

DAN CONOVER

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

This sci-fi satire was one of the most popular entries in the 2002 Phobos Fiction Awards— at least among the staff. The conservative celebrity judges felt differently, but Phobos editor Keith Olexa revived it for his 2004 anthology “Absolutely Brilliant in Chrome.”

Dermot Knauss hurried down the back hallway that led to the Oval Office, brushing past staffers, flashing his ID to the security guard and whispering the one word he knew would get the appointment secretary to buzz him in to see POTUS immediately: “*Majestic.*”

POTUS was getting an afternoon briefing from the CIA, with the FBI director there to give a good showing of inter-agency cooperation, but he seemed more interested in the autographed baseball the World Champion Chicago Cubs had given him in the Rose Garden that morning. Dermot’s arrival interrupted both the president’s contemplation of the ball and the CIA director’s soliloquy on French Algerian computer terrorists.

“Dermie the Germie!” POTUS shouted, delighting in the nickname he had given Dermot (which Dermot hated – his last name was Swiss).

“Check out this baseball!”

“Sorry to interrupt you, sir,” Dermot said. “But this is a Majestic Protocol, so I’m going to have to ask that you clear the room.”

“OK, Potsie and Dicky, you heard the man,” POTUS said, making a backhanded shooing motion to the directors of the CIA and FBI. “Y’all come back later.” They rose grumpily, passing the rest of the White House contingent of the Majestic Group as they arrived, all at once, at the Oval Office.

“What the hell does Rozzie want this time?” POTUS demanded as soon as they were alone. “I’m getting damn tired of him calling the tune around here.”

“It’s not the Wisterians, sir,” Dermot said, his eyes wandering over to the other Majestics: the Veep, breathing heavily in the Kennedy Rocker; the PSL (Private Sector Liaison), arranging her skirt neatly on the couch; and the ASSe (Advanced Science Secretary), nervously flipping through his Majestic Protocols cheat-sheet booklet. “It’s a ship. A ship of unknown origin.”

“A ship of unknown origin?” POTUS exclaimed, suddenly nervous.

“That’s an ETSCUO,” the ASSe said, pushing his Elvis Costello glasses up his nose and reading off

his reference guide. "Extra-Terrestrial SpaceCraft/Unknown Origin."

"Hell fire!" POTUS exclaimed. "Dermie, I thought the whole point of that damn treaty was that we weren't supposed to get any more of these ETSCUOs! What does Rozzie have to say about *that*?"

"Rozzie hasn't been notified yet," Dermot said. "But I don't think he'll be pleased. Meanwhile, we're trying to get our own positive I.D. on the ETSCUO, which we've tracked from its entry over the Northwest Territories to a location over the Catskills in Upstate New York." His cell phone vibrated and Dermot popped it open. "Knauss. Yes. OK. Time? Roger." He snapped the phone shut and sighed.

"It's Zzbax," he said.

The Veep, the PSL and the ASSe all rolled their eyes.

"What the hell is a Zzbax?" POTUS demanded.

Dermot hated entering Rozzie's suite in what used to be the bowling alley below the White House bomb shelter. Even the heavy-duty air scrubbers had failed to keep up with the Wisterian's 50-year chain-smoking habit, and the alien's natural dirty-socks-in-a-gym-locker body-scent only compounded the offensiveness of his quarters. "Rozzie!" Dermot called out as he looked around for the solitary alien, but there was no reply.

He found him in the video room, his feet up on his favorite recliner, a Camal Jade cigarette dangling from his lipless mouth and a remote control in his three-fingered hand. Rozzie was channel-surfing on ten different sets simultaneously. The alien ignored him.

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" Dermot asked.

"I'm busy," Rozzie said, expressionless. But then his bug-eyed face was always expressionless, an implacable gray façade with just the slightest tint of blue.

"NORAD has tracked an ETSCUO," Dermot

said.

"So?" he replied, the multiple sets reflected a thousand times in his multiple corneas. "We've had ETSCUO before. We had ETSCUO in '68, '76 and '99. I'll deal with it."

"It's Zzbax," Dermot said.

"Zzbax!" Rozzie exclaimed, and the remote clattered to the floor. Wisterians didn't express emotions facially, but they had other means, and when he was alarmed, Rozzie expressed the feeling by running around the room in random patterns flailing his long fingers in the air. Dermot found the practice more than merely annoying. "*Zzbax! Zzbax!*"

"Stop that," Dermot demanded. Rozzie halted suddenly and stood stoop-shouldered, staring up at Dermot, the Majestic Administrator/White House (MAWH).

