



Clash of Cultures

Book One of the Embassy Series

Steven Hoefler

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Embassy Book One

(Sample)

By
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This sample:
Version 1.0.2 January 2016

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Thanks to CoffeeCat, under whose influence much of this
was written.

Thanks to my editor Goli, and my early readers for honest
feedback:

Laura, Alex, Andrew, Thomas, and Adam.

ONE

Dinner With An Alien



I stared with growing horror at the extraterrestrial across the table. It wasn't that I found the Throad ambassadorial assistant unsettling. Dealing with Extras was my job, and it just looked like an uprooted tree stump perched on a pair of stainless steel ostrich legs. What killed my appetite were the words coming out of it, which was that human excrement was an unmatched aphrodisiac.

"It's truly fantastic stuff," it said in a vibrant tenor. "Our entire ambassadorial office acquired enough to saturate ourselves during a departmental orgy. I believe the English idiom is 'mind blowing.'" It ruffled its tendrils in what was supposed to be an indication of respect. In this context, it felt more like a leer.

It's a good thing my dinner wasn't great, I had lost my appetite. Possibly forever.

I was too stunned to reply. "We all found ourselves doing things well outside of our physical contracts. Willingly!" it said with enthusiasm. It leaned toward me. "What is the human biological equivalent of tapping the engorged fourth ventral cavity?" it asked, leering again.

The extraterrestrials had all shown up, each species with its own ship, at the same moment nearly two years ago. It was time, they had said, to make introductions. Forty-eight completely different civilizations with their own technologies, and thousands—or millions—of years of unique history and culture each. Earth was ready, they

said. Ready for what, they didn't say.

And then they more or less ignored us.

Earth reeled, of course. Riots, panic, fear, speculation, conspiracy. But the extraterrestrials continued to do nothing. They were still mysterious, but they were in orbit and we had tangible trouble to deal with closer to home. Natural disasters and political conflict pushed them from the headlines. General interest (and terror) waned and it was time to get down to business. The Extras made it known they weren't here to conquer us, for the obvious reason that they would have done it already.

The Throad's nearest tendrils quivered. "Ah, but it would only bore you to hear of our clumsy, primitive attempts. You are, after all, quite intimate with it and you must be masters of using your own effluvium to its best effect." It paused to withdraw some tentacles and reach out with others. "Can you give me advice to make the best use of it? If I could outperform my partners it would improve my standing in my contract group."

I didn't have to make eye contact with someone who had no eyes so, I stared at my messy plate of *polenta alla bolognese* and found the brown sauce all too reminiscent of the subject at hand. My stomach started looking for the nearest exit.

It reconfigured its tendrils again. "I think I understand. A virtuoso never wants to give away its secrets. Perhaps you can just give me some hints? Do you change your digestive intake to alter the final properties? Smooth to create a romantic adventure, chunky to create an exciting one?"

I had a coughing fit into my napkin. "Uh, no, I don't do that," I muttered.

"Hmm," it said in a way that suggested it was adjusting its estimates of my sexual performance downward. "Regardless, I will be sure you receive an invitation to our next orgy." Little tendrils on the branch

nearest me reached in my direction. Each one had a tiny glistening suction cup at the end.

One of the few things the extraterrestrials had made clear was that they wouldn't deal with the nations of Earth separately. They needed a single point of contact. In response, the UN created the Extraterrestrial Contact and Outreach Organization. Officially we shortened it to ECOO (pronounced "echo"), but casually we called it *The Embassy*. A few optimistic jokers called it Starfleet Command.

The United States had donated an old navy airbase in San Francisco Bay for our headquarters, complete with Starport One, the official name of several miles of old runway intended for landing starships, though at this point we didn't even know if starships needed landing fields.

About 90% of ECOO was made up of the Earth Nations Council, the human-facing side of the organization. It was like a junior United Nations where representatives of every country gathered to argue over access to the Extras and their technology. However, at this point, nobody had any access to *any* of the Extras *or* their technology, so it was mostly just a simmering group of frustrated bureaucrats.

They primarily aimed their frustrations at my section, the Office of Extraterrestrial Trade and Diplomacy. ExTraD is the side of the organization that officially interacts with extraterrestrials. We have a staff of seven, including two assistants and three part-time phone sitters. And that is still too many people for the amount of work we had. The head of the section is Earth Ambassador Abby Ling, who is technically the first point of contact between Earth and Extras. She's a lifetime politician, a xenophobe, and my immediate boss.

