

Two

Terra, the planet where this tale begins, is a world very much like our own. It orbits a yellow star, Sol, on a 365 day schedule, (a Terran day is defined as the amount of time it takes lights to travel 7.7×10^8 kilometers). Terra has a single satellite, Luna; its atmosphere is the tenuous mixture of Oxygen, Nitrogen, and Carbon Dioxide that allows for the development of humanoid life; 75% of Terra's surface is liquid, but by some accident of evolution, the most intelligent humanoids ("Terrans") could only survive on land (which may explain why they did not choose to name their planet "Aqua").

The average Terran life span was 29,000 days. Since Terra had a population of five billion, each day approximately 170,000 Terrans were born, and 170,000 Terrans died. In the meantime, as they progressed from their first days to their last, they worked, fought, made love and occasionally paused to contemplate the meaning of it all, just as they do on our world. On any given day, a Terran might engage in one or two of these activities, but seldom more. A day, after all, is not a very long time.

On this particular day, the day after Rikkii Ruuttu's accident, Red Derring was fighting. *They're out there*, he reminded himself. *I'll teach those NASA bastards to try and interfere with the process of scientific research. I'll teach 'em to mess with Red Derring.* He squinted to cut out the sun's glare on the metallic surfaces of the Rye Observatory. This balcony was the perfect vantage point. He had held off the previous tank squad with a few crisp blasts of his rocket launcher, but now he was out of missiles, and he only had a few hundred rounds left for his G-12 Assault Rifle.

A disgruntled astrophysicist clumsily ascended a ladder from the control center below. His sweaty head peered up at the ledge where Red perched.

"How's it going up here?" Dr. Sambier queried.

Red looked over his shoulder, annoyed at the distraction. Sambier was a middling man in his forties, yet an aura of premature age had already set in, as if life wearied him. He was absolutely

breathless from climbing the rickety ladder. Sambier's most distinguishing feature was his unkempt hair — streaks of gray mixing randomly with black — that sprouted from above his bifocals in myriad directions. He seemed a bizarre hybrid of the wide-eyed child who dreams of being an astronaut, and a hoary old man who, never fitting in with other people, had bypassed all the joys in life. Dr. Sambier's passion for astrophysics had consumed him and left him eternally alone.

"If they call in the Air Force," Red grunted, "we're rat meat! But hopefully they won't have the balls to napalm a building on a college campus. They'll stick to APC's, and at worst, Apaches."

"I hope you're right. I'm making some progress on my investigations. I know that signal I picked up was not a natural disturbance. With any luck, I'll establish contact soon. You hang in there, huh?"

"Doc..." Red tried his best to look pensive, running his fingers through cropped crimson hair, (the inspiration for his nickname, (his real name was Richard, but years of abuse in school — "hey, **Dick!**" — had persuaded him to modify his birth-certificate when he turned eighteen)). Having given the pensive look enough time to register with Sambier, Red went on: "...I'm running low on ammo and I've got no more rockets. If there's another tank assault, all I'll have left is the mortar."

"Well, keep your chin up. I'm counting on you. Goddamn, the fate of the free world rests on your shoulders!"

Red caressed the muzzle of his rifle. "Don't worry. I'm used to that."

"Oh, and keep an eye on the basement. You know there's a secret tunnel. If the soldiers discover that..."

"Sure. Sure. I'll take care of it."

"I'll be working with the telescope if you need me. Let's hope you don't."

Sambier descended. Red watched the top of the older man's head withdraw, and, noting the spots of gray in Sambier's hair, snickered semi-audibly, "What help would you be, grandpa?" Scientists weren't the only smart people in the world, despite what they might think!

After scanning the perimeter again, Red allowed himself a moment of relaxation. He cradled the rifle in his powerful arms. Hopefully Dr. Sambier would complete his work before NASA braved another assault. Red knew he was facing a life-long jail sentence for the murder of those soldiers, but that didn't bother him because the old man was right: events of great importance were afoot. Even a non-scientist such as he could feel it in his gut. The U.F.O.'s were coming.

Then again, it might have been the grilled cheese sandwich he'd had for breakfast...

Across campus, in a quaint corner of the university's least repulsive cafeteria, Rikkii Ruuttu and Sarah G. Robinson were concluding a charming lunch.

