

Rejection by Robert Reed

"Rejection" views "first-contact as dating; as courtship; as a promise of great, but always vague rewards; and as the omnipresent threat of heart-wrenching loss."

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May 2011

Michael never forgot how his mother cried.

Really, the alien ship wasn't that neat. It looked practically tiny, even when people said it was bigger than the Moon, and it didn't seem all that fast—a speck of light growing only a little brighter each night. But for days and days, the adults couldn't talk about anything else. The aliens were broadcasting, they said. They said the aliens were from the galactic union, whatever that was, and this was going to be the biggest thing in history. The aliens had come to offer people a membership in their union. Whatever that meant. But Michael's mother believed every good story. She was a dreamy sad woman full of enthusiasms. Sitting down with her son, she promised, "Everything is going to change now. Aliens will be visiting us all the time, and we'll build our own starships and travel far away. We're going to learn wonderful new things, sweetie. Everybody's life is going to get so much better. Longer and healthier and better. You can't imagine all the good things that will happen. Nobody can."

Michael imagined a new Game Boy. He imagined himself throwing the ball all the way from right field to first base. And then, giving his mind free rein, he pictured himself hitting the game-winning home run.

"Isn't it a beautiful ship?" his mother asked.

They were watching the newest pictures on their old television. What Michael saw was a smear of light that couldn't decide what color to be.

"It's made of plasma," she explained, believing the word would mean something to him. "I know it's almost as big as a planet, but the ship doesn't weigh that much. It's like a bubble of bright golden air. Really, it's like a breath coming straight from God."

That was a very weird way to think, Michael decided.

Then Mother gave him a hard, level look. This was the look she used when it was time to visit his grandparents, or sit through church, or when a new boyfriend was going to stay the night.

Michael braced himself.

"The aliens want to speak to us," Mother explained. "They're going to interview each of us. Alone."

The boy nodded, saying, "Okay."

"It's just a formality," she assured. "This is something everybody does before they become full members." Mother never smiled much, but she was smiling then. She looked very pretty and young, grinning at the golden smear on the television, her hands jumping around in her lap. "The interviews won't be hard, and they won't last long. But everyone has to do them. Do you understand, Michael? These are the rules."

"Okay," he said. He understood the importance of rules.

"Be brave," was her advice. Then she set her hands on her knees, and she shivered, her eyes huge and staring at nothing. "Be honest," she was saying. "But try and make a good impression, Michael. This is

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“I'll try,” he promised, speaking with confidence. Then he took a deep breath before asking, “Will the aliens give me a

Game Boy? If I'm really, really good?"

* * *

The starship looked big only during the last few hours. But the sun was still up, and all Michael could see with his own eyes was a dull patch of silver light hanging in the eastern sky. This was going to be the big day. He and Mom were visiting her parents. He was playing outside. "Stay close," his mother had warned. "And please, be good." He was trying to be good. Sitting on the driveway, Michael was using a stick and his thumbs to crush ants. He wasn't bothering anyone when Mom threw open the front door, shouting, "Get in the house now! Hurry, hurry!"

He never made it. He tried, but the

starship had accelerated without warning, suddenly leaping all the way from the Moon's orbit to the Earth. It took just a few seconds. And it became even bigger, swallowing up their little world. But the ship didn't weigh much, just like they were promised. The impact was soft as a breeze against skin, and then it was finished. Suddenly Michael found himself standing inside a big silvery room. He was alone. There was a bright silvery chair in the middle, but he didn't sit. He didn't feel like sitting. The old stick was still in his hand, and goo clinging to the tip. Should he throw the stick away? He started to hunt for a wastebasket. That's what he was doing when the aliens appeared.

“Hello,” they said.

Michael turned toward the voices. The aliens were standing at the far end of the room. They looked like old men and women. Then they looked like aliens, their faces weird and stuck in weird places. And then they turned into glowing clouds, their voices coming from inside. The boy laughed, sort of.

“Hello, Michael,” they called out.

