

Wetlands Preserve  
by Nancy Kress

The duck hunter waded through the marsh, breathing deeply of the sweet dawn air mixed with wet decay. Each lift of his high boots sucked up mud with a soft splurging sound. Cattails rustled in conspiratorial whispers. The dog beside him flicked its tail at a dragonfly.

"Soft, girl, we're not supposed to be here," the man said, grinning. "But listen to them ducks!"

Abruptly the flock of mallards, until now out of sight, flew up. The man raised his gun, fired once, twice. A bird fell and the dog took off.

Grinning, the hunter waited. She was the best dog he'd ever had. Never missed. A beauty.

"Hey, girl, what you got, let's see it there, oh you beauty..." The man's wife complained that he talked more affectionately to the dog than to her. The dog dropped the duck. The man bent to pick it up from the shallow water, and the snake swam past him.

Not a snake. Green, long, but with fins. Three eyes. Three. Before he stopped to think, the man had grabbed the thing behind its head, the way you grabbed a copperhead if you had to grab it at all, and lifted it out of the water. On its underside were four short legs.

And the thing went on staring at him from two of its eyes, the two facing sideways, while the third eye stared straight up to the empty gray sky. It didn't thrash or try to bite. It just gazed steadily, interestedly.

The dog barked to draw attention to its duck. The man ignored her. He went on staring at the thing gazing so tranquilly back at him. "What ... what are you?"

Then he saw the blackened craft half submerged in the mud and water.

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Lisa still wasn't used to the guards. Security guards, yes, Kenton had always had those, although not because anyone expected trouble. The John C. Kenton Memorial Wetlands Preserve and Research Foundation in upstate New York wasn't exactly a hotbed of contentious activity. Until now, the greatest excitement at Kenton had been the struggle to keep *Lythrum salicaria*, purple loosestrife, from displacing native waterfowl food plants.

However, like all research labs, Kenton contained expensive equipment that no one wanted stolen, so there had always been one guard, seldom the same one for very long because the work was so boring. But now they had Army soldiers, two at the door and two in back and God-knew-how-many on patrol around the unfenced perimeter of the wetlands. None of them knew what they were guarding, although it seemed to Lisa that if they had any intelligence whatsoever they would pick on the intense, badly suppressed excitement pervading Kenton like a glittering mist.

"Identification, please," the soldier said, and Lisa handed over her new government pass. The soldier ran it through a slot on a computer and handed it back. Then he smiled. "Okay, Lisa Susan Jackson. You

sure you're old enough to be in there?"

You don't look any older than I do, Lisa wanted to snap back, but didn't. She'd already learned that silent disdain was the only thing that worked, and not always that. It made no difference that she was a graduate student in fresh-water ecosystems, that she had been selected over three hundred other applicants for this prestigious and unusually well-funded internship, that she made a valuable contribution to Kenton's ongoing work. She was a small blonde woman who looked about fourteen years old, and so even this cretin in camouflage felt entitled to patronize her.

She walked past him with freezing dignity and went to the main lab. Early as it was, Paul and Stephanie were already there, and through the window she could see Hal pushing off from the dock on the flat-bottomed boat accompanied by yet another visitor. The staff always tried to arrive earlier than the visiting scientists and Washington types, even if it meant getting to Kenton at four in the morning. Lisa couldn't do that, not with Carlo.

"Lisa, the latest test results are in," said Dr. Paul Lambeth, Kenton's chief scientist. The scientists were all very considerate of her, keeping her fully informed even though she was only an intern. Even though the project was, of course, now heavily classified. Dr. Stephanie Hansen had insisted that Lisa stay on even after the Department of Defense had questioned the presence of a mere graduate student in this unprecedented situation. Hal—Dr. Harold Schaeffer—had fought to get Lisa the necessary clearances, which probably hadn't been easy because of Danilo. Never mind that she hadn't seen Danilo in over a year, or that membership in Greenpeace was not exactly tantamount to membership in China First or the neo-Nazis. The DOD was not known for its tolerance of extremist organizations, no matter how non-violent.

Of course, Lisa knew, Stephanie and Hal had been thinking mostly of protecting the whole internship program rather than her specifically. Lisa was still grateful. She just wished that gratitude didn't make her feel so constrained.

"The latest results," Stephanie repeated after Paul, and an alert shiver ran over Lisa. Stephanie, decisive and taciturn, never repeated others' words, said anything unnecessary. And Stephanie's eyes gleamed in her weather-burned face that had spent thirty years in the outdoors studying how the environment and everything in it worked together to sustain life.

Paul was always more flamboyant than Stephanie. It was Paul, of course, who would eventually announce to the media, standing side by side with the president in the Oval Office. "Do you want to sit down, Lisa? It's big."

"What is it?" she said, wishing he wouldn't play games, knowing she was reacting to his game with the strangled breathlessness he expected.

"The genetic structure is not DNA-based."

She felt her mouth open, her eyes widen, even though the statement wasn't unexpected. Ever since she'd seen the animal brought in by a man illegally duck-hunting in the Preserve, she'd wondered. They all had. It was the spacecraft that made them take the animal so seriously, rather than writing it off as just one more deformity caused by pollution. NASA had come up from Washington, run tests on the blackened outside and mysterious inside of the half-submerged object, and verified the structure as a spacecraft. Immediately it had been carted off to somewhere classified.

