
A Beginner's Guide to Invading Earth

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For Abby

CHAPTER 1

THREE ALIENS SAT TOGETHER in a booth of the bar and grill, not eating the food before them. The two adults stared down at their plates with disbelief, a greasy burger with two floppy strips of bacon and a square of droopy orange cheese in front of one, a meatloaf special featuring a discharge of thick white gravy hiding two lumps of something next to a side of a leaf of iceberg lettuce and a tomato slice before the other. The third alien was a toddler a bit too big for the booster chair she was strapped into. Her footed pajamas with the "Phone Home!" and "Beam Me Up" slogans were stained by the cran-whatever juice in her sippy cup. Her alien antennae headband had slipped to the back of her head. The husband and wife's sparkly blue makeup looked less than fresh, faded, and streaked. Their tour of the world's loneliest highway's UFO sites and the Lovelock, Nevada First Annual UFO Con was at an end, and the meal before them was a final insult on a long day. The toddler fussed, burbled, and started to cry.

Jeff Abel bussed the table nearby, placing beer mugs, bottles, and ketchup-smearred plates into a grey plastic bin. The male member of the Family Von Alien grabbed Jeff's arm and tugged. Jeff wasn't a small man, but he let himself be dragged. The man wore glasses, which made his eyeballs look bulgy and big as he looked up at Jeff.

"Excuse me," the man said, "but this is unacceptable. This food looks disgusting."

"Let me get your server," Jeff said. He looked around for Stacy, their waitress. She wasn't anywhere to be seen. "Hmm. Okay, would you like me take this back?"

The woman said, "And why are there people smoking in here? It's not legal. The smoke is bothering our baby." She gestured about them with long, blue nail-polished fingernails.

Jeff looked at the toddler. She was at least two, maybe almost three, going on pork chop, and looking generally upset about everything.

Jeff nodded. "I wish they wouldn't smoke, either, but it's legal in Nevada inside the bar."

"Well, it shouldn't be."

Jeff nodded.

No one in the dining room smoked, but the attached bar had a handful of patrons, and two held burning cigarettes alongside their beer. A thin haze meandered through the dark wood rafters of the establishment, hanging over bar patrons and diners alike. From the walls of the dining room, the mounted heads of a mule deer and a six-point elk buck looked on impassively. But the bar and grill smelled of cigarettes even out in the parking lot, so the smell of smoke inside shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Let me figure out the food situation for you," Jeff said. "Want me to bring you something different?"

"A salad," the woman said. She wouldn't make eye contact. Jeff was used to that. His exotropia caused his right eye to look slightly off and away, wall-eyed some would say, as if he were a fish. People didn't know where to look sometimes when talking to him. Some didn't look at him at all.

Jeff pointed to the iceberg lettuce on the side of the meatloaf special. "Unfortunately this place doesn't do much better than that. But I'll see the kitchen comes up with something that'll make you happy."

The woman made a non-committal noise. Her blue fingernails drummed on the table. Jeff grabbed his bin with the dirty dishes.

"Back in a jiffy."

Jeff went to the kitchen. Only one cook worked behind the stainless steel station. He presided over a burger patty that sizzled away on a hard top grill and a batch of fries swimming in a fryer. The short, brown-skinned cook grinned when Jeff came in.

"Hey, Masaya, I'm going to make a salad for table four," Jeff said.

"Tell Stacy to do it," Masaya said.

"She's not around."

Jeff washed his hands and got out a cutting board and a chef's knife. He found a cucumber and some strawberries in the walk-in, along with a sealed packet of feta cheese.. He peeled the cucumber with a peeler, chopped off the ends, and scored the sides with a fork. He then cut it

into neat slices and put it into a small bowl. Also into the bowl went sliced strawberries. He sprinkled the berries and cucumber with some balsamic, a pinch of sugar, and some dry dill. He tossed it with his hands. On a small plate, he arranged it all into a collapsed column. Some of the cheese went on top. On the side, he put a pair of cherry tomatoes.

"Voila," Jeff said and showed Masaya the salad. The cook smiled, nodded, and went back to his burger, plating the buns and fixings for his next victim.

