

The Wormhole

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“We are approaching our destination now, captain.”

Suspended in the vastness of space was a strange circle. It blended in with the inky blackness surrounding it, but the ship’s scanners were populated with activity. If you didn’t know what you were looking for, you would never see it. A twinkle of light slightly shifted in the sea of blackness. I peered down from my elevated captain’s chair at one of the crew members in the research bay below.

“Weyl, can you set out the probes? I want a better look.”

I watched as my diminutive crewmate adjusted his glasses and began the activation sequence.

“I’m one step ahead of you. Probes are fired up and launching now.”

My eyes affixed to the viewport of the ship, waiting to see movement from the dark. Two small glints shone in the blackness before; the probes were on their way to scout ahead. I called once more.

“Can we get a visual?”

One of the other crewmen, Flamm, a member of an alien species called Veros, reached out his four-fingered hand and typed in a sequence blindingly fast. His singular eye caught mine as he winked in anticipation. I shielded my eyes, as suddenly the viewport illuminated with a holographic representation of the space surrounding us.

“Radar-view is up and running, you should see the wormhole in 3, 2...”

There it was. Our crew had seen many before, but something still turned within me every time. The wormhole, a pinprick in the vastness of space leading from one point of seemingly unconnected space to another. The holographic view showed that within the circle was something that stretched imperceptibly far, but the other side was almost visible. It reminded me of a kaleidoscope, like the one Ellis bought for his kid when we were on leave. Except here, it was like there was a void in the middle, and the beautiful colors and refractions were only in the periphery.

My attention moved to the communications terminal, and the relaxed crewmate manning it.

“Ellis, before we go through, check our comms. We want to make sure that they are fully operational.”

Ellis leaned back in his chair, “I told you before we got here, I already checked. My wife would kill me if I forgot to call again before an expedition.”

“I’m just making sure, last time you didn’t adjust the antenna and the rest of us had to wait hours for you to fix it.” I caught Ellis mid-shrug as my eyes shifted toward the last crewman. Our resident mathematician always wore a respirator mask that covered his whole face. I’ve never been able to get a good read on him. “Kip, how do the calculations look? Are we all set to proceed?”

His head turned. “The numbers are mostly good, captain. There is a slight imperfection that could cause an issue, however.”

“Can we fix it before the Wheeler flies through?”

Weyl perked up, “I’m seeing the readouts. The drones can moderate it. Traversal will be safe.”

I gazed into the portal before us. Hopefully, this one would lead us somewhere useful. Somewhere like the Crab Nebula would be nice, so that the company could have another route for mining ionized helium. A new gateway like that would get them off our backs for a while, and I could get some time off.

Taking a deep breath, I readied myself for the journey. It's a routine procedure, but my gut always tightens before we travel through a new wormhole.

“Alright, crew, all systems ready?”

I glanced around to see them all raise their hands, indicating that it was time.

“Well then, initiating thrusters.”

The Wheeler began drifting toward the wormhole. The crew began preparing their instruments for analysis on the other side. Controls were all in my hands, and I steered us into the quickly approaching gateway.

I always hold my breath just before I go through. Traversing the wormhole only takes a second, but something about starving my brain of oxygen helps me feel like I'm in control somehow. As I inhaled, I looked at my crew and peeked at their readings. The irregularity was still on the screen, but hopefully, Weyl could fix it once we got through. My thoughts caught back up to me as I realized we made it through.

The view ahead of us was nothing too extraordinary. The truth is, most space is just that: empty space. I did see a distant planet, though. It looked barren, with rings of debris orbiting around it. The crew began working on their readings of our new position in the universe. This is where my work paused, and theirs began.

Breaking the silence, Weyl frantically jumped out of his chair. “What! No, no, no!” He whipped around to face me. “Captain, turn around now! Abort mission!”

I had little time to register what he was saying, but my hands worked faster than my brain. I pivoted the ship into a sharp about-face. As the stars spun around us, the wormhole we just emerged from came into focus. Something was wrong.