My official title is the Deputy Head of Mission of the Extraterrestrial Contact and Outreach Organization's Office Of Extraterrestrial Trade and Diplomacy. It takes

up the entire front of my business card. It meant I was the junior ambassador.

Working in ExTraD is career purgatory. We have all the pressure of representing Earth to the Extras and we have to answer to the demands of the Earth Nations Council. But since the Extras rarely return our calls, we have no ability to do anything. There is no chance of being promoted within the department, and since it's theoretically the most prestigious post in the organization there is no chance of being promoted out of it. There are, however, many opportunities to get fired. Whoever gets assigned here is being punished for something.

I was being punished for not living up to the expectations of my powerful, political parents.

There were hazy rumors about what Abby Ling was being punished for. She'd been the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the People's Republic of China for twelve years. If she had been as much of an abrasive glory hog there as she was here, I could see why they would want to get rid of her.

She's one of those people who is so uncharismatic and focused on work that no one refers to her by name. We just call her The Ambassador, capital letters and all. She loathes extraterrestrials and only interacts with them when it's absolutely necessary. She defines "absolutely necessary" as when she can claim credit for something good. Any other work and all blame she passes down to the rest of the section. Which is just me, Benjamin Taylor, twenty-nine-year-old son of a senator.

But hey, at least I get to talk to extraterrestrials.

"Your species takes such joy in its effluent, it makes me a bit jealous," the Throad continued, oblivious to my increasingly desperate body language. I had gulped a glass of merlot with the hope that alcohol would shield my brain from what was being forced into it. "The word 'shit' is one of your most common, a true multipurpose

word, invoked more often than your deities. You spend so much time and energy collecting it, moving it, processing it. I've heard every house, almost every building, has at least one room with a dedicated altar to it, complete with a throne! At popular gatherings people form queues to access such altars." It pulled all of its fronds back, tilting back easily on its exoskeleton and considered something. "Are your discharges, perhaps, used for a more special purpose? A primary or secondary form of communication? Should I provide some of my own excrement for your examination to help further our relations?"

The real problem with our section (or "organ" in UNSpeak) isn't that the Extras ignore us, but that there is nothing that they need from us. Our technology is almost prehistoric. Any material goods or mineral wealth is easier to find closer to home. Our musicians, sculptors, performers, and other artists produce nothing original or even appealing to them. So there is little for my section to do except to think of ways our backwater planet could pique the interest of races that could travel between stars.

One idea I had was the Extraterrestrial Integration and Excursion Program, EIEP. I pronounced it 'Eep' but I called it Date Night. It was time spent one-on-one with an Extra ambassador (or, like tonight, their assistant) outside of the formal ambassadorial roles. The Extras would be introduced to Human culture by participating in traditional Earth activities, and we would hopefully learn something about them as well. Much to everyone's surprise, several of the Extras were eager to join in.

Unfortunately I had come up with the idea before I discovered The Ambassador's xenophobia, and was surprised when she assigned me the job of playing gracious host to our off-planet visitors.

Drinks, dinner, and a show. Quiet conversation and maybe a long walk on the beach. Getting to know each

other, just like a date. Except no intimate physical contact, and if it went poorly they wouldn't simply ignore my calls, they would simply sterilize the planet.

So tonight, while The Ambassador was deep in an after-hours meeting to decide if our official demonym should be Earthlings, Earthers, or Terrans, I was in an Italian restaurant being asked if I could get my hands on my boss's poop.

“Your Ambassador is the first among your people. Her post-digestive treasure would be a singular gift. It would further our two species' intercourse.” It leered again.

Normally this is where I would excuse myself, go to the bathroom, and regain my composure. For some reason that didn't appeal to me at the moment. I hoped there would be a time, somewhere in the distant future, where I could go to the bathroom without recalling this conversation.

“Yours' is a complex substance, impossible for us to replicate. Each a bit different. Perhaps not unlike your wine?” The waiter had just refilled my glass, but now I eyed it with hostility. “Under other circumstances we'd be willing to trade for your effluvia. But ...” It bobbed its stump up and down a bit. If I remembered my briefing correctly, that indicated regret.

There was something it said that was important, but all I heard was a potential exit to an awful conversation and I leapt at it. “But what?”

