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## Confessions Of A Little Green Man

### Chapter 1

#### Humans

Arbii (Ar-bee) was an alien. No, not the kind who comes from another country and who is, in reality, so similar on a genetic level that the term ‘alien’ has no real meaning. He was that other type: what you might call the real deal, a traveler from another planet, a being born under a different sun. A creature that was so different, in so many ways that the term ‘alien’ simply did not go far enough.

It was a simple enough truth and one that Arbii had never given much thought to. Until now. Because today he was angry, so mad in fact that for the first time since his arrival on Earth, he positively yearned to have direct contact with humans, if only to get the chance to set the world to rights, to tell his side of the story, to explain how things really are in the cosmos.

If he could have demonstrated down the streets of Times Square with banners and flags protesting for equal alien rights and an end to alien discrimination, he would have, right there and then.

Of course, the means to appear in Times Square or any other square for that matter stood a short ten-minute walk away, but he conveniently glossed over

that fact, preferring just to seethe and stare at the end credits of the TV show that hovered in the air in front of him.

The aliens on this so-called entertainment drama were small and thin, and they seemed to possess all the charm, charisma, and character of blocks of wood performing to an audience made up of thick planks. Watching this grossly inaccurate portrayal of alienkind made his green blood boil.

Just what was it with Earthlings anyway? He pondered in a simmering fashion. Why did aliens always look like grown-up baby humans? Why did they always have big black eyes, overly large heads, and no sense of humor? Why did they never speak? And why did they always wear silver jumpsuits? Arbii shook his head in an effort as much to clear it as to express his disbelief, and with a deft flick of his hand, he swatted away the offending program.

If humans were constantly being portrayed by others as savages, interested only in sex, money, and power, then perhaps they would understand how he felt...

...but then again, perhaps not.

He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. Of course, he had long known of the stereotypes, though he had never actually seen alien kind portrayed on the small screen before. He looked down at his turquoise and green nano-suit that resembled a futuristic wetsuit with organically shaped pads. Better than being naked, he supposed.

When aliens weren't all busy going to the same interstellar tailor, they apparently liked nothing more than to walk around wearing...nothing. They could build spaceships capable of traversing the stars and yet they couldn't be bothered to make or wear any clothes and, of course, when they do, their clothes are always silver!

Arbii let out an annoyed huff, it was time to put these stereotypes to rest, he decided, springing up from his chair and walking over to the white wall of his room. With a finger, he drew the outline of a large oblong and with a tap, a tall, rectangular mirror returned his gaze.

"Display some pictures of human males, bald, twenty-five to thirty-five years of age," Arbii said to the computer.

A large holo-screen floated above the tablet computer on his desk containing thousands of images of humans fitting his description. “No, no, display them on the wall.”

The array of photos instantly appeared next to the mirror. He chose one picture at random and tapped it, and in an instant, the image grew to the same size as his reflection in the mirror. The human then began moving, copying his every gesture.

Arbii had never directly compared himself to a human before and he was quite surprised at how stark the differences were. He did indeed appear markedly smaller and thinner, and his head and eyes were unmistakably larger. From his perspective though, it was the human’s head and eyes that were too small for its body.

He had no hair, no eyebrows or eyelashes, but he had strong eye ridges and a wider, more expansive face than that of the human standing beside his reflection. His brown eyes were almost the same color as the human’s and his skin was not gray or green but a shade of brown not dissimilar to, and he went and chose another photo of a darker-skinned bald male and posted it on the other side of the mirror, this human here.

He smiled and the two humans standing either side of his reflection smiled back. He stuck out a green tongue and the humans rudely replied. He puffed up his cheeks, crossed his eyes, and scrunched his face so tightly it was fit to burst. And then, in the squeakiest of voices from the tiniest corner of his mouth, he ordered the computer to, “Freeze.”

The images of the humans either side of him stopped in their tracks and Arbii burst into a series of noisy chuckles. “You know, I honestly think you look better that way.” He then made a few adjustments to his nano-suit’s collar and it quickly morphed into a silver jumpsuit. He gasped; he actually did look a little like those aliens on...

But before he could reflect on the matter further, he decided to deflect the matter instead, and with a touch and a gesture, the two humans were suddenly saddled with the same unsuitable suit, and this combined with their exaggerated expressions made them look very silly indeed.

Many of his friends thought humans didn't need strange expressions or outlandish clothes to look silly. They could do a pretty bang-up job of that all by themselves, and who was he to argue.

As he stared at the humans, an idea grew and he grinned. He reached out and tapped the human images on their heads at the same time. He watched as hair sprung from their once bald heads and grew and kept growing longer and frizzier. "Guitars," he said to the computer. Star-shaped electric guitars suddenly appeared in the hands of alien and human alike. Arbii smiled. It was just like being at holo-karaoke night.

"Microphone please," he said, turning to the computer. A holographic microphone and stand magically appeared in front of him. Arbii held up a finger. "Get it on, if you will." The guitars started up and he began nodding his head up and down to the music and strutting around the room in exaggerated motions and then he started to sing.

