

Rowan Layne moves to Las Vegas in this second book in the Other Worldly series. As the US grapples with alien and hybrid life on Earth, presidential tweets trigger anti-alien vigilantes as Rowan is poised to write a tell-all on Red Orbiters. Instead, she finds herself battling bigotry and promoting otherworldly candidates in the upcoming election.

Feeling Alienated

By Lauryne Wright

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Feeling Alienated



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First Edition

Chapter 1

Our Uber driver taking us back to the Aria hotel was Latino but might have also been alien or a government agent because he was looking at me intently in his rearview mirror.

“You’re that lady that hangs out with Red Orbiters? Am I right? I’ve seen aliens,” he said, “but a different kind.”

“Where?”

“Up at Mount Charleston while camping, and it was wild, dude. There was a spaceship too!”

“Did they have red hair?” I asked.

“It was hard to see anything but a shape. They looked small, skinny but with a belly bulge.”

“You said there was a spacecraft?”

“It was dark, and I saw trees that looked all lit up down this trail. I walked towards the light and saw something oval shaped with two green lights over an opening. The lights went out, and it disappeared.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Just a whoosh of air like it zoomed away. But I felt something. It reminded me of *duendes*, but more like a fairy. *Hada malvada*. It was like they could hold you back, keep you from getting too close. I couldn’t move. Not all fairies are good. Some are evil.”

My sister couldn't move fast enough to get out of his car when we reached the Strip, and I was left with unanswered questions, such as, what's a *duende*, and how do you spell it?

My name is Rowan Layne, soon to be a former local newspaper columnist once I relocate from rural central Nevada. I hear aliens with my overly sensitive ears or, more specifically, I hear Red Orbiters and their observers can hear me when I speak out loud. But I wasn't hearing a darn thing at the moment.

As G—that's what I call my sister, Gwynne—stood in line for fancy coffee to help her not wig out about evil fairies in Las Vegas while she was helping me find a rental house, I did a search on my phone for "Latino fairy name."

Up popped "*mediocris*," Latin word for "fairy" and not what I aimed for. But the picture of a cloud labeled *Cumulus mediocris* looked familiar, so I clicked on it.

"A low- to mid-level cloud exhibiting small protuberances from the top."

Protuberances shaped suspiciously like a dome atop a flying saucer with little green men inside, like on one of my coffee mugs. Or like clouds my pals Rauc and Rowdy routinely created to camouflage their flying red orb.

I tried searching "Mexican mythology." Jackpot.

Duendes were little elves similar to trolls or leprechauns. About twenty inches tall, and they ran around naked. Yikes.

Someone posted, "Today, we merely sense them in the wind, sometimes we catch an unfamiliar smell or hear them whispering. But duende language is different from ours, so we cannot understand what they are saying."

OMG, if I was going to hear elves too, I was done for.

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“How did we reach this point where you’re the go-to girl for everything alien? My little sister? How did this happen?” said G, handing me a caramel macchiato.

After three sips through voluminous whipped cream, I was totally shaky from a sugar high, but I searched “evil fairy in Spanish.”

The answer: *Hada malvada*.

Holy guacamole.

I forged ahead, looking up Mount Charleston, which I’d visited twenty years ago. Wikipedia said it was an unincorporated town in Clark County with an elevation of 7,510 feet and a population of 357. It was also the eighth highest US city by altitude.

I didn’t realize Mount Charleston was known as Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, which touted, “Hiking, camping, and much more!”

Our Uber driver seemed to think so.

It was time for a chat with the Red Orbiter brothers about what they weren’t telling me. As observers from the planet we know as Jupiter but they call Cumulus, as well as keepers of all known data about the universe, they were bound to have answers. If only I could reach them.

“Raucous and Rowdy Wilde, why can’t you hear me? I really need you to come back from wherever you went! I have questions, damn it! And the government is on my case again! Because of you and your mysterious disappearance!”

Chapter 2

Okay, so I shouldn't have shouted out my missive to Rauc and Rowdy in public, but we were in a crowded Las Vegas casino, so no one paid any attention. Except my sister, who glared at me and stalked off.

I chased after her, feeling too-sweet coffee sloshing in my stomach.

"Where's the spa? I'm scheduling pedicures and massages," G said over her shoulder. "We need to chill."

"You know I can't get a massage here!" I said, waving my arms. "If I get too relaxed, I'll hear every freaking Red Orbiter voice out there and lose it! Plus I didn't bring the right sandals for a pedicure." My sister probably had plenty of open-toed shoes at the ready. She's a chip off the octogenarian block known as Mom in that regard.