His woody tendrils curled inward. Confusion? “Buthut?”

The Throad talked fluently and without accent (or their implants or translators or symbionts did), so despite appearances, I forgot I wasn't talking to a native speaker. I never knew what was going to trip them up. The Throad didn't appear to use a translating device, but I had no idea how it was talking. Or listening. Or what any of its seven senses were. “What other circumstances keep you from

trading for our... With us?" I asked, stuttering.

"With regret, the Klovik," it said, shifting itself in its exoskeleton with little rustling noises.

I was unable to eat my food for conversational reasons, and it couldn't eat human food for biological reasons, so our plates had sat undisturbed for most of the night. For the first time, it picked up the fork, knife, and spoon in wads of bifurcated appendages and started toying with them. If it had been human I would've guessed it was suddenly uncomfortable.

"The Klovik," I said, happy to participate in a sane conversation for a change. "We haven't had a lot of contact with them. They seem to keep to themselves." Even more than the other Extras, which was saying something. "What can you tell me about them?" I asked, trying to pull a nugget of useful information out of this date.

"Hmm, yes," it said. The utensils were not made for tendril-based life forms. It couldn't keep a grip on the knife or the spoon, and held the fork backwards, twining thinner roots between its tines. "They have other ways of getting to know species." It fidgeted a bit more, then shook a branch of tendrils to disengage the fork, which clattered to the table. "Tell me," it asked, "Why do your chefs prepare food that's too big to fit in your mouth? Cutting it into smaller pieces should be a standard part of proper food preparation, should it not?"

It was obviously trying to change the subject. I was happy to play along.

TWO

The Ambassador



That, believe it or not, was the fun part of my job. Extraterrestrials weren't all like that, but they were all unique and fascinating puzzles, and I loved deciphering them. They were truly *alien* in a way that another human, or even another Earth creature could never be. That made the rest of my job almost worth it.

The Throad ambassador hadn't wanted to hold hands or take a long walk on the beach, so I got to bed on time. The next morning I was in the office early, working on my report and doing a little cultural exchange with my assistant Mohit.

Our desks were at right angles to each other, which made it easy to divide our time between work and conversation. He looked up from his tablet. When he had my attention, he said, "A monkey does not know the taste of ginger."

Since he had recently moved to the US to join The Embassy, and my job was trying to understand very foreign cultures, Mohit and I filled our time exchanging cultural minutiae. Lately it had been aphorisms. We were both learning more about our own cultures than the others'.

I leaned back from my desk and gave the apparently traditional Indian saying some thought. "Just a guess, but I think it means it's hard to appreciate things you've never been exposed to," I said.

A smile lit up Mohit's already boyish face. "My

mother always says it as a great insult against fools who cannot appreciate nice things. But I like your meaning better.”

“Your mother might like the English phrase ‘Pearls before swine’,” I said.

He gave me the dubious look that said he thought I was making stuff up. “I may need some assistance translating that,” he said.

The Ambassador breezed into my office, which meant it was nine o’clock exactly. As usual, she stopped right up against my desk, letting me know that my personal space was of no concern, neither noticing nor caring that she interrupted a conversation. She pinned me with a steady gaze as she slowly raised her full coffee mug to her nose and inhaled deeply.

One of the perks of our division is that it’s aspirationally funded. No one in charge of budgets wants to be blamed if we messed up inter-Extra relations over underfunding. This was a government-like organization, so if we didn’t spend it, we lost it.

And because our legitimate budget was small, we ended up spending it on things like a Swiss coffee roaster for our break room. The Ambassador had claimed it as her own and made her personal assistant arrive an hour early to create one perfect cup of coffee. When it was ready, The Ambassador paraded her fresh brew around the office, making sure everyone could smell it and know that there was only one cup—hers. She had caused it to exist. She even had a locked humidior to store her beans and grounds in environmentally controlled security.

She eyed me like I was trouble and took her time savoring a noisy sip. With her daily ritual complete, she got to business. “Anything Earth-shattering?” she asked. This was not her idea of humor. She believed it was possible—if not inevitable—that I would commit a faux pas big enough to bring about the end of the world.

“No,” I said, glancing up from my tablet, ignoring her

provocative coffee enjoyment. I preferred tea, but I wasn't going to let her know that. She'd find a way to ruin it for me.