"The Zzbax will cause problems," Rozzie said.

"The Zzbax are space trash."

"According to our treaty, the Zzbax aren't supposed to enter this sector," Dermot reminded Rozzie. "According to our treaty, *you're* either supposed to handle this problem or license *us* the technology to do the jobs ourselves. Which, *by the way*, would not be an issue if you guys had come anywhere *close* to meeting the timetables we agreed upon twenty years ago."

"Not ready," Rozzie said, lighting another cigarette. "All I do is monitor you, and you're not ready."

"Then this is your show, Rozzie. And POTUS made it clear he wants this dealt with quietly. No incidents. No *public* incidents."

"Screw POTUS," Rozzie said. Dermot hated when he talked that way, and had spent thirty years developing a toxic dislike for the Wisterian liaison to the White House. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

"One hour, Rozzie!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Hey, MAWH," Rozzie called after him. "Dinner time! Send more lobsters!"

“Not until you deal with the Zzbax!”

“Not fair!” he screeched as the door closed behind Dermot and cut off his high-pitched whining.

The Monsters of Rock Reprise Festival at Meadowlands Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., had been going strong since mid-afternoon by the time Jon Bon Jovi blew a kiss to the crowd, stripped off his sweat-soaked A-line tank top and tossed it to his fans. That got them going, and by the time the lights came up again and seventies superstars KISS took the stage, the home of the Jets and Giants looked from the air like a throbbing, pulsating single-celled organism.

To most of the crowd, the Zzbax ETSCUO just seemed like another stage prop amid the laser lights and pyrotechnics. It hovered over the band to the delight of the fans, who held their lighters above their heads and roared their approval, and when the bottom opened and a ray of light emerged in a solid beam, they went nuts. The best part, though, was when Grrndl, the mission commander, descended slowly from the saucer via the beam and stepped moistly out of the light. Gene Simmons seemed particularly stoked, wagging his fake tongue and drooling stage blood with an enthusiasm the faithful had not witnessed since the Carter administration.

KISS had reached the chorus of “I Wanna Rock And Roll All Night” when Grrndl approached the microphone, activated the electronic translator he wore around what passed for his neck, and leaned close to Ace Freeley to shout “and party every day!” very much out of key. Even the band seemed to think it was part of the act, and after years of conditioning human beings to the Wisterian image of space aliens, who could blame them? Zzbax looked nothing like the stereotypic Wisterian/Roswell alien. If anything, Zzbax looked like cartoon characters.

In the first place, they were yellow, with a protective mucous coating. They were bipedal,

which was a plus, and had two long, skinny arms. But the rest of their makeup looked patently silly – and a little obscene – to the average human. Their bodies were pear-shaped and bulbous and featured out-sized genitalia: male in the front, elaborate and tentacle-like; female in the back, blooming like a huge, brightly colored orchid. Also quite notable was the trademark Zzbax anal tube, which served a secondary balancing function like a tail does on terrestrial animals.

Their facial features were equally absurd: Instead of noses, Zzbax had trunks like an elephant’s, and their beady little eyes were constantly blinking and watering. Whereas Wisterians had no ears to speak of, Zzbax were all ears – big, droopy ones. Their heads attached to their torsos via necks so thick that they appeared not be necks at all. Grrndl’s was particularly large, and he walked in a bouncy, loose-limbed gait that looked like Shaggy from Scoobie-Doo if Shaggy had just snorted a whole bunch of crystal meth.

“I just thought it was some dude in a really cool costume,” Freeley told USA Today later. “But when I like patted him on the shoulder, my hand came back all slimy. And I was like, *damn! Gross!*”

People in the crowd later recalled that Freeley appeared taken aback after the slime incident, but his reaction was unmistakable when Grrndl extended his python-esque Zzbax penis in his people’s traditional friendly greeting and ran it between the lead-singer’s legs, caressing Freeley’s latex-clad backside. The crowd went berserk, screaming its approval, and this got Grrndl even more excited, bobbing up and down at the knees and blowing wet trumpet blasts from his nasal trunk. Freeley recoiled in revulsion, and Grrndl seemed to realize he had committed a social faux pas. To make amends, the Zzbax curled his anal tube around to his belly and squirted a polite amount of waste into his hands, offering it up to the band’s front-man to smell.

Freeley had had more than enough by this point, and turned suddenly from the marauding alien

and dove face-first into the crowd. "It was," Rolling Stone reported, "the greatest single moment in concert history."

"*Rock and roll!*" Grrndl shouted into the mike through his electronic translator, and the crowd-organism at the Meadowlands went into mitosis.