"That was certainly a charming dinner," Sarah said, brushing the crumbs of dessert off the table. The smear of ruby lipstick that appeared on the paper napkin as she wiped her mouth sent Rikkii into fits of excitement. He'd completely forgotten about the argument with his car insurance company earlier that morning.

"I... I hope this lunch makes up for last night, Sarah. I still feel very bad about that." Rikkii picked up the morsels of his filet of sole self-consciously.

"There's nothing to make up for. Forget what happened last night. I don't hold it against you." The lipstick matched her red sweater, and Rikkii brought his attention to bear on the curves of her body.

"Yeah. Heh, heh... we probably wouldn't have liked the movie anyway."

"Probably not. The most important thing is that you weren't hurt in your accident." She patted Rikkii on the shoulder, sending him into another paroxysm of ecstasy. Beads of sweat emerged on his forehead. He removed his glasses for a moment, to wipe away the steam. "Anyway," she continued in a slightly less romantic tone, "I'd better be going. This meal has taken well over a half an hour, and I can only permit myself so much scintillating conversation in one day." Sarah squeezed out from behind the table and walked toward the exit.

Rikkii lunged after her. “Wait!” Glasses still in hand, he blurily stepped into the busboy who was taking a stack of dirty trays to the kitchen. Soda and fries spilled onto Rikkii’s beige cotton shirt. Sarah turned around to witness his oafishness and giggled.

“Watch it, you dumb ass!” the busboy barked.

“Uh, sorry.” Rikkii backed away, joining Sarah. “I didn’t have my glasses on,” Rikkii explained loudly for the cafeteria’s benefit. “I couldn’t see him.”

“Oh, Rikkii, you’re so ridiculous.” Sarah let out a little chuckle that could have been insult or compliment. She pushed her way through a set of double-doors. “I suppose this afternoon needed some excitement. Now, I must really be getting over to the...”

“Sarah,” Rikkii interjected as he rubbed futilely at the sugary, brown stain on his shirt, “I thought maybe we could go to the library, or something, and study for the journalism exam...”

“Well, I appreciate the help, but I have a previous engagement.”

“Engagement?” He continued to brush at the shirt. Two ruined shirts in two days was not going to do his dry-cleaning bill any good at all.

“I promised my uncle I’d help him work at the observatory today. I needed some extra cash.”

“Oh.” He adjusted the wire frames of his glasses.

“Actually, I think his research is fascinating. He’s sending communications to space in the hopes of finding extraterrestrial intelligence. My uncle used to work for NASA. He began this project with them and has kept it going on grants.”

“Wow. What kind of communications is he sending?”

“Television broadcasts, news, movies, popular music, internet...”

“And that’s supposed to make them want to come visit us?”

“Oh, it’s much too complicated to explain. In any case, I’d better be getting over there. I’m already late because I took time out for this lunch with you.”

Rikkii did not want to go back to the dorms. His roommate was probably still asleep. “Let me at least walk you there...”

“I think I can make it under my own power, Rikkii, but... fine. We can talk about journalism till it hurts!”

They strolled across campus. It was a mild, breezy day — perhaps a perfect Spring day — but the quads felt eerily empty and silent. Even the rampaging squirrels were nowhere to be seen today. Rikkii and Sarah (and everyone else on Terra) were unaware that, at that exact moment, a sleek black vessel had fallen into orbit around their planet.

“So you’re a senior?” he asked after quickly exhausting all journalism talk. (Rikkii Ruuttu’s rules of social interaction, Rule #1: Let people talk about themselves.)

“Yes, this is my last semester, but I took a year off.”

“Then you’re actually twenty-three?”

She nodded.

“I must say, you look young for your age.”

“That’s a nice thing to say... I think.”

“I mean it. If I had known you were three years older than me, I would have never asked you out.”

“And consider how much you would be saving on car insurance payments.”

“Hah hah...” This didn’t strike Rikkii as being very funny, but politeness triumphed. “Um, so... I guess you’ve gone out with a lot of really exciting guys while you’ve been here.”

“Yes, I guess I have...”

...and you’re not one of them, Rikkii completed the sentence for her in his mind. Silently scolding himself for not maintaining a positive outlook, he continued the gut-wrenching dialogue. (Rule #2: Accentuate what you have in common.) “I have too...”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. Well, not guys. You know what I mean: exciting girls. I’m not attracted to men or anything...”

“That’s too bad. It might have made things a lot more exciting.”

