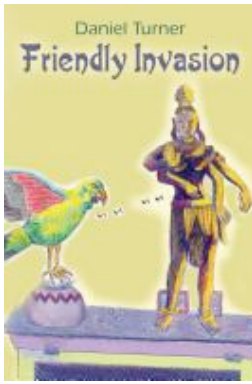


Daniel Turner

Friendly Invasion





The Zini are flying saucer people who built a comfortable observation station in our asteroid belt thousands of years ago, and have been studying Earth, waiting for the right moment to make contact. But, the wait is over. Humans have discovered the zini "counterplanet." The shock of this discovery is reverberating, posing huge social, economic and political challenges to Earth's establishments. Friendly Invasion is a fast-paced read, replete with conflict, romance, humor, and friendly persuasion.

Friendly Invasion

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Friendly Invasion

Daniel Turner

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Preface

The back-story for *Friendly Invasion* comes from Daniel Turner's earlier novel, *Twillinger's Voyage*. Set at the beginning of the 23rd century, mining and related activities are established on the Moon and near-Earth asteroids, indirectly creating strong demand for life-supporting water. It is expensive to mine the Moon's scattered and mostly low-grade ice deposits, so a mining company expedition goes out to the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, and succeeds in finding ice beneath surface layers in a group of asteroids. Unexpectedly Twillinger, a robo-drill operator on this expedition, discovers that one of these asteroids is actually an alien habitat: a squirrel cage rotating inside a spherical steel shell three miles in diameter encased by a layer of ice, with rocks and dust covering its outer surface.

By the end of that novel the aliens become subcontractors to the mining company, delivering ice to the Moon. *Friendly Invasion* picks up as revenue from the consequent stream of ice deliveries is put to use.

Friendly Invasion has an independent plot with a new set of major characters and stands on its own as a self-contained novel.

Acknowledgments and special thanks to:

- Susan Nichols for telling me her story, teaching me that "normality" is relative;
- Matti Pitkanen for great patience explaining how quantum jumps link awareness to material structure, for his ideas about memory, and for reading and critiquing relevant portions of this novel;
- Chris Shillock for Spanish translation assistance;
- Rosemary Bothwell for doing the illustrations;
- Marjorie Ewbank for copy editing;
- and my wife Martha for seeing a lot of "me" in this story.

Also, various ideas expressed by alien characters in this book are based on "human ideas" just entering mainstream scientific thinking. Most specifically I would like to acknowledge:

- Johnjoe McFadden for his Cemi theory of the brain's endogenous electromagnetic field;
- Walter J. Freeman III and his collaborators for their experimental EEG studies and neurodynamic theory;
- Bonnie L. Bassler for her studies of microorganism communication and "quorum sensing";
- Marvin L. Minsky for his decentralized, artificial-intelligence based model of how a nervous system functions.

While influenced by the scientists acknowledged above, none of the ideas expressed by characters in this novel should be taken as representations of fact or accepted science. I would also like to express my gratitude to these four—as well as other influences too numerous to mention—for helping me understand that science is an evolving proposition that often takes wrong turns and sometimes marginalizes its most creative contributors. This book is intended to be a work of "hard" science fiction, but plausibility is always relative to perspective. From my point of view "flying saucers," "visions," and being unable to remember my own name are plausible phenomena—because I've

experienced them myself. Such experiences are mysterious and I would like to acknowledge their influence.

"The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle." - from "The World as I See It," by Albert Einstein, originally published in 1956.

* Prologue *

The space transport dock was crowded with zini, mostly friends and relatives of the embarking passengers. The press of their furry bodies was modulated by episodes of bouncing and other ungainly attempts to deal with the minimal gravity of the hub.

Amrit did not have this problem. It was not that he was used to free-fall; in fact he had experienced it only a few times before, on class trips during his student years. But, being adept at plummeting from the sky as birds of his species are, he compensated effortlessly, as did his pararnar relatives and friends who were there to see him off.

Among the Paramari, a last farewell is a tangible interlocking of dream fields. This is an intensely personal and often surprising experience, especially for young Amrit who had never before touched his more elderly relatives in this way. Each had something to impart: advice or philosophy from a few, and unexpected depths of emotion from others he hardly knew. They identified with him. His mission was a projection of their hopes and dreams.

