

Prologue

A black silhouette streaks toward star system 116354 at half the speed of light. The human eye would equate its size to an aircraft carrier. Somewhere within its ceramic hull, a navigation system calculates the craft's celestial position and determines that the target planet is within range. Vectored thrusters rotate the vessel 180 degrees, and the ion space drive, silent for many Earth years, glows an intense fluorescent blue to decrease the ship's forward momentum.

The sleek craft skims the atmosphere of a gas giant in an aerobraking procedure and

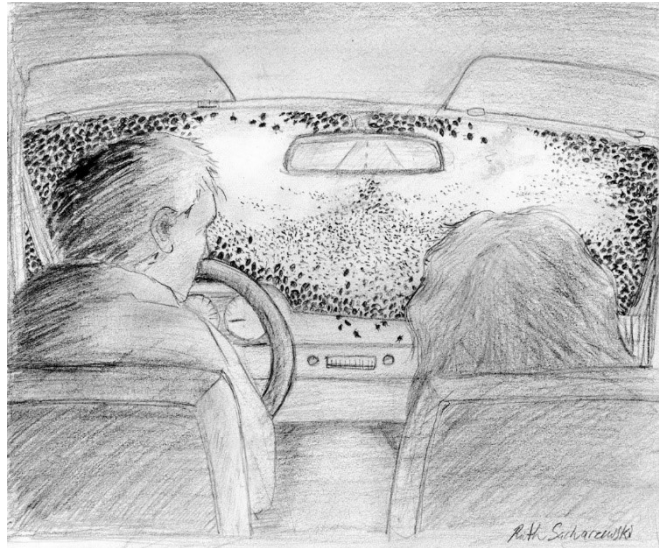
slows to maneuvering velocity. It follows a zigzag course through a minefield of planetoid and celestial debris and moves closer to the third orbiting body in this system. Long range astrometric sensors had detected a planet in this uncharted part of the galaxy, a body with acceptable environmental conditions: liquid water, an atmosphere of gaseous nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon compounds. The planet emits structured electromagnetic waveforms and the decaying particles of nuclear fusion reactions; this planet is populated, and its inhabitants have atomic weapons capability.

The craft nears the planet's only natural moon and separates. The smaller section veers toward the lifeless lunar surface. It dives into the rocky landscape with ballistic velocity. The force of impact buries the dart shaped vehicle at the bottom of a deep crater, on the side of the moon that can't be seen from the blue sphere. The larger part of the ship continues toward the main objective and its swirling white clouds.

150,000 kilometers above the planet's equator, the triangular vessel releases a small black orb, just one meter in diameter. The craft circles the globe and expels more black orbs. Each orb migrates to a designated geosynchronous orbit. When the last orb settles into position, the mothership's control system constructs a high-resolution topographical

map of the planet that includes its vast bodies of water. The passengers select a landing site—a trench eleven kilometers deep that sits at the bottom of an ocean on the northern hemisphere.

Crewmen on a seaworn Soviet fishing trawler bless themselves with the sign of the Cross, terrified by sonic booms and the unearthly fireball. A smoke trail streaks across the eastern horizon. The alien craft descends and levels its trajectory. It skims across the surface of the sea, and its huge girth plows a wake before it disappears into the ocean's depths. Enormous pressure, more than a thousand times greater than the planet's atmosphere, is exerted on the hull as it navigates to the sea floor.



Darkness falls over the eastern seaboard of the United States, and one of the black orbs jettisons an object the size of a football. It plunges into the New England sky. Barney Hilton and his wife Betty are moving toward home on a rural road in New Hampshire. “Betty, you see that?” He points to a fireball above the horizon.

Startled from her nap, Betty looks up as the object slows and goes dark. “Where? What was it?”

“A shooting star, but real slow, and bright, too.”

“That’s nice, hon. Why don’t you make a wish?” she says.

The small aircraft tracks the Hiltons’ car as Barney steers in and out of stands of evergreens. The vessel dives to the treetops and closes to within 100 meters before it emits a tight beam of light on the 1957 Chevy Bel Air. Barney Hilton can’t see the road. He makes a futile attempt at shielding his eyes. The light is white and more intense than anything he’s seen before.

“Barney! Watch what you’re doing!”