Jeff walked out into the dining room. The family of three was gone. In their place stood a tall, blond woman in a waitress costume, looking at the table with the two abandoned meals, and then at Jeff. Her ice blue eyes narrowed. She didn't have a problem with staring Jeff in the face.

"Where are they?" Stacy said.

Jeff looked around. Two other tables had diners, the rest were vacant. The family of three hadn't changed tables, nor were they at the front counter waiting to pay.

"Bathroom, maybe," Jeff said.

"And what's that?" Stacy indicated the salad.

"She wasn't happy with the salad on her plate."

"I made that salad."

"I know," Jeff said.

She looked down at the arrangement of the cucumber and strawberry salad and screwed up her face. "You cost me a tip." She turned and marched into the kitchen.

Jeff bussed the burger, the meatloaf special, and the two salads.

* * *

At the end of the shift, once the last bar patron left the place, Jeff swamped the floor and started to mop. Masaya sat on a stool with his back against the bar, a bottle of Mexican beer in his hands. He watched Jeff work.

"Stacy pay you your share of tips?" Masaya said.

Jeff shook his head. He wrung the water into the bucket, pulled the bucket along on its casters to the next spot to be mopped.

"She can't do that to you every night," Masaya said. "You've got to say something. You should be getting a quarter of the gratuity. It's the law."

"She got stiffed on a table," Jeff said.

"She says she did. Maybe she just took the money, put it in her pocket. Don't trust; always confirm, eh?"

Jeff shrugged. The owner came through the door from the stairs that led up to the office. He was squat and round with too much hair on the sides of his head and not enough in the middle. Masaya hid the beer behind a greasy, white pant leg. The owner ignored him, didn't look at Jeff.

"You'll lock up when you're both done cleaning up?" the owner asked.

"You bet," Jeff said.

The owner headed for the door.

"Uh, Mr. Carlson?" Jeff said.

"What?"

"I'll need to get my check from you before you go."

"You'll have to wait for tomorrow," Mr. Carlson said. "Receipts were kinda slow tonight. Hate to give you a check that'll bounce." The owner pushed the door open by the fanny bar and left. Jeff stared at the door as it closed on its automatic hinge. He waited for a moment, as if Mr. Carlson might pop back inside, check in hand, and say, "Just kidding!"

Masaya shook his head and chuckled. He said, "Why you even here this late? You're just supposed to bus tables and wash the pots. Avelino is supposed to close tonight and take care of the floors."

"Avelino had a thing with his daughter." Jeff finished mopping the floor of the bar, did a walk-through of the place. He turned the fryer off, checked the locks on the door, and killed the lights as he and Masaya went out the back. "So what are you doing here so late? You could have left an hour ago."

"My wife's car is in the shop," Masaya said with a toothy smile. "I was hoping you could give me a ride."

* * *

They walked across the bar and grill's gravel back lot to Jeff's navy blue Ford pickup. The parking lot lights around the place clicked off, leaving only the full moon to show the way. Masaya opened the passenger side door. Some books started to slide out, but he caught them before they fell to the ground.

Jeff got in, turned on the cab light. "Just throw that junk behind the seat," Jeff said.

Masaya took the books in his lap as he got in. "C+? Ajax?" he said as he considered the thick, soft-covered books and their bland text-book-graphic covers. "Linux? What, you some kind of hacker?"

He flipped thru the Linux book. It was replete with orange highlighter, margin commentary in blue ink, and Post-it notes covered with scribbles.

Jeff took the books from Masaya and plopped them behind the bench seat atop towels, a sweater, a toolbox, and the rest of the accumulations of the truck cab. "Stuff I had to read for my last job."

"Looks like hacker stuff. And on your last job was there a problem with getting paid? Maybe you shouldn't have quit."

Jeff turned the key and the engine rumbled to life. He poked the gas gauge, the needle buried past the 'E'. It didn't move as the engine warmed.

"We gonna make it?"

"Gauge is busted," Jeff said. "I'll get you home."