That's his...*thingy*?" POTUS asked, screwing his face into a mixture of amusement and disgust.

"Yes sir, Mister President," Dermot replied.

"And that ... flowery thing on his butt?"

"Female genitalia," Dermot answered, clearing his throat.

POTUS shook his head in amazement. "Well, if that's his... *poontang*, then how does he take a dump?"

"Through this anal tube, here," Dermot said, pointing out on the appendage on the frozen screen.

"You mean he craps through his *tail*?"

"Yes sir."

"Hot damn," POTUS said, impressed. He sat with the remote in his hand, running the tape from the concert back and forth, pausing it, rewinding it, examining it, paying particular attention to the moment in which the Zzbax ran its member between the shocked rock star's legs. Ace Freeley's expression was simply priceless. "That's just about the biggest thingy I've ever seen in my life, and I own a ranch - don't I, Early Bird?" POTUS said, using his pet nickname for the ASSe. The science advisor nodded earnestly. "So, Dermie," the president said, his attention drifting back to the tape. "Can one of these Uzbek-guys..."

"Zzbax, sir," Dermot corrected him.

"Whatever. Can one of these guys, you know..."

"Self-copulate?"

POTUS pointed a finger at him and grinned knowingly.

"Yes sir," Dermot said. "And they often do."

"Well, I can tell you one thing, boys," POTUS said, forgetting for a moment that the PSL was a

woman. "My predecessor, Mr. Happy Pants, he'd have been jealous as hell if he knew something like that was possible. He never would have even gone into to politics if he coulda done that, don't you think? Just woulda laid around the trailer park, self-copulating."

"Comfort behavior," Rozzie said on the video-teleconference monitor (he had refused to come to the Oval Office ever since POWTUS told him he couldn't smoke there anymore). "Zzbax self-copulate when they are nervous or under stress. Very distasteful."

"Hell, says you," POTUS said to the Wisterian. "You're just jealous 'cause you don't have any equipment, Rozzie. You couldn't get any if you wanted it, you bug-eyed bastard."

"Sex," Rozzie said deadpan. "Overrated."

"Here's the deal, Mr. President," Dermot interrupted. "If two Zzbax are on familiar terms, they greet each other by copulating briefly. This Zzbax got overly familiar with the rock singer, here, recognized his mistake, and then extended the more formal Zzbax greeting." Dermot paused the tape at the spot where Grrndl filled his hand.

"Did he just do what I thought he did?" POTUS asked.

"Yes sir, I'm afraid so."

"Unsanitary," Rozzie said. "It's supposed to prove that they are healthy and pose no threat. Disgusting."

"*Gross!*" POTUS said, laughing and reaching for his phone. "Dad's gonna love this."

"Sir, your father isn't on a secure line," Dermot reminded. "Majestic protocol: What gets said here, stays here." POTUS slammed the receiver down.

"Well then, Dermie boy, why don't you or our little non-flying-saucer-driving Wisterian friend tell me what we're gonna do about this? This concert was simulcast around the world."

"We've leaked it through our usual outlets that the Zzbax encounter was a clever publicity stunt," Dermot said. "End of story."

"What about your end, Rozzie?" POTUS

demanded.

"I have made contact with the Groom Lake crew," Rozzie said, taking a drag and blowing smoke at his video camera. "At the first available opportunity, the Zzbax will be destroyed."

"Well, y'all better not drop that ship where anybody can see it," POTUS admonished him. "Cleaning up after you guys is expensive."

"Are we done?" Rozzie asked.

POTUS reached over and hit the power button on the videoconference monitor. "Yeah, we're done, you little piss-ant. I swear to God, Dermie, I think that little alien has a big attitude."

"If I may," the ASSE said, sitting forward a bit, "why don't we try to *talk* to these Zzbax first?"

"Because our treaty is with the Wisterians," POTUS sighed. "You gotta dance with the one what brung you, Early Bird."

But the ASSE's question stirred the sediment at the bottom of Dermot's brain, and suddenly a new thought bloomed. "Wait a minute, sir," Dermot said. "He's got a point. We've been doing business with Rozzie and the Wisterians since 1948, and what have they really given us that we couldn't have produced on our own?"

"Velcro," said the ASSE. "Tang."

"What are you getting at, Dermie?" POTUS asked, the thought growing visibly in his mind.

"I'm saying," Dermot said, "that the Wisterians told us they were part of an interstellar confederation and would sponsor us for membership and protect the Earth from other planets during the interim. But what evidence have we ever seen of this confederation? What promises have the Wisterians ever kept?"