Our only path back was folding in on itself. The almost invisible portal we had just travelled through began wrapping the light of the stars around itself. It was forming a corona of light as space dust started to trail toward it. I fruitlessly tried racing the ship forward, hoping to squeeze in before it was gone. Sirens blared in the cockpit, and emergency lights tinged the cabin red. These lights only went off if the worst was happening. I pulled the ship back, trying to break away from the force that was vigorously trying to pull us in. My field of view blurred as I turned the ship as far as I could from where the wormhole once was. The red lights and sirens faded into the back of my mind as I put everything the ship had into going anywhere else. Gravitational pull began ripping at the Wheeler's back, but I managed to hit our emergency thrusters in time to push us into a calm in space.

I turned the ship back around to see what had just happened. Flamm quickly pulled up a magnified view of the wormhole's location. In its place was a newly formed black hole. The planet we briefly saw was slowly getting dragged into its field of influence. We sat powerlessly as the black hole accelerated the doomed planet toward itself, consuming it.

The lights and sirens ceased, and the cockpit hung in silence. I wasn't the scientist; I was the pilot. I looked pleadingly at Weyl and asked the obvious. "What just happened? I thought the wormhole was supposed to be stable?"

Weyl's face was caught in a horrified shock. Without looking at me, he replied, "Our drones couldn't hold the stabilization. The wormhole's mass collapsed in on itself." Somberly, he caught my gaze. "It's gone; we can't return through."

A lump formed in my throat, which I swallowed through. I stood from my seat and walked to the research stations. My hands began to shake, but I hid them behind my back. “Crew, you heard him. Until we can figure something else out, we proceed with the mission. Find out where we are so we can make a plan.”

The crew was clearly rattled, but they sat back down at their stations. I joined Ellis’ side at the comms station. “Comms are normally the first thing to go through. Are you picking anything up?”

Ellis broke out of his trance and typed at the keypad, adjusting the frequency in frantic succession. After a moment that went on for an eternity, he turned to face me. “Nothing yet, but that’s happened before. Trust me, I’ll get something through.”

I saw the look in his eyes. He was desperate; he was trying to convince himself more than me. I laid my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure you will, keep trying.”

As I walked away, Ellis’ hands quickened. The room was still dead silent, save for the soft hum of the inter-spacial drive propelling the ship further away. Making my way to Flamm’s station, I had to squeeze my hand behind my back to hold my concentration.

“Flamm, have you figured out where we are yet?” I glanced at his screen, which he rapidly changed as I made my approach.

He turned to face me directly, interposing himself between me and the terminal. “Not yet, captain. I’m still looking.”

Flamm’s alien features made it hard to read his emotions. I couldn’t tell what his intentions were from his face, but his four-fingered hands wouldn’t stop wringing. I cocked my eyebrow, but decided to let the moment pass. “Let me know when you do.”

“Will do, captain.” He turned back to face the monitor. He didn’t raise his hands to type; he just stared at a zoomed-out map of the universe.

My hands clenched even tighter. Despite my desire to appear calm, my feet began speeding up. “Weyl!” I noticed my tone was too exaggerated and dialed it back. “Tell me what happened to the wormhole. What went wrong?”

Weyl was slumped in his chair, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know, captain. We’ve been working with highly advanced technology. The science is new and still mostly theoretical. In all likelihood, we have just been lucky so far.”

I kneeled to meet his eye level and put my hands on his shoulders. “Weyl, I need you; we all need you. Focus for me. Find out what we can do to get back.”

His eyes looked up to meet mine; they were wet and swollen. I put his glasses back on his face. From behind me, Kip began booming.

“You traitor!” Kip paced in the middle of the room, his mask barely concealing his rage. “Flamm figured out where we are! I saw him try to hide it! He wanted this! He wanted us to get stranded!”

Flamm waved his arms in protest. “No, I didn’t. I didn’t do any of that.” He turned to face me. “Captain, please, believe me!”

I stood up, as calmly as I could. “Kip, stand down. Flamm didn’t do this. No one knew that wormhole was going to destabilize. Besides, he’s in it with us. Do you think he wanted to nearly get torn apart by a black hole?”