But Paul Lambeth had fought to keep research into the animal, and the other animals soon found exactly

like it, as a joint project between Kenton and Washington's hand-picked labs. Paul had won, but not because Kenton was such a well-equipped research lab (although it was; John C. Kenton had left an endowment so generous it was the envy of even places like Harvard). Kenton had kept primary research responsibility because that's where the wetlands were, and who knew what else had come off that spacecraft? The Kenton Preserve, immediately quarantined, had become the mountain toward which the eminent scientific Mohammeds went, since the entire wetlands ecosystem could not go to them. So Kenton did the in situ research, and the CDC, Harvard, and Cold Harbor did the genetics and zoological work.

Non-DNA-based. Alien.

"What . . ." Lisa was annoyed to find her voice coming out too high. ". . . what will they do with it?"

"Nothing, yet," Paul said, and even in his slick media-loving voice she heard the hidden awe. "We're not done searching the ecosystem, even. Did you finish those water sample tests?"

"Not yet," Lisa said. Yes, work, that's what she needed, routine methodical work. To ground her. But she couldn't do it. "Can I see the report?"

"Sure," Paul said, smiling, and there was that condescension again, that egotistical pleasure in his own generosity at sharing this historic moment with such a very junior colleague. Lisa pushed the perception away. She darted for the report and began to read hungrily, wanting to know everything, to gulp it down all at once.

Non-DNA-based. Alien.

From the stars.

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After the initial elation came the questions. The animal was not DNA-based, yet it was eating DNA-based plants. Lisa could see one of the snakers (the catchy name was Paul's) in the oversized cage, munching contentedly on sedges. How was it metabolizing plant food it had not evolved to metabolize? And how had such fully developed animals—warm-blooded, multi-stomached, large if unfathomable brain tissue—survived the trip through space? They might have been in some sort of cold sleep; Lisa had not seen the inside of their small craft. So small! How many had made the journey? They couldn't have been here more than a few years, at the most. Someone would have seen them before now. The twenty-square-mile Kenton Preserve was supposedly off-limits to hunters and bird watchers, but in fact both seeped in all the time, at least on the vast wetland's edges.

The CDC/Harvard report said the genetic material seemed to be concentrated not in the cell nucleus but rather scattered throughout the cell. That was characteristic of very simple organisms like prokaryotes, but not of complex ones. The cells themselves were full of structures. Some had already been catalogued, at least in a preliminary survey, as analogous to ribosomes or mitochondria or receptors. They broke down molecules for energy, they utilized oxygen, they received chemical signals from other cells. Some were total mysteries.

Lisa read the report once, twice. Then she went to stare at the snakers' cage, which was a mini-ecology twelve feet by five, equipped with marsh areas, a pool, a dry hummock, stands of cattails and bulrushes, aquatic plants and rocks and insects. Two of the three captive snakers had disappeared into the foliage. The third one raised its head and looked back at her from a side-facing eye. Lisa stood gazing for a long time.

"Lisa?" Stephanie said. "We're going out this afternoon on the boat to survey another sector. Want to come?"

"Yes!" The Preserve had not been so thoroughly surveyed in years, now that everyone wanted to know exactly how many of the alien creatures existed. A lot, it seemed. They bred quickly. Lisa went to finish her water sample runs as quickly as possible so she would be able to go out on the boat.

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When she finally got home, muddy and exhausted and smelling of swamp, Danilo was there. "How did you get in? The door was locked."

"Jimmied a window," he said in his liquid Filipino accent. "Not hard. God, Lissy, you look like a drowned rat."

Lissy. His pet name for her. Which he goddamn well had no right to use. He lounged at the table in her kitchen, which was also her living room and dining room, having helped himself to Raisin Bran and English muffins. She said sourly, "You better be careful. That food probably has genetically modified foodstuffs in it. You could sully your ideological purity."

"Same old Lissy." He sat up straighter, and the gleam of white teeth disappeared from his sunbrowned face. Despite the heat, he wore jeans and heavy boots, the old uniform. A knapsack rested on the floor. His trim body looked fit and rested, which only irritated her more. It had been so long since she'd had a good night's sleep. Too much to do, always.

Danilo said quietly, "I want to see him."

"You don't have the right."

"I know. But I want to anyway. Carlo is my son."

"Only biologically. A hyena is a better father than you've been," Lisa said, and they were off again, the same old track, sickening her even before they really got rolling.

"Only because I had a more urgent job," Danilo said, apparently willing to go over it all yet once more. Lisa wasn't. He'd made his choices, and at the time Lisa had even seen why he'd made them, or thought she had. The fate of the planet over the fate of a single child, the human race itself at stake, global warming, depleted oceans, dangerous genetically engineered organisms released into the environment, deforestation, pollution, nuclear radiation, blah blah blah. Or, rather, not blah blah blah; she was preparing herself to work for the same ends, through scientific ecology. But it all looked different somehow when you had that actual single child with you day and night, dependent on you, needing your

care and interrupting your sleep and clamoring for your love. You realized that there was no more urgent job.