"We'll have cocktails then," said G, frown-pouting.

"But we just had coffee, and it's only three o'clock..." I sounded ridiculous. This was Vegas, baby! Soon to be my new home.

Speaking of Mom, her timing was uncanny as always with an incoming text.

"Thinking of our dear Doodles and Peaches and hoping house search is going well!!! How is weather??? Cloudy here. Ugh. Enjoy

your special dinner reservations tonight!!! (kissing hearts, cloud, dinner plate emoji)”

It didn’t matter that my age was fifty-seven and my sister’s sixty-one—Mom and Dad used our childhood nicknames as much as Mom used emoji and excessive punctuation in texts. Shamelessly. And in public.

It was mid-May, so the weather was warm and sunny, not having revved up to summertime extremes.

“What do you say, Peaches?” I smirked after we responded to Mom. “Shall we call a truce and shower and change for dinner so you can meet the latest most popular chef in Vegas?”

“I can’t believe Rose Bergin’s an alien,” said G. “All those years of watching her show, and I have all her cookbooks. Her latest is called *Galaxy Table*, same as her new restaurant!”

Unlike me, my sister received the gourmet cooking gene. I was likely to lop off a finger while chopping with kitchen knives. But I was all in when it came to fine dining, especially if my sister was buying. My bank account wouldn’t be flush until I sold my house in Yearntown.

I was able to get coveted restaurant reservations in the newest and most insanely devised casino on the Strip, Planet Wynne, due to my Red Orbiter connections. Or perhaps because of my auditory abilities, because the minute I arrived in Vegas, a voice in my ear invited me to dine at *Galaxy Table*, the voice being celebrity chef Rose Bergin.

It was good to know my Red Orbiter clout remained despite the fact that my communication with Rauc had been cut off when he vanished soon after our trip to Monterey for my birthday last month. Had this happened *before* a grandly publicized announcement about

me writing an unprecedented book on Red Orbiters, I would not be in the spotlighted pickle I was now.

People titillated by all things otherworldly knew my name and my face, but my personal and professional futures were on hold, at best.

And if significant others in my life did not stop disappearing on me without a word, I might just take my dog and cat and move to the moonship to commune with Labyrinthians from Mars. Government agents presumably couldn't hound me with calls there.

Arriving at Planet Wynne early, we got that cocktail after all in the newest desert watering hole known as Galaxy Grog. Inside, it looked kind of like a planetarium, which reminded me of the interior of Rauc's orb.

"Rauc spoke to me from this bar when I was in Portland with you back in March. He said, 'Oops,' and had to run off because Rowdy won a bundle gambling again, drawing attention." I moped and sipped my handcrafted concoction with botanicals from Saturn, the extraterrestrial version of a gin and tonic.

"I know you're worried about him, but don't you think his sister would get word if something bad happened?" said G.

"It was Ophelia who told me I should just keep on with my plans and all would be okay," I sighed.

Rauc's sister was busy with plans of her own, to wed fellow Red Orbiter and scientist Bruce Robertson, the acoustical engineer who'd tested my ears and Dad's for extraordinary ability. Would her brothers return in time for the couple's nuptials in October?

"See? You're doing just that," said G. "Let's have a toast. To finding you a great place to start a new life in this fabulous foodie city."

Our glasses pinged as they touched, just as my phone pinged an incoming text message. Mom. It always was.

“Forgot to tell you!!! Your horoscope said not to take any unscheduled excursions this week and beware of strangers! Love you oodles, Doodles! (scary face, kissy face, heart emoji)”

I made a face, showed my sister, and downed the rest of my drink.

“Gee thanks, Mom,” said G. “Let’s go have dinner. You’ll feel better once you eat something. But first, make me feel better by explaining to me one more time the difference between being OW and alien?”

“We’re otherworldly, or OW, because we’re human hybrids with more than 50 percent extraterrestrial DNA. But actual percentages aren’t important—it’s just a benchmark the Other Worldly Coalition came up with. Also, they rejected the term *alien* because of its historically bad connotation among racist bigots, but everyone pretty much still uses it anyway.” I snorted.

“There’s also those who have less than 1 percent human DNA, so they’re an alien even if they were born here. Martians, Venetians, etc. And of course we have Red Orbiters, total aliens from another planet and pretty much gorgeous,” I said, grinning. “And now, according to at least one Uber driver, there’s another little alien running around as well.”

