

# On the Use of Insults in Successful Diplomacy

by Bryce Anderson

A single spacecraft traced a leisurely orbit high above the Earth's atmosphere. Protected by an EM-absorbing hull, its small crew listened in on the electromagnetic cacophony given off by the planet's inhabitants. For two years, they had been receiving all sorts of useful information about the monkey-like creatures from TV and radio signals, cellular phone traffic, and police and military communications. But six months ago, their mission priorities had been changed. Now their most valuable intelligence came from a small transmitter, less powerful than a child's walkie-talkie set, currently located in the Four Corners area of the United States.

"I wish to report my findings for planetary body 67192.3. It is my considered opinion that everyone on this planet is insane," the transmitter broadcast back to the fleet. "The dominant species refuses conduct itself with any modicum of sensibility, and our final report should make it clear that they are very silly indeed." The transmitter was lodged in the cranium of a twenty-something woman who, at least for the moment, called herself Sandra Keddiss. She had been born approximately five months ago in an orbiting test tube, her genes "borrowed" from a seventy year old Australian woman they'd found wandering alone on a beach, and her brain -- though her own to use and abuse as she saw fit -- owed a great deal of its knowledge, memories, and personality to Fleet Commander Xuraxnos XXIV. From the time she had been deposited on this unknown world, she had been learning to blend into the culture of the current superpower, while trying to fill in the wide knowledge gaps left unfilled by PBS and E! Tonight.

*I'll make a note of it*, said an audible voice in Sandra's mind. *But insanity is just another way of saying that we have no idea what they'll do next.* The voice belonged to Third Pilot Ykras, who was tasked with monitoring her for the next week, while his alternate was in stasis. This pleased Sandra. Ykras was more than just good company; he had some surprising insights into the human condition.

"I never said it was an explanation", the spy responded as she steered her car -- a rusted out Metro -- down the road. Unfortunately, she had to speak out loud for Ykras to hear her. This often became awkward, because humans got distressed when other humans conversed with themselves. "But it's important for anyone who deals with this planet in the future to know that they're a bunch of selfish, shortsighted nitwits."

*I think you're just frustrated.*

"I have a right to be. Don't get me wrong, I like these monkeys. They can be entertaining. But going strictly by the book -- and you know ConFed always goes strictly by the book -- the species isn't eligible for membership. They may even require containment."

*That would be... unfortunate*, Ykras admitted. *But there are some positive signs. They do have various space programs, so they're not completely self-involved.*

"Small, timid affairs. I suspect the political will for continuing it comes more from the aerospace lobbyists than from public demand. Worse, I'm inclined to believe that the industry itself only exists because of the Cold War."

*Oh, yes. We watched that part on the History Channel.*

"I'm going to browse through some books on psychology when I find a decent library," she mentioned, altering course slightly to avoid a tortoise in the middle of the highway. "There has to be some reasonable explanation for their apparent disinterest in space. Of course, any reasonable species would have had a decent start at terraforming at least Mars by this point in their development. A really ambitious one would be halfway finished, and starting on Venus."

*I think you're exaggerating a bit*, said the voice in her brain.

"What happens if they don't make it?"

*That's not for us to decide*, Ykras admonished.

Sandra heard a metallic scraping sound coming from her left rear wheel. She pulled over to the side of the road, and got out. It took several minutes to clear the clutter out of the back of the car and find the jack. The mess was inconvenient, but Sandra was pretending to be a young woman in college, and the clutter seemed authentic.

Five minutes later, as she fumbled with the heavy jack, a small, rusted pick-up truck pulled up behind her. "You all right, ma'am?" a thin blond man smiled as he leaned his head out the window. "Car trouble?" There were subtleties in his speech patterns that suggested that he was from the southeastern region of the United States, but she had a poor ear for accents.

"Car trouble," she responded, a little too obviously. She sized him up. He was decades older than her body, two centuries younger than her mind, and about the age she looked. She hoped he was already romantically partnered, as it would make the interaction much simpler.

"Truth told, I don't know a thing about cars," he admitted. "Have you called anybody?"

"I don't own a cell phone," she admitted.

"Me neither. I lost it somewhere back in Virginia. But there's a town about twenty miles from here. I could take you if you're inclined."

*Go ahead. If he tries to get gropy, we can zap him from here.* Sandra laughed. Though the man didn't seem particularly dangerous, but the heavenly backup was reassuring.

"Would you, please? I'd be most grateful."

"Sure. Just don't complain about the mess." As the man cleared some plastic wrappers and empty soda cans from the passenger's seat, Sandra grabbed her suitcase and laptop from her car. "By the way, I'm Nick."

"Sandra. Sandra Keddiss. I'm glad you found me before the coyotes did." The truck accelerated onto the highway, its engine squealing horribly.

"Nah," he replied, "Coyotes don't generally attack humans." He gave her a conspiratorial look. "Now the prairie dogs, them you need to watch out for. They look harmless enough, but when night falls, they'll gang up on you quick. Twenty of them can bring down a full-grown man." Sandra gave a quick, fearful look out at the passing scenery.

"Sorry. I tend to ramble." Sandra glanced back at the driver, who seemed embarrassed.

"That's quite all right." A strange reaction, Sandra thought. Nick obviously wasn't comfortable talking about these fearsome prairie dogs. Perhaps they'd killed someone close to him? Whatever the case, it was better to talk about something else. "Tell me about yourself."