He dropped his stick and said, “Hi.”

“May we ask you some questions, Michael?”

“I guess.”

“What are we, Michael?”

Didn't they know? Suspecting a trick, the boy leaped for the easy answer. “You're aliens. You come from some big

old star.”

“We come from many places,” the aliens cautioned. “Many worlds orbiting many suns are our birthplaces. We represent a confederation of highly advanced societies. And as your mother has told you, we are here to see if your species should be admitted into the galactic union.”

The boy nodded, and waited.

“Would you like to be our friend, Michael?”

Right away, he said, “Yes.”

Then they asked him, “Why?”

Again, as quickly as possible, the boy explained. “Because if we weren't friends, we'd have to be enemies.”

“Is that so?” the voices asked.

With a conviction based on hard experience, Michael said, “Sure.”

“And what would happen, Michael? If we were enemies—?”

“We'd fight,” he reported. What could be more obvious? “Enemies always fight each other.”

Then he was standing on the driveway again. The silver room and aliens had vanished. Mom was still standing in the front door, staring out at the yard, nothing there to see but Grandpa's fresh-mowed grass. Then she turned and hurried back inside, and Michael looked at the sky. There was no ship to see. The sun had fallen a long ways, and the air had grown cooler, smelling like nightfall. Michael found his trusted stick

and returned to the driveway, searching for prosperous ant nests. Then he heard his mother wailing.

He crept to the front door, and with a practiced wariness, he peeked inside. Mom was sitting on the sofa, weeping. Grandma was beside her, looking puzzled about something. Grandpa was in his chair, and he was nothing but angry. On the television, someone was talking about an application being turned down

... humanity was found unworthy of the honor ... and like she did whenever a boyfriend left her, Mother sobbed and made fists and shook them at nothing....

Only this was worse than when boyfriends left.

Michael could tell. Just watching, he knew this was going to be much, much worse.

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October 2021

The chemistry professor opened the lab on Saturday morning, giving his slowest students this one opportunity to catch up. Michael had been struggling with his apparatus all week, trying to harvest enough of the properly doped buckyballs and earn a passing grade. It was a miserable morning. His hangover just seemed like the topper. He was sitting on a high stool, his balance uneasy, his vision blurring at the worst possible moments. Suddenly the professor returned from his office—a

bearded and relentlessly disheveled man who was running for some reason—and with a wide grin, he made the simple declaration:

“They're back!”

Only Michael remained on the stool. He might not harvest another ten buckyballs, but at least he didn't bolt with the others. He didn't rush back to his dorm room or the student union, watching events that were happening halfway across the solar system. He even managed to convince himself that he enjoyed his sudden solitude. At least twice, he caught himself singing. Once, he heard himself chatting with his dead mother.

By contrast, his girlfriend was made

of weaker stuff.

“This time,” Jackie said. And that's all she needed to say. Everyone knew what the two words meant. Again and again, with a firm conviction, she would say, “This time,” and look across the restaurant table, smiling at him.

Michael could have said, “Sure.”

Or better, he should have told her, “I don't want to talk about it.”

But instead, he ignored her. Or he tried to ignore her. He ate as if he were hungry, and when they were finished with dinner and heading back to her room, he spoke carefully about everything but the aliens. Maybe she noticed.

More likely, she didn't. Really, she

wasn't the sharpest soul. Michael was beginning to appreciate that. The sex was good, but only good, and whenever he bothered to look at the two of them, he saw nothing but trouble looming.

Unaware of the perils, the girl steered back toward the only real topic of the night. "We've made so many changes in the world," she exclaimed. "Improvements everywhere. Life on Earth, and above, is so much better now. And in just ten years, too."

He didn't respond.

Jackie mistook silence for agreement. "I'm sure they'll be impressed. They've got to be. Poverty rates are what? Half what they were? And there isn't nearly as much disease. And what's the literacy

rate now?

Around the world, I mean.”

“I don't know.”

