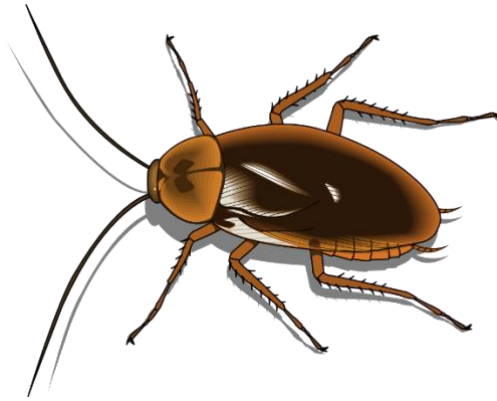


“The trouble with Aliens”

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Chapter 1

Charlie waited excitedly outside the biggest set of doors he'd ever seen, his heart racing. After weeks of Government checks he was here, on the biggest job of his career. He'd landed a contract at the UK's only Space Exploration Centre. The blast doors opened slowly, ponderously, moving their great weight aside on greasy tracks. Charlie licked his lips, walking into the cavernous space stretching away in front of him, keeping an eye out for the parking area he'd been told was a few metres into the tunnel. The parking area turned out to be the size of two multi-story car parks and was filled with cars. A uniformed man waved at him. "A1 Exterminators?" Charlie nodded and was led to a small electric buggy. "Where are we going?" Charlie asked after they'd been driving for five minutes. "The kitchens, we got a cockroach outbreak there, the like of which you've never seen."

In the main control room, buried at the very centre of the vast complex under the Chiltern Hills, the tension was mounting to fever-pitch. After nearly eighteen months of hard work and constant worry, the greatest event mankind would ever experience was about to take place. Since picking up the weak signals from Jodrell Bank, the crew stationed at SEC had worked hard to crack the signals emanating from what they

discovered to be a space craft heading towards earth. It had taken them eight long months before they'd finally been able to exchange meaningful information with the ship, and both sides, wary of giving away too much, had agreed to an exploratory meeting outside the SEC complex first. The Grunions - the nearest approximation to what the visitors called themselves in English - had the capabilities of cloaking their craft's appearance from radar, so the SEC director put out a newsflash that it had discovered an incoming meteor, to take care of any telescopic sightings. Now, seven months and five days from initial contact, mankind was about to have its first meeting with an alien race.

Charlie wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his overalls and wriggled his way out from under the big stainless-steel cupboard.

Done, every little sucker was either curled up in a dead ball or laying on its back, kicking its legs in its last throws of life. Charlie smiled in satisfaction - not because he particularly enjoyed killings things, nor because he hated bugs and insects, but for a job well done. He looked at his watch. Three hours. It had taken him far longer than he'd thought it would, but the kitchen complex was huge, easily big enough to cater for a couple of hundred people. He'd have to up his charges for this one. Shrugging the big tank off his back, Charlie picked up his tool-bag and slipped into the electric cart, watching the line of overhead lights flash overhead as they sped their way back towards the entrance.

“We have your signal on our guidance system. Locked on.” The words issuing from the big speakers under the giant TV screen didn't sound like anything intelligible, but the large Cray computers on the floor below were flashing up the translations from the incoming vessel. “Landing in four - three - two — Landing successful. Will disembark and make our way to the meeting point.” A thunderous explosion of clapping and shouting echoed around the big room as men and women hugged and slapped one another on the back for a job well done. “Ladies, gentlemen” - All heads turned to the Prime Minister, standing looking down at them from a gallery under the giant screen, a big smile plastered across his face. “let's go meet our visitors, shall we?”

Chapter 2.

Charlie thanked the driver for dropping him off by his van and watched the cart disappear back into the tunnel, marvelling that two such massive pieces of metal could close so silently. Charlie tugged open the back doors of his van with far more noise, tossing his tool bag inside. He hesitated, standing silently for a moment, head up, nostrils flared, scenting the air like some overgrown dog. The smell was unmistakable, but far stronger than Charlie had ever experienced before. Heavens above, it was overpowering! Looking around Charlie gasped when he spotted six of the biggest roaches he'd ever seen.

Taken aback for a moment, he watched them heading towards a large clearing to one side of the big steel doors. They moved fast. but Charlie moved faster, his years of training taking over as he whipped the spray nozzle from its clip, pumping the long handle that pressurised the canister. It was over in a few seconds and the six roaches lay dead at his feet, their pungent smell stinging his eyes. Charlie crunched one with his boot, wondering at its size. It burst open, shooting out a long splat of green, foul-smelling fluid. Charlie backed off, wiping his boot in some nearby grass. He nodded as he climbed into his van. He'd give them this extra kill at no charge. Weird, was his last thought before driving off towards the main gates of the complex.

“This is SEC, do you read. Over?” The operator turned to his superior, a worried frown creasing his forehead. “I don't understand it sir. One minute he was screaming about some enormous creature - the next, silence.” “Keep trying. I'll go and make sure we keep the Prime Minister inside for the present, just in case.” “Hello, this is SEC calling. Respond please. Hello, this is SEC.”