There was no way to tell that to Danilo, no way that he would hear. Lisa said only, "I'll get Carlo. The woman next door takes care of him while I'm at work."

"Is she ... can she ..."

"She's had experience with disabled children." And then, cruelly, "She costs most of my grant and all of my scholarship, of course, between daycare and physical therapy. Nothing left to donate to good causes."

Danilo didn't answer. Lisa went next door to get Carlo.

It was one of his good days. He laughed and reached up for her, and she knelt by the wheelchair and hugged him. Undoing all the harnesses that kept him comfortable was a major undertaking. "Mommy! I drew a picture!"

"He did, Lisa. Look," Mrs. Belling said, and held up a childish picture of a blue tree, green sun, and red structure that might have been a house or a car. "He's getting really good with his right foot, aren't you, Carlo?"

"I'm good," Carlo said, with such innocent grandiosity that Lisa wanted to weep. He was almost five. Next year he would start school. How long would he keep that pride around other people, people less kind than Mrs. Belling or Lisa's colleagues? Carlo was intelligent, happy, severely deformed. Both arms hung truncated at his sides, devoid of any nerves to transmit muscle impulses. His head lolled to one side. He would never walk. His radiant smile nightly filled her with fear for his future.

Danilo had left her, joined first Students Against Toxins and later Greenpeace, the day Carlo had been born. Carlo's father blamed the baby's condition on contaminated groundwater in the factory town where Lisa had grown up. Perhaps he was right. Lisa had gone into shock that Danilo could leave her now, leave her with a deformed infant, leave her unmarried and about to start graduate school and all but broke. Selfish! She had screamed at him. Necessary, he had replied, so more Carlos aren't born like this, and more, and more. She was the selfish one not to see that. It was no different than going off to war. He was disappointed in her that she couldn't see that.

The horrible thing was, she could. But she was still the one left with Carlo. Whom, now, she wouldn't trade for anything on Earth.

"Carlo," she said, after lavishing praise on his picture, "Uncle Danilo's here." Her one condition for letting Danilo see him at all: unclehood, not fatherhood. Fatherhood was something you did, and Danilo never had.

"Uncle Danilo?" The child frowned, trying to remember. It had been over a year since Danilo's last will-o'-the-wisp appearance.

"Yes, your Uncle Danilo. You'll remember him when you see him. Let's go, sweetie."

"Bye, Mrs. Belling!" Carlo called. "See you tomorrow!"

Lisa watched Danilo flinch when she wheeled in Carlo. Revulsion, or guilt? She hoped it was guilt.

"Carlo, this is Uncle Danilo."

"Hi, Carlo."

"Hi! Mommy, he gots a bord!"

"A 'beard,' sweetie. He has a beard."

"Can I touch the beard?"

Danilo knelt by Carlo's chair. Lisa moved away, unwilling to stand that close to Danilo. But on the warm air she caught the scent of him anyway, bringing such a rush of visceral memory that she turned abruptly away. God, how long had it been for her ... and never like with Danilo.

Lisa Jackson and Danilo Aglipay. Salty working-class American and wealthy cultured Filipino. Ideological purists, committed activists, the sexual envy of an entire campus, with her blonde small-boned beauty and his exotic dark intensity. Except that the working-class salt-of-the-earth parents shoved Lisa out of the family when she took up with a "gook," and the wealthy Filipino swore he would never go home to the father who made his money exploiting the planet, and the blonde beauty swelled with pregnancy that ruined the activist plans so much that Danilo left, spouting speeches.

And out of that wreck I made a life, Lisa reminded herself fiercely. Graduate school, Carlo, the internship at Kenton. The alien animals. Talk about world-changing events! If Danilo knew about the aliens ... but he wouldn't. It was her knowledge, her life, and no whiff of masculine pheromones would ruin it for her. Not now, not ever.

"The beard feels strangey," Carlo said. It was his latest pet word.

"Oh, it's strangey, all right," Lisa said, and Danilo looked at her.

She fed Carlo and Danilo too (inescapable), read Carlo a story, put him to bed. Danilo watched silently from his chair at the table. After Lisa closed the bedroom door, she said, "Now go. I have work to do."

"Work? Now?"

"All the time, Danilo."

"And you think it does anybody any good, this work? This studying minute details of ecosystems even as the exploiters destroy them out from under you?"

"Probably as much actual good as your 'non-violent confrontations' at Greenpeace."

"I'm not with Greenpeace any more," he said, and something grim in his tone, coming through despite the soft accent, made Lisa look directly at him.

"You're not?"

"No. You're right—non-violent confrontations accomplish nothing substantial. I am with EarthAction now."

"Never heard of them."

"You will," he said, and that tone was there again. "Lissy, I don't have anyplace to stay."

"You're not staying here. See that sofa? That unfolds to create my bedroom, and in another few hours I'll be using it. Bye, Danilo."

He didn't argue. Picking up the knapsack, he moved with his fluid gait toward the door. Watching him, Lisa suddenly remembered that she still had dried mud in her hair from the boat survey, still smelled of swamp and lab. Well, she'd shower later; the reports in her briefcase were too exciting to wait.