What 'it' was or quite why they had to 'get it on' he had no idea. Equally nonsensical was the idea of 'banging a gong' especially as there was none in the arrangement, not that any of it mattered as just singing the strange words in the song made him feel great.

Several songs later (including an obligatory encore to the thousands of adoring holo-fans that had now surrounded the room) and Arbii felt ready to take on the world, only he couldn't do that wearing a silver jumpsuit. So he returned to the block of photos and chose a man wearing a rather fetching three-piece number, and with a simple flick of his fingers he, his two human mimics, and his adoring fans promptly changed attire.

Now, this was more like it, he thought to himself. He took a deep breath, puffed out his chest, and admired himself in the suit. He could hear his fans screaming in adulation. Arbii nodded his head in approval and dismissed the men, the mirror, the fans, and the photos with a backhanded swipe.

He then walked over to his desk, switched his computer to screen mode, and ordered a coffee from the Intraxus universal food and drink dispenser. (*For when you just can't wait. Food you'll always appreciate.™*)

His smile gradually faded, and he grabbed the coffee, took a sip, and slumped onto his chair. He wished he could be in a real band with humans. He wished he could have real human friends. He wished he could do more than simply monitor Homo sapiens from the safety of his base. Arbii planted an elbow on the desk, cradled his head in his hand, and exhaled a quiet, wistful sigh.

Arbii wanted to like humans. He wanted to sympathize with them and see their world as they saw it. He loved singing their songs, learning their languages, wearing their clothes, exploring their media, and even, at times, eating their foods. And yet despite all that, he felt no closer to really understanding them.

His look changed to one of grim determination. He put the coffee cup on the desk and sat bolt upright. He was not giving up, dammit, he thought to himself, and he slapped the top of the desk hard to drive home the point. The little alien then paused and gave the table a guilty look before meekly checking under his hand to make sure he hadn't damaged the wood. Finding the desk's surface had coped with his frustration rather better than his hand had. Arbii then went about pulling open a drawer and removing the diary and pencil. He took a deep breath and steeled himself as he strove to overcome his greatest human challenge yet: the art of putting one's thoughts to paper.

It was, as he had quickly found out, an exercise in extreme patience. The notion of quite why any being would want to write a diary was most confusing. Don't humans know what they think? Is their memory so bad that they must write everything down? And exactly what should he write? All of his thoughts or only the most important? And then how do you decide which thoughts are the most important? The ones you can change or the ones that you can't do anything about? It was all so very confusing.

Still, he persevered and these were the first words that he wrote (and not consigned to the bin).

*I think I have made a big mistake coming here.*

A fact he felt was so obvious that it did not need to be written down, but he wrote it anyway and followed it up with more facts that did not need to be written.

*I should have listened to my sister. I know that now, but since I'm stuck here for the foreseeable future, I guess I'm just going to have to make the best of it.*

He had been 'stuck' on Earth for a mere eight months. Actually, 'stuck in' Earth was more appropriate, as he resided in an underground facility located some two hundred miles under The Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, USA.

It was a very nice underground base, as underground bases went, replete with all the trappings of home. It had Zumerian food and drink, Robo-staff, entertainment in all its forms, virtual wallpapers, and even virtual weather.

He remembered how impressed he had been when he had first arrived on Earth. The very idea of being an observer on a world that was 'off-limits' and 'pre-space revolution' had, at the time, sounded so exciting and exotic.

It was just the kind of thing that a historian of alien cultures like himself could get into. An unexpected jolt of realization assaulted his thoughts and he quickly scribbled into his diary.

*I think I finally understand the human expression 'too good to be true.'*

He paused before adding.

*It's not all bad; there are things that I do enjoy about my job, especially the monitoring of humans. They can be so weird and interesting. It's just that most of my time is spent monitoring the seven other alien species on this planet, and that, needless to say, is not very interesting at all.*

Arbii had been so lost in thought he hadn't noticed his data-pad was flashing. The boss wanted to see him. He put his pen and diary down, grabbed his tablet computer, and double-tapped its edge so that it shrunk. He then slipped the small computer in his jacket pocket and hurriedly made his way out.

It was at that very moment a sudden gust of inspiration swept through him and he quickly turned back, picked up his diary and pencil, and on a new blank page wrote what was later to become the infamous ‘List of unfathomable things.’ Actually, what he wrote was:

*Humans and a small list of unfathomable things about them.*

Followed by two initial entries:

*Making lists*

*Eating chocolate*

He set the diary down one last time and headed out to the main thoroughfare. The theme of the day was a country lane lined with cherry trees in full bloom. Millions of pink and white soft-hued petals danced and swirled on the ground as he walked. The houses that occasionally punctuated the rows of trees were tastefully dressed in log cabin finishes, and the sky was a bright rose-colored sunset hue that perfectly complemented the carpeted pink landscape below. On days like this, it was hard to know who had the upper hand, nature or the holo-weather engineers.