Kip raised his hand to protest, but instead clenched his fist. “Whatever you say, captain.”

With that fire diminished, I stared daggers into Flamm. “Did you find out where we are?”

Flamm shifted uncomfortably, playing with his hands. All eyes were on him. His face went through dozens of expressions I couldn't recognize before he turned around and pressed a button. A star map projected into the center of the room, filling the cockpit with a facsimile of space.

"Flamm, what are we looking at?"

He got up out of his chair and walked across the room. At the far starboard side, he raised his finger to point out a star cluster. "This is the galaxy we came from; the Loun Galaxy."

Then Flamm began walking, and with every step, the reality sank in deeper. With one step, he walked past our home galaxy. With the next, he passed by the rest of all galaxies explored by the federation. One more step and he was further than anyone known has ever gone and returned. He continued walking across the room, every step filling the cabin with louder echoes. Each step representing countless light-years. Eons seemingly passed until he eventually stopped moving. He was now standing on the other side of the cockpit, and his hand was raised again.

"This is where we are. The scientific community hasn't even named this galaxy."

Silence once again plagued the room.

"That doesn't mean we can't get home," Ellis piped up, his eyes wired and bloodshot.

"Can't we just fly back?" He grabbed both my shoulders tightly, but I had no response. I studied star maps throughout my whole apprenticeship. I didn't even know the map was this large.

Kip turned his head to Ellis. "Are you dense? Even with the fastest ship in the galaxy, *which we don't have*, it would still be impossible." He looked at the map for a second, and his hand unclenched. His tone softened, as he whispered, "It would take millennia to return."

Weyl turned away, hiding the tears streaming down his face.

Ellis faced the crew. “Isn’t there anything we can do? I haven’t checked every frequency yet. Maybe one of them will work?” His face was in so much anguish; I had to avoid his eyes.

“Please, I have a family. Are you saying I’m never going to see them again?”

Weyl cleared his throat, and wiped tears from his face. “We are never going home. To everyone else we have ever known or loved, we are dead.”

I looked at my crew, all in disarray. None of us could meet one another’s gaze because we all knew the same unavoidable truth. We were going to die in space, never returning home. I watched as my crew processed. Untold emotions were emanating through the air.

I stared up at the middle of the cockpit, at the projection of the universe. “We never really talked about our personal lives, except for Ellis.” I tried to force a smirk in his direction. “We all have people at home, people we care about. Weyl’s right, to everyone at home we might as well be dead.”

Weyl wiped his nose on his sleeve. The rest of the crew looked as if I at least had their attention despite their sullen demeanor.

“I want to get back home, back to them...” I pointed to our home galaxy in the star map. “Back here. Forget about everything else. How can we do that?”

Ellis looked at me with hope in his eyes. “What if we found another wormhole?”

Some courage managed to return to my voice. “The whole purpose of our expeditions is discovering and stabilizing wormholes. Weyl, is it possible?”

His face had salt-stained trails, but he met my gaze. Downtrodden, he responded, “I suppose it’s possible, but there is no way-.”

“Possible, I can work with. Flamm, get us a course home anyway.”

Flamm tried to avoid my eyes. “But we can’t get home that way, you heard Kip.”

“It wasn’t a question. I want you to plot a course. Even if we don’t make it back, the ship will. Something good has to come from this.”

Kip walked to meet me, face-to-mask. “Are you deaf? That will take thousands of years. Do you really think we’ll find a way back before we all die?”

I swelled my chest and stood firm. “I don’t know, but if we do nothing, it’s all lost anyway.”

Kip remained motionless, and I stood resolute. He walked away, his feet landing hard on the ship’s deck. He sat down in his position before turning back to face me. “Well? Are we doing this or not?”

I returned to the captain’s chair. “Let’s find our way home.”

Before I prepared to steer the ship away, I lingered. The nascent black hole ominously hung in space, satisfied with its planetary meal. I turned the Wheeler away, eager to leave behind the thief of our way home.