She'd already started to work by the time Danilo closed the apartment door.

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"Washington wants even tighter security," Paul said to the assembled Kenton staff, plus the visiting scientists, Washington representatives, and whoever those others were that Lisa couldn't identify. "That's why we have an increased guard. I know all the checkpoints are inconvenient, people, but consider the benefits. We're getting another month of study before any announcement is made and we're overrun with outsiders."

Hal said bluntly, "Could have fooled me. There are already far too many outsiders in the Preserve. It's starting to look like O'Hare Airport out there. At this rate we're going to irreparably damage the ecosystem."

Paul looked embarrassed. People shifted on their chairs, crowded uncomfortably into the too-small break room. Nobody looked directly at the visiting scientists.

"Hal, we appreciate your concerns, but we have to be practical here as well. This is perhaps the single most important event in the history of humankind. You can't really expect it to stay confined to a bunch of academic swamp rats like us."

People laughed obligingly, but the tension wasn't broken.

Paul continued, "We have a full agenda this morning, and a very exciting one, so let's—"

"If you're really trying for tight security," Hal persisted doggedly, "then all these soldiers and checkpoints and cars going in and out isn't exactly the best way to get it. Don't you think the locals, including the local journalists, are going to notice?"

Lisa had to agree with him. Just last night she'd heard two women at the grocery store speculating about what could be going on "down to the Preserve, with all them crazy tree-huggers." And the off-duty soldiers went in and out of Flaherty's, the town's most popular bar. She'd seen them.

"I think we can leave security to the professionals whose job it is," Paul said smoothly, "and get on with our own job. First, a really exciting report from Dr. Mary Clark of Harvard."

"Thanks, Paul," Dr. Clark said. "Hang onto your hats, guys. We've finished the water analyses. Our alien footed snakes are not the only extraterrestrials in the Preserve."

Gasps, chatter, shouted questions. Dr. Clark held up her hand, eyes gleaming at the sensation she'd produced. "There are one-celled organisms with the same non-DNA genetic structure out there in the swamp water. There are also multi-celled organisms and some primitive worms."

Over the fresh buzz, someone called out, "Nothing in between? In evolutionary terms?"

"No," Dr. Clark said, "and of course we still don't understand that."

No one did. It was the central mystery about the alien snakers—how had whoever sent them known what environment they would find when the craft landed? Had the snakers been chosen because, miraculously, they were perfectly adapted to a swamp environment at this latitude? That could be true only if their planet of origin were very similar to Earth, which seemed too much of an unlikely coincidence. (In fact, as the NASA rep had said, the odds against it were so high that the possibility was meaningless.)

Had the snakers been engineered for this environment? But that argued a detailed knowledge of an Earth swamp ecosystem, and how could the genetic engineers have that unless they'd been here? If they had, why not just appear themselves? Why send these non-sentient but apparently harmless creatures as forerunners?

And now these much more primitive non-DNA creatures. Too primitive to serve as food for the snakers, which in any case were eating sedges and Lemna minor just fine. And that brought the questions full circle to the central issue: How could the snakers be metabolizing food they had not evolved to metabolize?

The rest of the meeting produced no answer. The Harvard geneticist gave a long and detailed progress report of the research into the peculiar, scattered genetic structures in the alien cells. Lisa listened intently. After forty-five minutes she discerned the central point: Nobody knew anything definitive.

There were other reports and what promised to be an intense give-and-take, but she couldn't stay. She had to get Carlo from Mrs. Belling. Paul turned his head as she went out the door, and she saw him frown.

But, then, Paul had a wife looking after his children.

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Danilo showed up while she was feeding Carlo. He opened the apartment door, walked in, and dropped his knapsack on the floor. Carlo sang out, "Hi, Uncle Danilo!" and Lisa was stuck being semi-polite. "I brought some veggies," Danilo said. "Did you know you have an organic farmer just the other side of town?"

"No," Lisa said. "I don't shop around much."

"Good stuff. No pesticides, no fertilizers. I thought I'd make a salad. Do you like salad, Carlo?"

"Yes!" said Carlo, who liked everything.



"I got some peaches and cherries, too."

Lisa's mouth filled with sweet water. She made herself say, "Thank you, Danilo. But you should knock, you know. It's good manners." She looked pointedly at Carlo.

"You're right. I will. Carlo, watch this."

Danilo tossed cherries in the air, caught them in his mouth, mimed exaggerated satisfaction. Carlo laughed, and so Danilo hammed it up more, until the little boy was whooping with laughter. "Now Carlo's turn."

"Pit them first, Danny," Lisa said quickly. He had always swallowed the cherry pits. Oh God, Danny ... it had just slipped out.

Danilo played with Carlo all evening. It wasn't until Carlo was in bed that Lisa could throw Danilo out. "You can't do this."

"Do what?" he said.

"Get Carlo used to you, enjoying you, then disappear again."

"Isn't that what 'uncles' do?" Danilo said, and they were facing each other, bristling like cats.

"Danilo, what are you really doing here? I looked up EarthAction on the web. They're suspected in half a dozen environmental bombings. A pesticide factory in Mexico, a supermarket in Germany that refused to remove genetically modified foods from its shelves, a Monsanto distributor in South Africa, a whaling operation in Japan."