"Not much to tell, really. Born and raised in Oklahoma. Mom raised me, didn't see my Dad much. Now I'm working on an architecture degree at Berkeley, and I sometimes wait tables for beer money. Nice laptop, by the way."

"Oh, this thing?" she said innocently, pointing to the most powerful number-crunching machine on the face of the planet. "I mostly use it for creative writing." She tapped a few keys, trying to look authoritatively author-like. "Would you like your nose to be described as 'sharp' or 'hawkish?'"

Nick flushed again. "Maybe you'd best leave my nose out of your story." A strange request, she thought, but she tried to comply. "Nick, a man without a nose," she said as she typed, "drove his rusty pick-up truck with the skill of... someone who had driven a truck a lot." She sighed. "I have no talent for metaphor. What do you think of the space program?" Sandra watched as Nick tried to shift mental gears, and ended up popping the clutch. "The what?"

"The space program. You know, rockets, astronauts, frozen alien corpses in underground bunkers."

Nick gave a long sigh. "I remember wanting to be an astronaut when I was younger. Seems kind of pointless these days, though. Shuttle goes up, astronauts take some pictures for their scrapbooks, a pair of rodents refuse to have sex. What's the payoff?"

"Do you want to go back to the moon?"

"Not me, personally. I've heard the place has no atmosphere." He chuckled to himself, then glanced sidelong at her and stopped short. "As a species, I suppose we should. I haven't thought about it much, really. You taking a poll or something?"

"Well, it seems like your species..." -- she silently cursed herself for the slip -- "our species should be making more of an effort to explore the solar system."

A small collection of dilapidated buildings appeared up ahead, gradually coalescing into a rude approximation of civilization. Once in town, it took a few minutes to find a mechanic's shop and another two minutes to find the note saying that the mechanic had stepped out for a bite. Nick offered to stick around, saying that he was in no hurry, and that she might need the help.

*He didn't specifically mention it, Ykras mentioned, but I believe he's also hoping for romantic relations.*

Sandra muttered something uncomplimentary under her breath.

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"...and if it were Venus, I'd understand your reluctance. But you could have a breathable atmosphere on Mars within three hundred years..."

"All I'm saying is that flinging that much junk into orbit is too damned expensive. You can't ask the taxpayers to pay for it without--."

"Would you leave the taxpayers out of it? They wouldn't know a good long-term investment if it jumped out of a dark alley and bludgeoned them with a--"

A friendly, booming voice startled Sandra. "Y'kids need something?" The man who spoke was a tall man with a thick red beard and a body that carried significant fat reserves to guard against starvation. He was dressed in coveralls, suggesting that his occupation involved mechanical services. The patch on his chest introduced him as Cliff. She and Nick had been so immersed in their argument that they didn't even notice his tow truck pull in behind the shop.

"Do you repair cars?" Sandra asked.

"I can fix anything that runs on gas or electricity."

"I try to leave 'em better than I found 'em," Cliff replied.

She thought hard about that statement. *I believe he is answering in the affirmative*, Ykras hinted. *But he may also be making a ritual display of humility. Perhaps he sees your male companion as a threat to his position, but I cannot be sure.*

This interaction was becoming strained, Sandra decided. Best to move it forward. "My car broke down about twenty miles down east of here," Sandra said as she stood up. She discovered that she only came up to Cliff's chest. "Something was grinding in one of the rear wheels."

Cliff grunted to himself. "I'll probably have to tow it back here. Hop in the rig." Nick was about to suggest that they stay, but Sandra had already scampering up into the cab. She bumped the horn as she sat down in the driver's seat.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Nobody drives Lorraine but me," Cliff laughed, waving her into the middle seat. Nick jumped in on the other side as Cliff fired up the engine. It gave a roar, and the three took off down the highway.

"So, Cliff," Sandra asked, practically shouting over the noise of the engine and the wind from the open window, "How long have you lived here?"

"Oh, about six years now, I reckon." he shouted back. "I moved back down here after the kids left for college. The youngest is about your ages now. She's married and expecting."

"Expecting what?" Sandra asked.

Nick smiled. "She's in a family way!" he shouted. Sandra looked at him in confusion.

"What I mean," Cliff said, throwing a conspiratorial glance at Nick, "is that she's got a bun in the oven."

"She's expecting a bun?" Sandra asked, feeling her anger begin to rise as the men laughed.

"She's pregnant," Cliff finally told her.

"Oh," Sandra said. "What's that mean, exactly?"

Cliff's jaw dropped, and he shot an incredulous glance at his passenger. Sandra flushed, knowing she'd just made another huge blunder. Finally, Cliff let out a loud laugh. "Son, you and her had better be sleeping in separate rooms till you explain a few things." He laughed again, and now it was Nick who flared crimson. Sandra knew that it had something to do with sex and procreation. The species' attitude towards its own reproduction was so hopelessly conflicted that Sandra had given up on trying to understand it.

"So," Nick said, trying to break the lull in the conversation, "How are the Dodgers doing this year?"

"Where you been for the last two months?" Cliff asked. "That new kid, Spellman? He's looking to break sixty homers this year, and they've won fourteen of their last seventeen."

"I was hiking the Appalachian trail, so I've been out of touch. Sixty home runs? Really?"

