

First Encounters

Dena Raposa

"Excuse me? Sir?"

Leeroy ignored his secretary. Miss Smith was an unattractive woman in her late fifties with a voice like a hungry cat, a face like a horse, and a mouth like a sailor. She had been working under Leeroy for fifteen years, and in all that time he had never seen her smile.

"Sir!"

Normally, Leeroy found ignoring Miss Smith to be a very useful technique, one that usually resulted in her storming out of his office, cursing his name, and leaving him free to get back to work. Or, in this case, his mid-afternoon nap. Today, apparently, she had no plans to leave.

"I see you have no intention of leaving, Miss Smith," Leeroy said. The words came out slightly muffled, on account of the pile of paperwork that had tipped over while he slept, burying his head in a pile of unfinished reports. Paperwork. Files and forms, facts and figures. He hated it, hated the duplicates and triplicates he found most of his days filled with, but it was just one of the necessary evils of the job. One of the very many necessary evils. Sometimes Leeroy wondered what working at a job full of so many necessary evils said about him and the state of his own immortal soul.

"No, sir," said Miss Smith.

Leeroy sighed and sat up. A waterfall of papers cascaded to the floor. "In that case," he said, "maybe you can answer a question for me."

"And what's that?" asked Miss Smith. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You've read Dante's *Inferno*, haven't you?" Leeroy asked, ignoring the note of impatience in her voice. "I mean, it seems like your kind of a book. Kind of a downer."

"I have."

"Then tell me." Leeroy grabbed the nearest sheaf of paper out of his overflowing inbox and waved it in her face. "Is there a special circle of hell reserved for paperwork?"

"Not in the version I read," said Miss Smith. "But if we can return to the land of sanity for a moment—"

Leeroy snorted. "Sanity? Here?"

Miss Smith ignored him. "I just came in to say we have an important visitor."

"Lies," said Leeroy. "We don't get important visitors. We don't get any kind of visitors. No one outside of the government even knows we exist, and the government doesn't *want* to know we exist. They don't even let us keep our records on the computer because they don't want anyone to find out they actually have a department devoted to chasing down every alien-related red herring, and this way they can just deny that Area 51 actually exists."

Miss Smith waited patiently through Leeroy's rant. It was far from the first time she'd been exposed to one of them. When his tirade had worn itself down to angry mutterings, she said, "The visitor isn't the government. It's an alien."

Leeroy sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Miss Smith," he began. "You and I have been to more 'alien landing' sites than anyone else on this planet. We've seen more crop circles, talked to more supposed abductees, and fielded more prank calls from more crazies. We've got a warehouse full of so-called UFOs that could just as easily be bits of meteor or just about any piece of random metal someone found lying around. Aliens do not exist."

Miss Smith didn't even blink. "There's one in the bathroom."

Leeroy made a noise halfway between a groan and a snort. "Fine," he said. "Let's go see this alien of yours."

Miss Smith turned on her heel and led Leeroy out of his cramped office, through the equally cramped reception area where she worked—which had never once been used as a reception area, as they had never once had a visitor—to the bathroom on the other side. Very carefully, so as not to make any noise, she opened the door and gestured Leeroy to poke his head in.

Over a decade ago, when Miss Smith had first come to work for Leeroy, she had made it quite clear that she had been hired as a secretary, not a janitor, and therefore she would not spend her working days cleaning up after anyone, not even her boss. Leeroy was used to living and working in places just shy of being declared disaster areas, and as visitors to Area 51 were literally nonexistent, he agreed. The office quickly descended into a state of comfortable chaos, broken only for the annual fumigation when the cockroaches started to get too big.

The sole exception to this was the bathroom. Several years ago, following a bad bout of food poisoning that had left the bathroom in an unusable state, Leeroy and Miss Smith had divided bathroom-cleaning duties between them and never mentioned the Incident again. Because of this, the bathroom gleamed. Shining porcelain toilet, a floor fit for eating dinner on—and a green-skinned man standing in the middle of the room, his back to the door, examining a roll of toilet paper with apparent fascination.

Very quietly, Leeroy withdrew his head and shut the door.

"There's an alien in our bathroom," said Leeroy in a whisper.

Miss Smith nodded.

"Why'd you put him in the bathroom?" Leeroy hissed.

"I don't know!" Miss Smith looked slightly panicked, at first. Her hair had started to slip from its normally impeccable bun. "Where else was I supposed to put him?"

"Anywhere else, maybe?" Leeroy suggested.