“In so many categories, we're doing better.” She couldn't stop praising humanity. Obviously she was practicing for the next interview. “When was the last time we had a war?”

“South Africa,” he mentioned.

“But that's a civil war. I don't think that counts.” With a forced sincerity, she said, “We're more peaceful now. A good, law-abiding species.”

“Is that what they want?”

Michael was sitting in the driver's seat—a traditional gesture in a world where electric cars glided along with computers at the helm. He'd asked that

simple question without considering the consequences, and when it was met with silence, he thought, “Screw the consequences.”

Facing Jackie, he asked, “What do they want us to be? Do you know? Can you explain it to me?”

She was astonished.

He reminded her, and himself, “They rejected our first application. No explanations. Just a bland little,

‘Thank you,’ and some noise about future opportunities.”

“Which is now,” she replied.

No, she wasn't stupid. But she was simple and she was silly. That's what Michael decided, staring at her with a mixture of rage and pity.

She was appalled. “Ten years,” she repeated, “and look at the changes we've accomplished. The world's a better place. We've got bigger rockets, and there's a lot less hunger, and the gap between rich and poor is starting to shrink—”

“Is that what it takes?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Is that what these assholes want? Centralizing governments mandating fairness and decency?” He shook his head, asking, “Why does everyone assume that? That the bastards—”

“Michael!”

“That the bastards have any politics. Why does that make sense?”

She had never asked that simple

question. Facing it now, she could only sob and shake her head, finally wringing loose a few sorry words meant to warn him. "I guess I don't know you," she muttered. "Not like I thought I did."

"Yeah, well."

She started to cry, quietly and bitterly.

He said, "Shit."

Looking straight ahead, he said, "Bullshit."

At enormous expense, cities had reduced light pollution to a trickle; how could you join the galaxy if you couldn't see it? A person sitting inside a robotic car could look into the sky, catching his first glimpse of the great starship. Like the last ship, it was plunging toward the Earth. But it looked different in small

ways, and it had originated from another part of the sky. There was no evidence that it was the same ship as before. Really, even the simplest answers were beyond the clumsy reach of humanity. Michael stared up at the smear of light, and with frustration as well as a massive inevitability, he told Jackie, "I think we should break up. See other people. That sort of thing."

She said nothing.

Michael glanced at her. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were closed and her mouth was trembling. Instantly, he regretted his outburst. But when she didn't react, he grew impatient, saying again, "We should break up."

"I heard you the first time."

“This isn't going to work,” he explained.

“Shut up,” she told him.

“Why do you have to be so awful?” she asked him.

Then to herself, with a quiet and furious voice, she said, “I'm so stupid. I should have known...!”

* * *

The impact was very much the same. Again, the starship picked up velocity as it crossed the Moon's orbit, and it merged with the Earth and every orbital platform. The human species met a nebulous panel of alien species. On average, interviews lasted for eight apparent minutes. Yet many were much briefer, while a few seemed to last for

hours. Once again, Michael found himself inside a small room. But this time the walls were green and there was an enormous soft pillow in place of the chair. Again, he didn't sit. He gave the pillow a kick and then stood with his feet apart, listening to a half dozen questions being delivered with a smooth American English.

“How are you, Michael?”

“What do you think of us?”

“What do you expect from us?”

“Do you have anything to say?”

“Why are you silent, Michael?”

“Why do you cry, Michael? Please, tell us that much.”

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August 2039

“Evelyn placed your name on our master list. I'm assuming she knew you years ago. In graduate school, was it?”

Michael said, “Sure.”

Then he asked, “How is Evelyn?”

“Extraordinarily busy. She would have preferred to meet with you herself, but what with our timetable and several thousand test subjects to prepare during the next six and a half days—”

“What exactly is this project?”

The technician was a harried little man armed with electronic forms and a briefcase jammed full of tiny wonders. He paused for an instant, the question seeping into his exhausted mind. Then with a confused shake of the head, he said, “Sorry. I thought you'd given

permission. This would have been five years ago, just after we received funding.” He stared off in a random direction, accessing buried files or his own uncertain memory. Finally, with a measure of certainty, he said, “Yes. You consented to take part, when and if the opportunity arose.”