The driver doesn’t hear his wife. The Chevy weaves over the yellow line again and again until the eight-cylinder engine goes silent. The car coasts to a stop on a deserted stretch of pavement near a small pond. Bullfrogs croak into the night. Barney turns the key several times, but the engine won’t respond.

“Start the car, Barney! Start the car!”

“It won’t start! Whaddaya think I’m doin’ over here?”

The light drops until it’s level with the windshield. The Chevy’s passengers shield their eyes and blink, but the powerful beam overwhelms them. Then the light dims as a small bulkhead on the front of the spacecraft pivots open and releases a swarm of miniscule insect-like devices.

Barney and Betty don't see the dark whirlwind approach the car. A black cloud covers the windshield in seconds. Everything is dark. The middle-aged man and his wife holler at one another and roll up the windows. "Lock the door!" Betty screams.

A few seconds elapse as Barney and Betty look at each other. They hear their own rapid breathing and a low buzz from beneath the dashboard. A cloud erupts from the air vents. The swarm floods the car's interior and encases the couple in a black cocoon.

Screams are muffled and finally silenced as the foreign mass dissolves through clothing, skin, and muscle. The microscopic explorers investigate, measure, observe, and analyze the bodies with supersonic speed. They resurface and exit the car in a maelstrom just seconds later, headed back to the mothership. The bulkhead closes when they finally board the eerie craft. The white light disappears. It's as if a blanket has been thrown over the sun, and the New Hampshire road is dark again.

Shortly before sunrise, Barney Hilton struggles to regain consciousness. His throat is dry, but he reaches over to shake his wife's shoulder. Betty is unresponsive, but he persists until she opens her eyes. "Hey, you okay?"

"Barney, where are we?"

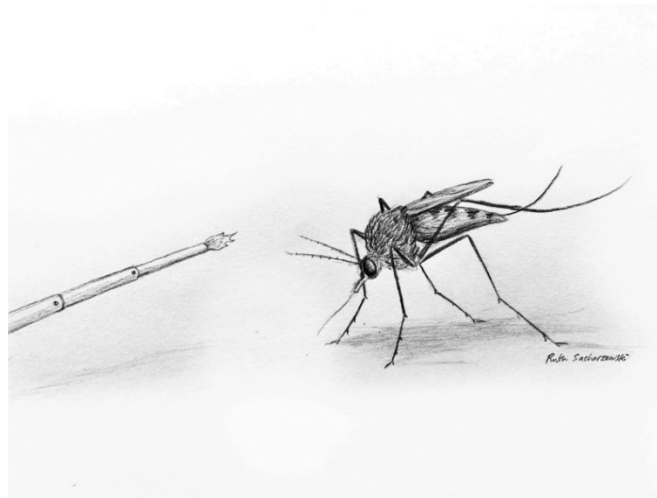
“I think we’re in our car,” he says in a raspy voice. The horizon turns from grey to a pale red.

“Barney, I don’t— I can’t remember how we got here.”

Barney squints and rubs his eyes. “I don’t know. Somethin’s weird.” He shakes his head and turns the ignition. The Chevy’s engine clatters to life, and he steers into the road as the sun, blood red now, finally peeks over the horizon.

“Barney, look at that sunrise.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Red at morn’, sailors be warned. There must be a storm a-comin’.”



CHAPTER I - The Alteration

An upstairs window is open to the night. A raspy congested cough broadcasts that a miner lives in the clapboard house. Maria Zemetsky tosses and turns in an antiquated iron bed, but she can't shake off the heat. Her husband Matthew lies next to her. The mattress and creaky bed were uncomfortable before she was pregnant. Now it's unbearable, but she'd never say that to Matthew. He'd run out to buy her a new bed. There isn't a thing Matthew wouldn't do for her. But money for a new bed? Not now.

She wipes sweat from her forehead and isn't surprised by the chapped hands. She

washes mine clothes every day with bulky bars of abrasive soap. Maria sighs and rolls to the right. The bedsprings strain at the movement. It takes several attempts, but she manages to wedge a feather pillow under the bulge at her waistline. Finally, she gets into a position where nothing hurts, and she falls into an even cadence of deep breaths.