His mother was the last. "You are the chosen one, my fledgling," she sang softly. "It was foretold on your hatching day. Be brave; be inspired; be outrageous! Our old songs will not work with the humans, so you will have to invent new ones. Sing to them in their own tongue. Nothing else is different, Amrit. Their dreams are said to be like zini dreams, so you are halfway there. But be careful, my little one; hold back until the light of understanding resolves within you. When the time is at hand, you will know it." She extended her beak and groomed the downy feathers of his face. "You are mine forever, precious birdling. We shall meet in the land of dreams."

Their heads touched and their dreams met. A sacred heart of love and warmth enveloped him, and gently released him. "Mother," he chirped, weeping.

"Till dreamland reunites us, Amrit."

"I shall always miss you, mother."

With his father's assistance she fastened his traveling kit to his harness and secured the leg straps. His parents and the others seeing him off were all perched on the outer ring of the departure platform's pararnar trellis, a frame of concentric rings three meters above the

crowded deck. Amrit had been moving sideways around the middle ring bidding his well-wishers farewell one by one. Now he hopped to the innermost ring, bowed to his parents and launched into the air. Fluttering in place, he turned slowly through a full 360, acknowledging each pararnar with a final nod.

This maneuver would have been strenuous bordering on impossible in normal gravity, but here it was almost effortless. Amrit felt cheered by this auspicious empowerment coming at the moment of final farewell. He would never see his loved ones again. "Goodbye, Mother and Father, goodbye my dear, beloved friends." With a flick of his wings he soared away from the trellis, toward the open door of the boarding hatchway. At the last moment, flapping strongly against his motion, he alighted on the shoulder of a widrix who happened to be approaching the hatchway."

Lend me a perch, esteemed lady; he projected silently, using the mode of radiant empathy co-evolved for mutual survival by their Wid World ancestors. Her welcoming wordless reply came back as fast as light. Cooing a sound of gratitude to the widrix, Amrit pirouetted about so he could see his farewell wishers, and saluted them with a wingtip as the widrix carried him through the spaceship's door-port.

When he could see family and friends no more, he turned his attention to his benefactress. *Thank you gentle lady,* he beamed silently.

Stay with me, bird, she replied in the same mode, inviting, not commanding.

Continuing to grip her shoulder, he rode to the lower of the ship's two passenger decks where the widrix found a seating alcove with a wid-sized chair. One of the other chairs was occupied by a zinae, dressed in a typical Fourth Caste outfit, who looked up at the unusual pair with curiosity. "Hello..."

The widrix addressed her in a voice many octaves lower, "I'm Nubeline, my dear. Shall we be seatmates?"

"My pleasure. Please call me Orrana." The zinae shifted her big green eyes to the bird. "And will this feathered fellow join us?"

Amrit cocked his head, eyeing the zinae: "I am Amrit!" he sang, pitching his voice for the zinae's benefit. His imitation sounded like a real zini voice, and he could feel Orrana react: clearly, she was intrigued at the prospect of sitting with him.

Because of their characteristically beautiful voices, great singing range, and perfect pitch, paramars had evolved a privileged role in galactic society: many of them were professional singers. So as not to seem rude, he whistled a bar of friendly notes.

"I don't think our bird here is going to do much talking," said Nubeline as she eased her powerful body into the seat, taking care in the negligible gravity, "unless we can find some acaranzi for him to chew on."

Amrit whistled another bar of notes, more softly this time, and sent a message of patience wordlessly out to the widrix. A supply of the Wid World fruit was at hand but the crew was busy now, so it would have to wait.

More zini were filling the remaining empty seats on the radial passenger deck. Shortly after the last visible empty seat received an occupant, Amrit felt an air pressure pulse on his eardrums as the locks on bridge deck were sealed. An announcement in Zini advised them to fasten their seatbelts, and a few minutes later the window-screens lit up with a video that summarized the same emergency rules that had been drilled into all of them during their orientations in the preceding weeks. Amrit was already wearing his harness, and Orrana obligingly clipped its retracting tether to a bracket on the back of Nubeline's seat.

Unexpectedly, Amrit felt the ship jolt sideways. They were on their way! The tow-system in the axial tunnel of the counterplanet was now hauling their ship toward the tunnel's forward mouth. His birthplace and home was sliding away, unseen but not unfelt.