The truck rolled and crunched its way to the road, where Jeff turned onto the two-lane highway. A black Suburban was parked on the shoulder across the street. The lights reflected off of it as Jeff's truck passed by. Tinted windows revealed nothing of the vehicle's interior. Jeff tried not to look at it as they left it behind, but he couldn't help checking the rear view mirror. The Suburban didn't follow them. He wasn't being watched, not anymore. Not out here, away from his former life, away from who he used to be.

"You just shouldn't let this guy take advantage of you," Masaya said. "Or you should get another job. Why you washing pots when you could be doing your hacking?"

"It wasn't hacking, it was programming," Jeff said. "And I quit that so I could come here and work with you, of course." And when he washed pots, the overwhelming anxiety of someone, some agency, either foreign or domestic, tracking his every move all but disappeared. But Jeff didn't mention this.

Masaya laughed. After a moment, he said, "But you know computers."

Jeff gave a half-shrug, nodded.

"Then when we get to my place can you fix my computer? My kids got some viruses on it or something and it doesn't work right."

CHAPTER 2

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE HUMANS wasn't going as planned, as was obvious by the rank smells that choked the air of the alien visitors' craft. But no one called them aliens where they came from.

Seven little Greys, short bipeds with large heads and big eyes and delicate limbs, sat in the flight seats of their ship's crew compartments and listened as the Mission Commander lectured them from the Command Module. The harangue lingered in the air, not as words or even sounds but as a smell, a ripe one replete with pheromones and scent packets that the Greys used to speak with one another. A new string of curses from the Commander's glands smelled of licorice. The Mission Commander composed itself. It wiped sticky sweat from its hairless frontal lobe.

The lights and displays in front of the seven crewmembers blinked and flashed. No one would so much as touch a button until the Commander was finished addressing the crew.

"I'll hear no more of it," the Commander said. "We're on the human world. We go forward. Probability calculations for success show at 100%. The computer will be trusted."

"But sir," one of the crew said, "the computer did indeed flash its composite probability a moment ago, and it read 99%." This Grey sat in the eighth flight seat, the lowest rung of the crew's hierarchy, and it was the shortest of the otherwise identical crew. Even the Grey in the second seat wouldn't speak unless spoken to. The rest of the crew fidgeted at their junior member's contradiction.

The Commander ignored the crewmember's protest. It checked the multitude of screens before it, numbers and charts and all of the flight information. But the ship did most of the flying, and the calculations had been done weeks and months before. These things could be counted on to

be correct. With the wave of a hand, the Commander collapsed the screens until only a few remained, displays of the geography around them, their immediate flight data, and a countdown.

Five minutes to go until first contact with the human.

The smallest Grey, its earlier protest ignored, touched its terminal. The probability calculation came up. 100%. Its crewmates all saw the final number underneath the crush of calculations that preceded it. They puffed their pheromones of satisfaction as the number confirmed that all was well and they could proceed. They exchanged nods and returned their attention to their own screens. Then the number changed.

The screen flashed 99%.

"Sir!" the smallest Grey said. "It changed again. We are at only 99% success! We must abort!"

The Commander tapped the command screen and a bubble lowered down over the dissenting Grey's flight seat, isolating the little fellow. The isolation bubble muted the crewmember's protests imperfectly, and the smallest Grey continued speaking, its voice and the smell of its protests leaking out to the others. With another finger-peck on the screen, the Commander pumped the bubble full of the stench of rotting vegetation. Any lingering complaints were vented out of the ship and into Earth's atmosphere. The little Grey under the bubble coughed. All of the screens in front of it went blank. The other crewmembers sat quietly lest they be silenced as well.

"Anyone else?" the Commander said. "No? Good. We're almost out of time. The calculations say this is the location."

The timer read two minutes. The Commander minimized the screen with the probability calculation. It enlarged a screen with the approved certificate of first contact, assigning the Commander its position as diplomat with all of the implied honors upon a successful mission. The Commander breathed deeply and composed itself. Greys shouldn't get excited. A serene, dispassionate demeanor was their hallmark. And what was one percentage point? Let the mathematicians argue over probability and degrees of certainty. Earth was about to receive its invitation into the Galactic Commons.