He followed the lane until he came to a large area full of buildings with several different routes branching off in many directions. This was the communal area. It had large log and stone styled restaurants, cafés, stores, bars, entertainment centers including virtual reality and holo-karaoke booths and some buildings that had no human equivalent.

A light orange Zumerian walked out of one of the bars wearing a green t-shirt and jeans. He had a rounded face, a rounded nose, and dark orange eyes that made him look like an overgrown cherub. A cherub with a taste for alcohol and for getting into trouble.

“Hi Arbii, how are you doing? Care to join me for a drink?”

“Hey, Treeba.” Arbii paused. “Erm, didn’t I just see you leave that bar?”

“Yeah, I needed to get some fresh air. I think a minute is probably long enough, so are you coming?”

“I wish I could, but I’ve got to see the boss.”

“Oh, so that’s why the snazzy suit.”

“I thought it was your day off.”

“It is.” Treeba looked momentarily confused.

“Well then, join me for some lunch! You have to eat, don’t you?”

“She is not going to be happy if I keep her waiting.”

“Man, she is not going to be happy if you don’t keep her waiting. I mean, this is the boss we’re talking about, right?”

“You turn up early and she’ll complain you’re interrupting her and she’ll make you wait for ages. If you turn up on time and she’ll say she’s busy and make you wait for ages, and if you turn up late and she’ll make you wait even longer than ages, just so that she can have a really good gripe at just how incredibly late you are.” Arbii smiled.

“You have a point,” he said and he followed his friend into the bar.

Arbii rarely frequented bars of any description be they the ones back home or the ones in the base. So he was surprised at the seeming authenticity of the place. It had a fireplace, a red patterned carpeted floor, wooden tables and chairs, a wooden counter, and wallpapered walls adorned with all sorts of Earth antiques. He could honestly believe that he was above ground in a real human bar. The only things that stood out were the alien clientele and the Robo-bartender who looked like a Zumerian made of metal, ceramic and glass.

“Two beers.”

“You know I don’t drink Earth alcohol.”

“Just give it a try. You might like it.”

“No thanks. I’ll just have a ginger ale,” Arbii said to the Robo-bartender

“And one of those.” He pointed to a meal on the food menu behind the counter.

“Ginger ale, huh. I thought you said you weren’t going to drink any alcohol,” Treeba commented with a sarcastic grin.

“It’s non-alcoholic.”

“Oh, then why is it called ale?” Arbii shrugged. They sat at the counter and raised their glasses, brought them together, and began drinking.

“So, how’s life at the science and cultural commission?” Treeba asked, after a large gulp of beer. Arbii sighed.

“It would be great if I didn’t have a boss from hell.”



“Is that what they’re calling Nevada these days? It could be worse,” Treeba said with a fearful stare.

“I don’t see how?”

“Well, she could be human.”

“Oh, talking about humans, that reminds me, I did that thing you told me that I should never ever do.”

“Which thing was that? There have been so many of them, I’ve lost count.”

“The thing about never watching a human drama with aliens.”

“Oh, that one,” Treeba laughed. “Were they the short, skinny type who can’t walk properly and have no sense of dress?” Arbii chuckled and nodded his head.

“Did they mutilate any cattle?”

“No.”

“Create any human hybrids?”

“No.”

“Abduct any humans?”

“No.”

“Try to take over the Earth with stupid and impractical weaponry.” Arbii nodded his head and laughed.

“Where do they get these crazy ideas?”

“I know,” Arbii said drawing out the word ‘know.’ “Can you imagine going to a party with humans.” Arbii stood up tweaked his collar until his three-piece suit turned silver and then put on a voice.

“Err, No, we don’t intend to take over of your world and no, we don’t want to mate with your women and.... well, yes, of course, your women are attractive, sort of...” Arbii gingerly explained with wide arms and several bobs of his head. “No, I’ve never abducted anyone, cross my heart, why yes, I do have a heart, in fact, I have two...” And he drew crosses with his fingers over his chest.

“Look, I have nothing against cows, they are perfectly nice creatures...well, you’re the ones that eat them and wear their skins...oops, sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you...” he said, looking as if he had just insulted the entire audience along with their relatives, their co-workers, and their dearly departed.

Treeba rocked back in his chair, burst out laughing, and clapped his hands a few times. “That’s brilliant.”

“Thanks, I’ve been studying stand-up comedians. I don’t understand most of their jokes, but I think I’m getting their mannerisms.”

“Absolutely, any more human and I’d be abducting you myself.” Treeba raised his glass. “To humans and their insane ideas!”

“To humans and their insane ideas!” Arbii echoed and the two Zumerians clashed glasses and heartily downed their drinks.

“You know, I don’t get why almost all the aliens on these shows look identical to humans. I mean, all they do is stick a few pointed ears or change the skin color and suddenly they are alien.” Arbii nodded his head emphatically.

“And I don’t get why we never go to work, relax at home or play with our offspring in these dramas. All we ever do is ‘kill humans’ and try to ‘take over the Earth,’” Arbii said, stressing each fact in a funny voice.

“It’s worse than that, we always fail.” Arbii sniggered.