Nubeline sensed his distress. *I feel it too, sweet bird*, she projected silently.

Unmollified, Amrit closed his eyes and tried to reach out to his mother and father. They couldn't be that far away...

The widrix's voice brought him back to present timespace: "There's too much going on, Amrit;" she said in Zini, "too many people; too much emotion."

He wobbled his head, zini style, a non-verbal sign that is part affirmative, part fatalistic acceptance. Just then their view screens' context switched to the scene outside, and an announcement briefly explained how to aim the camera's viewpoint.

Orrana took the display controller and rotated the view until it faced the direction of their motion, showing them the dimly lighted tunnel

walls surrounding them, and the spherical opening a few hundred meters ahead where the darkness of space was specked with stars. A few seconds later a blindingly bright star migrated into view as the tunnel opening grew closer, and it was evident that this star was illuminating one side of the tunnel ahead. "That's what we're heading for," said Orrana: "the 'Z' star."

The ship seemed to accelerate for some seconds and then the tunnel walls disappeared as the tow system ejected them from the counterplanet's axial port. Blackness strewn with stars could be seen everywhere as Orrana rotated the display perspective around until they saw the huge form of R113 to the rear of their ship. The velocity they had acquired while being ejected from the hub-tunnel now caused them to continue drifting away until the counterplanet could be seen on the display screen in its entirety. Instead of appearing perfectly round, it reflected the Z-star's light like a moon perhaps five percent into its gibbous phase.

There was no noise, no audio commentary. The image projected on the view-screen spoke for itself. Amrit knew the counterplanet was hurtling toward the star at close to fifteen thousand kilometers per second. The infinitesimal difference in velocity that they had just acquired accounted for their apparent motion away from it. While they would spend the next several weeks slowing down, R113 would keep right on going, using the Z-star's gravity to adjust its course toward another stellar encounter some hundred years in the future.

Gradually Amrit became aware of the vibration of the ships engines, winding up. As though to offset the engine's hum, zini background music began to play and an announcement advised they were cleared to accelerate. In another minute inertial gravity began to overtake them, orienting everything toward the floor and fulfilling Amrit's initial impression of the cabin as a big circular parlor with a utility core at the center. He knew that this core concealed the axis of the ship's powerful propulsion system, making him glad they were sitting at the outer perimeter of the cabin, as far away from the core as possible.

When his attention returned to the viewscreen, the counterplanet had become a quarter moon crescent. As the minutes went by, the crescent narrowed to a sliver, and gradually the sliver shrank to insignificance and the glare of the star rendered it invisible. The bitter fact of separation from his life's roots settled over Amrit's usually cheerful

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perspective. There would be no return, ever. He put his head under one wing and cried silently, knowing that Nubeline felt his anguish, while hoping Orrana wouldn't notice.

- Chapter 1 -

(four years later)

Jack McQuaid was in his office at 7:30 AM, half an hour earlier than his staff. Some people get a cup of coffee when they arrive at work, but Jack had a different ritual. Behind his desk was a section of carpet with an almost invisible feature: in addition to the disintegrating carpet pad underneath the faded red pile surface, there was a four by eight fiber exercise mat whose outline was visible if you knew where to look. When Jack arrived each morning he would use this spot for a private session of calisthenics.

He had made a habit of this ever since his days as a special warfare instructor when he used to lead a whole squad through some of the same exercises. Five minutes was more than enough to get his middle-aged blood pumping but not quite enough to bring out an inconvenient sweat.

This particular morning Jack was half way through his workout when the door opened and someone walked in unannounced. McQuaid glanced around, startled to be caught using his office as a gym. Seeing it was his boss, Henry Barnhill, he instantly adjusted his expression. Henry had told him to be ready early, for the little "dog and pony show" that they hoped would moderate the hawkish influence of the National Security Advisor. The operation Jack was working on might seem hawkish on the face of it, but compared to the alternative currently favored by the Advisor, it was a close cousin to diplomacy.

"Get your coat, Jack!" said the director. "We can't be late for this."

Barnhill's chauffeur drove them across the river in a long black staff car flying the agency flag on one side and Uspa's on the other. Their destination was the Executive Office building on 17th street, a staff annex for the White House. The flags on the front of the car were no help getting them through the gate. Tight security was legendary here.