Sandra tuned out the pointless male chatter. Ykras used her boredom to his advantage. *I've done some research. 'Pregnant' refers to a human woman having a fetus within her womb.*

"I know, I know. I just forgot," she said under her breath.

*Just wait until I tell you how it got there*, Ykras said, sounding delighted and scandalized.

She knew Ykras was trying to be helpful, but dwelling on her mistake was making her miserable. It seemed she knew so much about all the wrong things. She thought back, trying to think of a time when she'd spent this long with a single individual. She couldn't recall one. For the first time, she was realizing how thin and fragile her disguise really was.

Sandra put it out of her mind, and opened her laptop. The President was proposing to slash NASA's funding by five percent, after a cometary probe got lost prior to rendezvous. Some in Congress were demanding more. NASA-bashing had suddenly become politically popular.

She read on. One of the recurring themes was that much of NASA's research had no "practical applications," and that the agency needed to retool their missions to remedy that fact. Improving satellite telemetry, weather prediction, and whatnot. "Studying your damned navels," she muttered bitterly. Her companions didn't hear her over the roar of the diesel.

She hadn't wanted to admit it, but over the last few weeks, the evidence had been piling up. Humanity was doing an "inward turn," as ConFed's xenosociologists liked to call it. Most species followed one of two patterns: either they went quickly from the low planetary orbit stage to widespread colonization of their solar system, or they began turning inward, showing almost no interest in anything beyond their own planet. Earth had been classified as a borderline case.

That fact alone was enough to warrant this ConFed mission. But now it appeared that the species was sliding into a planet-wide isolationism. Such behavior was seen by many as evidence of a self-destructive species, which required containment. Long ago, for more

isolationism. Such behavior was seen by many as evidence of a self-destructive species, which required containment. Long ago, far more drastic measures were often taken, and a vocal minority within ConFed were still arguing that it was best to wipe out isolationist species' altogether. Sandra's stomach churned at the thought.

"The Suns don't need Branson anyways," Cliff opined. "Sure, he's got a great jump shot, but he disrupts the team. The kid ain't happy unless he's got three scandals in the paper at once."

"I could almost agree, if Teggerson wasn't out injured most of the time," Nick retorted, "but until they build him an unsprainable ankle--"

"Excuse me," Sandra interrupted, "but I hereby ban all sports-related talk for the duration of this trip."

Cliff nodded. "I guess we ain't entertaining the lady. No sports talk."

"I agree," Nick said. "So, what's going on in the WWF?"

Cliff's laughter roared, almost drowning out the engine. Sandra wasn't sure what the WWF was, but instinct told her that Nick was disobeying her request, and she was supposed to be indignant. So she glared at Nick.

"C'mon. It's not a sport! It's entertainment!" Sandra still glared. "Okay, okay. Sandra does seem to be fascinated with the space program. What's your opinion?"

"It's all a fake," Cliff said happily. "They faked the moon landing, and we were dumb enough to believe it."

"Probably faked Sputnik, too," said Nick. "So they could get money for new warheads. Which seems kind of pointless, since they made up the Soviet Union as well."

"Now yer just pulling my leg," Cliff said, sounding a bit sullen, as though his feelings were hurt. Humans didn't like having their beliefs made fun of, Sandra remembered. It was actually the rule among sentient species.

"Don't worry, Cliff," she consoled him. "I think you have every right to distrust the government. Nick, please don't be so mean."

"I'm not being mean. But the evidence for it is..."

"Listen, kids," Cliff broke in, "All I know is what I read on my Internet back home. Maybe it's right, maybe its wrong. It don't do me no harm neither way. There's yer car."

Sandra could see her little car up ahead, shimmering in the desert heat. They drove on in silence, punctuated by occasional chatter from Lorraine's CB radio. It worried her that an able-bodied member of the species could believe that the crowning achievement of their space program was a hoax. She would have to think about the implications of this later. Right now, she had to focus on getting her car fixed.

Cliff slowed the rig, coming to a stop just ahead of the car. He grabbed a hydraulic jack and quickly lifted up the offending wheel, giving it a few experimental spins. The wheel squeaked and groaned convincingly. Then he pulled off the lugnuts and played with the braking mechanism. He continued disassembling it until he'd pulled off the rotor drum.

"Aha!" Cliff said. "See? The ball bearing casing came apart, and the tire's been rolling around on the spindle unprotected. It looks like you've been driving it that way for quite a while. I'll need to replace the caster, and maybe the stem."

"How much will it cost," Sandra asked.

"Depends. You got rich parents?" He let out another gale of laughter, then caught Nick's not-at-all-amused expression. "I won't know until I get it back to the shop."

"Look!" Nick exclaimed, pointing out at the field along the highway. "Prairie dogs!" Sandra turned and looked. Sure enough, two or three were poking their heads out of their burrows, staring at the newcomers intently.

Sandra froze. After a few seconds, she whispered, "Wouldn't we be safer back in the truck?"

Nick looked at her incredulously. Then a thought seemed to dawn on him. "Oh, right. The fearsome prairie dogs. They usually don't attack during daylight hours. Still, you'd probably be safer back in Lorainne," he said in a voice rich with concern. "I'll stay out here with Cliff."

Sandra eased her way around her car, and slowly opened the door to the rig. Nick watched her as she went. When the door was securely fastened, she looked back at the two men outside. Nick seemed to be having trouble breathing, but he didn't retreat to the safety of the cab.

"Nick is very brave," Sandra whispered.