His orange friend then finished off his beer and wandered off to the little alien’s room whilst Arbii tucked into his bubble and squeak, which he noticed, neither bubbled nor squeaked.

He looked around the pub. A couple of colleagues from C division were having a heated debate accompanied by perfect miniature versions of themselves projected from data-pads lying on the table. At another table, a lone figure was making wild gestures in the air, playing some kind of VR or AR game, no doubt. Whilst at the far end, a group was playing a brightly colored, multi-layered, virtual game of air hockey.

Arbii caught sight of the Robo-bar hand who seemed to stare at him somewhat disparagingly.

He looked down at his silver suit, cleared his throat and played with the collar. His attire took on a distinctly less flamboyant tone, and the robot nodded in approval and resumed cleaning the glasses. When Treeba returned, so did the topic at hand.

“So there I am in the toilet, thinking about humans as you do.”

“It’s called toilet humor. Humans love it.”

“Humans find toilets funny,” Arbii echoed with a brief skeptical look and a shake of his head. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Anyway, I was thinking, you know, every time I watch one of these sci-fi shows, all the aliens and robots always want to become human. Talk about low self-motivation,” he said, leaving a hand to hover a few inches from the table. “Humans are hardly the pinnacle of evolution, now are they? Their heads are too small for their bodies for a start.” Treeba turned to the robotic bartender.

“Would you want to become a Zumerian?”

“Are you asking me, sir, if I want to become a weak, fleshy being with a limited lifespan, an imperfect memory, unremarkable features, and an inflated, bordering on warped, sense of self?”

“Sorry, I thought you were talking about humans,” Treeba stated with a comical smile.

“I fail to see the difference,” the robot replied courteously.

“Oh, very good.” Treeba waved a pointed finger at the robot. Arbii smiled; Treeba was his oldest friend on the base. He was brash, brilliant, and a total outsider who didn’t get on well with authority, any authority. Naturally, they hit it off straight away.

“At least you can understand why this planet is under protective quarantine,” Treeba said as he sat back down. “Though I reckon it’s not to protect the humans from us, more about protecting alienkind from them.”

“You’re not kidding,” Arbii agreed, his attention focused on the two tabletop AIs. They had decided enough was enough and they stood with rapiers in hand, preparing to duel whilst their real, life-sized counterparts took to shouting and making stabbing motions at one another with their fingers.

“Sometimes, I wonder what we are doing here at all,” Arbii mused, resting his head in his hand.

“You know perfectly well it’s all about politics. We have to have a presence here for the day when we make official contact.”

“They have been saying that for over forty years — forty years!”

“Oh, here comes the ‘we should be making contact now’ speech.”

“Well, we should: what’s the point of being here if we never actually meet any humans?”

“You know the point, as one of the first races here—”

“We get preferential rights on all treatise signed. But when will that be?”

“Whenever those bureaucratic morons at the Galactic Council decide to get their act together.”

“So another hundred years then.”

“Give or take.”

Arbii glanced over at the patron playing the virtual game that no one else could see. The black and white cow-patterned fellow was clambering on the table, teetering on the edge trying to grasp something that wasn’t there.

“You know, humans are almost an advanced species now,” Arbii stated matter-of-factly causing Treeba to choke on his drink.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Treeba replied, wiping the beer from his mouth and chin.

“Ah, c’mon, they’re creating things, which is the very definition of species advancement. They’re creating artificial realities in much the same way that we do.”

Arbii gestured to the customer playing the game invisible to everyone else. The patron was now safely sitting on his chair, making wide swimming motions with his arms.

“And they are creating AIs and artificial constructs.” He pointed to the warring customers with the AI duplicates. The larger of the two was throwing beer mats at his colleague who was busily blocking them with a food tray. Meanwhile, their AIs had taken to hovering on virtual clouds attacking one another with lances and shields.

“Not only that but they are on the verge of creating artificial life and that makes them advanced and that means we should be contacting them right now,” Arbii demanded, hammering a frustrated finger on the table.

“But aren’t you forgetting war, famine, poverty...” Treeba’s eyes flicked upward as he struggled to think of more examples. “Conspiracy theorists. Oh, and rugby,” he added. Arbii sighed.

“Hmm, I guess you have a point.”

“And have you thought about what will happen if we do make contact official. We will be forced to meet their world leaders,” Treeba whispered with a melodramatic look of dread. “Sometimes, I think the GC has set this up to spare us from that horror.” Arbii huffed and gave a half-hearted grin.

“But if we don’t contact humans, then we’ll never get to know them or understand them.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t worry about that too much. Humans don’t understand themselves, let alone anything else. Look at the silly things they do: half the time they don’t even understand why they are doing them. The only thing they truly understand, are emotions.”

Arbii glanced at the far table where tensions had escalated. The data-pads on the table had expanded in size as had the holographic AIs. They now looked like alien judo combatants. They lunged at one another and fought and grappled, moving from data-pad to data-pad whilst their owners took to shouting and pointing with darting arm gestures.

