

It wasn't that Thomas hated aliens, just that he really, really didn't like anything about them. Not *anything* anything and not all aliens. Just the ones he didn't like. And it wasn't that he didn't like aliens. It's just a lot of what he didn't like revolved around them. His friend Vincent was what some would call an alien in so much that he was from another country. But Thomas didn't mean political alien. Real aliens. You know, "take me to your leader" alien. But then what about Veek? Thomas thought a thought like that was speciesist and felt a pang of xeno-racial guilt as he let out a long defeated sigh, the breath from his nose puffing out in a dense cloud in the cold air. It was intrusive thoughts like this that Thomas often felt in moments of stress or mental absence. Perhaps during a particularly long shower. Taking a long walk after a fight with his girlfriend. Or while exercising. Maybe when he was on the metro to work. Generally thought, he had these disruptive and wandering thoughts in even more commonplace situations, like when he found himself standing in front of the site that used to be his favorite cafe which was now merely a pile of rubble, dust and splintered glass after yesterday's Robo-Rumble. Sold out event. No rules. Fate of the world at stake. Geellack Creesan, the interstellar menace vs. Erich "The Titan" Wolton. He had seen it before. He had lived it before. The real invasion was better, he thought. He had seen last night's Rumble on T.V and was sure he recognized the building in question being flattened but hoped that he had mis-remembered. Or rather, that it had been some other building. Maybe an orphanage. Or a Starbucks.

It had been nearly 20 years since the real invasion. Not these re-creations. The first conflict was incredibly brief. Maybe efficient was a better word. After landing in America, of course, the invaders sought first contact with the locals. However being America and in particular being in rural Virginia, these locals had much more of a propensity for violence than the interstellar travelers were expecting. Unbeknownst to both parties, rural Appalachian Virginia dialect bears a striking resemblance to traditional alien war cries and death calls. Needless to say, it was more than a small misunderstanding. Small arms fire. Whole towns were vaporized. Missiles were launched. World councils formed. From the outside it looked just like another day for humanity. Fortunately, aliens were particularly fond of bureaucratic processes and took full responsibility for the infractions. After legal proceedings between the two species took place in the host nation of Germany, a resolution was drafted. Aliens could stay. But they had to get jobs.

So it was here, in the crisp October morning breeze, that Thomas stood like a foreman of ruin. Stained with the dust and metal shavings of the resulting destruction, ribbons of a small paper banner bristled gently in the wind. A poker-table-felt-green canvas awning had twisted around the remains of the metal doorway and lay unevenly like a bad part after a worse haircut. Thomas could just make out the writing. Union Square Cafe. A black double sided chalkboard menu sign laid tipped over, just fashionable enough to look intentional, in front of the blasted low brick wall. Through the fine coating of dust like sugar on a beignet he could make out the messages written on it. "Now 90 days without demolition!"

Thomas thought that at the very least, he knew the place, knew the owner. The file would be easier for him to start when he got to the office. If it was still there. Why couldn't that have been pancaked? His stomach rumbled at the thought of a morning nibble. Nestled within the splintered timbers and pulverized mortar and drywall sat a single, untouched red armchair.

His usual spot. His hands remembered the rough upholstery and the sound of the creaking wooden frame as he sat with his morning espresso and croissant before work. It's the little things, he thought to himself. Sometimes they are too much to ask for. At the moment, he felt his pocket chirp and buzz. A text. From Veek. On the screen was the profile picture of a strange looking creature with leathery and speckled blue skin, no visible mouth, green and black pools for eyes and standing nearly 8 feet tall in a suit that was about 3 inches too short in all directions. In the picture, the gaunt figure stood slightly crouched down with its arm wrapped across Thomas's shoulder, clearly a picture from a work function or worse, a wedding. Thomas read the notification on the screen before it disappeared.

"Morning buddy! Pick me up a coffee on the way in?"

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When he finally reached the office the coffee was cold, the sad excuse for a croissant had become flimsy and flaccid and the elevator was out. What's the point of all that shining glass construction, axio-aluminatite framing and grav-shaft lifts if it can't take the legwork out of legs, he thought. Thomas wasn't usually one for the gym much less an impromptu stairmaster session, what with his worn out knee, hands currently full and his general proclivity for all things sedentary. He always imagined himself in a more proactive state of being but found that his motivations and general zest for life always hit its zenith around the time he was finally falling asleep and was nowhere to be found during the waking hours. As a matter of fact, if Thomas had one skill that stood him out from many of his colleagues, it was his incredible ability to be remarkably imaginative of all things he wished his life to be and equally as remarkably incapable of seeing those things come to fruition.