The Commander didn't have to do anything but touch another button to get the ship back on course. There was no sensation of movement as the ship cut through the nitrogen and oxygen atmosphere towards the projected meeting point. The when and where data streamed

into the air of the command compartment from a small machine like golden pearls climbing an array of shimmering threads. The Commander examined the information. A straight stretch of highway ran for miles in either direction just underneath their ship. The contact itinerary showed that Jeff Abel's truck should pass this spot on the road in the next thirty seconds.

The ship slowed as it reached its prearranged coordinates, and when it stopped, a ping alerted the crew that they had arrived. The Commander checked the screen display of the terrain below, saw nothing, checked the monitor's clock. They were on time. A quarter minute passed. The timer flashed zero.

The Commander got up from its chair and began to pace. Where was the human? One screen showed the human species' stats as well as the height, weight, specific density, and coloration of their intended target. Humans, it turned out, were non-combustible. Jeff Abel was the selected target, although unaware of the privilege.

Jeff Abel was either late or the calculation was off. Or perhaps the human was here somewhere. Humans weren't small enough to hide in this terrain, were they? They possessed no shape-shifting abilities according to the cyclopedia. Their scent profiles were easily identifiable, especially the ones that ate animal proteins.

The Commander activated the ship's scanners. Large blinding white lights shot out in every direction, painting scrub and sand in brilliance and shadow. The computer tagged and labeled a hare as it shot out from one bush. Small mammalian herbivore, not a member of the dominant contact species from this world. The Grey touched the screen so the animal, now identified, would be ignored. Next came a snake, a lizard, another hare. Once identified, all of these were also disregarded. No Jeff Abel among them. The timer ran a second string of numbers from the missed contact event: two minutes and rising. Maybe he would arrive shortly. The Commander kept calm, aware of the crew's full attention. Move forward or go back home and reassess?

It considered the minimized screen with the probability calculations. It swiped a finger. "Collating," a computer voice said. A green eye appeared on the screen and stared at him. "Contact probability 100%."

"Excellent," the Commander said. It ignored the rest of the screen with all the fussy numbers and charts. Time to go. "Whatever the problem might have been has passed. Time to meet Jeff Abel."

"Agreed, Commander," came the reply from the part of the crew not in isolation bubbles.

If they didn't make contact, if they blew it, another species would be chosen to contact the humans, picking up appropriate bragging rights and Galactic Commons swagger along the way. The window for this operation was limited. Failure inconceivable. And now they've regained 100% probability despite the delay. Plus, some of the ship's equipment had been rented and was a bit pricey.

The Commander landed the ship. A broader scan for biological signs spotted something man-sized, not far off and to the north. It wasn't moving. Maybe something in the sensor reading was amiss, but no matter. Some of their equipment was past the warranty date. The earlier 1% percent difference could be chalked up to an old connector or a driver that needed an update.

The silenced brood fellow in the isolation bubble might have reminded the Commander that one number being off in a probability calculation could spark a chain of similar errors, just like when one of their kind rolled over onto its side on the nest cushion and nudged its neighbor, each sleeper adjusting until finally one at the end might indeed roll off and spoil a perfect rest cycle. It also would have mentioned that the probability computer wouldn't normally change its mind on their chances without some kind of input. But that Grey was silent, stuck under a bubble, and breathing rank air to shut it up.

In the command compartment the Grey killed the ship's exterior lights. With the flip of a switch, a hatch dropped open and a ramp lowered to the ground. The Grey stepped out into the cool night, filled its small lungs, and interpreted the signals in the air with the help of an imbedded app programmed with Earth's flora and fauna. A variety of sensations flooded over the Grey. The scant trees on this side of the mountain range were dropping their pollen. A coyote bitch was in heat. Nearby lay a clutch of snake eggs. Other creatures and plants, even in this dry landscape, germinated, farted, and shed dander. But there, as distinctive as a thick chain of reeking algae floating atop a pond, especially the delicious blue-yellow stuff only found on its native subcontinent, the Grey smelled a man.