Up in orbit, Ykras had shut off his microphone. He was having trouble breathing as well.

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They got back to town, and Cliff unloaded the Metro at his shop. Cliff gave the wheel assembly another look, pulled up some parts information on his computer, and offered to fix it for \$600. After Sandra agreed, he got on the phone and ordered some parts from nearby Tucumcari. Sandra went to the pay phone and started calling around for hotel rooms. There was nothing nearby.

She spotted Nick playing with an enormous grey dog outside. "Nick!" she called out. "Where are you staying tonight?"

"Same as every night," he said, throwing a stick. The dog chased after it, caught it between his teeth, and disappeared behind the shop with it. Nick stared after for a moment, then gave a shrug that seemed to express confusion and resignation. "I'm just unrolling my sleeping bag and sleeping in the back of the truck. Why?"

"The closest motel is in Tucumcari. It's about twenty miles."

"Need a lift?"

"Yup."

"Okay. But you have to buy me a beer someplace."

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They finally ended up at Kipsey's Bar and Grill, where the music was loud and the bikers were louder. The air reeked of cigarette smoke and perfume, and the occasional clacking of pool balls punctuated the air. A group at the other end of the room was celebrating some major milestone by wearing silly hats. Nick liked the place immediately. It was a lot like one of his hangouts back at Berkeley. He scanned the menu, and didn't see anything marked "vegetarian" or "tofu." So in some ways, it was better than Berkeley.

Sandra was staring goggle-eyed at everything, and Nick wondered if she'd ever been in a bar before. It didn't seem possible, but then it didn't seem possible that anyone could believe his prairie dog yarn. She seemed fiercely intelligent in many ways, but in others...

Sandra waved a hand in front of his face. "Sorry, what?"

The middle-aged waitress chuckled. "What will you have to drink?"

"Umm... Yes." he fumbled, scanning the menu quickly. "This sounds good. I'll have the Lamprey's Extra Stout."

"Good enough. And you?" she turned to Sandra, pencil at the ready.

"I'll have a beer," she said, a tone of finality in her voice.

The waitress looked at Sandra suspiciously. "You haven't had beer before, have you sweetie?"

"Of course I have," Sandra responded indignantly. "I've had beer on many, many occasions, and I want another one now."

"She'll have an amber," Nick told the waitress, who nodded understandingly and flashed them a smile as she left.

"Is that a beer?" Sandra asked. Nick nodded. "Why does getting drunk have to be so complicated?"

Over the course of the evening, Nick tried unsuccessfully to turn the conversation to Sandra. She would either deflect questions about her past, or say something infuriatingly vague and follow up with, "How about you?" It became obvious that she didn't want to reveal anything, which intrigued him. The possibilities ran through his mind. Serial killer? Arsonist? Salutatorian on the run from her barely imperfect past? Escapee from a UFO cult? What could explain this odd, fascinating girl seated across from him?

Just after his third beer, an impossible thought struck him. His mind floated back to the moment in his truck, when she'd said "your species." It had been just one of many incongruities to which he'd turned a blind eye. Not that he blamed himself, since she was very pretty.

He took a breath, and dove. "Did you ever find out what pregnant means?" he asked, as nonchalantly as he could manage. He instantly regretted it.

Sandra's cheeks went red, and her eyes flared. "Of course I know what it means!" she shouted. Nearby conversations ground to a halt for a few uncomfortable seconds. Nick was taken back by the forceful reaction, but it added to his conviction that she really hadn't known.

"Then tell me," Nick said, his voice almost a whisper, eyes locked on hers. "Tell me what it means."

"It's when a man carries a child in his womb! Everyone knows that!"

"You mean a woman."

"What?"

"Men don't have wombs. It's women who get pregnant. My god, what planet are you from?"

He watched her face go ashen. She fumbled with her silverware, as though her hands needed something to do. "I know. I was... It was a slip of the teeth..." She knocked her drink off the table as she tried to stand up. Nick winced as the glass shattered.

"I'm sorry," he exclaimed, standing up.

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "Why can't you just leave me alone?" Sandra fled the bar, nearly bowling a woman over in her escape.

Nick cursed himself as he sat down to the applause of the other bargoers. He waited a few interminable minutes before following, and paused before he got to the door. He could hear her talking, and peeked around. She sat on the steps, her back to him, with her head between her knees, talking to herself. "What do you mean, 'it didn't take'?" she asked the air. "I don't care if someone hears. I don't need to be able to recite the history of the Gregorian Calendar or a list of the original signers of the Magna Carta. But those things sure 'took'. I need the little stuff. The stuff everyone assumes everyone else already knows." She sobbed weakly. "I screwed up again, and now he knows, and... I have to get out of here."

Another short pause, and then, "Anywhere."

She stood up just as two huge bikers shoved past Nick and staggered out. "Excuse me," she said, grabbing the front of one of the bikers' leather vests. "Could you take me someplace?" Nick cringed. He wasn't a big fan of making other people's decisions for them, but this was extremely stupid in more ways than he could count, and she seemed ill-equipped to know that. He started out the door.

"Sandra!" he shouted, running after her. The bikers stopped leering at her, and turned to size him up. They didn't seem intimidated.

"Sandra, don't do this!"

"I can do whatever I want. It's a free country, and I can recite your entire U.S. Constitution to prove it!" She turned, stumbling into one of the bikers.

