

The Exobiological Hug
by Lesley L. Smith

After the aliens landed on earth, they needed places to live. The politicians decided the friendly thing to do was to invite them to stay with human families. Of course, it was the cheap thing to do too. Amazingly, none of those same politicians had space in their homes for the emissaries from another planet.

As an exobiologist, I was determined my wife and I would be one of the host families. Unfortunately, when I asked her about it, she said she'd have to think about it.

The morning after the announcement, I studied Sarah over the top of my coffee cup as we sat at the breakfast table. She'd let her long dark hair fall in front of her face, a common tactic when she wanted to avoid talking to me.

Finally, she brushed her hair out of the way and said, "I guess we could take in one of the aliens, if you really want to."

She was trying to be accommodating, since we were having some problems with our marriage. I wanted to have kids A.S.A.P.-I guess it was my Catholic childhood coming back to haunt me. She claimed we'd agreed before we got married that we would wait. Technically she was right, but I'd been trying to convince her we weren't getting any younger.

I flashed her a smile. "Great, Sarah! This'll be awesome for my career!" I jumped out of my chair. "But we don't call them aliens; they're exobiological intelligences."

"Yeah, that'll catch on," Sarah said, grinning. It was nice to see her smile.

I was already reaching for my phone. "I can't wait to tell my boss."

"See if we can get an astrophysicist that can help on my project, too," she suggested. "Our radio receiver for Arecibo observatory is way behind schedule. We need more help from the aliens to receive and decipher the message they're expecting."

The aliens were explorers trading scientific and technical knowledge. They'd promised to send us a huge data dump from their planet via radio signals.

I called my boss to give him the good news before Sarah could change her mind.

When I got into work, I got to meet a slew of the exobiological intelligences in the temporary barracks. They were humanoid, about three feet tall, had two arms and two legs and were covered in fine gray fur. "Hello?" I said. "Can you understand me? I'm Brian Asimov. I'm an exobiologist and I'm going to host one of you at my house."

One stepped forward, listened to the noises coming from a small box around its neck, and said something.

Out of the box, I heard, "Hello, Human Brian. I am Sheokdivmnastkth. Nice to meet you. I will be your guest. Thank you."

This was all very surreal. "Uh, thank you. What was your name, again? Sheo-something?"

"I sense you cannot pronounce my name, Human Brian. You can call me Sheo."

"And please call me Brian." I looked up from Sheo. "All of you, call me Brian."

The rest of them introduced themselves, and in a daze, I led the group to the Exobiology Department.

That night when Sarah got home, I exclaimed, "There you are! It's here!"

Sarah leaned over and pecked me on the cheek. "Already? Usually bureaucrats moved at the speed of snail. Remember how long it took your raise

to come through?" She dropped her purse on the dresser and kicked off her shoes. "Hey, did you say 'it'?"

"Yes. We've been learning about them today. They have three genders, which all contribute genetic material when they reproduce. Sheo is what they call a facilitator, with both male and female organs. The facilitator makes contact with the male and female, collects their genetic material and mixes it together with its own to create a baby. It's totally cool! Come on and meet it."

Sarah turned to face me. "Wait a minute. There's an actual, real-life alien here in our house. Wow."

I smiled and nodded. "In the guest room. And it's an exobiological intelligence." I grinned more.

When we entered the guest room, the humanoid sat on the bed. It almost looked like a child in a fur-suit except for the twelve fingers and twelve prehensile toes. And the face was subtly off: the nose was too flat, the lipless mouth too small, and the eyes too low.

"Sarah, I'd like you to meet Sheo." Then I pointed at Sarah. "Sheo, this is my mate, Sarah. She's an astrophysicist, too, like you."

"It's an honor to meet you. Welcome to our home," Sarah said.

My eyes were glued to Sheo. It was fascinating with its human animal dichotomy. Its eyes were clearly filled with intelligence, however.

The exobiological intelligence listened to its translator and responded with some unintelligible noises. Then the mechanical voice of the translator said, "It is an honor to meet you, human female. Thank you for letting me reside in your home."

"You're very welcome." Sarah thought for a second. "It's a custom among humans to give a hug in such situations. Would you like to try it?"

The translator did its job and soon we heard, "Yes!" and Sheo's nose flattened. "I was unaware humans engaged in such behavior outside their mating pairs. The exobiologists I've been meeting with, like Brian, have not done so."

Sarah stepped near the bed, holding up her arms.

Sheo reached out its arms, and the first inter-exobiological intelligence hug occurred--at least to my knowledge.

Later, when we were back in our room, Sarah said, "It reminds me of the Siamese cat I had when I was a little girl. Its fur is so soft, and it has a kind of feline grace."

"It's not a cat, Sarah. It's a person, albeit an odd-looking one."

"I know that! Sometimes you can be so pretentious." She fluffed her pillow and lay down. "I'm just telling you my impression."

Within a few days, Sheo, Sarah, and I settled into a routine, eating breakfast together before we went to the lab. Sheo was assigned to Sarah's project and was a huge help. It was very motivated to help us because Arecibo, the largest radio telescope on earth, would be uniquely able to receive the message from its home world.

Since the installation deadline for her new equipment was looming, most nights Sarah stayed late at the lab. I insisted Sheo get home at a reasonable hour so it wouldn't get tired and I could study it. Sarah suspected I wanted to play at being a dad. And she was pretty much right.

In the evenings, Sheo and I talked about its home planet and how it differed from earth, or watched TV and commented on that. I came to enjoy hanging out with it. Sarah was hardly ever home, after all.

I started hugging it goodnight before it went to bed. It was almost like having a child of my own--albeit a furry one that had to use a translator.

Right after Sarah left for Arecibo, I started to come down with something. I thought it was a cold and Sheo kindly stayed home from work to take care of

me. It brought me blankets and tea and sat with me. But I didn't get any better. If anything, I got worse.

Sarah's trip was a week long. When she got home she was appalled at my condition. "Brian, what's wrong with you? Did you go to the doctor? You look horrible!"

I shook my head feebly.

"I'm taking you to the emergency room, right now."

We went to the emergency room, but they had no idea what was wrong other than I had a fever. They hypothesized I had some kind of infection.

Back at home, Sarah woke up Sheo, presumably to ask it when my symptoms first started, etc.

Sheo was confused. "Brian is sick? He was fine a couple hours ago when he went to bed."

Now it was Sarah's turn to be confused. "What do you mean? He has a high fever, he has no energy--he has all kinds of problems."

They had come into the bedroom and were standing over me as I lay in bed.

Sheo looked from Sarah to me and back again. "Oh, Brian has not told you the good news yet. He's pregnant."

Sarah's mouth fell open.

"I'm what?!" I yelled.

Sheo's nose flattened in amusement. "Of course you're pregnant--what did you think would be the result of all that hugging?"

"Oh, my God!" Sarah guffawed. "That's priceless!"

Needless to say, my bosses in the Exobiology Department were very interested to hear of this development and started conducting experiments on me immediately. Once my pregnancy was confirmed, they forced me to remain in the lab twenty-four/seven so they could study the first inter-exobiological reproduction.

On the bright side, I guess I'm going to get my wish to be a dad.