The ship behind the Commander hung on nothing, a dark sphere of black against the starry sky. The Commander tapped a sub-dermal

remote, and the hatch closed. It walked away from its ship and across the sand, cool and coarse on its bare feet. The way was not as flat as it had looked from the sky, so it clambered up a graveled shoulder and onto the asphalt. This made for easier walking. The faded lines marking the shoulder provided an easy path to follow. There, just past a rise in the road, Jeff Abel waited for the honor of first contact, a greeting into the fold, a guest pass as ambassador to the Galactic Commons, and a personal blast of scent from a member of the Happy Alien Welcome Committee.

Pheromones of trepidation from the other crewmembers still inside the sphere wafted from his communicator. Some of the other brood mates were nervous. Should the Commander be so far from the ship?

"Stay at your posts," the Grey puffed. "I will succeed and welcome!"

From the direction where the Grey expected to meet Jeff Abel came a shimmer in the darkness and a single golden light. The light weaved, sometimes on the center of the road, sometimes not. The Commander grabbed at its belt and activated the welcome beacon. The beacon opened up like a fountain of illumination. Bright light washed over the Grey, highlighting its smooth skin in flattering tones. By the beacon's design, any functioning sensory organ would pick up on emotions of peace and love and kinship from the one that held the gadget. Pheromones pumped into the night, signaling familial warmth. And a small drone painted words in the air that read, "We Are Your Friends!!" in the appropriate languages for this area of the planet.

Much debate had gone into the phrasing and translation of those words. Most suggestions, upon research, proved to be vague, inviting an attack based on mutual consumption or, possibly worse, inviting erotic entanglements. These suggestions were discarded. But the message the Happy Alien Welcome Committee had settled upon was perfect.

The light got closer, the one cone of illumination in the approaching lane vibrating and getting larger. The Grey stood well on the shoulder, smiling as best as its lipless maw could manage. Only a second before impact did it realize that the approaching vehicle had one headlight out and was straddling the shoulder line.

The front of the old park department service truck struck the Grey full on, sending up a final puff of exclamation into the night. The signal from its belt vanished, a tire crushing the beacon.

The driver of the truck leaned up from underneath the dash, victoriously producing both the no-longer-free-rolling last bottle of Mickey's beer and a long-lost Journey cassette, newly recovered from the trash on the floor of the cab, just in time to see a bit of the splat of the Grey and the vanishing traces of the welcome message. A strange feeling of peace washed over him along with a notion of familial warmth as the pheromone component of the welcome message worked its magic. It complimented his buzz perfectly.

"Huh," he said before clicking the tape into the cassette player.

CHAPTER 3

JEFF ABEL HAD HIS THUMB OUT as the park department service truck blew past him on the highway. Jeff put the thumb down. He checked the road and exhaled, his breath just visible in the chilled night air. No one else came. He gave his own out-of-gas pickup truck a final glance. It sat off the shoulder on flat, dense sand, parked amongst tumbleweeds and scrub. This time, the broken gas gauge wasn't lying, and the drive to Masaya's place had been farther out than Jeff had expected. Masaya had been grateful for the lift, at least, and his kids grateful for a working computer once Jeff deleted the bloatware, spyware, and malware from the machine's hard drive. Not enough time for a full system wipe and an OS reinstall, but good enough. Jeff wouldn't have touched the machine but for Masaya's insistent begging. Throughout the hour of computer time, Jeff's sweat ran cold and his hands trembled. These days, ever since giving up programming and staying as disconnected as possible from the internet and his former world, Jeff couldn't even check email without having a panic attack. He hadn't calmed down until saying goodbye and getting twenty minutes alone, driving in silence.

Jeff walked back towards town.

For a moment it appeared as if another vehicle might be coming from the direction of the first truck. A brief spasm of light flashed in the sky, like a set of stadium lights had been flicked on and off. But nothing came. And with the single light of the truck now gone, the moon and the glow of the stars were his sole illumination.

Three hours later, he walked into a gas station mini mart. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the last of his money. Two dollars and thirty-two cents. Not enough cash for a gallon of gas. Masaya's gratitude hadn't extended as far as any funds for fuel.