"It's not safe," Nick swayed slightly, feeling the alcohol.

"C'mon, sexy," the other biker told her. "We'll have some fun when we get back to my place." He cast a threatening look at Nick.

"Sandra, I'm sorry," Nick pleaded. "If you come back inside, I won't ask any more questions. I'll just drop you off at the motel, and you never have to see me again. Just don't do something stupid."

Sandra softened at this. "Okay," she said. But the big man had his arm around her stomach. "Let go of me!" The man only laughed.

"Let her go, now," Nick threatened, "or I go in and call the cops. I'm guessing they know who you are."

"Don't be stupid, Mike," the other biker warned.

After a few tense moments, the man released his grip, and Sandra pulled away. Nick turned to walk away.

"Stupid prick just wants the little whore for himself," he called after them. "Not that I blame him!"

Nick stiffened, turning back around. "What did you call her?" The two men just stared back at him. Nick's fists clenched.

"Nick, don't. Just walk away." Sandra tried to pull on his arm. "Now *you're* about to do something stupid!"

Nick wasn't listening. "You'll apologize to the lady right now!"

"Or what?" Mike mocked him. "You call the cops?" Nick stepped forward again, raising his fists. His vision went dim and starry as the first punch caught him in the cheekbone. When it cleared, he was lying on his back, his opponent towering over him. "Pussy," the man spat at him, then turned away, walking toward his bike.

"Hey!" Nick shouted. "We ain't finished!" He stood up and dusted himself off. The biker turned to face Nick again, and Nick took a step forward...

...and doubled over as his groin exploded into pain. Even through the agony, part of his brain was screaming that something incomprehensible had just happened. He heard distant laughter, and when his vision cleared, he saw Sandra standing over him. "You... kicked me?" Why would she...?

"I'm trying to keep you from getting yourself killed," she told him, then shoved him into the dirt and went after the biker. "This man is in no condition to engage in combat! By the customs of your society, there is no honor in harming him further." Nick raised his head, and saw the bikers nearly falling off their rides, howling with laughter.

"You can have her," Mike called out, gunning his engine. "That bitch is ten pounds of crazy in a five pound bag."

Sandra waved at the men on the bikes as they rode off. Nick stumbled back towards the bar, groaning in agony.

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"Are you feeling better?" Sandra asked Nick, who lay on the motel bed with an icepad to his groin. He seemed to be taking his defeat well, but she knew that his experience could lead to psychological trauma or suppressed Oedipal ideation, and she wouldn't have that on her conscience. Brains were such fragile things.

Nick nodded. "Mostly I'm just mortified. Got beat up by a girl in front of everybody, then that same girl demanded that I whip out my clydesdale in front of everyone so she could inspect it for damage. I don't think I can take much more today."

"I don't understand you at all," Sandra grumbled. "Why did you seek a confrontation with that man? I mean, all he did was say words, correct?" Nick nodded. "Then why get into a fight you knew you were going to lose?"

"How do you know I would have lost? I'm not totally defenseless. I've watched two... no, three Bruce Lee movies. I may have seen one of them twice, in fact." Sandra chose to say nothing to this. "You're not big on cultural references, are you?" Nick asked.

Sandra sat next to him on the bed. "Bruce Lee, born November 27, 1940, died July 20, 1973. Starred in dozens of martial arts movies, the last completed film being Enter the Dragon. Game of Death had to be finished with a stand-in. But I don't understand how watching his movies would actually aid you in combat."

"I was joking. Really, I couldn't look weak in front of you. I reckon it's a southern thing, or a guy thing."

She thought about it for a moment. "Being dead wouldn't have raised my estimation of your strength."

"True," he laughed. "But I can't say I was thinking logically at the time."

"I once saw this PBS documentary about Jane Goodall and her gorillas," Sandra mused. "It fascinated me. They would fight over mates, they would fight over territory, they would fight over grooming. Apes fight over everything, don't they?"

"True. Humans would like to think that we're so much better than that, on account of having logic, reason, CD players, and all that. But the way I figure, we wear these trappings of civilization like a disguise, and when we're cornered or just pissed, the disguise gets flimsy. Your race must not think too highly of us gorillas, and I honestly can't blame you."

Sandra caught the implication. "But I'm human too." she said weakly.

Nick took her hand and looked her directly in the eyes. "You do look the part. I don't know what you are, but you're not... At least, you weren't raised among humans. It's the only thing that fits."

Sandra knew she was supposed to feel terrified. But instead she felt relief. "Did I blow it that badly?"

"Not so badly. But you've never spent this much time around one person, have you?" She shook her head. "And you've never had a beer before, have you?" She laughed. Before today, she'd never set foot in a bar. She'd spent too much time flitting between libraries to really round out her education.

"You promised you weren't going to ask any more questions," Sandra said.

Nick looked startled, then disappointed. "Pardon, miss. It isn't my place to pry." He flipped off the light by his bedside. "We should probably just get some sleep."

She turned off the light, and tried to drift off. She didn't care for sleep; her parent species didn't have anything that resembled it, yet her body still needed it. She could get intense bouts of insomnia when something was troubling her. Now, for instance.

The last twenty-four hours on this planet had taught her as much about humankind as the prior four thousand four hundred and thirteen, all because she'd been forced to interact with humans themselves rather than their historical records.

"Nick, are you awake?" she asked.

"Yep," he replied.

She turned on the light. "I want you to ask me questions. All of them."