"Nothing proven whatsoever," Danilo said.

"Mostly because you haven't hit anything in the United States. God, Danilo, a supermarket?"

"Do you know how dangerous those genetically modified foods are? The growers use two to five times the pesticides that regular farmers use. Worse, nobody knows the long-term effects of introducing organisms into the environment that didn't develop there naturally. We could be looking at global disaster down the road, just so the agri-industrial complex can boost its profits now."

"You used to believe that violence was descending to the level of the enemy!"

"And all that peaceful confrontation failed, didn't it? Did you breast-feed Carlo, Lisa? You probably had toxic organochlorines in your breast milk. Do you read the newspaper when you're not in that swampy ivory tower of yours? Did you read about the fish depletion on the Grand Banks because of overfishing? The drought in Africa because of climate shifts due to the actions of industrial countries? The destruction of sustainable, diverse agriculture because of one-crop genetically engineered planting with God-knows-what side effects? The ninety-six people in Manila—" He stopped, breathing hard.

Lisa said quietly, "What about the people in Manila, Danilo? Which people?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"It was the garbage dump, wasn't it? I saw it on the news. A dump collapsed outside Manila, burying the shanties of people who lived by scavenging in the garbage."

"Men, women, children," Danilo said. "Buried under huge mounds of rotten garbage. Burned when fires broke out from the pathetic makeshift stoves they used to cook their food in the shanties. Cooking food there. Rescue people couldn't even get the bodies out right away because of the stench."

Lisa waited.

"My family owns that dump, Lisa. Just like they own most of that Manila suburb."

"Danilo, you—"

"Come out of your bog once in a while and see what's going on with the planet. Which we're not going to have indefinitely unless somebody gets through to the people exploiting it for profit."

He was right, she knew he was right. And yet all she could think was, He talks like a propaganda leaflet. Was Danilo still in there somewhere, a real person?

"See you," Danilo said, picking up his knapsack. "Tell Carlo I said good-bye."

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Lisa was the first one in at Kenton the next day, a miracle. She couldn't sleep, and when she saw Mrs. Belling's light go on at 4:00 A.M., she took a chance and asked her if she could take Carlo this early. An emergency at work, Lisa babbled, they'd just phoned, she hated to ask, wouldn't let it happen again.... Mrs. Belling, blinking in either sleep or surprise, agreed. Lisa carried the unconscious Carlo next door. In Mrs. Belling's shabby, comfortable kitchen she noted on the counter a jar of peanut butter, plastic food containers, a receipt for dry cleaning. Genetically modified foodstuffs, persistent organic pollutants, environmental toxins. That's what Danilo would have said.

Screw Danilo.

The lab was cool and sweet-smelling, a window open to the moist night air. Lisa shrugged off her irritation at once again being ribbed by the guard. She pulled out her notes on analyses of snaker fecal matter.

Thrashing sounded from the snaker cage.

A snaker sat in a shallow pool of water smack up against the mesh wall. It ignored Lisa as she approached. Again it thrashed with the back half of its long body. Something was emerging. The snaker was giving birth.

Unable to believe her luck, Lisa grabbed a camcorder. She put it right against the mesh, hoping the fine carbon-filament netting wouldn't interfere too much with the picture. The snaker paid no attention. It was totally absorbed in the excruciating pushing process of mammalian birth, supplemented by a snake-like thrashing.

Finally, something emerged. Lisa gasped and almost dropped the camera.

Not possible.

A brief rest, and the snaker resumed pushing. Lisa could barely hold the camera steady. The offspring looked nothing like the parent, a phenomenon associated with reptiles and amphibians and insects. Tadpoles, larvae. Egg layers. But the snaker was a warm-blooded pseudo-mammal, and its offspring was ...

Its offspring looked orders more complex than the parent. It had long, far more developed legs, with knee joints and toes. Toes. It had a shorter body. It had ... not possible.

It had a prehensile tail.

This didn't happen. Offspring were not more evolutionarily advanced than their parents, not like this. This looked like an entirely different animal. No, that wasn't true, either. It looked like a plausible development from this animal but several million years up the evolutionary ladder.

Not possible.

But there it was, a second one, emerging from the snaker. Who then gave a last enormous thrash, curled up, and went to sleep. Apparently completely certain that her two offspring could fend for themselves.

Which they could. They leaned over and both gently bit their mother on the head. A few minutes later, they began to eat her.

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"I have a conjecture," Paul said.

It came after a long silence. The few scientists who had arrived by 5:30 A.M. looked at Lisa's video, gasped in disbelief, looked again, stampeded to the mesh cage, where there was nothing to see. The infant snakers...no, you couldn't call them that, they were clearly something else besides snakers...had disappeared into the cage's lush interior. For the first time, Lisa regretted the large, ecologically correct environments lab animals got at Kenton.

Paul didn't respect the philosophy behind this, not this time. He removed the top and beat the swamp reeds and fished under the lily pads and pond scum until one of the offspring was found.

Unceremoniously he hoisted it with a net into a small bench cage, and everyone had gasped a second time.