“Let’s not talk about that,” said G with a Gigi pout. At least she didn’t demand I call her by that French name she’d come up with months ago.

It was fun to watch my sister’s beaming face as our first, second, third, and fourth dinner courses were served—all galaxy-to-table marvels of culinary wonder, including a cheese fondue invented in

Earth's moonship by galactic gastronomes. It came with apples from Jupiter for dipping, as delectable as Honeycrisps, my favorite.

"Who knew our moon had a culinary school? It's still hard to think of it as a spaceship," said G.

I thought she might spontaneously combust when her chef idol arrived at our table sporting short dark hair and merry green eyes, bearing the finale to our dining experience. I already knew about it because she'd spoken to me before emerging from the kitchen.

"Rowan, it's me, Rose Bergin," her charming Red Orbiter voice resonated in my ear as if she were right next to me. "Don't be alarmed. I'm bringing dessert, and yours has a special message inside. Be ready to make something up about what it says to read aloud at the table."

I smiled and nodded as she approached to greet my sister and me. G was on cloud nine because the famous chef bent down to hug us both.

"This creation from a distant star might remind you of a cannoli in taste and texture, but it has a message inside, like a fortune cookie, although the paper is edible and the 'ink' is flavored with pomegranate juice, which is also otherworldly." Rose winked.

"Pomegranates and cannoli! Two of my favorite things, Rose! Thank you so much!" I said, probably too effusively as we dove into the sweet surprise.

"Mine says, 'You will soon be rewarded for your efforts in helping others,'" read G. "Does that mean I'll hit a slot machine jackpot for helping you find a place to live?"

I rapidly scanned my message with a frozen smile. It said: "Copper, it's me. I'm okay and will contact you as soon as possible. For now, do not under any circumstances go to Mount Charleston.

And you should stop researching it on your phone. I'll explain when I can, and I miss you, my queen of hearts."

My smile was no longer fake, but I struggled to hold back tears. Rauc finally found a way to communicate with me in the sweetest way possible. And I could eat his words.

"What does it say, Sis?"

"Well, it's rather uncanny because it sounds like the horoscope Mom sent," I said before pretending to read aloud, "Avoid strange places that may beckon. You will soon have answers." Not bad for drafting rapidly in my head while my ears rang up a raging storm.

The universe was undoubtedly speaking directly to me, even if my alien lover couldn't.

Chapter 3

As we departed the restaurant, two millennials in dark-blue suits approached us.

“Well, if it isn’t Tim Rider and Bart Reynolds from Homeland *Insecurity!*” I snarked. “Am I supposed to be grateful you waited to ambush me until I finished eating?”

“They wouldn’t let us in the restaurant,” muttered Bart.

“Why? No reservation? Or no probable cause to harass patrons? You must be racking up frequent flyer miles stalking me. Should I be on the lookout for your rental car chasing me again on my drive north?”

“Ms. Layne,” said Tim. “We’re sorry to approach you this way, having been unsuccessful reaching you by phone, but we are once again concerned for your safety. We think your friends Raucous and Rowdy Wilde were abducted, and if they’re in danger, you very well could be too.”

My sister grabbed my arm and emitted a squeak.

“Abducted?” I smirked. “How? By whom? Little green men?”

Bart’s pronounced Adam’s apple bobbed as his eyes bulged.

“Rowan. Ms. Layne,” Tim Rider implored, “we just want to warn you. Truly. We’re in Las Vegas for the indefinite future. This is a

number where you can reach us.” He handed me a white business card with the Department of Homeland Security logo.

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But how do I know it isn’t you who snatched them? Funny how you haven’t asked me if I’ve heard from them. Why is that?”

“Have you heard from them?” blurted Bart Reynolds, and I silently congratulated myself for refraining yet again from chuckling at his name.

Instead I narrowed my eyes. “Sure, every day. With texts full of weather reports and emoji. They send them through my mother. No ransom note, though.”

My sister snorted.

“Ms. Layne, we would greatly appreciate any information you have, including whether you’ve received communication from them on their whereabouts,” said Tim.

“Because you’re so very concerned for their safety? And mine? Or because you want to stick your nose into their nonsubversive business?” I said, hands on hips. “What if I told you I received an edible message from them moments ago in my dinner?”

G’s nails dug into my wrist as she emitted an eek.

Tim smiled tightly. “We won’t take up any more of your time tonight. Call me if you hear anything, or if you need anything at all.”

