiling alien commander. "This is the linguistics section, Admiral. The aliens understand a fairly common galactic symbology, I believe we can translate simple messages for you now."

"Ask him where the hell he is," Heselton snapped without thinking, then instantly regretted it as the alien's face showed unmistakable surprise.

The alien's smile grew into an almost unbelievable grin. He turned sideways to speak to someone out of sight of the camera and suddenly burst into a series of roaring cackles. "He's laughing, sir." The translator commented unnecessarily.

The joke was strictly with the aliens. Heselton's face whitened in quick realization. "Rogers! They *didn't know* that we can't see them!"

"Look, sir." The navigator pointed to the tv screen and a brilliantly clear image of Big Joe shimmering against the galaxy, lit by millions of stars. Every missile port, even the military numerals along her nose were clearly visible.

"They're rubbing it in, Rogers. Showing us what we look like to them." Heselton's face was chalk. "They could blast Big Joe apart, piece by piece—the most powerful ship in the galaxy."

"Maybe," said Rogers, "the second most powerful."

Without answering, Heselton turned and looked out again at empty space and millions of steady, unwinking stars. His mind formed an image of a huge, ethereal spaceship, missile ports open, weapons aimed directly at Big Joe.

The speaker interrupted his nightmare. "This is fire control, Admiral. With your permission I'll scatter a few C-bombs ... "

Heselton leaped for the microphone. "Are you out of your mind? We haven't the slightest idea of the forces that guy has. We might be in the center of a whole blooming fleet. Ever think of that?"

The alien's face, still smirking, appeared again on the screen. "He says," said the interpreter, "that he finds the presence of our armed ship very annoying."

Heselton knew what he had to do. "Tell him," he said, swallowing hard, "that we apologize. This part of the galaxy is strange to us."

"He says he is contemplating blasting us out of the sky."

Heselton said nothing, but he longed to reach out and throttle the grinning, alien face.

"However," the interpreter continued, "he will let us go safely if we leave immediately. He says to send an unarmed, diplomatic vessel next time and maybe his people will talk to us."

"Thank him for his kindness." Heselton's jaws clenched so tightly they ached.

"He says," said the interpreter, "to get the hell out."

The grinning face snapped off the screen, but the cackling laughter continued to reverberate in the control room until the radio shack finally turned off the receiver.

"Reverse course," the admiral ordered quietly. "Maximum drive."

A thousand missile launchers, designed to disintegrate solar systems, were deactivated, hundreds of gyros swung the mile-long ship end for end and stabilized her on a reverse course, drive units big enough to power several major cities whined into operation, anti-grav generators with the strength to shift small planets counterbalanced the external acceleration, and the ship moved, away, with a speed approaching that of light.

"Well," muttered Heselton, "that's the very first time Big Joe has ever had to retreat." As if it were his own personal failure, he walked slowly across the control room and down the corridor towards his cabin.

"Admiral!" Lost in thought, Heselton barely heard the call.

"Admiral, look!" Pausing at the door to his cabin, Heselton turned to face the ship's chief astronomer running up waving two large photographs.

"Look, sir," the professor gasped for breath. "We thought this was a spot on the negative, but one of the men got curious and enlarged it about a hundred times." He held up one of the photos. It showed a small, fuzzy, but unmistakable spaceship. "No wonder we couldn't spot it with our instruments."

Heselton snatched it out of his hand. "I see what you mean. This ship must have been thousands of miles ... "

The professor shook his head. "No, sir. As a matter of fact, it was quite close by."

"But ... "

"We figure that the total length of the alien ship was roughly an inch and a half."

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