"Not a damned one," POTUS said, his face trending simian with sincerity.

"These Zzbax are outside of the alleged Wisterian 'confederation,'" Dermot continued. "They don't have to play by the same rules. They've clearly got advanced technology and they seem friendly enough."

"You're suggesting we cut our own deal," POTUS

replied, warming to the idea. "We make nice with these Zzbax, freeze out the Wisterians, tell Rozzie to pack his bags and bingo! We get our bowling alley back."

"Can you just imagine what that technology would do for our economy?" the PSL asked, her fingers trailing distractedly along the line of her ample cleavage. "We'd have to handle this carefully, of course, particularly with the boys over at TRW. They've made a lot of money over the years off those Wisterian licenses, but if we show them what they *could* be making..."

"Now *this* is more like it," POTUS exclaimed, slapping his desk. "I feel like I'm back in the oil business again! Dermie, can you make the contact?"

"I think so, Mr. President," Dermot said.

"That's great. Tell these Zzbax I want to have 'em come on by for a meeting," POTUS said. "But Dermie?"

"Sir?"

"Make sure you tell 'em the President of the United States does not wish to scrump with aliens, and has no interest in smelling their poop. Got it?"

"Yes sir," Dermot said, rising to leave.

The most difficult part was making sure Rozzie stayed of the loop. Though the White House Wisterian was kept under constant surveillance, Dermot had always suspected that their resident alien kept a few tricks up his sleeve. He started by sending down extra lobsters, and saw to it that TNT ran an unscheduled, commercial-free showing of "E.T." That ought to keep the little bugger occupied, he thought.

The usual procedure for alien ship visitations to the White House involved rain, and Dermot had an intense, locally centered downpour called in on Pennsylvania Avenue. A Wisterian ship would have approached from a vector that offered the most minimal risk of exposure, but the Zzbax seemed not to care. Tracking data showed them buzzing Baltimore and following the beltway at treetop level on their flight in, and the UFO sightings lit up the

9-11 boards across Maryland and the District. By the time the Zzbax had parked their saucer in the cloud above the White House, the Internet was already talking about another saucer outbreak.

None of which bother Dermot. Periodic increases in Wisterian activity had been easily explained, ignored and discredited, and even the mid-1990s leaks regarding Area 51 had been handled efficiently (thank you, Larry King). His only concern was the meeting with the Zzbax, and POTUS's likely reaction to them. The MAWH had been less-than-candid about his knowledge of these aliens when talking with the president, but he rationalized his non-disclosure as prudence. Everything he knew about Zzbax came from the Wisterians, and their dislike for this other race was palpable: "Crude, underdeveloped species. Acquired their 'jump' technology through uncontrolled contact with space travelers (Which ones? Dermot wondered). Irresponsible, hyperactive, unpredictable, slovenly. Uninterested in confederation membership. Considered extremely dangerous."

How much of this was true? Dermot asked himself as he waited under an awning with POTUS, all twenty members of the full Majestic Group, the First Lady and a Marine escort. Was the Zzbax file nothing more than yet another manipulation by Rozzie and the Wisterians? Well, they would soon find out: a beam of light cut through the downpour into the Rose Garden, and Grrndl alighted into the rain, followed by Xoshi, his second in command. They were so comical that Dermot had to stifle a smile, but he needn't have bothered. POTUS was grinning ear-to-ear by the time the loose-limbed yellow aliens had reached him, and he stuck out his hand in greeting. Grrndl sniffed his hand with his trunk, then formally squirted feces into his own hand and offered it back to POTUS. The Zzbax were clearly on their best behavior.

"You're supposed to sniff it, sir," Dermot whispered to POTUS.

"What I do for my country," he replied, then

made a perfunctory show of smelling the alien's offering. "Whew!" POTUS said, straightening up and smiling. "Well, y'all are just a couple of regular guys, aren't you?" The Zzbax flicked the wet waste off their palms and wiped their hands on the grass. "Hello, POTUS," said the boss alien. "I am Grrndl of the Zzbax. This is my friend Xoshi. Thanks for having us over."

"Well, we're all just glad to have you," POTUS said. "This is the First Lady."

"How do you do," she said, giving them a polite bow. The Zzbax bounced up and down a couple times as if doing knee-bends on an exercise tape.

"And these here are the folks from what we call our Majestic Group," POTUS said, indicating the knot of alien managers who stood behind him. "They're the ones who keep track of all our contacts with visitors of the extraterrestrial sort. You can sniff 'em if you like, but I'll vouch for 'em otherwise. They all work for me."

You wish, Dermot thought.