So he did. She told him about ConFed and their mission. She told him her memories of being grown in a tube. She shared ConFed's concern that humanity was disengaging from the rest of the galaxy. She told him the square root of 11,287,103, and was a bit miffed when Nick didn't double-check the answer. She told of her struggle to blend in.

"Take that pencil, for example. I know that it's a utensil for writing. But it takes me two tries to remember which end I'm supposed to use, and I have to think hard to associate it with paper." Nick nodded in sympathy. "Okay, I've told you just about everything about myself. Now tell me more about your weird little hominid species."

"Well, we fight a lot. We fight over resources, but also over ideas, money, status. You know, intangible shit. But it feels important to us. Even our bruised egos can have a life of their own. I reckon you noticed."

Sandra smiled at this. "When you were marching toward your certain doom, what were you thinking?"

"Maybe I just thought you'd be impressed by my act of chivalry. Stupid idea, I know. But the urge to impress women is ingrained in us, probably a billion years deeper than opposable thumbs."

"So you wanted to attract my interest as a mate?" Nick only shrugged. "So you wanted to have sex with me?"

Nick didn't meet her eyes, but instead looked studiously at the bedside lamp. "It wouldn't be chivalrous to say yes. Call me old-fashioned."

"Chivalry be damned. Answer the question."

"No!"

"I don't understand this. You and I are healthy, breeding-age specimens. You don't appear to dislike me, I'm physically attractive, and I'd like to become familiar with the act of intercourse. Is there some nuance to the situation that I'm missing?"

"That's just not how it works," Nick said.

"You're not being helpful. How *does* it work?" she demanded. "Should I be dressed in something lacy and transparent? Should one of us be offering money to the other? Am I supposed to play 'Happy Birthday' on a ukelele? I could really use some guidance here."

Nick shook his head. "It's not that. This is just sudden, is all."

"It isn't, though," Sandra argued. "The time between meeting and sex can be a matter of hours. Less if alcohol is involved. You even have a name for it: a 'one night stand.'" Sandra leaned forward to give him a slow, not entirely clumsy kiss. She was relieved to feel him responding.

Then he pulled back, speechless, his face displaying concern and indecision. "I don't want this to be a one night stand," Nick said.

"Neither do I," Sandra replied, then slipped her arms around his waist.

Nick only nodded, then kissed her, gently at first and then with increasing force. Sandra reached out and turned out the light. Then, with a quick thought, as though throwing a switch in her mind, she turned off her transmitter.

Thirty thousand miles above, Ykras uttered a string of the most potent curse words in the entire galaxy.

---

Sandra had dozed off, only to wake up in the darkness. She fumbled for her watch. 3:31. She gently pushed away the arm that Nick had draped over her, threw on some clothes, and snuck out the door. It felt good to be out in the cool desert air, though the bright fluorescent lights from the nearby truck stop irritated her. They were washing the stars out, and she really wanted to see them right now. She reactivated her transmitter.

*I was wondering when you'd come back,* Ykras said. *We thought you'd been ravished by the hairless monkey.*

Sandra laughed. "I'm not sure who ravished who, but it was very pleasant."

*Congratulations. Has this given you any grand new insights into the human psyche?*

"I'm still letting it all soak in. But I think I understand them a lot better than I did two days ago. Give me some time to think on it."

Sandra heard a dull clatter from the door behind her. It opened, and Nick leaned out and looked for her. "I thought maybe they'd whisked you off," Nick said. He closed the door and sat down next to her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, then gave his neck a kiss. "No, I'm not leaving you. You're teaching me too much."

"Have you decided how to drag humanity kicking and screaming into space?"

"It doesn't work like that. The best we can do is try and give you a reason to want it."

"Why not just announce that you're here?"

"We've considered it," she said, "but too often when you do that, the species just gives up. They expect us to just hand them the schematics for an FTL drive. It's better for you to learn to do it by yourselves."

"Why?"

"I guess because you don't have to resent owing us anything."

"I take it you've done this before?"

"The Fleet Commander has, and I have some of his knowledge and memories. Most of it didn't fit. He's got a very large, very old brain on him."

Nick squeezed her tighter. "So," he asked, "Who lives on that star?" He pointed at one of the few dots that wasn't washed out by the halogen lights next door.

"They look a lot like giant prairie dogs," Sandra said, giving her lover a sharp jab with her elbow. "Most of the stars you see now are blue giants. They burn out in a few million years, before evolution has a chance to string a dozen amino acids together."

"That one's not blue. Who lives on that red one there?"

That one's not blue. Who lives on that red one there?

"Nick, that's Mars."

---

Two days later, they stood looking over the vast bowl of the Barringer Meteor Crater in Arizona. They had left Sandra's car with Cliff in lieu of payment, and had traveled almost non-stop along I-40, pausing only for food, bathroom breaks, and heavy petting. As they drove, they had entertained and dismissed a dozen different schemes for spurring humanity to action, but all of them had numerous major flaws. So they were feeling a bit frustrated as their overly perky tour guide led them around the north rim.

"So," Nick asked as the tour guide gushed on about the crater, "Should we head straight for California, or head up to the Grand Canyon first?"

"Don't care much," she responded dully. She stared out over the railing. "This meteor impact probably killed everything within forty miles. We should be trying harder to catalogue objects like those."