“You want me to wear a wire,” Michael said, smiling warily. “Yeah, I remember. Evelyn called. We had a little chat, and in the middle of everything, she asked if I'd be willing.”

“I have your verbal agreement. If you need to hear it—”

“No, I believe you.”

The man nodded gratefully, wiping his dampened forehead. Then almost as an

afterthought, he admitted,

“You could refuse. I mean, if you're having second thoughts ... it would be bad news for us, of course ... for Evelyn ... but we won't force anyone to act against their will....”

“I doubt if it matters,” Michael confided. “Your eavesdroppers are going to fail, I'm guessing.”

Again, time had to pass before the words could be heard. Then the man removed a single packet from his briefcase, opening it with a practiced flourish, its contents spilling across the middle of Michael's desk. There were glass wires and microrecorders, false hairs and at least three syringes, each containing a different ensemble of

nanochines that would construct subtle, practically invisible sensory networks designed for the sole purpose of observing the aliens.

During the first visit, people who happened to be holding cameras at the critical moment failed to capture a single image. On the eve of the second visit, half a hundred ad hoc efforts were launched, and despite some initial excitement, no useful data were harvested. But these were a different species of machine, the man assured. He effusively described each of his tiny wonders. He was fond of them. He was proud of his work and its possibilities. Michael remained mute while the man described and promised, countering

every possible objection with reasons that only a person devoid of genuine imagination would find compelling.

Finally, Michael said, "Sorry, but it still won't work."

Then before the insult could be heard, he added, "I'll do it anyway. Everything you've got. Put them on me. In me. Whatever Evelyn needs. And when the pricks get here, I'll give it my best shot."

The man accepted that weak promise. He nodded, and for the first time began to notice the surrounding office. "Evelyn tells me that you're very much respected in your field."

"Can't tell by appearances, can you?"

The little office was in desperate need of a cleaning. Michael's guest gave a

snort, and then instead of disagreeing, he moved to a safer subject. "A Ph.D. in Biology," he remarked. "Your area's what now?"

Evolutionary theory, isn't it?"

"It's a bit narrower than that," Michael allowed.

The man nodded, remarking, "I'd think you'd have some interesting ideas about our aliens. Their origins, and shared patterns of evolution. That sort of business."

"I have a few notions," Michael teased.

But the man didn't ask for details. He had work to do, and presumably he had many more stops to make over the next few days. "If you would, please. Let's

start with your right arm.”

Michael surrendered his bare wrist, asking, “Do you have any advice?”

“About what?”

“Should I stand as close as possible to them? Should I talk loudly? Softly? What would be best?”

“Be honest,” said the man.

Then with a puzzled shake of the head, he added, “That was Evelyn's advice. She said, ‘Tell Michael to say exactly what's on his mind.’”

“Do you want to know what's on my mind?”

“God, no,” the man exclaimed. And then after a deep breath, he looked up and said, “Your left arm now. If you please.”

* * *

There were no questions. The instant Michael found himself standing in the small white room, he began to talk. To shout. Before they even appeared, he said, "I don't like you much. You're fucking arrogant and manipulative, and I think this is a game for you. Nothing more."

His insults were met with silence. A multitude of half-formed faces were floating inside the most distant wall, saying nothing. When Michael stepped toward the faces, they popped into existence in another wall. He did that twice, and then gave up. All the while, he let an angry tangle of words pour out.

"You bastards," he said. "You don't

care about shit, do you? You've turned us down twice, and it makes us crazy. We keep telling ourselves that we aren't worthy, and of course we want to be, and it always brings this rush of earnest, quarter-baked programs from every government and everywhere else. We pour trillions into space programs, because that's bound to impress you. We're spilling tens of trillions into social programs and environmental causes, trying to make ourselves more decent and respectable and honorable. And maybe we'll succeed in doing that. But we keep avoiding the central question here:

“What do you arrogant shits really want from us?”