An insect lands on the bedroom's dusty screen. It waits among mosquitoes, dead June bugs, and gnats that litter the windowsill. But this insect is different from Black Rock Valley's native pests. The intruder extends an articulated appendage that exposes a white-hot flame. The torch slices through the screen's metal, a nearly perfect circle at the bottom corner of the pitted frame.

A hungry mosquito senses the elevated levels of carbon dioxide in the bedroom and flies to the newly created porthole. The alien device turns to block the blood sucker and slices it into six even pieces. Optical sensors track the mosquito's remains as they fall in a heap on peeling white paint. The cutting tools retract and tiny hatches close.

The intruder plunges into the darkness of the Zemetsky bedroom. It levitates and hovers, just inches below a cracked plaster ceiling. The room is scanned at various wavelengths of the infrared spectrum. It is quick work to locate the pregnant female life

form in an unconscious state next to her mate. Imaging data is used to calculate an ideal location on her body—the shortest distance from the outer surface to the developing fetus. Spider-like, as if dangling from an invisible thread, the trespasser descends.

Another portal opens on its shell and launches a hypodermic dart. The dart whizzes and stings the carotid artery on Maria Zemetsky's exposed neck. Her body flinches in reflex, but her breath becomes slow and regular. A nerve agent has been introduced into her system.

Like a tick out for blood, the alien insect attaches itself to Maria's exposed abdomen. Beneath its outer shell, an iris opens and reveals a thin, hair-like tubule. The hollow needle extends and spins before it pierces her pale tight skin. Thousands of microscopic biomechanisms inundate the fluid surrounding the unborn child. Each probe is designed for a specific destination and purpose. With the last of its payload delivered, the visitor withdraws the tube, closes the iris, and floats toward its exit.

The family cat jumps to the windowsill in the same instant. This is routine activity for the cat, but tonight it prevents the egress of the alien visitor. The insect tries to dash around the obstruction, but the cat is intrigued enough to swat with sharp claws extended. The

miniscule craft lands on the animal's nose. A flash of light pierces the darkness when the device delivers a gash across sensitive flesh. The feline leaps from the window onto the exposed back of Matthew Zemetsky. The claws on all four feet are extended. The cat wails and leaps to the headboard before it vaults to the floor, the stairwell, and then to the kitchen.

"Jeezas Crites almighty!" Matthew arches his back and gropes in the darkness. The sudden activity startles Maria. She struggles to sit up, hampered by a sharp pain in her stomach. She clutches her midsection and moans.

The flying machine retreats through the same breach it used for entry. Once on the outside, it uses micro-welders to repair the screen. The craft inspects its work, rotates, rises, and speeds into the darkness.

"What? What happened?" asks Matthew. He's forgotten about the cat and his throbbing back.

"The baby! The baby! Somethin's wrong with the baby. I got an awful pain."

Matthew scoots out of bed and smacks his forehead on the closet door. He rebounds in pain—ouch! —stumbles to the porcelain wall switch, and pushes the top button.

The delicate bowl-shaped light fixture in the center of the ceiling paints a soft glow over the room. The wallpaper is blue paisley.

Lace curtains adorn two windows, and between them sits a simple dresser. "Lemme see where's it hurtin'." He tries to focus and leans over Maria. She lifts her night gown and exposes a miniscule red welt. Matthew sighs and fingers the raised knot on his forehead. "Looks like it's just a bug bite, maybe a wasp," he says. "Still hurt?"

"A little. Kinda stings some. I don't want it to hurt the baby."

"Come on downstairs," he says. "I'll mix up a plaster and draw out the poison."

"Maybe I should see the doctor." It's more of a question. Her feet drop to the cool linoleum floor and then into a pair of shabby pink slippers. Doctors cost money. "Can you make me some tea?" She lets out a nervous yawn and plods down the creaky wooden steps.

The kitchen's fluorescent light makes Maria wince and fumble for a chair. The kitchen is the center of activity, the biggest room in the house, and the busiest. Green linoleum wainscoting wraps the walls, topped with a faded pattern of cherries, pears, and apples on oilcloth. A chimney protrudes from one wall, and there's a pie-shaped indentation where once stood a woodstove.