Two women sat behind the counter. The first wore an orange and turquoise tank top, a metric ton of electroplated jewelry, and a scowl. She glared at him. The second woman leaned back on an old office chair that bent under her weight. She was busy twisting a curl of glittery dark brown hair. She ignored Jeff, intent on a television framed by beef jerky and a display of energy pills. Jeff grabbed a Milky Way bar, put it back, and instead took a Payday. From one of the refrigerators, he took a bottle of water.

"Three dollars," said the first woman. Her glare continued, but she had to shift a bit to look up as Jeff stood tall at the counter. Her tank top was a few sizes too small, the straps digging into her fleshy shoulders. Several faded, blurry tattoos on her arms bore feckless witness to loves lost and dreams unrealized. One read "Hawai" without the second "i." Another read "Scooter" or "Skeeter," some of the vowels now smudges, writ over a large heart. When she saw his off-kilter eye, her gaze shifted to the stubble on his chin.

The second woman sat behind the register and held out a hand for the money. She never made eye contact with Jeff. The TV showed some judge presiding over a juryless court. Quick cuts between arguing plaintiff and defendant, both as round as their lecterns were narrow. No one looked happy.

Jeff looked at the candy bar and the water. He considered the money in his hand. "Just the water." He put the candy bar back.

The cashier didn't say anything.

"One of those nights," Jeff said with a smile. The first woman took his money and handed it to the second. Jeff gestured with the water. "Thanks."

The first woman now, too, was looking up at the TV. Jeff left.

He walked to the edge of the gas station's property. He pushed his mop of brown hair back from his face and took a sip. His throat was dry, and the water was good. He chugged half of the bottle's contents and looked out at the peach and copper lights of approaching day. Two wrecks from America's automotive past marked the border of the wild desert beyond. From somewhere, he heard one of Journey's shopworn wedding standards followed by the rumble of a truck.

A single light bounced into the gas station. It was the ranger service truck from earlier or an uncanny duplicate. It stopped. The driver got out, ignored Jeff, and ran into the station.

"Call CNN," the driver yelled. "I just ran over E.T."

Jeff peeked in the truck's bed. From under a tarp protruded a small, limp, grey hand.

* * *

Jeff saw the driver many times in the weeks to come, all in snippets on TV, interview after interview. Lindsey Sheldon, according to the captions, was now the man who made first contact, and his dead alien made him popular. Jeff never tuned in long enough to get the whole story. He was busy working, and he didn't talk to any of the other employees at the bar and grill long enough to get the spreading rumors about Mr. Sheldon and his find. Except Masaya.

"It's the real deal, man," Masaya said. "Aliens. 'Bout time someone bagged one, and the government didn't cover it up."

It was another late night, and Masaya watched as Jeff did the final clean up.

Jeff paused for a moment and leaned on his mop.

"I'm not saying they don't exist," Jeff said. "I couldn't prove they don't as proving a negative is impossible. But I believe what I see, and there's a sucker born every minute."

"But you told me you saw the body yourself. Too smart to believe what's in front of your eyes?"

"One: keep that to yourself. And two: there's too many ways to fake things like this. Even a body. When this thing settles down, I'll form an opinion."

"But the guys on the news say it's real." Masaya flashed a smile.

"I don't watch the news."

* * *

Business at the bar picked up with more pots for Jeff to wash. With the increase in business, the dining room became crowded. Jeff hated busing tables when the place was so full, and tried to stick to the pots and dishes in the back. Still no split on the tips from Stacy. At first the bump in patrons was from news crews from local Reno and Carson

City areas and a few national reporters. The next wave of drinkers and diners was the tourists eager to see the contact site firsthand, hopeful for a glance of alien tech or even a burn circle where the ship must have landed. There was nothing legitimate to see, but the bar and grill made out well for the duration. Jeff worked on and worked extra.

A week later, Mr. Carlson called Jeff into the office at the start of the afternoon shift. He handed Jeff a check. Jeff looked it over. It was missing ten hours of his overtime, but included pay up through the previous evening.