"This is your house?" Grrndl asked, his electronic translator buzzing louder than the muted nasal snorts of his own language.

"This is the White House," POTUS said. "It belongs to the American people, but I live here."

"Good deal," said Xoshi. "Back on Zzbax I live in my cousin's house. Not so nice."

"Can we look around it?" Grrndl asked.

"Come on in, boys," POTUS said. "I'll give you the tour."

Things were off to a good start, Dermot thought as POTUS led the Zzbax inside. He nodded to the ASSE as the group headed through the door, and the science advisor discretely scooped up the Zzbax excrement from the wet grass and bagged it.

The tour was a big hit, and by the time the entire group had repaired to the Presidential Quarters both POTUS and the First Lady were laughing and slapping the Zzbax on their mucous-covered shoulders, and Grrndl and Xoshi were having a grand time, gesturing

with their hands and trunks and anal tubes and male genitalia. Dermot struggled to understand the jokes, but there was no doubt that the Zzbax and the Texans were hitting it off. They were bonding.

A member of the Majestic housekeeping staff tossed a plastic covering over the couch in the President's study and the Zzbax sat down, the plastic sticking to their bodies.

"So," POTUS began. "What brings y'all to Earth?"

"Well, me and Xoshi were just driving around and we got your invitation," said Grrndl.

"Our invitation?" POTUS shot a look at Dermot.

"You know," said Xoshi. "HELLO ALIENS! COME TO EARTH FOR YOUR NEXT VACATION! BEACHES! MOUNTAINS! OCEANS! COWS! NIGHTLIFE! LOBSTERS! MUSIC VIDEOS!"

"Where did that come from?" POTUS asked Dermot.

"It was a joke, sir," Dermot replied. "A couple of graduate assistants from Texas A&M working the night shift at the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence project. They broadcast the signal for a couple of months back in 1998 before we shut them down."

"You mean to tell me that a couple of Aggies invited these guys?" POTUS asked, smiling. "Don't that just beat all!"

"Grrndl, Xoshi, we're happy to have you," Dermot said. "But that wasn't a formal government invitation."

Xoshi blew a raspberry through his trunk. "Government. Government is just a pain in the anal tube."

"We're the only government *we* need," Grrndl said.

"I *like* you boys!" POTUS said. "That's what I've been saying my whole life!"

"We love your planet," said Grrndl. "Not so stuffy like other planets. We like your TV."

"MTV," said Xoshi. "VH-1. Turner Classic Movies. HBO."

"Cinemax," Grrndl said. "Particularly your Spice

TV and Playboy Channel." The Zzbax made a purring noise and bobbed up and down again.

"Not so stuffy," said Xoshi.

"See, that's America," said POTUS. "We're the Land of the Free. We believe in the individual here, in basic human rights. Freedom of speech. Free markets. Free enterprise."

"Free sex," said Xoshi, his tentacle doing an erotic snake dance in front of the First Lady. Her eyes grew wide.

"Whoa, now, cowboy," said POTUS. "That's my wife."

"They don't understand that concept, sir," Dermot said. "Let me explain this to you, friends from Zzbax. Our TV – particularly our satellite TV – does not accurately reflect the attitudes of most human beings toward sex. Humans come in one of two genders, and it takes one of each to reproduce. That coupling is the basis of human culture, and POTUS and his wife believe that all sex should be limited exclusively to sex between what we call a married couple."

"So how do you make friends?" Xoshi asked.

"Just like this," POTUS said. "Sitting around, talking, maybe having a nice barbecue."

"And you don't all have sex afterwards?" Grrndl asked.

"Maybe in California," the First Lady said, and everybody had a good laugh.

"California," Xoshi said afterwards, clearing his trunk. "*Baywatch*."

"OK, no sex, but we like you, POTUS and First Lady," Grrndl said, quieting his tentacle and retracting it somewhat. "Maybe we can drive your HUMVEEs instead?"

"Humvees?" POTUS asked. "Y'all like to go four-wheelin'?"

"Four-wheelin'!" Grrndl said, pantomiming a steering wheel. "Baja truck races! Humvees!"

"And NASCAR," said Xoshi. "Dale Earnhardt. The Intimidator."

"He died, you know," POTUS said.

"No. 3?" Xoshi asked, his beady eyes suddenly

huge. "So sad. He was our favorite."

"Mine too," said POTUS. "Now it's all 'Jeff Gordon this' and 'Jeff Gordon that.'"

"I'm sure POTUS could arrange for you to drive a Humvee," Dermot said. "There's a lot for us to discuss, and it might be better if we didn't do it here. Are you aware that we have a Wisterian in the basement, friends from Zzbax?"