“Yeah, everybody can relate to feelings. I mean, emotions are pretty much universal. Still, that doesn’t stop humans from being weird though.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“You know I’ve started writing a list of all the weird and unfathomable things humans think and do,” Arbii announced, sounding a little more upbeat.

“Now that’s a great idea!”

“I think if I write a list of all the things I don’t get about humans, it might help me understand them better.” It was Treeba’s turn to shake his head.

“Scratch what I just said, that’s an insane idea, but then humans are full of those.” And they raised glasses again.

“Humans!”

“Humans!”

And so it went on, with Treeba and his astute observations of humankind and Arbii trying to get a bite in edgewise until his data-pad vibrated and the screen flashed in annoying colors.

“I had better be going before this thing decides to explode,” Arbii remarked, glancing at his computer. “Are you not working today?” Treeba looked up at the clock in the bar.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. I should have been at work two hours ago.” Arbii waited for the punch line.

“Good job I’m head of my division. I guess I’ll have to tell myself off after I have made myself wait for ages first.” Arbii chuckled and his face grew serious.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Treeba paused for a moment. “Don’t let things here get to you. And best of luck.”

“What, in my quest to understand humans?”

“No, with the boss,” his friend commented with a wry grin.

Arbii left the pub and followed the road straight ahead. The cherry blossoms were busy carpeting the ground and being blown by soft winds, causing showers of delicate petals to briefly rise into the air and cover small areas in a blizzard of pink. He was enjoying the spectacle, so much so that he momentarily forgot where he was going and who he was seeing. Suddenly the sky near him grew dark and an image appeared above him.

It was his boss, in inglorious 4D and looking very much larger than life. Even to the untrained eye, she looked markedly different from Arbii. Her eyes were a dark yellow and her skin had a similar yellow hue. Her mouth and face were larger and her chin more pronounced.

However, none of these refinements made her appear any more pleasant to look at. It was as if her features had somehow connived and worked together to make her appear as close to the definition of an alien witch as was humanly, or indeed, inhumanly, possible.

“You’re late!” she exclaimed and before he had a chance to reply she added: “I don’t have time for your petty excuses. I want you to go down to the flight control center as quickly as you can.”

“Okay,” Arbii replied in his most courteous tone, the one reserved for overzealous bosses, domineering mothers, and teachers who always seemed to resent the fact that he was smarter than they were.

“Oh, and try not to take too long. You’re going to be busy enough as it is.” And she flashed a smile. Not the ‘I’m happy and I’m sharing my happiness with you’ kind of smile, more an unsettling leer, that seemed to hang in the air, even after the virtual screen had vanished.

Arbii watched as a new pathway appeared, cutting through the cherry trees and inviting him onward. The flight control center was located some distance away from his boss, a fact that always made Arbii feel happy, and then there was Teimai, a fact that made him positively grin.

Grinning in all its forms, from small incongruous smirk to broad salacious teeth-exposing smiles, was about all he could ever do when he saw her. He looked up at the cherry blossoms. Could there be a more perfect setting for how he felt? And he grinned for the whole journey along the meandering pathway toward the vacuum underground unlimited mobility tube system.

The Vuum tube was a gloriously archaic mode of transport built back in the days when human contact was virtually assured. It was designed to help transport the thousands of human exchange students, workers, and tourists that were expected to visit the base.

Of course, that fateful day is still pending and, in the meantime, all residents are encouraged to use a vacuum tube transport, rather than the far more expedient teleporter booths for trips to and from other parts of the base. Traveling at thousands of miles a minute felt so antiquated and retro that to a human it must seem like traveling by horse and cart, Arbii briefly mused during the twenty-five seconds or so it took to get to the flight center.

He exited the floating, hyper-stylized bullet train and walked out into another underground base deep under a lake somewhere in Mexico. Aztec pyramids, bright beaches, and a colorful market dominated the holo-wallpapers. They helped to make him feel like he was in Mexico rather than twenty miles under it.

Arbii strolled along the main walkway and tried not to think about, oops, well, there it was. Once you tried not to think about something, it was all you ever could think about and, as if by some miracle that others might call magic but he called trans-temporal relocation, she suddenly appeared right there in front of him. Arbii grinned.

“Hey Teimai, how’s it going?”

“Good.”

And good she was, Arbii thought, especially in her blue padded jumpsuit.

“Thanks,” she replied and Arbii’s skin turned a bright green as he blushed, realizing rather too late that she was wearing a psychic mind-reading machine, also known as a mind-link. Teimai smiled.

“Here, I’ll turn it off.” She tapped the side of her head and a thin glistening metal headband appeared. She removed the band, shook it a couple of times. The silver band shrunk to the size of a ring, which she then snuck into her pocket.

“Sorry, I forgot I was wearing it. They are just so useful for work.”

“It’s okay,” Arbii remarked with consideration over honesty.

“No, it’s not,” Teimai countered with honesty over consideration. And with that, they both smiled.