I knew she was in her early fifties, but her thin, sour face looked ageless. At 180 centimeters, she was nearly my height, but couldn't weigh more than 45 kilos. (ECOO was big on using the metric system.) I always had the impression that she was starving, hungry for more meetings and paperwork.

"The report will be in your queue in half an hour," I added.

As usual, she didn't even nod. She turned without a word, whipping her long horse's tail of black hair across my desk, and swept off to her own office across the hall.

Through the open office doors I heard similarly terse exchanges with the office secretary and her own assistant. That was good news—it meant she was busy with her own work today and was unlikely to pass anything back down to me.

Mohit and I exchanged smiles of good fortune. "I often worry about why she is so unhappy," he said.

"I bet your mother would have some advice."

"That is a certainty. Though I suspect none of it would be appreciated."

"Okay, here's a saying I've never understood," I said, putting our conversation back on track. "There are no atheists in foxholes."

Mohit put his hands behind his head and leaned back, staring at the ceiling and pursing his lips.

"I've been told it means that when you're in trouble you'll believe in God, but I never got it," I said. "I always thought if I was laying in the dirt with death raining around me killing my friends and with no hope of escape, that would turn me into an atheist. No decent God would let that happen to one of his children."

Mohit was still lost in thought. "Of course you know that I served in the army before I was called to the Special

Protection Group,” he said distantly.

I cringed. Mohit was so boyish and easygoing, and his duties so rarely martial, that I had forgotten the path that had brought him here. His neat and efficient haircut suddenly looked like it had been trimmed to military order.

He had fought terrorists while in the Indian army. I didn't know the details, but knew he had been decorated for risking his life to save the members of his squad during an ambush. His valor brought him to the attention of India's Special Protection Group, their equivalent of the Secret Service. He'd then protected his President for four years before transferring over to ECOO.

When I was out on a date with an Extra, he was on hand as my security liaison, but otherwise he was happy hanging out in the office with me. He had taken the assignment at The Embassy as an honorable retirement after his President was impeached. He had never talked about his time in the army, only referring to it obliquely, if at all.

His gaze was fixed on the past. “There was a time, much like you described. It was hot and dusty. Gunfire was bringing death to those around me. I found my spiritual side became stronger than I have ever known. I truly believed that my soul would find a new body after death. Before, it had only been a convenient thought.”

I tried imagining myself in that kind of situation, and failed. “My God doesn't do reincarnation,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

His focus returned to the room and his face brightened. “Then let us hope you never find yourself in a foxhole,” he said.

The morning passed uneventfully. I sent my report to The Ambassador and fretted over a few innocuous questions that Public Relations had sent for comment. Mohit and I were picking the remains of lunch out of our teeth and

comparing American Beatniks and Indian Hungryalists when The Ambassador stuck her head through the door to my office and jerked it toward her own. I was summoned.

Mohit gave me a consoling look as I grabbed my tablet and followed her across the wide hall through the double doors to her office. As I passed the office secretary and The Ambassador's assistant, I tried to get a sense of what I was in for. Both of them conspicuously avoided eye contact.

In her spacious but sparse office, she waited for me to sit down before waving a hand at her tablet. "Ben, what is this shit?" It was showing my report.

I had two conflicting reactions. The first was annoyance that she still insisted on calling me "Ben". The second was to laugh at both her awkward pronunciation of American vulgarity and her topical choice of words.

I let the two reactions fight it out and mostly kept a straight face while I tried to give a straight answer. "Well, ma'am, that was how the ambassadorial assistant put the request, and I know how desperate we are to have something—anything—to export off planet, so I thought —"

"Not that." I had been there long enough to recognize all of her extensive portfolio of scathing expressions. She had one particular look that was identical to the one my mother gave me when she found out I was the only kid in my class who couldn't tie my own shoes. The ambassador used it now.

"This," she said, tracing a line of text as she read from her screen. "There is an unspecified conflict with the Klovic that prevents exports of this nature." She glared back at me. "If you know how desperate we are to generate exports, why didn't you find out what the conflict was?" She put an exclamation point on her question by slapping her hand on her desk.

I stuttered a bit. "Uh, a date—an EIEP outing—is supposed to be an informal cultural exchange and avoid

diplomatic topics.” Defending myself with official policy seemed like a great idea, so I rolled onward. “I reported the information, as well as the Klovic’s mysterious ‘other ways’ of gathering information so that this office could followup through formal channels.” That felt right. That was policy. Unimpeachable.