"Oh yeah," said Grrndl. "Everybody knows about Rozzie. He's the idiot who crashed his saucer on Earth and couldn't get away."

"Rozzie is a *mo-ron*," said Xoshi. "Control freak, too."

"We have a treaty with the Wisterians," said Dermot. "They have promised to sponsor us into membership in the Intergalactic Confederation."

The two Zzbax bounced up and down on the couch in merriment. "Pull the other one," said Grrndl.

"Boys, I think we're getting a raw deal from these Wisterians," POTUS said, leaning forward. "Maybe we should talk a little business."

"OK, but first we're on vacation," said Grrndl. "You come with us, POTUS, we'll have us some fun. Then maybe we'll talk a little business."

POTUS exchanged looks with Dermot, the First Lady and the rest of Majestic. "Well hell," he said, brightening. "I've been wanting to get back to the ranch anyway."

"Oooo, ranch," said Xoshi. "*Bonanza*."

The Texas trip was a raging success as far as interstellar relations went. Dermot and the rest of Majestic flew down in their usual black, unmarked aircraft, but POTUS broke protocol at the last minute and caused a crisis, running off with the Zzbax and flying down on their saucer. Everyone was distraught, because the security implications were titanic, but POTUS called on his cell phone 10 minutes later and reported he was back on the ground in Texas.

"I gotta get me one of these, Dermie," he said.

After the initial panic, things settled down nicely.

Majestic flew in a couple of its Humvees the next morning, and after a quick orientation, POTUS and the Zzbax spent two happy hours cruising around the range, jumping ditches and scaring jackrabbits. The staff put together a passable Texas barbecue on short notice, complete with three-alarm chili and brisket, and the dust-covered four-wheelin' party settled down under a shelter for lunch. Everyone from Majestic was wearing a cowboy hat, as per POTUS's order, and most of the group looked exceedingly uncomfortable. As the First Couple and the Zzbax sat down at the picnic table, POTUS motioned to a staffer who brought over two gift-wrapped boxes. Grrndl and Xoshi opened them and blew happy trunk blasts when they saw what was inside.

"Those are real Stetsons, boys – the Hat that Won the West," POTUS said. "You like 'em?"

"Stetson," Grrndl said, placing the hat on his head. It rode low over his eyes, with his floppy ears twitching under its weight and making the brim hop around. "Look at this, Xoshi!"

"Clint Eastwood," said his traveling companion.

"What do you want to do this afternoon, POTUS?" Grrndl asked. "We've got some pulse rifles on the saucer. You wanna shoot 'em?"

"Not yes but *hell yes!*" POTUS exclaimed. "And I've got all kind of guns back in the house! We can go shoot cans, jackrabbits, coyotes, whatever you like!"

"Cows?" Xoshi asked.

"Well," POTUS said, taken aback. "Sure, what the hell. This is a special occasion."

Grrndl leaned forward confidentially. "When you shoot a fat cow with a pulse rifle, it makes a really big explosion."

"Gentlemen, if I may," Dermot said, interrupting. "I was wondering if we could talk a little about the Wisterian situation." But his attempt to change the subject was thwarted when the two Majestic waiters placed a galvanized bucket of ice on the table.

"Grizzly, Hot Dog," POTUS said, reaching into the ice and pulling out cans of Budweiser, "This

here is what we call beer. I don't drink the stuff myself anymore" – he shot a glance at the First Lady – "but I think y'all will really like it." The waiters returned and stuffed a six-pack of near-beer into the ice for POTUS. He demonstrated how the pop-top worked, and the Zzbax opened their cans and slurped loudly through their trunks.

"More, please," Xoshi said, setting the can down on the red-and-white checked tablecloth.

"Hot Dog, you're alright by me," said POTUS.

"Gentlemen, as I was saying," Dermot said, trying to forge ahead again. "According to our treaty with the Wisterians, this gathering should not be occurring at all. If we're to abide by our 1948 treaty, this meeting should be occurring at the Wisterian embassy at Area 51, so as you can see, POTUS is taking a big risk by inviting you here. Rozzie and his friends will be most upset that he met with you outside of the protocols."

"Screw them," said Grrndl. "Stuck-up bastards."

"Exactly. So-called 'intellectuals,'" POTUS said, making quotation marks in the air with his fingers

"Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that we were to negotiate a new treaty with you Zzbax," said Dermot. "What protections could you offer us against the Wisterians? They have technology they haven't shared with us, and our defenses against them are quite limited should they turn hostile."