When they were ushered in, National Security Advisor Stan DuBieux was seated at the head of the big conference table, shuffling his papers. He looked up and nodded to Barnhill, but promptly went back to his self-important shuffling. During the next five minutes bigwigs from the Pentagon filtered in and took their places at the table, while lesser people like McQuaid sat around the periphery.

The Advisor started the meeting by stating his time constraint: a scheduled meeting with the President at nine-thirty. Then they got started: Stan's assistant prompting with items from the agenda, and council members or staffers responding with updates or brief reports.

After fifteen minutes of this, DuBieux himself introduced the next topic: "We have Rod Lloyd here with us today, Uspa's representative to the League of Spacefaring Nations. Rod, please go ahead..."

Lloyd leaned forward and addressed the meeting. "As you will recall, about a year and a half ago the League turned down our proposal for a unified fleet to confront the zini. Asia's exports of construction materials for Z6 were too important, of course, alien domination of the solar system notwithstanding! Moving past that disappointment, we opted to go ahead on our own. Last week the Alaska's first engine module was moved out of 'dry-dock' on the moon and into lunar orbit where it's being attached to the ship's skeleton framework. Over the next few weeks that space drive will be put through a series of tests. Meanwhile the remaining modules are being sent up and will be added to the ship. The current estimate is we should have a battlecarrier ready for shakedown in about six weeks. The Europeans are just beginning to move their assembly operations to our dry-dock complex, so they are at least six months behind us.

"At the League's regular monthly meeting, yesterday, the countries that held back eighteen months ago reversed themselves. The vote was five to three to build two more battlecarriers, with ourselves, the Europeans and the Russians opposed. These new ships will have bigger propulsion systems, and prospectively will be twenty percent faster than the Alaska. But if we go up against the aliens that difference won't be tactically significant because zini ships are an order of magnitude faster, at least.

"Well, there you have it," said Rod, concluding: "we will need to decide whether to ante up Uspa's financial share for the League's two prospective ships."

The National Security Advisor steepled his palms, evidently giving the matter deep thought. "The alternative would be to opt out of the League?"

"Yes sir," replied Rod, soberly.

"Thank you Rod," said the Advisor. "I expect we'll have to work toward some compromise to keep the League together. But meanwhile,

we may be in a position to deal with the aliens on our own. General Tibbit, could you bring us up to date on the AS-32 program?"

The commander of the Air Force's Aerospace Wing spoke up: "Based on the nuclear salvo concept that our ordnance bureau presented here six months ago, we went ahead and evaluated the feasibility of upgrading the battlecarrier's spaceplanes from two to six missile capability. Luckily, we have about a thousand MIRV de-commissioned warheads stored out in Nevada. Our contractor has just completed an evaluation, and tells us that about a third of them are adaptable for use with the AS-32's missiles. For our purpose, the contractor suggests five light tactical ones, and one heavy to finish the job.

"Our science advisory people agree with ordinance bureau that there is no possible defense against a walking salvo of these nukes, even though there's never been an operational test. So, if we can get a squadron of the new '32s, or even a single one, within four hundred miles of a counterplanet, we should be able to destroy it. And by the terms of the ILC treaty, we have every right to approach within two hundred and fifty miles."

"So, you're saying we could take out Z4 with a pre-emptive strike?" said DuBieux, frowning. "How do you rate the possibility of retaliation?"

"Z4 is effectively isolated," said the General, explaining what everyone in the room already knew. "Their interstellar counterplanets never slow down and the closest one won't be coming through this solar system for another year. Z3, which is in orbit around Saturn, is basically a workshop and dormitory for their construction operation on the shell of Z5, their half-finished project out there. It's so far away it's tactically irrelevant. We've managed to track some of their transport ships going out to Z3, and they take about a month. None of their ships ever go much faster, so if they come at us from out there we'll see them coming in plenty of time to nuke 'em into plasma."

"If you were the zini commander on Z4," DuBieux conjectured, "what would you do if we brought the Alaska up within striking range?"