For some reason throwing her own policy at her only earned me an icy glare. My confidence was broken but my mouth kept talking. “Besides, it was nervous.”

She looked at me like I had dropped some Throad aphrodisiac on her desk. “Nervous.” It was a statement, not a question, but I answered it anyway.

“It was restless, playing with its utensils. Dropped its knife and spoon.”

Back to the You Disappointing Idiot look. “You didn’t feed it any of our food, did you? You know what that does to them.”

“No, I didn’t feed it.” She had a way of making me feel like I was a dog that had chewed her favorite shoe. “The Throad had very specific body language all evening, but when we started talking about the Klovic it was all different. It withdrew and started fidgeting. And it changed the subject.”

“To what?”

“Why we cut our food.”

She took a while to digest that. “After reading this piece of...” she waved a dismissive hand at my report and bit back a word, “I spent ten minutes talking with the Throad ambassador and its assistant.” She said this like it was the worst thing she could possibly do. Like I hadn’t spent several hours doing the same thing last night. “They are adamant they never mentioned the Klovic and that you have made a mistake.”

What could I say? For diplomatic reasons the dates weren’t recorded, at least as far as I knew, so it was my word against theirs.

She doubled up on her glare. “It also asked for ten

kilograms of my excrement.”

I would have sacrificed a lot to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation. I cleared my throat to stifle a laugh. “Did you...?”

“It’s under consideration. Then,” she continued before I could really put my foot in it, “I spent an hour pulling every last string I had trying to set up a meeting with the Klovic ambassador.”

I swallowed in a suddenly dry throat. This was bad. Worse. Because of me she had pulled strings. Now I owed her a set of replacement strings. I didn’t have any strings. My experience was more on the marionette side. Her stare made it clear how expensive this had been for her.

“I failed,” she said at last. “He refused to see me.”

“Ah.” I knew she’d find a way to make it my fault. I wondered what the punishment was going to be.

She told me.

“But you,” she said, jabbing a finger at me, “have a date tonight.”

THREE

Dinner, Again



Date Nights are staged. We try to keep an authentic appearance, but all of the “public” venues are vetted in advance and rented out for the occasion. The locations are populated with ECOO security or staff who want to eat and drink on the organization’s tab. This gives the restaurants, bars, and other locations some ambiance while keeping the cranks, crazies, and gawkers away. Or at least on the other side of the glass.

Since vetting and organizing locations takes weeks, we hastily decided to reuse the location from last night. That meant that for the second night in a row I was sitting in an Italian restaurant not eating dinner.

The Klovic ambassador had demanded a window seat. I thought he might have an affinity for glass, as he was more see-through than most people, but when I asked he (all Klovic are “he”) said no. In fact glass was completely opaque to his senses, but apparently the street traffic gave off interesting vibrations. I was not so lucky since, to human vision, much of his body was transparent or translucent.

The Klovic ambassador was reminiscent of a pony-sized caterpillar. Most of his body was a thick tube, three meters long with four pair of stubby legs near the bottom and three pair of stubby arms near the top. He stood on all eight feet and held himself upright, curving his body into an L. He didn’t have an identifiable head, and the top half meter of his body was where he kept his short, wrist-like

arms and stubby three-fingered hands.

His entire length was covered with transparent, thick whiskers or quills that twitched as he moved his torso around as if smelling the air. Circling his arms and legs the hairs were thick, essentially making his coat opaque. However around his mid-section they were short and sparse.

When I let my eyes stray I could make out translucent internal organs going about their business. Headlights from passing cars refracted through them occasionally. Being able to see his digestion so vividly actively disrupted my own.

My dossier said Klovic would eat any kind of human food, but it didn't mention the unique method they used to do it. The ambassador started by leaning into the bowl of tortellini and his body's bristles picked up pasta and globs of sauce and conveyed them to the top of his body. It was pulled into a hidden orifice and shredded with a waspish humming sound. It was like watching a reverse mudslide. Of Italian food.

"What is the purpose of this meeting?" he demanded while food was still sliding into his orifice. The harsh voice came from a crystal bangle he wore on one stubby wrist.

It was a curious question. I was surprised he would show up without being briefed. My own briefing was pretty meager since we simply didn't know much about them, but at least I knew the agenda.