"We'll kick their butts," said Grrndl. "We'll call our cousins."

"And what would you seek in return?" Dermot asked. Grrndl and Xoshi exchanged glances.

"What would you give us?" Xoshi asked.

"In exchange for protection and technology licenses through the Majestic Group and the U.S. Government?" Dermot asked, pondering the thought. "I think you could practically name your price." The Zzbax looked at each other and bobbed.

"Cows," Grrndl said. "Lobsters."

"Cable," said Xoshi. "Satellite TV. Humvees."

"And a place at Myrtle Beach," said Grrndl.

"Boys, it's a deal," said POTUS.

"Should I draw up the papers now, Mr.

President?" Dermot asked. "Perhaps just an agreement in principle to enter into more extended negotiations?"

"Now? Hell, Dermie not *now*," POTUS said. "Me and the boys are going out shooting this afternoon." The Zzbax bobbed more rapidly, and to Dermot's great alarm, he noticed that POTUS was bobbing along with them.

Dermot's cell phone rang. It was the Majestic Ambassador/Groom Lake Embassy (MAGLE).

"The Wisterians are on to us," MAGLE blurted. "And man, are they *pissed!*"

"Stall them," Dermot said. "We've almost got an agreement."

"*Stall* them?" MAGLE practically shouted. "I can't even *stop* them! They blasted out of here in a couple of speeders three minutes ago. I'm calling to tell you to get the hell out of there, and take POTUS with you. They haven't been this angry since *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*."

"POTUS is four-wheeling with the Zzbax," Dermot said. "He's not here. And the Secret Service is having one hell of a time keeping up with them."

"They'll be there in just a few minutes, Dermot," the MAGLE said. "God help us."

The MAWH snapped his phone shut, motioned to the Majestic security detail he was keeping on standby, and within seconds they had loaded him into their black Grand Cherokee and were whisking him off to the pad where their black, unmarked helicopter waited. They were airborne within seconds, skimming across the Texas plains.

"Arm the missiles," Dermot shouted over the turbofan, and the co-pilot hit the switch that activated the helicopter's retractable armament pod. Behind him, the men of his security detail stowed their M-16s and broke out the helicopter's cache of alien weaponry: Wisterian shield-defeating energy guns, .65-caliber depleted-uranium saucer-killers, primitive one-shot pulse generators. In more than fifty years of human-Wisterian relations, matters

had only deteriorated into violence twice. This time, though, it felt personal.

Dermot stared through the plexiglass, searching for POTUS's shooting party. He spotted them just about the same moment that the pilot screamed "Bogeys! Wisterian telemetry!" and Dermot saw them, two small, silver saucers plunging towards Earth at ridiculous speed only to stop on a dime like aliens from a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

"Hold your fire!" Dermot shouted. Maybe there was still hope. He raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes and focused on POTUS's Hummer. Xoshi was driving, with POTUS beside him, and Grndl was in the back... *raising a huge, shiny Zzbax pulse rifle!*

"Holy..." Dermot began, but the sight and sound of the pulse bolt leaping from the Presidential Humvee and obliterating one of the speeders cut him off. The second speeder responded immediately, accelerating in that unnervingly fast Wisterian way and targeting POTUS and the Zzbax with a stream of green laser blasts that stitched along the ground. Only the brilliant evasive driving of Xoshi evaded the Wisterian gunnery, and the few seconds reprieve was all Grndl needed. His second pulse shot leaped from his gun with a resounding "WHUMP!" and seemed to bend in the air before it slammed into the second speeder and reduced it to so much space dust.

Dermot stood slack-jawed in the open door of the chopper and almost didn't notice that his cell phone was ringing again. When he answered it, the caller was Rozzie.

"*You're messing with the wrong species of alien!*" Rozzie said. "Did you think I was stupid? Do you have any idea what I'm doing to do to your technology timetable now, Dermot? *No licenses this year!* Everything is off the table! And you will *double our lobster quota!* And I want a new POTUS! That ingrate never even *thanked me* for Florida, and now he goes behind my back? He's finished, I tell you!"

"Screw you, Rozzie," Dermot said. "We just moved up to a better class of extraterrestrial. And

POTUS wants his bowling alley back." He ended the call and hit his speed-dial.

"Majestic security office, White House," the desk sergeant said.

"This is MAWH," Dermot said. "Liquidation Protocol 42 is now in effect."

"Roger that," said the desk sergeant, who paused as he leafed rapidly through his procedure reference. "By my protocol you are to authenticate Juliet Echo Echo."