Again, silence.

“We think we know. But really, it's just a pack of guesses. Old political ideas married to dreamy movies. I know that's where my mother got her vision of the future. She used to tell me—”

He paused, for an instant.

“In excruciating detail,” he continued, “my mother told me about the new world that was coming. Everyone would be well-fed and happy, and everybody would be effortlessly smart, and when I grew up, I could travel to the stars. If that's what I wanted to do. I was going to be that wondrously free, she promised me.”

Michael glared at the smoky faces.

Then with a smooth, old rage, he

reported, “My mother killed herself. It was a few years after your first visit, and you're partly to blame. I wish I could hold you completely responsible, but the woman had other problems. Like a quick, stupid marriage that went bad, and she took an overdose ... and I was the one who found the body first ... and shit, shit....”

The faces began to fade away.

“Where are you going?” Michael screamed. “Hey, jokers! I'm not even half-done with you yet!”

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January-April 2055

“Hello, sir.”

“Hello, yourself.”

The young woman had a handsome

face and sweet little body, blue eyes made from the finest smart-crystal, and she smiled at the professor with a gentle, fictional warmth. Without question, there was something unnervingly familiar about her. Half a century old, and Michael felt like a teenager again. He felt desire. He felt the nervous tang of excitement. “Are you in my Breeding Strategy class?” he inquired. She said, “No, sir.”

But the high-level classes were small, and he knew every student by name. With a shake of the head, he said, “I’ve seen you around campus.” Was he flirting? Fine, he was flirting. If you did it badly enough, then you could avoid tripping over the various codes

concerning student-professor relationships. “I’m sure I remember you.”

“You don’t,” she said. Then again, she said, “Sir.”

Reminding him of his age, no doubt.

“No,” she continued, “I’ve come here on behalf of Preparation. I wish to talk with you. If you have a moment, that is.” In a very sweet way, she gave him absolutely no room to maneuver. “If not now, we can schedule another time. Within the week, I should think.”

“Now,” said Michael. Then he showed off his best smile, adding, “I want to help Evelyn as much as I can.”

“Oh, this isn’t about her project.”

“No?”

“I belong to an entirely different team.”

“Of researchers?”

She said, “No.”

Michael meant to ask, “What then?” Except another question intruded, and with a tight little laugh, he said, “Shit, you've seen the next one coming. What happened? Did the new mirrors catch sight of a starship?”

Her smile tightened, telling him everything.

“Okay. When's the announcement?”

But she wouldn't tell him. Instead, she steered them back toward the previous subject. “My team has identified certain people who might garner more attention from the visitors. Important people.

Influential and well-educated people. Like yourself, for instance.”

Michael felt the warmth of the words, and then what lurked behind them. With a quiet, slow voice, he asked, “What do you want?”

“Just to talk for a moment,” she promised.

He nodded, saying nothing.

The silence prompted her. Files appeared in her eyes, and while watching Michael, she said, “I know this is a lot to ask.”

“What is?”

“You're an independent man. As is your right. Your writings and lectures are part of the public record, and they make compelling arguments. I think you

are wrong, and in many ways. But I can see why you believe what you do, and I can respect—”

“What do you want?” he interrupted.

“Success,” she said instantly. Without a shred of doubt, she told him, “I want this year's meeting to go well. I want us to win the respect and help of our alien brethren, and really, when I look at your work, I see that you want the same ends.”

Michael gathered himself, and then, with a harsh laugh, he said, “First of all, I haven't written more than a handful of works that even mentioned the aliens. And second of all, my public speeches on the subject are pretty much limited to offhand remarks made when my students

seem exceptionally bored.”

She watched him, saying nothing.

He felt prompted. “But you're not talking about anything public, are you?”

“Sir.”

“You're spying on me. Is that a fair assessment?”

She said, “No.”