"We' as in humanity? You've decided to join us?" Nick squeezed her hand. "I reckon once the first one hits, it'll get our attention. Of course, your ship's most likely found everything in the solar system bigger than my fist, and figured out where they'll all be a good thousand years out." Sandra didn't try to deny it. "So tell me," Nick asked, "if there was something screaming towards us right now, would you tell us?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she laughed, shoving him playfully. "We might tell you. Or we might deflect it ourselves."

"I'd give my right arm to hike down inside this monster," Nick laughed.

"But the tour guide said that it wasn't allowed. She used a very stern voice."

"All the more reason to do it," Nick reminded her. "What's the fun if there's nobody to say 'Bad Sandra! Bad!'"

Sandra tried to follow this line of reasoning, but couldn't. "You would want to do something simply because there's a rule against it?"

"Why?" Nick asked, hopping the railing and hanging on to the other side. "Because that makes it more fun! You're not just doing what you want, you're doing it while telling all the clueless rulemakers to go stuff themselves!" His voice was getting louder, and starting to attract the notice of the other dozen tourists. "You're saying, nobody owns me! Nobody chooses my path! I live my own life, chart my own course! Live free or die!"

"Sir, get back on this side of the railing right now!" the young tour guide's valley girl voice suddenly took on an imperious, commanding tone that Sandra hadn't thought it capable of.

"Yes ma'am," Nick said, sounding completely defeated. He scrambled back over the railing to the trail. The tour guide's iron will satisfied, the group continued on.

"But you don't act that way with all rules."

"True. But if a rule is stupid or unfair, we're obliged to resist it."

"So the only thing we have to do is lay down a stupid rule? Maybe tell your species that you're not allowed to leave the planet anymore?"

"Could work," Nick said uncertainly. "What the hell have I gotten us into?"

---

A few days later, the two were camping above the Grand Canyon. They had just returned from a short hike when Ykras contacted Sandra.

"Ykras says we should turn on a radio."

"What frequency?"

"Doesn't matter!" She motioned for Nick to hurry.

He jumped in his truck and flipped on the radio. A low monotone voice was speaking in what sounded like Mandarin. Sandra wondered if it was even comprehensible to the target audience, given the language's emphasis on inflection. Then it stopped for a few seconds, then started up in English. "For many years, you have been asking: where are the aliens? This is an alien speaking. We are the aliens who have watched you for thousands of years, and if you wish to know the future of your species, I am the alien who will tell you. I will be landing on the White House lawn in two hours and twelve minutes to deliver my message. Make whatever preparations you feel are necessary. That is all." Then the message began in French.

"Ykras knows someone is going to catch the Ayn Rand homage, right?" Nick asked.

"You read Atlas Shrugged?" Sandra looked at him with suspicion.

"Guilty pleasure. The woman had a thing for architects. My point is, it seems a bit inauthentic. People will talk. And what's with the whole

'landing on the White House lawn' bit?"

*I requested that, Ykras told Sandra. I can't get enough of 1950s alien invasion movies.*

"You need help, Ykras," she told the air. "There's plenty of time for a hike before they land."

"We'll look mighty suspicious not glued to a TV. Let's go be disoriented and worried, like the folks over there," he said, pointing to a small crowd gathering in the next campground over. They were fixated on a small portable television, and a few were waving Sandra and Nick over to join them.

"What's going on?"

"Aliens!" a middle-aged woman blurted out. "Landing here!"

Nick stared at the TV set. CNN already had a countdown graphic running in one corner of the screen, and a camera was already trained on the White House, where people were milling about in preparation. More and more campers trickled in, faces bearing emotions ranging from terror to reverence to complete mental gridlock. A woman held a small baby protectively, while trying to hush the older brother playing at her feet. An older couple whispered to each other.

The wait was interminable. About an hour ahead of the deadline, the President came on and gave a short speech, encouraging citizens to stay at home, and to stay resolute and courageous. Sandra said it lacked poetry, Nick said it lacked substance, and the woman with the baby said that the both of them lacked patriotism. Soon people began arguing over whether it might be a hoax.

The moment arrived. The cameras panned up to the sky, where a tiny speck was visible. It grew bigger, slowly at first, but with increasing speed, until its outline was clear.

"Okay," Nick said, with more than a hint of displeasure in his voice. "Now you're just mocking us."

Sandra burned with humiliation. "I told them not to do that," she whispered. I swear to god, I told them."

The small craft that landed on the lawn was shaped like a flying saucer. All that was missing was a strand of fishing line extending up into the sky. The crowd seemed almost relieved, as though the whole thing were an elaborate stunt. Then the saucer opened, and a ramp unfolded. With a slow, flowing grace, Fleet Commander Xuraxnos XXIV marched down the ramp and onto a red carpet, there to tower over an unflinching Madame President. The audience was instantly convinced.

The Fleet Commander stood on four of his six legs, extending one of his free hands in a rough approximation of a handshake. His enormous, insect-like form was covered with translucent armor. A seemingly fragile breathing apparatus was slung over his back. Gingerly, the President reached out, and took the offered limb. They shook, and the crowd erupted in a cheer. Then the President stepped aside, allowing the alien to approach the waiting podium.

Sandra laughed out loud when she saw the "translator" the Fleet Commander placed on the podium beside him. It had a wide assortment of lights, diodes, and spinning dials, which she suspected did absolutely nothing. A few people shushed her.