"Authenticate Delta Alpha Charlie," Dermot said, reading off his own sheet.

"Roger that, I have Majestic Protocol Authentication," the sergeant replied.

"One more thing," Dermot said. "Take good care of the body. We haven't done an autopsy on one of these guys in a long time, and we're a lot more advanced now. No unnecessary damage beyond fatal, sergeant."

"Roger that," he said, and Dermot ended the call as the chopper set down beside the president's Humvee.

"Can you believe they're just *giving* this to me, Dermie?" POTUS beamed, holding up the silver pulse rifle. "You gotta shoot it just once. You won't believe the feeling!"

"Anything you say, Mr. President," Dermot replied, nodding to the frantically bobbing Zzbax.

The Zzbax celebrated the Lubbock Treaty by granting POTUS his wish. He was a former fighter pilot, just like his Daddy, and ever since he'd flown down to Texas in the Zzbax saucer he'd been bugging them to let him fly it. "Piece of cake," said Grndl.

Their route took them south at first, where Xoshi gave POTUS his orientation over the Gulf of Mexico, staying well away from the former Wisterian underwater base near Bermuda (Rozzie had once assured Dermot that it was still marked as a no-fly zone on all Confederation interstellar charts). From there the saucer zipped straight up into space and flew north, disappearing for a few

minutes before reentering at the pole and blasting in over Canada, speeding straight down the center of the continent at a blinding velocity that nevertheless produced only normal gravity on the saucer. Dermot watched their progress nervously on his laptop computer as he sat in his black Crown Victoria outside POTUS's ranch house. Somehow, when his cell phone rang, he knew it was the president.

"Dermie!" POTUS shouted. "I buzzed the Kremlin!"

"That's great, sir," Dermot replied. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"This thing is so stable and maneuverable, man! You wouldn't believe it!"

"I'm sure I wouldn't," Dermot said. "It's an advanced technology that we don't yet have."

"Well, we've got it now," POTUS said. "Look! There's St. Louis!" Dermot could hear the Zzbax purring in the background.

"Hey, watch this," Xoshi said, his translator audible over the open cell connection. "Give me the controls."

"That Hot Dog is the best pilot I've ever seen!" POTUS said, getting back on the line. "Yaaa-hoo! We're looping the loop through the Gateway Arch, Dermie!"

"Mr. President, are you sure that's a good idea?" Dermot said, his nervousness taking control now.

"Oh, don't be such a stuffed shirt, Dermie!" POTUS said. "Can't you see it's a new world? Hell, the Cubs just won the World Series, for crying out loud. That's *got* to be some kind of sign! Yaa-hoo! Here we go again! Hot damn! Right under the observation deck and..." There was a pause.

"Mr. President?" Dermot shouted.

"Uh-oh," POTUS said right before the line went dead.

Making up with the Wisterians wasn't easy, and the new terms they settled on weren't nearly as good as the ones Eisenhower had negotiated, either. While the

ambassador at Area 51 had never really liked Rozzie – he knew as well as Dermot did that the Roswell crash was incompetence, not mechanical failure – he wasn't exactly enamored with Dermot for ordering the Earth's senior Wisterian liquidated, either.

Dermot apologized profusely. There are times in business where you just have to take a bad deal and make the best of it.

After thirty years on the job, Dermot still didn't understand the Wisterian obsession with cows, but one thing was clear: The new treaty gave the aliens access to so much cattle for "experiments" that the price of beef was sure to skyrocket. He put in a call to his broker in Chicago on the way to the Presidential funeral and told him to invest big in beef futures.

The Veep's speech at the new Presidential grave at Arlington was dignified if a bit stuffy. "This brazen terrorist attack has wounded us all, but our will is strong," he said, making reference to the St. Louis crash. "We will soldier on, and those fanatics responsible for this cowardly act will meet our Infinite Justice."

Maybe, but not from you, Dermot thought as he watched the Veep fumble through his speech. The Wisterians had never liked this Veep for some reason, and the ambassador had already put in an order for a new POTUS. Maybe it would be a Democrat this time, or that maybe young Republican governor down in South Carolina. Creating the scandal would be entertaining, but the controversy and the breaking in of the new POTUS would be exhausting. Dermot sighed, lamenting the fact that he would never retire from this job and dreading the meeting the Wisterians had called for that night. That reminded him and he suddenly remembered the detail he had forgotten.

"Is this the White House kitchen?" he whispered into his cell phone as the mourners filed into line to pay their respects. "Listen, this is MAWH. Lay on more lobsters. Yes, as many as you can buy."

"We're having guests over tonight."

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