Teimai was bigger, taller, and rounder than Arbii. She had large green eyes, tanned skin, a tiny nose offset by more pronounced ears and, it had to be said, more pronounced muscles too.

For Arbii this was thoroughly natural: On his planet, it was the females who were the stronger sex. They had to be bigger and tougher to raise and protect their offspring. To visit a world where males were the dominant gender was yet another reason why he had originally found Earth and humans so fascinating, (although he suspected that, despite outward appearances, it was the human females who were in control).

In front of them, a large virtual signpost that looked and smelled as if it had been freshly hewn from a large pine tree pointed left and right with strange symbols accompanying the arrows. Teimai grabbed Arbii's hand and took the left exit.

"Are we not going to customs?"

"Nope."

"So you don't need me to evaluate some item of historical importance."

"Not today."

"Then what do you need me for?"

"Many things," Teimai commented with a cheeky grin. Arbii raised his eye ridges and produced a cheeky smile of his own.

"So, I was thinking we could eat out and sing some songs at the holo-karaoke booth this weekend."

"Hmm, I don't know."

"It's our four-month anniversary on Saturday."

"Is it?"

"Yes, and where better to spend it than where we first met?" Teimai let out a small puff of resignation.

"Oh, alright, but promise me, no strange singers or wacky outfits."

"Who, me?" Arbii protested, pointing to himself. Teimai half-rolled her eyes, smiled, and with a flick of her head, beckoned him onward.

They walked together, passing rows of market stalls. These wall holograms were a step up from the ones Arbii was normally used to. People strolled from one wall to the other to continue their frantic buying and haggling. A couple of old women stepped in front of them and they appeared so lifelike that Arbii instinctively stopped. Teimai just laughed and continued to walk right on through the projections.

“They are only holograms, Arbii.”

“Aren’t we all.” And he could have sworn that one of the old ladies winked at him.

He was merely echoing a popular alternative theory that the entire universe was, in fact, a giant hologram. Whether this was true or not, the universe wasn’t saying, but it certainly made the holograms a great deal happier about their lot in life.

They walked through the tunnel that led toward the flight hangers. The huge passageway slowly transformed from a bustling market to a tropical rainforest, where the hoots, tweets, and noises of the jungle could be heard in the distance.

“You know, you still haven’t told me why you want me here.”

“Because we have been worried about you.” Teimai stopped and turned to face Arbii. “I heard you were thinking of leaving.”

“No, that’s not true. I just... wish I could enjoy being here more.”

“So, I’m not enjoyment enough for you?” Arbii sighed, raised his eye ridges, and smiled.

“You are wonderful! It’s all the other bits of my life, you know, the ones without you, that aren’t so great.” Teimai beamed, grabbed Arbii’s hand, and led him eagerly through the jungle pass.

“C’mon, you’re going to love what we’ve got in store for you.”

“I still don’t understand how you managed to get my boss to agree to send me here in the first place. It’s been ages since she allowed me to visit.” Teimai laughed.

“You have no idea how hard that was! Every time I would ask for you, she’d send someone else, so I had to enlist the General for help.”

The forest began to slowly fade away in the distance with each step they took until all that remained was a series of signs and words explaining where each of the three roads in front of them went. The two aliens followed the central route that led to an enormous cavern.

Arbii gasped. Ahead of them was an area almost the size of a small city, but instead of buildings adorning the skyline, spacecraft of every shape and size littered the expanse for as far as the eye could see.

Though, this was somewhat of a misnomer, as the entire region extended further than any reasonable eye could ever hope to see. For the holographic wallpapers in this cavern were not of trees or Mexican markets. They simply showed more of the same, spacecraft in every direction, which meant it was tricky to know where reality ended and where the holograms began. (Of course, the holograms will tell you that there is no boundary.)

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Teimai enthused, admiring the vast, grid-lined city of spacecraft. She tugged Arbii’s hand and began to lead him down and into the maze of walkways that connected the flightships.

The entire area buzzed and hummed and screamed with activity. They walked past robots carrying spare parts, quarreling neighbors who had parked too close to one another, and astronauts just taking a breather. Arbii looked at Teimai, who just shrugged as if it was business as usual. In this town, it was not only the pilots who did the talking.

“But I do not want an X-218 multi-phase converter,” piped a starship which, ironically, just happened to be shaped like a gigantic starfish. A giant-sized, five-pointed echinoderm, covered in multi-colored chrome.

“It’ll be good for you. You’ll feel a whole lot better,” the robotic pilot replied as he was making repairs to the ship’s raised crown.

“That’s what you said with the hyperdrive accelerator. I still get jip in my backend every time we make an FTL jump!”

“Well, it was either that or a trip to the scrapheap,” the part-mechanical, part-maniacal, robot responded.

“You always say such nasty things. You non-organics can be so mean sometimes,” the ship’s AI grumbled.

“Look who’s talking,” the maladjusted mechanic retorted. And with that the doors closed, the hatches sealed, and the starship’s nano-skin shivered and a burst of powerful ripples sent the robot sliding down to the floor like a surfer suddenly bereft of a surfboard. The incensed engine specialist got up, rubbed its neck and back, and tried to get into the flightship.