"This is a chance to interact with humans in a natural setting, outside of formal diplomacy," I said.

"Diplomacy. Synonym for information gathering," he declared. Klovic either declared or demanded. Conversation was not their forte.

"I like to think of it as cooperative information sharing," I said, diplomatically. Outside the window a young boy had grabbed his mother's hand and was dragging her our direction, pointing vigorously at the

ambassador. I noticed Mohit, as undercover liaison to the security detail, hanging around outside wearing a 49ers hoodie over his starched shirt and tie. He didn't like being undercover, he thought that security worked best when everyone knew about it. He was lounging against a lamppost and pretending to send messages on his mobile. He glanced at the family, decided they were no threat, and went back to his mobile.

“You will share information,” the ambassador demanded. He put the empty bowl onto the top of his body like a hat and scrubbed it clean with some of his larger bristles. “What did the Throad say talking about us?”

The Klovic's translator was far from perfect. “Ah, well, that was a private conversation,” I said. I wondered if it was possible to *not* talk business with a Klovic.

There was the usual pause before he responded. I suspected his bracelet took some time to translate for him. “It was not private. Conversation was in a public place. This place. Tell me.”

This was not in my briefing. All The Ambassador had said was, literally, “Find out what's going on and don't screw it up.” My guideline from the nascent security division was “Don't betray any strategic information.” I thought that was unlikely because I didn't know any strategic information. But now the Klovic had asked something that seemed strategic and I could either answer or not. If I did answer, I had the choice of telling the truth, which the Throad had denied, or lying, and keeping the peace with the Throad. I didn't know how this Klovic would react to either of these options.

I was going to screw it up.

“It said—that is the Throad ambassadorial assistant said—that trade between us—that is between Earthlings, Terrans, whatever, and the Throad—were restricted because of the Klovic. It did not elaborate.” His blunt speaking style was starting to rub off on me.

He finished licking the bowl clean with a pattering like heavy rain on a window, passed it down between his pairs of hands in a surprisingly elegant gesture, and placed it back on the table. “What do you require for an overnight stay?” he asked.

This caught me by surprise. Spending the night with an Extra? With *this* Extra? He wasn't suggesting that, right? He was just asking an innocent question, curious about human traditions. Or maybe dinner for a Klovic took all night. I had no idea, so I went to my usual refuge: humor. It was often a mistake with Extras since they never understood it, but it was a hard habit to break and it could sometimes distract them.

A dozen awful jokes flashed into my head. At least I had enough presence of mind to pick the least risqué. “Just a toothbrush,” I said with a wry smile. I couldn't shake the feeling that he was asking a serious question. How far was I expected to take Date Night?

“We will go walk on the beach,” he demanded.

Eep.

FOUR

The Beach



As part of our budget overflow The Embassy had built a custom limousine for our Extra guests. It was some kind of converted Land Rover bus thing designed to cart around beings of arbitrary morphology. It was supposed to be bulletproof and bomb-resistant too, though those features hadn't been put to the test yet. The Klovic ambassador had more than enough room to stand upright in the back, while I sat in front next to the driver. Mohit and half of the security detail were in a car in front, with the rest trailing behind.

We were headed for the beach at Aquatic Park. The ambassador was unsettling me and Aquatic Park was the closest, smallest beach, so I hoped this would keep his long walk on the beach as brief as possible. It was also next to Fisherman's Wharf and there would be a lot of tourists around this time of the evening. That made it something of a security nightmare, but if he went in for a kiss I'd have lots of witnesses.

The driver pulled past the cable car turnaround and into the short dead-end street between the park and the beach. While the undercover security dispersed into the area, the ambassador scuttled down the ramp at the back of the limo. It was a standard San Francisco summer evening, so I pulled my suit jacket tight to protect me from the chill blowing in from the ocean. A couple of miles to our left the fog had consumed most of the Golden Gate Bridge, leaving only the top and bottom of its towers

visible in the gloomy twilight. I gestured for the ambassador to lead the way, a gesture he probably didn't understand but he led the way anyway.

He trundled past the public restrooms and into the sand. He stopped and wiggled a bit, as if to check his footing, then scuttled off along the narrow stretch of beach. He moved briskly and I had to trot to catch up, filling my dress shoes with grit.

He stopped in the center of the beach in the wet sand just above the reach of the waves and stood facing the bay. When I caught up, he declared, "We will wait."