As a young man, Thomas had a great affinity for stories and otherworldly characters and imagined worlds beyond the mundanity of daily living. Growing up in an unremarkable house, to unremarkable parents, in an unremarkable place had given his young brain a remarkable thought. The corollary to these observations, he thought, was that if he lived in such a vast and frothing sea of milquetoastian proportions surely there were places that were much more interesting. Where waking up wasn't just a conditional on a daily for loop of living but a question with a different answer each day. The thought swam between his neurons and intoxicated him to the possibility of not just life but living. He imagined each day as the start of a grand adventure or quest as though he were living in the worlds from his favorite role playing games and authors and directors. Would there be magic and stealth and loot and monsters? Well probably not, he thought. Thomas was imaginative and a bit stupid, but he was no idiot. Or so he believed. It didn't need to be grand either, he thought. Some of Thomas's favorite things were hardly worthy of mention but to him felt as though they belonged in a museum of sorts to be observed and cataloged for their value.

The clatter of a handful of dice against a wooden table.

Taking late night walks just to imagine the lives and goings on within people's homes through the sickly electric blues and greens of their illuminated windows. Bodies passing as splotches of pale black against the curtains like ghosts made of CRTV static smoke.

Coming home just, *just* before a rainstorm begins and the deluge of water envelopes your home like a blanket of gray and insulates your mind like liquid armor.

It was an unfortunate turn of events, then, that something happened all those years ago. One might be remiss for thinking it was a great trauma or upheaval in his life that occurred shortly after and rendered him devoid of joy. Death. Disease. Loss of home. No, it was something much worse.

He simply woke up the next day.

And the next day. And the one after that. And continued to wake up every morning until this one. Everyday he dreamed and every night he simply went to sleep. He found this trait had followed him throughout his life and even though these 36 years had given him some new found perspectives on this element of himself, he found it never quite sat well with him, like a pebble in a shoe. Or a rambling crazy person on a metro seat next to him. Either way, he found it to be a necessary truth of his being but one that he wished were not so.

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Veek met him at the door and took the less appetizing pair of what Thomas attempted to pass off as breakfast items. Maybe it was out of the kindness of his 7 chambered heart or maybe it was just pity but regardless, Veek did their best to act like the coffee was nothing short of divine. Heaven sent, even.

"Just what the doctor ordered!" Veek said, their voice deep and tonal like house music from a room over.

"You don't get sick." Thomas replied, clearing his throat. He thought he felt the beginning of a cold coming on. Or perhaps it was just the soggy flakes of pastry trying to kill him.

"Sure I do. I get sick of the news, sick of winter. I even get sick of pumpkin flavor. But I never get sick of you!" they replied with a "smile" through a "mouthful" of pastry. Funny.

In reality, Veek, being a Malakovian, was fully psionic and had no need for something so crude as a human smile. The lactic build up. The awkwardness of smiling during tragic events. The crows feet. It was all so mushy and cro-magnon in nature. Several milenia prior to the wilted Veek's people had quickly realized the efficiency of fully remote psionics and quickly evolved it as their species wide method of communication. No better way to find the television remote than through a perfectly transmitted rewind of the last few minutes of their life, now in

stunning one million K resolution. Veek also had no real need for a mouth or food or coffee or “croissants” but also as a Malakovian, they were extremely polite and tightly bound by local customs to make everyone around them feel as comfortable as humanly possible. There’s a saying in more cosmopolitan circles that goes, “The only thing the Malakovians didn’t modify about themselves was politeness and paperwork. Those come with the genes.”

Given their species appearance and general lack of need for things like regulated physical structure or really a face at all as well as avoiding the very impolite intergalactic faux paw of talking to a non-bounded (without a defined body) Malakovian’s “rear” rather than their “face”, the next task on the Malakovian biologically agenda was the development of shapeshifting technologies. Through the proper channels, of course. Also, being a Malakovian meant Veek was not only strongly in favor of the bureaucratic process, to them it was a pastime. A way of life.

The documents. The organization. The stoic and perfect obelisk that was a filing storage apparatus. Sometimes on really special evenings, Veek would spend the time with an old paper file folder and digitize the notes. Needless to say, several years and a few billion nanobot insertions later any Malakovian could choose to be any shape they wanted. Even this was quickly standardized to avoid a repeat of the massive spike in intergalactic hijackings along sector 7. Over the years some less than law abiding Malakovians thought it a lucrative venture to masquerade as members of other species and “inspect” shipments of different valuables on their way to different ports. After this came to several the attention of numerous intergalactic agencies After all it wasn’t Thomas’s fault his best bet for asking where to find a toilet or napkin if he missed a spot was to sputter, wheeze and moistly flap about his meat bits. And also opening his mouth while he was at it.