“Ms. Layne, are these gentlemen harassing you in my establishment? Do you need assistance? Shall I call security?” asked an unfamiliar yet pleasingly vibrant voice.

A tall auburn-haired man dressed in elegant black designer togs Mom would approve of reached out a manicured hand laden with rings. Emeralds flashed glowing green amidst one huge, spectacularly faceted red gemstone. Was it a diamond?

“Octavius Wynne, at your service. I trust you ladies enjoyed your dinner at Galaxy Table?” He grasped my hand with a flourish.

“Thank you, Mr. Wynne. Dinner was delightful. We love Rose. My sister, Gwynne, is a big fan.”

“Gentlemen.” He turned to Tim and Bart. “Surely you are aware Las Vegas casinos do not look with favor upon law enforcement pursuing law-abiding patrons inside our establishments? But if you’re interested in gambling at Planet Wynne, where winning is out of this world, I will be honored to comp you each five hundred dollars at a game of your choice.”

“I could go for some blackjack,” said Bart Reynolds.

“Thank you, Mr. Wynne. But we’ll be leaving now. Enjoy the rest of your evening, ladies.” Tim Rider nodded to me, unsmiling.

“Rowan—may I call you Rowan?” said Octavius Wynne once Homeland Security departed. “Next time you must stay with us. I can arrange suites for your family. Is this your sister? Charmed to meet you, Gwynne. Love your name!” the Vegas mogul shook her hand.

“Thanks, Mr. Wynne,” we said in unison. I added, “But next time, I’ll be staying in the home I’m renting. Although my family might take you up on that offer when they visit.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him no way could I stay in his hotel because I’d never make it to my room via elevators moving in a circular motion, like an amusement park ride, around the circumference of Planet Wynne, including the bottom designed to resemble a ringed planet with two upper portions depicting a flying saucer and Earth’s moon—correction, moonship. An indoor escalator to the second floor was the only reason I’d reached the restaurant without getting queasy.

“Please call me O.W.,” he said. “I trust that you especially enjoyed”—he looked over his shoulder—“dessert?”

How had I not known Octavius Wynne was a Red Orbiter? One more bit of information Rauc had neglected to impart before darting off to who knows where.

“Yes, I did. Very much.” I nodded, smiling.

“Good. Please call on me if you need anything once you’re settled, and come back to see us. Rose is full of culinary surprises!” O.W. pressed his business card, with its shiny red-orb logo, into my hand.

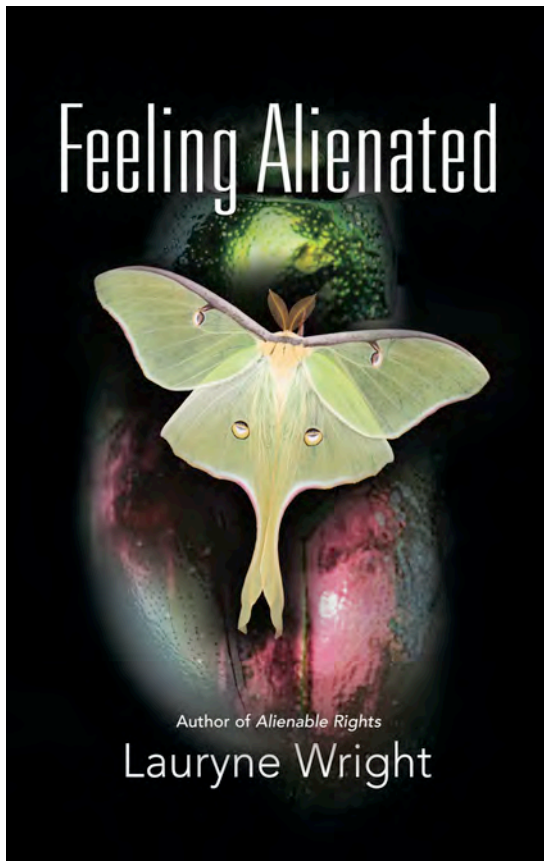
We exchanged air kisses to both cheeks, and G and I tottered off toward the escalator.

“I can’t believe he goes by O.W.,” I muttered. “I hope this won’t mean I have to explain the difference between OW and alien to you again. This dude is just going to confuse matters.”

“I can’t believe you told those government guys about dessert! And what did your message really say? Is Rauc okay?” asked G, eyes growing wide. “And was that a big honking sphere of a red diamond on his finger?”

“I suppose it’s symbolic for Red Orbiter.”

“Seriously? Is *everybody* who’s famous going to turn out to be a Red Orbiter?”



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