And wait we did. Except for the cold, which I was nearly used to after living in San Francisco for nine months, it wasn't a bad place to wait. The little beach had piers surrounding it, making it a sheltered cove. Happy and curious tourists were everywhere. Two antique sailing vessels were berthed to our right, and beyond them the Alcatraz lighthouse cast its eye around the bay. Across the water the glistening lights of Sausalito were taking their time to twinkle before being smothered by the inevitable fog.

The ambassador was a world-champion waiter. He stood patiently, his upper body moving slowly in a figure eight, his internal organs doing whatever it was that they did. I counted the time between blasts of the foghorn (thirty-six seconds) and how many times the Alcatraz lighthouse flashed in a minute (twelve).

Twice I asked what we were waiting for but he only repeated, "We will wait." And so I hugged myself warm and waited. I looked for more things to count, pondering the grains of sand at my feet. There was some boat traffic this evening. Ferries, a container ship. A somewhat reckless speedboat, which seemed unusual.

We made a great photo, the two of us standing still, side-by-side on the beach, gazing out into the water at dusk. But it made me nervous, being exposed out here. I didn't feel physically vulnerable because I trusted the

security team and knew they'd take care of us if anyone started trouble. But I could hear a crowd gathering behind us, and I felt like I was on display. I could hear the tourists back there muttering to each other, making smart-ass comments, speculating. Shooting lots of photos and video, sharing them with friends. In San Francisco, a city famous for its weirdos, a true extraterrestrial was still notable.

I hazarded a glance back and spotted our security people well mixed with the crowd. Everyone was keeping their distance and behaving. Mostly waiting to see what would happen next.

I was exposed and on display. What were those people seeing? Did I have an embarrassing sweat stain? Had I split my pants? Was my cowlick more visible than usual? Of course they were all looking at the alien next to me. Unless there was some embarrassing reason for them to look at me.

I fretted for a while and tried to casually pull my pant leg out of my shoe. I made a mental note to keep a fresh suit at the office in case of emergency dates. The crowd was getting lots of photos of my creased and wrinkled back.

I decided there wasn't a comprehensible reason we were waiting. Extras were inscrutable more often than not, and my guess was that this was just something that the Klovic did. Maybe it was meditating or digesting or waiting for a sign. Maybe it thought this was what humans did on a date.

"I will hold your hand," he said suddenly.

"Uh..."

The ambassador bent toward me and grabbed my wrist with one of its stubby, bristle-covered hands. I tried not to cringe. Or panic. This was the first time I—or anyone on Earth—had made physical contact with an Extra. To keep from freaking out I tried to focus on the weird speedboat that was now headed into the cove.

The next moment the world was full of cold water and it was all trying to go up my nose. I sputtered and coughed and flailed, but I couldn't move correctly. I tried flailing my arms, but my left was firmly gripped in the Klovic's three right hands, and my other arm was trapped as my jacket tried to slide off my back. I finally realized the ambassador was pulling me through the water. I kicked, trying to get my head far enough above the water for a solid breath. My feet encountered something rubbery. I was kicking the Klovic ambassador. Good, I hope he had sensitive reproductive organs down there.

I flailed around some more and glimpsed enough to get an idea of what was happening. He was dragging me into the bay at an impressive speed, headed directly for the speedboat I had noticed earlier.

Another flail and I collected a lung full of water, but I got a better look at the speedboat, which was looking less like any watercraft I had seen before. It appeared to be made of crystal and had an awkward, blocky shape. It had pulled into the gap between the piers and killed its throttle. Or at least stopped moving. Something about it suggested it moved in silence.

All of this activity was well beyond what I found acceptable on a first date. Security wasn't prepared for anything like this. Their training was to protect the Extras from humans, not the other way around. Their procedures were all based on the premise that the Extras would behave and humans were the troublemakers. And by now I was well out of range of anything they could do.

I coughed up enough water to catch a breath and kicked ruthlessly at whatever parts the ambassador had available. Earlier in the day I would have been mortified about causing an interplanetary incident. But at that moment I had a premonition of what the rest of the night was going to bring and I didn't want any part of it.

The Klovic surged. I thought my jacket was going to choke me as he pulled me upward. For a second we left

the water, which was nice. Until we landed in the boat,
me on the bottom.

This is just the very beginning! If you liked this sample, [the remaining 90% awaits you.](#)

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