

An alien comes to Earth to become a Movie star!

Xanthan Gumm

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Robin Reed

Chapter One

On the fringes of the galaxy, nearly 8,000 parsecs from Galactic Center, a single-engine, single-occupant spacecraft could be seen approaching a small blue and white planet. The spacecraft was a Glexo Nebula with an overhead fusion injection engine, 53,000 light years on the meter and a pair of fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview monitor. The planet was a small, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, not terribly impressive bit of space debris that had cooled, congealed, and spawned a dominant intelligent life form that liked to get down and get funky.

The driver of the little spaceship was breaking every galactic law on the books concerning this particular small blue planet. It was absolutely forbidden to visit this planet or even its solar system. The only way to get at all close to it was to take a cruise ship that skimmed the planet's solar system, giving the cruise takers a vicarious thrill and allowing them to go home and tell their grandchildren that they had been within less than a light year of the forbidden planet called Earth.

That was exactly how Xanthan Gumm had arrived in the Earth system. He (though the pronoun "he" wasn't entirely accurate, as there were three distinct genders in his species) was a fairly ordinary resident of a small housing station near the middle of Galactic Center. He was a humanoid just under one devito tall with mustard-yellow skin and all the usual features of his species, which had evolved long ago as an amphibious species on some watery planet that no one remembered the name of. He was wearing sneakers, shorts, and a t-shirt from the resort planet Qaaxle. He had taken a vacation from his job as a framadort converter, and booked a trip on the cruise ship "Kathie Lee." When the ship arrived in the Earth system, and all the other passengers were gawking out the view window, Xanth was down in the hold revving up his Glexo Nebula, and preparing to break the law.

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Here he was, about to orbit that forbidding and forbidden planet, Earth. A little help from a friend who worked on the cruise ship opened the doors of the hold, a long burn of the Glexo's engine brought him within sight of the third planet, and a short burst of his maneuvering jets put him into orbit. He was here! The legendary planet where the natives had invented something that no one else, in all of the civilized planets, had dreamed of, something called The Movies.

Xanth had seen every Earth Movie he possibly could, given that he couldn't watch them all the time. He did have to go to work and convert framadorts. But when he was home he was watching Movies on his wall screen. Earth was an amazing planet. An entire species, called human beings, devoted their lives to nothing but creating Movies. All the humans were like busy little bees making the best form of entertainment ever invented. What those humans didn't know was that their efforts were viewed and appreciated on all the planets and in all the habitations of Galactic Civilization.

It was known that everything that happened in Movies was fiction, the creations of this story-obsessed culture. The things that Earth people could imagine were astounding. The Godfather and his family, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the shootout at the OK Corral, World War II... All fiction!

When the streams of images from Earth first started arriving, it was thought that this new planet was the most violent place in the universe. These "human beings" shot each other, stabbed each other, blew up each other, and tried to smother each other by pressing their mouths together. Soon, however, galactic scholars determined that the images were just stories, incredibly imaginative fictions. Watching these "Movies" became the most popular pastime in the galaxy.

But if The Movies were just stories, then the actual culture that humans lived in was a mystery. Galactic scholars could only guess that Earth was a peaceful, happy place, with all of its people cooperating in the making of Movies.

The only thing that was known for sure was the name of the king of the planet: Steven Spielberg.

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Xanth was close enough now to see some detail on the planet's surface. He decided to look at this new world more closely. He was quite nervous about landing. No one knew what really went on down there, except that it involved a lot of worry about body odor. So Xanth pushed a button on the dashboard of his Nebula, which made the little ship's viewscope extend into viewing position. In a moment, the main video display cleared and began to show the creatures of Earth going about their lives.

The resolution wasn't all that great. The viewscope wasn't meant to see that much detail from that much distance, and the focus was fuzzy. What it showed was largely what Xanth expected. He fixed the viewscope on one small community of the Earth natives and saw them working hard for the common good, and being rewarded with rich, full, happy lives.

Then he noticed that there was something wrong. He tried to adjust the viewscope. That was the problem: it was focused in much too closely on the planet surface. Xanth laughed to himself. What a dumb mistake! He hadn't been looking at humans at all, but at an "ant hill", the home of a much lower order of Earth life.

Xanth stowed the viewscope and prepared to enter the atmosphere of the mysterious planet. He was incredibly nervous and excited. He had dreamed of this day all his life.

Even while he converted framadorts, he had known that his destiny was to go to Earth and appear in The Movies. It was not unknown. Others had done it before him. Once in a while, someone from Galactic Center or elsewhere in the civilized planets disappeared and the next time anyone saw them was in an Earth Movie.

However, they had usually changed their names. Xanth had put a lot of thought into what name he should use on Earth. Xanthan Gumm was just too ordinary. How could he be a star of The Movies with a name like that? No, he would have to think of something else. Like the Altairan who was called "Chewbacca" in several Movies, or the Alpha Centauran who gained fame on Earth simply as "*E.T.*" Or the sand dweller from Deneb IV who was known on Earth as "Barry Manilow"

Chapter Two

Far below, not on but under the surface of the planet called Earth, dug into a mountain, was the main tracking station of NORAD, which was entrusted with the vital mission of detecting anything coming in from space that might constitute a threat to the United States of America. NORAD was created to detect, as early as possible, any nuclear missiles, launched from anywhere in the world and aimed at the United States. Deep in the heart of the mountain was the most sophisticated radar tracking technology that humanity could create. Billion dollar supercomputers used all of their high-speed processing power to notice even the tiniest object that might be a threat. When something was detected, a signal was instantly relayed to a screen where two highly trained NORAD personnel sat alertly watching for the first blip that would mean the start of a global thermonuclear war.