They heard a commotion up ahead. Police officers were swarming everywhere. Students crowded around to get a glimpse of what was going on. Rikkii and Sarah, pushed their way past the crowd and reached a roadblock at the base of the hill leading up to what a glittery neon sign indicated was “The Rye Observatory”. There were squads of police cars, trucks and motorcycles nearby. Fifteen meters up the slope, a cadre of NASA vehicles sat behind a protective embankment.

Sarah pushed her way to the front of the crowd. “What’s going on here?” she asked an officer on duty behind the roadblock.

“Some maniac has taken over the observatory. He kicked all of the teachers and students out. He was conductin’ some secret experiments with stolen equipment. Two Feds tracked him down this morning, and were killed. He’s got a rocket launcher and other hi-tech defenses. Anyway, our priority is keeping people safe.”

“I see,” Sarah mused, as a rescue team lay the burnt and mutilated body of a NASA soldier on a stretcher and carried it toward an ambulance. “So, officer, has this ‘maniac’ been identified?”

“Yeah. The NASA guys said he was a professor — Dr. Sam Beer or something like that. If y’ ask me, all these professor types are nuts. Dr. Frankensteins in sheep’s clothing, if y’ get my meaning.” The policeman snickered heartily at his witticism.

“Yes, well... is there any way I can get into the observatory? I... uh... left my notebook in one of the classrooms. It’s extremely important, officer. I’ve got a big exam tomorrow.”

“No can do, honey. It’s a war zone up there. The best thing for a nice-young-lady-like-you is to go back home where it’s safe. I’m sure your teacher will understand.”

Sarah disappeared into the throng behind her, and rejoined Rikkii on the other side. “We can’t get in this way.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. Apparently some sort of experiment has gone out of control. I know another way to get in. Follow me.”

“Sarah, maybe it’s not the safest place to be right now. If there has been a disaster... well, I’m certain your uncle made it out okay. He probably isn’t even in there anymore. Let’s let the police handle...”

“He’s in there all right. I wish you’d stop being such a drip!” Sarah ran to the Neurosciences Building. Rikkii followed with some reluctance. “I know that somewhere under this building there’s an entrance to a tunnel. It leads beneath the observatory to a fallout shelter. The astronomers who commissioned Rye a century ago demanded it include one in the event of an alien invasion or something like that. I think *War of the Worlds* had just been published and they were a little paranoid. Astronomers are a strange bunch. My uncle showed me where the tunnel to the fallout shelter was when I was ten because I loved dark, mysterious places. I had an active imagination.” Sarah, catching herself babbling to someone who was essentially a stranger, looked away and scurried down the steps toward the sub-basement without another word. After a moment of hesitation, Rikkii followed. The only person in sight was a janitor who merrily whistled a variation on ‘Eleanor Rigby’ as he passed them and headed up the stairs. The basement, untouched for years, had the pungent odor of used mothballs.

“Nobody’s here,” Rikkii noticed.

“Mmm, everyone is probably outside watching the ‘fireworks’.” Sarah paced up and down the dimly lit corridor until she found what she sought. “Aha! Help me move this.” With Rikkii pushing, she was able to budge a heavy steel bookcase lying on its side against the wall. Dust and cobwebs spattered their faces.

“That janitor ought to do a better job,” Rikkii coughed.

“Here!” Sarah’s fingers slid over a loose brick, and the wall behind the bookcase creaked inwards. “The tunnel. We should be able to squeeze through. You don’t have a flashlight, do you?”

“Umm... no.” Rikkii tried to wipe his glasses clean. “Do you think it’s such a good idea to...?”

Sarah disappeared behind the bookcase. “That’s okay. I think I remember the way.”

“Maybe I’ll wait here in case...”

Her lucent blue eyes peered out from the slot in the wall. “Aww, what are you scared of? When was the last time you did something **exciting**?”

(Rule #3: Speak with confidence and clarity.) “Well...”

“Your loss.” She vanished again.

Rikkii pondered his options. A journalism exam beclouded the coming dawn and the library beckoned, but Sarah’s pull was irresistible. There could be worse fates than being stuck in a dark tunnel with her.

Fine, he advised himself. *I won’t be such a ‘drip’*. He followed the apple scent of Sarah’s perfume into the secret passage.

“Sarah...?” he whispered helplessly.

The only response was the brisk puffing of her breath as she relived a childhood experience...