"I have a witness that says you stole some beer from the walk-in," Mr. Carlson said.

"I didn't steal anything," Jeff said. "I don't drink. And I pay for anything I eat."

Mr. Carlson shifted in his chair. A finger pushed a thin lick of hair off his forehead. He didn't look at Jeff. "I'm afraid I have to let you go."

Jeff left the office. As he walked through the bar towards the exit, he saw Stacy leaning in the doorway to the dining room. She gave him a wink and smirked.

Jeff went to his rented trailer and packed. He got into his fully gassed-up pickup truck with the fuel gauge still on 'E' and drove away. An odd sense of relief washed over him as he drove off. He had other job offers in places with fewer crowds and no Stacies.

CHAPTER 4

THE NEWS OF THE GREYS' FAILURE spread to the Galactic Commons and had settled onto the members of the Happy Alien Welcome Committee like heartburn after a bad meal. The emergency meeting of the Committee was somber, the air around the long table in their meeting hall thick with the sorrowful scent of the surviving Greys from the failed mission. The other Committee members put up with the musty odor, eager to move the discussion along and make further plans for the contacting of Jeff Abel and the human race.

The chaircreature brought the crowd to order with the tap of a gavel. The Committee consulted the computer models. The green eye of their computer winked and showed its numbers.

"Contact can't fail," the chaircreature said. "We need to pick another delegation to be sent to Earth."

They voted. Committee members raised hands, paws, and tentacles. The chaircreature took a tally even though the vote was clearly unanimous.

The Trin would go, the group decided, with the senior female Trin personally volunteering. She was humanoid, large-eyed, and furry with a protruding black snout that marked her as a seasoned tuber rooter. She gave a sympathetic honk of her nose towards the depressed Greys, placed a floral-and-dirt scented soap bar by the portrait of the dead Grey commander, and left the chambers.

The halls of the Happy Alien Welcome Committee building echoed with the clamor from the meeting room. The Trin found one of the computer rooms and shut the door. She took a chair and pulled up the volumes of data on Earth and its fauna. She took a moment to review the candidate, chosen by the computer from among the one Earth race intelligent enough to warrant contact. Her nose wiggled. She

cracked her knuckles. The humans as a biological entity didn't have fangs or claws or natural toxins. The display in front of her showed their biometrics: two arms, two legs, naked as newborn pups except for hair in the oddest places. And Jeff Abel? Ordinary, male, above average height, adequate but not exceptional intelligence judging by the surreptitious psych profile based on internet activity measured before the candidate went off the grid. And since he moved from his permanent dwelling and no longer had a mate, he could be contacted without unnecessary complications. How the Greys had failed to snag the human was beyond her. Never send a stinking gasbag to do the work of a true hunter.

She studied the calculation charts on when and where to contact Jeff Abel. To next find him alone and isolated, the projections showed a delay of several weeks. A direct approach was in order as two weeks had already passed since the Greys' failed mission. She entered the parameters with a few flicks of her fingers and executed the calculation. The probability computer blinked a green eye and worked its computational magic, and voila! She had a place and a time and would not need to wait. Out in the corridor, she still heard the committee meeting going on without her. She left the building without a word and took a tram to the transportation terminals.

The Trin went down to her species' hangar. Three vehicles awaited her, locked in their berths. Her steps echoed on the hard, clean floor as she approached the ship already prepped for her mission. A pair of Trin techs stepped away from the ship. Both bowed, but neither spoke to her. The hatch to the ship opened automatically and silently as she got close.

Her interphase flight vehicle was a boxy ship with a small cabin, equipped with enough wings and fins on the fuselage to accommodate the medium atmosphere of Earth with its gravity and mild weather. Orange and green lights popped on, illuminating the cockpit and its dark oakish-trimmed interior. The Trin got comfortable on her pillowed flight seat, cracked a few furry knuckles, and checked her gauges. All of the flight controls functioned. Her computers forwarded an electronic "thumbs up" to her HUD. The two techs outside both gave a raised digit. The hatch closed.