“Gin!” Lt. McCollum said, and slammed his hand down on the console. Lt. Robert McCollum had had an illustrious career as a special forces operative, and had been decorated many times over for his actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Malibu.

“Damn!” Sgt. Conroy muttered and gathered up the cards to shuffle them and deal the next hand. Sgt. William Conroy had been appointed to this position in the first line of defense of his country by none other than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David Eastlesswater. The general called Sgt. Conroy “The finest soldier I have ever had the honor of working with.” Sgt. Conroy called the general “Uncle Dave.”

These two ever-vigilant soldiers were at their station when the radar detected Xanthan Gumm’s little spaceship approaching Earth. Radar signals bounced off the ship and raced back to receiving dishes on the ground. Electronic signals zipped through supercomputers. A blip appeared on the screen, along with the message, “Unidentified object. Possible missile. Emergency Situation.” The siren that was

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supposed to go off didn't. The last person who had dusted the console had accidentally turned down the volume by bumping the knob.

"All right," Sgt. Conroy said, "this time I win for sure." He dealt the next hand. Things had gotten just a little bit relaxed at NORAD in the last few years. No one really expected any missiles to come any more. This was lucky for Xanth, because that meant no one would be launching America's secret orbital antimissile system that could easily have turned his GlEXO Nebula into space dust. Instead, when he hit the button for "Atmospheric entry mode," all the windows of the ship were covered by heat shields and the GlEXO began to make a controlled fall into the gravity well of the forbidden planet, with no humans yet aware that they were about to have a visitor.

After the ship had descended far enough, according to the instruments, Xanth pressed the button marked "Atmospheric Flight". The heat shields retracted and the agrav systems took over from the main engine, controlling flight in the gravitational pull of the planet. As the heat shields pulled back, Xanth saw the surface of the Earth for the first time with his own eyes. It was beautiful. Green dotted with the shimmering blue of lakes and the rich earthy brown of strip mines. Xanth was happier than he'd ever been in his life, for this was his dream. This planet created the entertainment for a galaxy and didn't even know it. Soon, he would be a part of it, known throughout the galaxy for his roles in Earth Movies, maybe as a kindly, gentle soul, like *E.T.*, maybe as a vicious eater of humans, like the ones simply called Aliens. It didn't matter. He, Xanthan Gumm, would be a Movie Star.

All he had to do was show up in the Earth city called Hollywood, which was the center of all Movie-making, find Steven Spielberg's office, and soon he would be in The Movies. Now, this part of his plan had been necessarily a little vague. No one knew much about the geography of this forbidden world. Sure, maps were often part of the electronic flood of information that was sent out daily from the planet, but like everything else they were assumed to be fictitious. So Xanth wasn't really sure where Hollywood was. Still, he figured that since the creation of entertainment was the main focus of all human activities, he could just stop and ask for directions if he got lost.

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“Hollywood!” Xanth was so excited he exclaimed the wonderful name out loud. “Here I come!” Now he was getting low enough that he could actually read some of the road signs. He saw one that said CHICAGO–10 Miles. That was encouraging. Miles were an Earth unit of measurement, and CHICAGO was a place where everyone sang and danced, according to one Movie. Xanth was almost in Hollywood!

Back in the underground NORAD complex, Sgt. Conroy started to say, “Uh, Bob, you know...” then thought better of it, and stopped.

“What?” asked Lt. McCollum. He was concentrating on his cards. He had just drawn a four of hearts, but he needed a three of diamonds.

“Oh, nothing.”

“No, really, what?”

“It’s just that...” Sgt. Conroy paused and cleared his throat. Then he discarded a card.

“Go ahead, Bill, just say it.” Bob snatched up Bill’s discard. Damn! Not a three of diamonds!

The blip that had been on their screens, trying to tell them that something unknown was coming in from space, was now gone, as Xanth’s ship was too low to be seen on radar. The screen showed nothing.

“Uh, well, what does NORAD stand for?”

“WHAT?” Bob looked up from his cards. Sgt. Conroy looked embarrassed, but determined. “I’ve been stationed here for six months, and everyone talks about NORAD this, and NORAD that, but I never can find out what the letters stand for.”

“Are you serious? Everyone knows that.”

“Well? Then what does it stand for?”

“North American Radar Air Defense, of course.”

“No, sorry, Bob, that’s NARAD.”

“Oh.” Lt. McCollum had to stop and think. He had been sure that it was North American Radar Air Defense. “Well, how about Northern Organization for Radar Early Detection?”

“Nope. That’s NORED.”

“This is ridiculous. We work here– we should know what it stands for. Northern Organization for Radar Anti-Detection?”

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“That fits, but it doesn’t make any sense.” Sgt. Conroy shook his head.

“You’re right. Hmmm. We could call your Uncle Dave. He would know.”

“He told me never to call him at work.” Just then, a door opened in the cavernous room where all the computers and radar screens and other equipment clicked and hummed and Lt. McCollum and Sgt. Conroy sat at their station, and when they saw who it was they scrambled to snatch up their cards and hide them. Bob slid the deck into a pocket just as the tall, imposing figure approached.

“We could ask him,” Bob whispered.

“What does he know?” Bill whispered back. “He’s a ground pounder.”

General Les. S. Moore walked up to their station, leading with a chin the size of a Tomahawk cruise missile.

“That’s General Ground Pounder to you, airman,” he said

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