Matthew fills the tea kettle and sets it on an enameled electric stove. He pokes one of the ivory buttons along the chrome plated top and a burner element glows red hot. Dime store

cups wait in the metal cabinet, and he grabs two. A dented aluminum canister has TEA embossed on the side. He pinches at dry, pale green herbs and drops them into the earthenware cups.

The green laminate kitchen table is cool to Maria's arms. Her husband mixes three teaspoons of baking soda with a little water in a stoneware bowl. The thick white paste is a home remedy he learned from his mother. It's what mom used for bites and stings, and now he did too— doggone hornets and wasps.

All the houses on the street looked the same, built by the coal company to house miners around the turn of the twentieth century. Black Rock Valley was in its heyday then, a town full of immigrants seeking fortune, or escaping poverty and starvation in Europe.

Matthew's parents came from Ukraine and eventually bought this house from the Black Rock Valley Coal Company. Mortgage payments were deducted from paychecks, and money was always tight. Matthew's father borrowed from the company store, too, just to feed his family. Mountains of coal and mountains of debt.

But Matthew's mother didn't complain— he remembered that most of all. She kept the family together. She cooked, cleaned, and raised a big garden. In their

native Ukraine, both of his parents survived on less than they had here in America. As far back as Matthew could remember, his mom and dad had made sure there was enough to eat, made sure that everyone had shoes on their feet.

They might not have been the best dressed kids in town, but not the worst, either. And everybody in Black Rock Valley, except for some of the higher-ups at Black Rock Coal, was in the same boat. They made it through the Great Depression and World War II. And his father's lungs would be filled with coal dust. They called it Black Lung. That was normal too.

Matthew scoops the paste with two fingers and smears it on Maria's stretched tummy. Alien technology distributes itself at a cellular level, within the developing child, just centimeters from where the home remedy is applied. Sub-micron devices invade several of the fetus's partially formed sensory organs. The intrusive hardware is beyond detection, far beyond anything the young couple can perceive. "Hornets don't fly around at night, do they?" Matthew asks. He rinses the bowl and puts it in the sink.

"I'll betcha it was in the pillowcase. I had those hangin' on the line today."

"That might o' been it. Ya gotta shake 'em out before ya bring 'em in."

They look to the stove as the copper teapot whistles. Matthew fills the teacups and watches the green herbs swirl. He serves his wife. Maria scoops honey and stirs it into her cup. The tea is St. John's Wort and some other herbs, all picked from the field above the house. Matthew slumps down at the table with his tired wife. She stretches out her palm and offers an invitation to the cat. The animal stays hidden under one of the chairs. "Ah, look, Matthew, the kitty's hurt. Her little nose is bleedin'."

Matthew bends down to pick up the animal and holds its face close to his own. "Where'd you get that?" he asks. He carries the cat to the bathroom and returns with a container of antiseptic in a brown glass bottle. An applicator leaves a trail of reddish liquid on the injured feline nose. The cat digs her rear claws into the side of Matthew's night shirt and he releases his grip. "That damn cat!" The animal bolts from the room. "Aw, geez. Maybe you want some of this on that sting?" He offers the antiseptic to Maria.

She touches the white paste. It's dry. The venom must be gone. She pats her swollen belly and says, "I think I'm okay. And we should get back to bed. You'll be gettin' up before you know it."

He chugs one last sip of tea and puts the cup in the sink. Then he hoists Maria to her

feet, and they march up the creaky stairs. Maria stares at a mirror attached to the dresser. "Matthew, do ya think we'll have a boy or a girl?" Her question is met with silence and a muffled snore, but she examines the bulge in her nightgown. The arms and legs of the little boy or girl in the womb spasm, a response to the alien mechanisms in the developing nervous system. "Whoa there, kiddo!" She whispers and leans on the dresser.

The movement stops and Maria walks to the open window. She leans on the sill and hopes for a breeze. The night is moonless. Streetlights make the rundown houses look harsh, the broken windows and overgrown yards. She looks at her belly. "Hey there, ya sure you wanna come out? Things don't look too good 'round here. But don't worry. Your mom and dad are here and we're gonna take good care o' ya. Yesirree. Don't you worry your little head." Maria lies down next to Matthew and adjusts the pillow.

A tall maple tree overlooks the Zemetsky house. A dark entity rests on a branch. It waits for further instructions from a location half a world away.