Mechanical arms took her ship through a conveyor system to an elevator already set with Earth's coordinates. The doors to the elevator

shut. The small room around her ship hummed to life as did her ship's engines. Numerous messages blinked across her command screen from fellow Trin and Committee members, all wishing her success and luck. There was no sensation of movement. Seconds later, the elevator's bottom opened, dropping her ship into Earth's night sky above the Sierra Nevada foothills. The Trin vehicle purred and hovered on its own power. It stood still in the air, the Trin gauging her point of arrival on her flight screens. A bolt of lightning shot out horizontally from bruised clouds a mile away, caressed the hull of her ship, and was gone, the electric charge entering on one end of the ship and exiting on the other. The wind pushed and folded around the ship's boxy body but didn't disturb its hover.

So, where was she? The Trin checked her computers. Jeff Abel would be sleeping in a domicile a few miles to the south. She directed her ship with a peck on a command board, and it responded silently, swooping through the night.

The target was thirty seconds away.

The Trin gave a final glance at the controls, set the speed so it would slow down directly above the structure where her target slept, and straightened herself up. A small mirror popped from her dash.

Twenty seconds.

She preened, long fingers pushing her top locks away from her two big eyes. Earth natives had a thing for cute animals, so why not look good for the inevitable cameras? Speaking of which...

Ten seconds.

She flicked another key on the command board. A round metallic disk emerged from its dock, and on its face a trio of eyes lit up, one clear, one red, one white. It hovered close to her, the three eyes glowing brightly, ready to document the event. The Trin cleared her throat, silently practicing the words she would say once she met the human.

Five seconds.

The collision alert sounded. Orange lights flashed on the console before her, and the craft's automatic response zigged the ship from its flight path. The display caught the flash of bright strobe lights from outside. Not lightning again, but a small, single-engine human aircraft dropped though the space where her craft had been a fraction of a second before, its wing and tail barely missing the Trin ship.

"Oh piss," she said.

She slapped at the controls. The mirror got in her way. She slammed it shut with her fist, glanced at the screens. Inertial displacement kicked in, shielding the Trin from the effects of her ship's frantic maneuvering. Her craft shifted, spun, stopped, and hovered. Had they collided? No. But where was the human aircraft?

The small plane was taking a steep dive and was not far from the ground. Its passage through the pocket of air left by her craft was like hitting a wind sheer, and the human's plane didn't have the speed or altitude to correct. The pilot and any passengers aboard would die. No houses directly below, not much nearby except for the dual landing strips of a small municipal airport. Still, if anyone died, that would change the probabilities of contact with Jeff Abel. Or had she altered something already? Or was this part of the calculation?

Abort? Ignore? There was one other option. She flicked a control. A white beam shot out from her craft, illuminating the plane below. Instantly, the plane's fall was arrested. It hovered a few feet from the ground. She could see the pilot pushing his face to one of the plane's windows, squinting at the blinding light above him. She set the plane down in the grass before what looked like the runway of a small airport. Her ship flew low above the field, her light a white circle around the landed plane.

Should leave, abort, try later. But the Greys had failed, and maybe someone else would go in her place. And wasn't this an acceptable prelude to an embrace of humanity into the galactic fold?

The floating recorder bobbed in her periphery. She smiled and knew what to do. She locked her vehicle into a hover over the human's aircraft and allowed the auto pilot full control. She got up and went to the hatch. It glided open. The recorder followed and captured the moment of the savior looking down at the saved, the Trin giving the human a big-sisterly wave.

The pilot stumbled out of his plane, held a hand over his brow to see. He was an older human, male, pale skin. Broken eyeglasses and an open bottle of some brown liquid tumbled to the ground at his feet. Her visual app zoomed in and translated the bottle label as some human beverage called "Wild Turkey." He obviously was blinded by her ship's light and couldn't see her. The Trin dimmed the lights and resumed her

wave, happy that the pilot was safe. He produced a chrome pistol from his pants pocket, raised it in her direction, and fired.

In spite of the human's fright, shaking hands, ill effects of his spilled beverage, and well outside any normal laws of probability, the bullet struck home.

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