Arbii and Teimai walked gingerly past the robot as it banged furiously against the smooth hull.

“Let me in. You can’t do this!” The mechanic paused briefly and then changed tack, its tone growing more ominous. “You don’t want me to get the neural quantum analyzer out now, do you? Remember the headaches and all that time spent trying to solve impossible equations, hmm? Now be a good spaceship and let me in.”

A hologram appeared at the top of the flightship, humanoid in shape and covered with the same multi-colored chrome as the craft itself.

“It’s in here,” the hologram bellowed out loud with arms folded.

Arbii and Teimai turned around and watched the AI with expectant grins.

“What is?”

“The neural quantum analyzer.” Now it was the AI’s turn to twist the hyper screws. “You know your proton re-charger is in here too. Getting tired yet? It’s been a long day for you. I bet you could really do with a high-density electron infusion just about now.”

The irate mechanic tried to climb the starship’s impossibly smooth skin and the AI hologram laughed and disappeared. The robot then began kicking at the ship’s exterior.

“You, you...!” It yelled.

The two aliens giggled and walked away as the banter between ship and engineer became increasingly acrimonious.

“Some pilots just don’t know how to look after an AI. You shouldn’t get one installed if you’re not going to treat it right. Don’t you agree, Arbii?”

“Err, yeah,” he muttered and Teimai laughed.

“You don’t have a clue, do you?”

“About AIs?”

“No, about treating others.” Arbii gave Teimai a look of mock surprise.

“Are you still refusing to use an AI for your data-pad?”

“Yep, I don’t want to be arguing with my computer all day long,” Arbii said, gesturing to the pilot and starship behind them.

“But they are so useful!”

“Too useful. Nobody seems to do anything without checking with their AI first. That is when they are not busy dating them or marrying them instead,” Arbii remarked with a smirk, showing how just ludicrous he thought the situation with AIs had become. “I think I’d rather...drink Earth alcohol than get an AI for my computer.” Teimai grunted.

“I bet you haven’t updated your data-pad either.”

“Not recently, no.”

“When was the last time you went on the galaxy-net?”

“Oh, about two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks! There have been so many exciting discoveries in the last two weeks! New worlds, new races, and new sciences.” Arbii shrugged.

“You sound like one of those data-implant commercials,” he then said and he put on a deep, studious voice.

“Every second of every day there are new wonders to be discovered. Don’t get left behind. Be switched on permanently and never miss out on your friends, family, and the galaxy ever again, and with our new unconscious mode, you can stay in touch even in your dreams. Be switched on, today.”

Teimai slapped Arbii’s arm playfully.

“I’m not that bad.”

“Not yet,” Arbii quipped with raised eye ridges.

They walked on past a row of small scout ships with skins that pulsed and flashed in spectacular colors and patterns.

“Still two weeks,” Teimai chided. “That means your data-pad is so out of date it belongs to the electronic Stone Age, and what with no AI it might as well be a computer fit for humans.”

“Hey, it’s got faster than light communication, I’ll have you know,” Arbii announced indignantly, trying to sound as if he cared. Teimai shrugged.

“Well, so has everything on this base, which is why Earthlings can’t detect our communiqués.”

“More’s the pity.”

Above them, large cargo pods floated gently in the air, like misshapen dirigibles, and every now and then a spacecraft would climb high into the bright blue sky overhead before disappearing in a bright flash.

“You know, I wish humans could break the light barrier. Imagine the shock they are going to get to find that every race out there is communicating in something they think is impossible,” Arbii said as he watched a flightship descend from the holographic heaven above.

“It’s humans that are impossible. I can never understand them. I mean, why do they spend all that time and effort using radio waves? They travel so slowly and get distorted or drowned out with all the background noise in space, it’s a wonder you’d receive anything.

“And who in their right or left minds sends radio waves into space in the first place, except as a pre-school project or an ancient history assignment?”

“Imagine humans’ first contact,” Arbii began with an impish grin and wide arms. “They receive a radio signal from space, they spend years deciphering the language and breaking the encryption, and the first message humanity receives from alienkind is...”

“Yes.”

“Is...”

“Yes,” Teimai responded in a tone that said ‘get on with it!’

“Is from a three-year-old babbling about how they can now use the toilet all by themselves.” And they both burst out laughing.

“Humans,” Teimai declared in a mildly disparaging tone. “Tell me, why are we here again?”

“Oh, some universal law about like attracts like.”

“But we’re nothing like them.”

“Well, we’re bipedal and we look similar to—”

“Don’t say baby humans,” Teimai interrupted, pointing an accusatory finger.

“I wasn’t going to. But you know, we have two arms, two legs, two hands, two eyes.”

“Two hearts, green blood, centuries of peace.” Arbii stared at Teimai, a stare that turned into a shrewd look.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he conceded. “I have no idea why we are here.”