Then she said, “Perhaps,” and sat closer to him, using her smile and body and a coldly efficient logic. “I met your wife last year.”

“My ex-wife,” he corrected. “We divorced six years ago.”

“She told me about your mother's tragic death. And I know that, for you, it was a personal nightmare. But no matter how awful it was, and no matter how

badly scarred you feel, I can't help but think that you are being more than a little unfair to accuse the extraterrestrials of any role in a sick woman's suicide.”

Michael watched the young woman.

“I am twenty-nine years old,” she confided. “And just in my lifetime, the world has become a distinctly better place. I won't waste time spouting statistics. I certainly won't attempt to defend every aspect of our government or our strides in science. Humanity is prospering, and if you won't admit it to yourself, then I can only pity you. Sir.”

With a tight little voice, Michael said, “I know who you remind me of. She was a girlfriend in college, as it happens.”

Files passed through those crystal

eyes. In an instant, she said, "Jackie."

Anger bled into a dumbfounded amusement. "So I'm that important to you. My entire life boils down to this. You want me to say nice words when the aliens arrive. Tell them how grateful I am for this chance and how much I'd like to belong to their shadowy union of worlds."

A toughness emerged in the pretty face. "Is that what I want?"

"Isn't it?"

She shrugged her shoulders, a look of disappointment blooming. On second thought, the woman didn't look much like Jackie. In fact, she wasn't even that pretty. Michael leaned across his desk, and with a hard low voice said, "It

doesn't matter anyway. What I say. What I tell them. Who I blame, and what they think of me. None of that matters at all.”

The disappointment worsened.

Talking to the desk, she said, “I guess that's what I'm doing here.” Then she looked up, asking, “How would you talk to them? I mean if you really believed your words mattered, if you genuinely thought that a dialogue was possible ... how, sir, would you approach such a sterling moment...?”

* * *

Michael had lived in the same apartment since the divorce. It was a small home physically, though it had an extra room lurking inside a commercial-grade immersion matrix—a room

approximately the size of a small continent and populated with a multitude of digital organisms evolving at their own breakneck pace. In early April, on the eve of the next visit, he sat on the puffy carcass of a giant digital grazer, staring off into the false pink sky and seeing nothing but his own thoughts. And that was the first time that he discovered a kind of happiness blossoming. Or at least, he felt a new contentment. Then with only an hour to go, he walked back to his physical apartment, stepping out onto the balcony just as his dinner finished cooking itself.

Neighbors were gathered on the green lawn below. Floating projections displayed the current images of the

starship, but people mostly ignored them, fixing their own eyes on the cloudy and chilled sky. Michael remained on the balcony, seated and out of easy view. A few of those neighbors had inquired about his plans tonight. They were divorced women and occasional lovers, and his honest rejections had plainly bothered them. But really, he wouldn't be much of a date tonight. Far too distracted, he was. The only people that he had the slightest urge to see were his children, and maybe, his ex. Was his family at home? Michael hoped so, floating his plate and rising, trying to slip indoors again without being noticed. A commotion began on the lawn.

He heard people muttering. For a self-

centered instant, Michael imagined that they had noticed him. They were calling to him, urging him to join them on this holy night. But of course they couldn't care less. Few of Michael's neighbors even knew his name, much less cared about his whereabouts. They were responding to something in the sky or in the projections, confusion bleeding into what sounded like a newborn anger.

With a word, his apartment called his ex's home.

She appeared before him, a middle-aged woman wearing her best clothes and a furious expression.

“Why are they doing this?” she barked.

“Doing what?” Michael asked,

absolutely confused.

“Missing us,” she said. “Aren't you watching?” Then she laughed at him, bitterly and with a certain relish.

“Oh, God, you aren't. Are you?” She practically cackled, telling him, “The ship just changed course. From the looks of it, this time, they're going to race right on by us!”

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2074

“I can tell you exactly who I blamed. Through all those years and all that self-inflicted misery, I blamed myself. That little boy crushing ants on the driveway was the culprit. That little sociopath who told the aliens that if he wasn't their friend, then he had to be their enemy.