"Well it's too late, he's already in there!" said Miss Smith. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"What did he say when he came in?" Leeroy asked. "Did you talk to him? Did he speak English?"

Miss Smith nodded. "He had the strangest accent I've ever heard, sort of... Scottish mixed with Norwegian with a dash of old South."

"Where do you come up with these things?" Leeroy asked. "You know what, never mind. I'm going in to talk to him."

"Talk to him?" Miss Smith repeated. "Are you crazy? He's an alien!"

"And we're Area 51!" Leeroy shot back. "It's literally our job to talk to aliens!"

The bathroom door opened, and the alien came out. "Sorry," he said. "I heard your voice and thought it was about time we got down to business."

"Uh—business?" Leeroy asked. "What business?"

"Of course." The alien was wearing something that looked a bit like a large brown parka. He adjusted it and coughed dryly. "We never got around to discussing the purpose of my visit."

"Right," said Leeroy, rubbing the back of his neck. "And that would be...?" He somehow felt that the conversation had gotten away from him.

"I am here on behalf of the planet Nixtraxes," said the alien. "My name is Jelvan Trek-Plume. You are Leeroy Delgado and Marigold Smith."

Miss Smith glowered. Her first name was something Leeroy had learned not to mention too often, and certainly never in her hearing.

"I've done my research," said Jelvan, in response to their slightly worried looks, "which is also how I know you recently impounded a vehicle belonging to the son of one of my clients. Now, normally we wouldn't bother trying to retrieve it, but unfortunately the client did insist."

"We—" Leeroy glanced at Miss Smith, who shrugged helplessly. "I don't remember any spaceship landings."

"Unfortunately it didn't land so much as crash," said Jelvan. "Burned up in the atmosphere. It probably wouldn't have looked like much more than scrap metal by the time you found it."

"Last week," Miss Smith hissed in Leeroy's ear. "In Seattle, remember?"

"Oh yeah..." Leeroy turned to the alien. "Well of course you can have your ship back." He chuckled nervously. "Wouldn't want to start a war or anything..."

"A war?" Jelvan seemed surprised. "Over a drunk driving incident? I'd heard the inhabitants of this planet were aggressive, but surely—"

"No! Of course not," Leeroy backpedaled quickly. "I was—it was—wait, seriously? Drunk driving?"

"Oh yes," said Jelvan. "This galactic sector has notoriously bad law enforcement. Favorite... 'hang out' for the kids when they want to make a little trouble away from their parents. You must have heard reports of alien abductions, anal probes, cow tippings..."

"Basically every unexplained event we've investigated in our careers," said Miss Smith. "Apparently we've been running around after teenage... hijinks." She spat the word out like it tasted bad.

"More than likely true," said Jelvan. He noticed Miss Smith's expression

and took an involuntary step back.

Leeroy cut in. "So—the... the spaceship. It's in a warehouse about twenty miles east of here. You're more than welcome to it."

"Thank you," said Jelvan. "You will, of course, require recompense?"

"Oh no," said Leeroy, just as Miss Smith said, "Yes."

She turned her glare from Jelvan to Leeroy and said, "Excuse us a moment."

Leeroy allowed her to pull him across the room before demanding, "What are you doing? This is it! This—this is first contact! We want to make a good first impression."

Miss Smith raised an eyebrow. "Considering you nearly declared war on him..."

"That was an accident," Leeroy snapped. "Besides, you put him in the bathroom. And what would we do with alien money even if he did pay us?"

"We get him to pay us in technology," said Miss Smith. "With real alien tech, we might actually get taken seriously."

Leeroy hesitated, but not for long. He'd been the butt of too many jokes at too many family dinners for too many years. "All right." He turned back to Jelvan. "We have a proposition for you."

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Two hours later, the deal concluded, Leeroy and Miss Smith ordered a pizza to go and ate it in the office while celebrating the first truly successful day of their careers.

"It's never going to be the same," said Miss Smith.

"I know."

"We'll make the history books for this."

"Possibly."

"And I was completely right about trading the ship for their technology," Miss Smith continued smugly. "I was completely right about everything."

Leeroy finished his pizza slice before interrupting her gloating. "Not quite everything."

"What do you mean?" Miss Smith waved her own pizza at him in a vaguely threatening manner. "What are you saying?"

"His accent," said Leeroy. "I didn't hear even a hint of Norwegian."

Miss Smith surveyed him in absolute silence for nearly a minute before the impossible happened.

She cracked a smile.

"Oh, you."