The two aliens slowed down, giving Arbii time to take in all the sights and sounds. He had never visited this part of the flight control center before. It teemed and heaved and bustled with all sorts of life. A twelve-foot, blue-green, four-armed, four-legged, malfeasant with four shifty eyes and knobbly skin, a combination which would have given any beautician nightmares, struggled between two big, power-armored security guards.

“What’s that?” he inquired, surprised, as he had never encountered a species like it. Not even on the galaxy-net.

“Oh, it’s just a smuggler,” Teimai replied with a hint of disdain. “That’s why we have so many flightships here. We’ve agreed to take over the processing and repatriation of all the smugglers captured on this planet, and as you can see, there have been so many that we are having trouble keeping up.”

“I had no idea smuggling was so popular,” Arbii commented as he tried to take in everything that was going on around him in the massive cavern.

“Once you label a planet as quarantined, you might as well be sticking a big intergalactic sign out there with a huge flashing arrow pointing this way. Suddenly every race in the cosmos becomes interested!”

The members of one such interested race were the bright green, glowing, shape-changing creatures trapped in clear square containers in front of him. They were being transported by power armored guards to an awaiting security space vessel. One of the glowing criminals expressed its anger by a wholly unique body language: every quarter second, its body would change into a different letter until it spelled something rather too shocking to print. Arbii’s large brown eyes widened in alarm though Teimai rattled on regardless.

“Humans still think that the most precious things on their planet are gold, diamonds, and funny pieces of paper. For a couple of cases of decent wine, I could get enough gold to triple-plate their tallest building and enough diamonds to coat it from top to bottom. They have no idea about what’s precious.”

“Well, I agree. However,” Now, this was dangerous ground for Arbii as he rarely disagreed with Teimai about important issues, “I think most humans realize that life in all its forms is the most precious thing in their world,” he tried to say as benignly as he could.

“Really? You could have fooled me. I mean, humans are doing a great job of systematically destroying life wherever they go,” Teimai replied with such force that if ‘benign’ were a new friend, then it was the type that was an ax-wielding murderer, who ought to be shot, then hung, drawn and quartered, encased in concrete, and dropped a mile under the sea just for good measure. Arbii stared back at her in surprise.

It is generally accepted that unless your planet has some unique properties, then the things most sought after by other alien races are:

1. Life in all its forms, because as every space-faring alien knows, all life is unique to its planet of origin. Zoo owners and species collectors have been known to pay obscene amounts of money for rare and exotic creatures. Whilst scientists the galaxy over are always up for the chance to study never-seen-before complex organisms.

2. Derivatives of life, including food, drink, clothes, furniture, etc. To the galactic gourmets, nothing is more exciting and more dangerous than the purveying and tasting of exotic alien cuisine. It is estimated that the illegal consumption of toxic alien food is the third biggest killer in the cosmos after wars and natural catastrophes such as exploding supernovae.

3. Art. The once-popular and unfortunate phrase, ‘One species’ art is another species’ toilet paper,’ has long gone out of fashion. These days music, books, paintings, and other forms of what is commonly considered art, have made a resurgence.



Now, planetary system-sized museums are vying with planetary system-sized zoos to attract the growing intergalactic tourist trade.

Teimai sighed and decided that 'benign' was perhaps not such a bad fellow after all.

"I guess you're right," she conceded with a smile. "It isn't the humans' fault that they are greedy. They just don't have anyone to guide them." Arbii grinned as the potential flashpoint had evaporated into nothing.

"I just wish they'd open this planet up because with the galactic black market the way it is at the moment, anything from Earth fetches a fortune, which means that there are more smugglers here than ever before, and they are becoming more reckless and dangerous.

"I'm just worried that these smugglers will do something stupid like get themselves discovered by humans."

"Do you think that could really happen?" Arbii said, his eyes and body becoming electrified with sudden interest as if he had just been asked to answer a question in a school class.

Teimai seemed to give the matter some thought. "Nah, not a chance," she finally responded with a sympathetic smile. "Still, they are seriously increasing my workload."

The couple walked on with Arbii in his dapper suit looking every bit as out of a place as he felt.

"So, what exactly am I supposed to be doing here?" he asked as they turned into a wider path giving them enough room for them to walk shoulder to shoulder.

"The General will explain it all." Teimai pointed to a spaceship a short distance ahead. It was shaped rather like a stepped pyramid, a pyramid that hummed and glowed with raw untamed energy.

Arbii thought that in all the chaos around them, this ship alone truly fitted in with the world above.

Most spacecraft can change their size, color, and shape at will, which is very handy for reconnaissance missions. Some mischievous spaceships had even been known to take on the classic saucer shape on low-flying Earth missions just to ‘freak out’ any humans lucky enough to see them. But the truth was the stealth abilities of even the most basic of spacecraft are so great that no alien ship could ever be detected by Earthly means, unless, of course, it wanted to be.

The General stood in front of his flightship with a look of satisfaction and Arbii couldn’t help but wonder if he had been reading his mind.

“Arbii, Arbii!” the dark alien in the blue overalls exclaimed in a loud voice and walked over with arms outstretched to give his friend a big hug.