And do you know why I thought that?

Because everyone else in that boy's life would have said the right words to the aliens. His friends would have. His grandparents. And yes, his mother. The boy was the bad seed. Watching his mother's awful collapse, the boy realized that he was the flaw in humanity. He had to be. Why else would these wondrous entities from the far stars turn away from his species? He had said the wrong words; he had thought the wrong thoughts. For God's sake, the boy was killing ants when the aliens met with him. Everything was his fault, which made it my fault, and I wore that blame very badly for an awful lot of years.

“It sounds silly, even to me. An old man sits in a golden room, and even after all this time, he wrestles with a single event from his not so innocent youth. But that's the silly truth. Time and maturity help me adjust to the guilt. I can talk about those few moments of life, and I almost believe that I wasn't responsible. Almost. I can grieve for my dead mother, and just as important, I can blame her. She was lousy about men. That was one of her worst features. She was insecure and sad and ready to latch onto any dreamy belief that promised salvation. On her strongest day, my mother was an emotionally fragile creature. Maybe the wise and godly hands of the galactic union could have saved her. But then

again, I suspect that your hands and your wisdoms have better things to do than patch up all these flawed little souls of ours.

“I don't know what you want from us. But I'm beginning to appreciate this process. This long, agonizing courtship of ours. In a lot of ways, humanity is the same as my mother. My species is insecure and alone, and we're desperate to be loved, and we will eagerly waste time and valuable resources in a careless bid to win your opaque affections.

“It wasn't my fault that you said, ‘No.’ Not when I was a child, and none of those times since.

“And all I can do now is be honest.

To be truthful, with you and with myself. And if you want my opinion, then it's yes. I think it would be good for humans to join some kind of union of species.

“But of course, I don't know anything about what you're offering.

“This union of yours. Its benefits, and its costs, and all the sloppy details between.

“Really, you're nothing to me but a pretty face. And I am not my mother. You're going to have to do a helluva lot better than you're doing, if you want to get into bed with me...!”

* * *

Evelyn's message arrived, and Michael broke the encryptions while he finished preparing his dinner, and then

he drifted down to the lowest cloud, eating the black air-shark steak while his old friend spoke to him.

“Are you settling in yet, Michael?”

Pretty well, he thought. His home was finished, and the world around him was nearly finished. Commercial terraformers had chewed up most of a smallish asteroid, then woven a transparent balloon around the dense new atmosphere. Michael's three-cloud home was free to him; he had designed much of the new biosphere, and the aerogel house was part of his fee. He was living more than a hundred million miles from Earth, in a frothy green world of relentless beauty, and he was happy in his life, and which part of that was the

most unexpected?

“Thanks for your help, again,” Evelyn told him. “I’m glad we could rail-up the hardware to you, in time.”

This time, the aliens had to visit a thousand inhabited bodies; but they managed it with a single spectacular, three-day event, their starship expanding into many twists of plasma—an enormous cloud pouncing on the solar system from high above the ecliptic.

“This time, we actually got some data.”

Michael stopped chewing, sticking his plate to the bluish-green foam beside him.

“Not much,” she admitted. “But what we got was pure gold. This isn’t for

public consumption, but we managed to hear the aliens talking among themselves ... in some common language that seems designed to be understood ... and in the last six months, we've been able to make some good guesses about they were saying during these last interviews....”

Michael looked over the edge of the cloud, watching a single pink parasol swimming past him.

“And we've come to some genuine conclusions, finally.” Evelyn's voice was smiling. She sounded like a girl again, whispering something private and beautiful to a lover on the other side of her pillow. “It's really the most amazing thing, Michael. But don't tell anyone—”

“Stop,” he told the recorder.

Then he bent and picked it up and blanked its memory by three different means, making certain that nothing remained of the message. And just to be certain, he dropped it over the edge of the cloud, watching as the device slowly, slowly descended into the bright emerald gleam of a newborn jungle.