"I have a conjecture," Paul repeated. Lisa recognized the reluctance of a scientist to make a fool of himself, coupled with the honesty that was going to let him do so. "I think they were genetically engineered to do this. The entire genome—maybe several genomes—exists in the one-celled organisms released from the spacecraft. In fact, one-celled organisms may have been the only things released from the spacecraft. They had the best chance of survival in many conditions, and could subsist on the widest array of chemicals available.

"The genome is in so many pieces in the alien cells because it's so huge. It contains multiple possible evolutionary paths for future organisms, depending on what environment the craft finds itself in. And that same environment triggers which genes kick in for each subsequent generation, advancing as fast up the evolutionary ladder as biology and environment permit."

Immediately objections broke out, some of them vehement. "I didn't say it was a polished theory," Paul finally said angrily. Lisa had never heard him get angry. "I said it was a conjecture!"

More objections, more arguments. Someone else came in—Dr. Clark—and someone else explained to her what had happened. The birth film was run again. People ran back and forth from the bench cage containing the new creature, the totally impossible creature, which had gone to sleep. The NASA rep arrived, looking stunned as he listened to the scientists.

Amid the din, Lisa sat quietly. I believe Paul, she thought. Not because the theory was tight, or well-supported, or inevitably logical. She believed it, she realized, because if she were going to send terrestrial life to the stars, that's the way she would do it. The way that respected the unknown ecologies so abruptly intruded upon. The way with the largest possibility of success.

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The next weeks filled with frenzied work. Lab staff and visiting scientists had divided into camps. Only the tremendous excitement of the discovery itself kept the arguing from deteriorating into turf wars. And sometimes, Lisa observed wryly, not even that. Kenton's previous major concern, controlling the invasion of loosestrife into the wetlands, was forgotten. The purple Eurasian weed begat and burgeoned.

Lisa stayed at the lab all she could. Unlike some people, she couldn't physically move in. Paul and Stephanie spent most nights in their offices. One of the CDC scientists, Lisa suspected, was sleeping on the very hard sofa in the break room. She herself drew more money from her small, precious hoard to pay Mrs. Belling as much overtime as Lisa could conscientiously allow herself away from Carlo. The child grew cranky with missing her, and Mrs. Belling grew stiffer as Lisa picked him up later and later, but she couldn't stay away from Kenton.

They found more of the new creatures—"post-snakers"—in the Preserve.

The geneticists isolated a few specific sections of the alien genetic material responsible for producing a few specific proteins. A tentative but definite beginning on mapping the genome.

Technicians installed heavy encryption programs for all data flowing between Kenton, Washington, the CDC, and the university research centers involved in the discovery.

A post-snaker was painstakingly dissected. Internal organs and systems were logical but startlingly advanced versions of its parents'.

Paul and Hal got into a public fight—it was not an argument, it was a fight—on the missing links between the worms they'd found in the Preserve and the snakers. From worm to pseudo-mammal with nothing in between? Impossible, said Hal. Irresponsible sensationalism.

The missing forms disappeared because they were no longer needed, Paul said. Just as the eaten maternal snakers were no longer needed after the snaker population had reached a certain level. They'd accomplished their purpose, so they stopped being produced.

Evolution doesn't work that way, Hal retorted. Species don't disappear because they're not "needed"—they disappear because their habitat changes, and not always then. We still have primitive, clumsy birds like hoatzins along with superb flyers like gulls and hawks. We still have alternate-branch primates even though man exists. We still have crocodiles, for God's sake, that were around in the Triassic. National Enquirer science is no science at all.

This isn't Terran evolution, Paul replied coldly, and the two men parted in anger.

Lisa watched the fight with sorrow, mingled with impatience. Why were these intelligent, capable men wasting time on turf wars? The greatest discovery in the history of the human race, and they used it to vent long-standing acrimonies, which was how it seemed to her. But maybe she wasn't seeing it too clearly. She was so tired. Being part of history might be exciting, but it was also so exhausting she was often afraid she'd fall asleep at the wheel driving home.

And then one night, as she staggered in past midnight with the sleeping Carlo a dead weight in her arms, Danilo was back.

"Lissy," he said somberly, and she couldn't summon the energy to tell him he wasn't allowed to call her that.

"Leave, Danilo."

"I'm going. This is a two-minute visit. Do you often work at night like this?"

"If I have to." She dumped Carlo in his bed, covered him, and closed the bedroom door.

Danilo said, "And do you often get to work as early as you did today? I was here at five and you were already gone."

"What were you doing here at five? Danilo, leave. I'm exhausted." She yawned.

"I can see that. Do you often get to work as early as you did today?"

This time she heard the casualness in his voice. Too casual. Her senses sharpened. "Why?"

"Just asking."

"No, you're not."

He picked up his ever-present knapsack and headed for the door. "Lissy, you work too hard. Don't go into work so early."

"The hell with you. How else do you suppose work gets done, Danilo? Not that you'd know."

He didn't change expression. "I know you hate me."

"No, Danilo. I don't hate you. I can even admire what you're doing, or at least I could when you were

with organizations like Greenpeace. It's necessary, important work. But it's not supposed to be an excuse to avoid normal human responsibilities such as your own child, and then even expect to get credit for doing that."

"I wanted you to put him in an institution, Lisa."