*Yes, yes, I need help, Ykras spoke, seeming more delighted than apologetic.*

Everyone fell silent as the Fleet Commander commenced his speech. "Greetings, people of the planet Earth. I am Xuraxnos the Twenty-Fourth, captain of the science vessel Polota. I represent the Confederation of Allied Planets. The constituent planets of the Confederation span twenty-thousand light-years, and its origins are lost to the depths of time."

"We have watched you from your humble beginnings. Our first probes entered this system over eighty thousand years ago. They discovered a few primates with sufficient brains that, it was presumed, could eventually master the technologies needed to ascend to the stars and join us in our great Confederation. So we have waited. And waited. And waited."

"We waited as your kind spread out over the globe. We waited as empire after puny human empire rose and fell. We waited through the Etruscans, the Egyptians, the Romans, and the Chinese dynasties. We waited through your Dark Ages. We waited through the recent explosion of technological prowess. When your race first set foot on the moon, we cheered alongside you. We believed that, after the many stumbles and mistakes of your childhood, you would finally begin to rise above your petty arguments and seize your future."

"Since then, we have been sadly disappointed. You have played within the confines of low Earth orbit. You have launched a few tentative probes, while squandering precious opportunities and planetary resources which, once lost, can never be regained. You have wasted your lives and your energies in wars of domination, rather than the nobler struggles of exploration. 'You have been weighed in the balance, and are found wanting,' as your Book of Daniel says. My message from the Confederation is this: your species has been judged too timid and shortsighted to be proper caretakers of your own solar system, much less valued citizens of the galaxy."

"For these reasons we decree: from this day forth, by the order of the Confederation of Allied Planets, no device of human creation is to ascend beyond the confines of Earth's atmosphere. A fleet has been dispatched, and will arrive in your system in approximately one hundred years to enforce your confinement. Until then, we expect your full compliance with our directive."

"We now return you to your regularly scheduled syndicated programming."

Standing tall and haughty on four of his legs, the Fleet Commander made his way down the center aisle, past the stunned journalists and row upon row of security guards. The stunned silence of the crowd quickly gave way to indignant murmurs. Then the booing began, increasing in rancor as comprehension dawned on the audience. Someone behind the security forces threw a half-finished soda can, hitting the Fleet Commander's torso. Despite the efforts of the security detail, other more dangerous objects followed. Xuraxnos broke into a skittering run, and quickly closed the distance to his ship. After a few seconds, a high-pitched whine could be heard from the ship. It took off quickly, chased by dozens of projectiles.

Back in Arizona, Sandra couldn't stop laughing. "Viva la revolucion!" she exulted. The woman who owned the TV glared at her, then returned to watching the screen.

"He was kind of harsh," Nick said, astonished.

"Think of it as tough love."

"Damned bugs aren't gonna push us around," the woman fumed, to the general agreement of the gathering. "It's our galaxy too." Sandra had to grin at that. Prior to this, the woman had probably never imagined herself as a joint owner of the heavens.

They watched the tiny screen as the President approached the microphone. She appeared visibly upset, waving off handlers who were trying to stop her from taking the podium. "My fellow Americans..." she said into the microphone, hands gripping the podium, "Excuse me... my fellow members of the human race. This insult will not go unanswered. Their proclamation means the subjugation and enslavement of our race. If thousands of years of human history has taught us anything, it is that slavery is intolerable, that we cannot be whole if we are deprived of the right to choose our own destiny."

"The Confederation has delivered its message, and I hope they hear our response. We shall not be controlled. We shall not be ordered. We shall not have our destiny chosen for us. Whatever form our future struggle may take, know that it is a struggle for our survival and our freedom." As she left the podium, the crowd erupted in a deafening cheer.

"Hey, that was pretty good improv," Nick said with a note of admiration.

As a frazzled commentator fumbled for something insightful to say, Sandra nudged Nick. "Let's start on that hike, shall we?"

---

That night, Sandra and Nick watched the sky from the back of Nick's truck. The sky was dark and cloudless, with no moon in sight. The vivid sky of stars was often punctuated by flaming satellites as they were blown out of the sky by the departing vessel. Nick watched the pyrotechnics with a mixture of awe and horror. "Was all this really necessary?" he asked. "We were using those."

"Well, we do have to look sincere."

"Is the space station manned right now?"

"Fortunately not."

"You're taking it down, right?"

"Kaboom."

Nick sighed. "I kind of feel responsible for this, and not in a good way."

"Just listen to the radio. It worked. As soon as the fleet breaks orbit, you monkeys are going to invade the solar system. Alpha Centauri will be in your rear view mirror before the supposed deadline passes."

"I hope you're right," Nick said, yawning. Another satellite plunged into the atmosphere, throwing off a bright purple trail of light. "So, will you be leaving with them?"

"No. Earth is my home. I can't imagine being anywhere else. Technically, I can't even breathe the air anywhere else. Besides, there are some particularly treacherous quantum mechanical equations looming over the horizon, and somebody needs to give your dullard scientists a little hint now and then."

"What about me?"

Sandra cocked her head, as though receiving another transmission. "The Fleet Commander says that you please us, and will be allowed to live."

"Gee, thanks. I mean, what about me... and you?"

"I want to stay with you. You're my friend, my guide in a strange world, and my cherished plaything." She nuzzled in close to him, kissing his neck. He embraced her. As their lips met, a sonic boom shook the ground.

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