"And I chose not to. Is that it, is the problem that Carlo's deformed? That the healthy Danilo Aglipay, stalwart macho crusader, has a son who will never walk or feed himself? Do you think that my keeping him against your wishes absolves you of responsibility? Whether you approve or not, the kid is here, and he's yours, and you'd rather be Richard the Lion Heart than St. Francis of Assisi. Fine. Just don't expect me, of all people, to applaud you for it."

He didn't answer. Danilo not insisting on the last word was such a novel phenomenon that, watching the door close behind him, she would have felt triumph if she hadn't felt so exhausted. She collapsed into bed and slept, dreamless.

.....

The next morning she was late. Lisa overslept, Carlo was in a rare terrible mood, Mrs. Belling had to run errands before she could take him. Lisa didn't get to Kenton until after ten, and it was clear that something big had gone down before she got there.

"Stephanie, what—"

"Not now. I have to write this report."

Stephanie never rebuffed her. Lisa was afraid to even approach Paul, who stalked tight-lipped through the corridors, looking to neither side.

Hal was on the dock, pushing off in the boat. Blunt, honest Hal. Lisa flew out the back door and down the dock. "Hal! Take me with you!"

"No." Then he saw her face. "Oh, all right, but don't talk to me. Just take this and count." He thrust a clipboard at her with columns headed with the names of various fishes. Most of the boat was taken up with netting. Lisa understood; Hal was sampling the fish population in various parts of the Preserve to determine any changes from baseline since the alien animals appeared. The staff had already established that the post-snakers would eat fish. Meekly, Lisa settled herself in the boat.

It was peaceful away from the research complex. Hal poled the boat past mixed stands of cattails and hard-stem bulrushes, around impenetrable stands of purple loosestrife. A wood duck had nested on a wind-throw mound and Lisa watched the ducklings slide into the water after their mother. A tern perched on top of an abandoned muskrat house. As the boat glided along, frogs splashed from hummocks into the muddy water, croaking indignantly.

She waited until they were far enough out that Hal wouldn't turn back. With Hal it was always best to be direct and brief. "Hal, I wasn't here this morning. Something happened. Please tell me."

"Politics happened. Fear happened. Stupidity happened. The Washington guy made a report."

"And ..."

"They don't know down there what to do with the alien animals. But they don't like the speed with which they're both evolving and reproducing. Washington in its cover-your-ass indecision listed several courses of action they might take. One of them was to eliminate the threat entirely."

Lisa suddenly could feel her heartbeat in her teeth. "Threat'? 'Eliminate'?"

"You got it. As in, 'Too many unknowns in allowing unknown organisms to propagate in human environments, with totally unknown effects.' As in, 'Kill them all.'"

"But ... how ..."

"Undecided, of course. Probably poison the entire ecosystem, before the Monsters from Outer Space spread too far. God, you'd think all these guys do is watch B-movies on late-night TV. No wonder nobody's actually governing the country."

"But—"

"No, there's nothing Kenton can do. Haven't you learned yet that science is mostly just the slave of politics and industry? It wasn't once, but it is now. Grow up, girl."

"I don't—"

"Shut up, Lisa. I told you could only come if you shut up. Just count."

Expertly he cast another net, then raised its stiff perimeters high enough in the water to see its thrashing occupants. Lisa counted.

They stayed out till mid-afternoon. Hal said not a single word more. Lisa followed suit. Just before they reached shore, a group of post-snakers swam past them, climbed onto a hummock, and disappeared into the trees. They reminded her of pioneers rolling westward, sturdy and purposeful. Cattails whispered softly, and her face was reflected in the calm golden water.

.....

Carlo was still fussy when Lisa picked him up. She fed him dinner, tried to play with him. But his usually sunny nature was in eclipse, and his forehead felt warm.

"Oh, sweetie, don't get sick now. Not now, honey!"

He whimpered, lolling heavily against her breast. She put him to bed with baby aspirin. He breathed easily, not congested. It was nothing; kids got minor infections all the time, and threw them off just as quickly. Carlo had done it before.

Lisa went into the kitchenette and washed three days' accumulation of dishes. It was only nine o'clock, and she had overslept that morning, but she was running a sleep deficit. Ten hours of unconsciousness

suddenly seemed to her the most tantalizing idea she'd ever had. She drew the blinds, put on her pajamas, and hauled open the sofa bed.

An envelope was taped to the center of the mattress. LISA AGLIPAY.

She had never been Lisa Aglipay, never married Danilo, never used his name. She opened the envelope. A single line of type: "Don't go into work so early, Lisa."

She stood very still. EarthAction. Suspected in half a dozen environmental bombings. A pesticide factory in Mexico, a supermarket in Germany that refused to remove genetically modified foods from its shelves ... "Worse, nobody knows the long-term effects of introducing organisms into the environment that didn't develop there naturally...."

No. Kenton was a wildlife preserve. A research facility for pure science, not an industrial lab. And there was no way EarthAction could know about the alien animals. Danilo was just trying to do what he had always done, control her through scaring her. He wanted the last word.

The young soldiers, going in and out of Flaherty's bar in town, more of them all the time as security was increased and then increased again. Were they all as stupid as the scientists thought? As much unthinking robots as the military thought? Danilo could have talked to any of them. Danilo was good at talking.

No.

She crumpled the piece of paper in her hand and threw it at the wall. In the other room, Carlo coughed. Lisa, hands shaking, put on the TV to distract herself.

"... earlier. The truck was found abandoned near Douglas, Arizona, the site of major and continual border skirmishes between local ranchers and illegal aliens from Mexico crossing into the United States. United States Border Patrol agents found the windowless truck locked from the outside. Inside were the bodies of thirty-two Mexican men, women, and children, dead of heat and dehydration. A spokesperson for the Border Patrol said it is not uncommon for Mexican citizens to pay large sums of money for transport into the United States and then be cheated by receiving no transport. However, this tragedy ..."

The visuals were horrendous. Lisa turned off the television.

Don't go into work so early, Lisa.

She dressed swiftly, checked on Carlo, and left him heavily asleep. She had never left him alone before, but it wasn't, she thought grimly, as if he were going to wander out into the street. Carlo was never going to wander anywhere without help.

It started to rain, first lightly, and then a hard driving torrent. The roads were shiny and slick. At Kenton she pulled out her ID for the guard, who came out of his tiny shanty wrapped in a bright yellow poncho. She looked at him hard. He looked like all the others.

"Lisa," Stephanie said somberly in the main lab, "back to work more? What about your son?"

It was the first time Stephanie had ever asked. Lisa said, "He's visiting my mother."

"Good timing, given the workload here," Stephanie said.



"Yes. Who else is in?"

"Nobody. Even Paul went home to see his kids for a change, *mirabile dictu*."

How long would Stephanie stay? No way to tell. Lisa set to work on some water samples.

Stephanie left at midnight. "You know the locking codes, Lisa?"

"Of course."

Five minutes, seven. Stephanie wasn't coming back. Lisa punched in the codes for the back door. Heavily laden, she made her way along the dock in the dark. A cool wind blew the rain against her body. In a few minutes her jeans and sweater were soaked.

She turned on her huge flashlight, set it at the end of the dock, and untied the boat. Pushing off from the dock, she rowed into the swamp, but not very far; she wasn't that good a boatman. It didn't have to be far. A little ways out lay a half-submerged fallen tree. Its branches encircled a sort of pond-within-the-swamp, rich with algae and the chemicals of decay, exactly what the scientists had determined to be primary breeding grounds. Once there, Lisa leaned over the side of the boat and filled all the plastic containers she'd brought from her apartment. Two empty margarine tubs. Two pieces of Mrs. Belling's Tupperware. A milk jug she'd hastily emptied. A covered pail that had come full of oversized crayons Danny could grasp with his toes. A gallon ice cream container. All of them, tightly lidded, just fit into her canvas gym bag.

The flashlight guided her back to the dock. Only half an hour had elapsed. Ten minutes more and she'd have Kenton locked, the gym bag in the car, herself driving out past the Army's "perimeter."

When would they detonate a bomb? Probably not for hours yet, just before dawn.

Don't go into work so early, Lisa.

Or maybe she was wrong. Maybe EarthAction would do nothing. Maybe it would be the government. Hal, grim in the flat-bottomed boat among the peaceful reeds and rushes. Probably poison the entire ecosystem ... "Too many unknowns in allowing unknown organisms to propagate in human environments, with totally unknown effects."

She wondered if Danilo would have found it funny that Washington and EarthAction actually agreed. Probably not.

She drove carefully through the rain, aware of her cargo. The microorganisms wouldn't last too long in those closed containers; they had evolved (so rapidly!) in sunlight. Tomorrow she would call in sick, bundle Carlo into the back seat, drive like hell. Where? Not all in one place. Better to diversify.

There were freshwater wetlands on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains, five hours' drive to the south. Wetlands in Maryland, the huge Dismal Swamp in Virginia. In West Virginia there were places so remote the post-snakers might not be discovered for years. And the post-post-snakers, and whatever came after that. Twelve hours' drive. Maybe Carlo would sleep a lot of the way.

Danilo, Hal, Washington ... they were all wrong. It wasn't about what humans were doing to the environment, terrible as that was. Concentrating on the rain-slicked road, what Lisa saw reflected in its

shiny surface wasn't deforestation or global warming. It was a garbage dump in Manila, crashing down in all its sickening rottenness to bury and burn ninety-six people who had nowhere else to live. A locked truck where human beings left thirty-two men, women, and children to die slowly and horribly. The factory in her childhood home, pumping sludge into the groundwater even after scientific studies had linked that water to cancers and birth defects. Carlo, one of those birth defects but also a happy and precious child, from whom Danilo had walked away with as little sense of responsibility as if Carlo had been an organically grown vegetable that had nonetheless developed an inexplicable blight. The images scalded her. Why didn't they maim everyone else as well?

Somehow, for some reason, they didn't. So they happened again and again and again.

It isn't, she thought slowly and painfully, what humans do to the Earth. It's what we do, have done, will do to each other. Maybe the aliens, when they were done evolving into whatever they had been designed to become, would do better. It seemed to her they could hardly do worse.

She wondered what they would be like.

The End