General Tibbit smiled and shrugged. "If they had a properly deployed military force, attempting to attack them would be suicidal. But in fact, Z4 is primarily an observation post. It may be big; it may be self-sufficient; but from what we've learned, it's vulnerable. If I were that zini commander, unless I was in a position to destroy every AS-32

that approaches within a thousand miles, I'd get that counterplanet going and make a quick exit."

"Very good, thank you General Tibbit," said the Advisor with a hint of satisfaction on his face. "Any questions or comments?"

Admiral Patterson nodded. "I'm mindful of Director Barnhill's most recent report indicating that some kind of simple pressure might persuade the aliens to pull Z4 out of here."

"Quite right," said DuBieux. "Director Barnhill is next on our agenda. Henry, why don't you go ahead and explain what your people have been working on..."

"Thank you, sir," said the JIC Director. "Before I begin, I'd just like to remind everybody that we definitely know the aliens are nervous about our nukes. That's shown up in responses to questions at academic gatherings the zini have attended on the Rotunda. If we weren't sure of that, I don't think we would ever have dreamed up what I'm about to describe. This is a plan to take control of the Z6 project without arousing a negative storm among our 'trading partners', here on the planet."

Henry's ironic emphasis on "trading partners" added confirmation to Jack's impression that among these top strategists there was implicit contempt for the World Fair Trade Organization, the financial and economic regulatory authority that was, de-facto, a planetary government for nations too weak to manipulate it to serve their own interests.

"As you know," Henry continued, "ever since Z6 started recruiting its unpaid human workforce, our propaganda people have been flogging it as a slave labor camp. Polls show that public awareness of the slave scenario is well established now, certainly well enough so if the workers up there begin any kind of strike, or job action, the zini will look like typical B-movie aliens.

"And how do we make that job action happen?" Henry asked rhetorically. He smiled and looked around the room. "My assistant for special projects," he gestured toward Jack, who raised a responsive hand so they could identify him, "Jack McQuaid here, has been working on this. Jack, would you step up and explain what you're doing?"

McQuaid stood up, nervous, but well prepared. "For three years now our agency has been trying to plant operatives in the Z6 workforce; but with no success. The reason has been the aliens' uncanny security

screening. I expect you all know about the weird creature who does that job for them: the "widrix" with the big ears? Apparently she's got some sixth sense. To get past her we tried hypnotizing our prospective operatives so they wouldn't even know they were working for us. But the widrix sniffed out every single post-hypnotic we sent up there.

"So, we consulted the army's psychological unit, and they suggested we try multiple personality cases. Technically this condition is known as Dissociative Identity Disorder, and it's diagnosed in about one person out of every three thousand, usually women. The aliens typically recruit men in their twenties or thirties who have good technical skills, which narrows the pool down, a lot. As it turns out, men in this age group who have the disorder usually aren't diagnosed, and don't realize they have it—strange as that may sound. They don't know because their multiple personalities all have separate memories, and so the main personality has no recollection of what happens when an alter is in control. Unless a person is diagnosed and a doctor explains what the occasional memory gaps in daily life mean, a typical case tends to defensively keep quiet about those gaps in order to appear normal. But to our psychologists, multiple independent memories looked like the key to getting past the widrix.

"The army gave us a profile for these multiple personality cases, and we ran it against the National Health Service database and came up with about five thousand prospects. Then we designed a strategy—ostensibly the clinical trial of a space-sickness drug for men interested in working up there—to entice these fellows to apply for a free shuttle ride up to the Freetax orbiting hotel where the widrix does the interviews.

"Of those who applied, we narrowed down on a hundred and twenty who would meet the aliens' typical recruiting profile. Under hypnosis twenty-six of them proved to have the disorder and didn't know it. So far, seven of those twenty-six have managed to get through the aliens' preliminary screening, which as you may know is a standard test being run for them by an international public relations firm being managed from their offices in countries that have strong commercial ties to the Z6 project.

"The initial phase of our program is being run by Dr. Nizer, of the Army Center for Psychological Fitness. When Nizer has a prospect qualified as a probable multiple personality case, Army psychologists put the main personality into a trance with hypnosis and then relate a

story-line that invites alternate personalities to come out and respond. It's not unusual for an individual case to have a dozen or more of these alters. Once one of them comes out, the next step persuade it to cooperate. Ideally we like to enlist the most dominant alter. So far, in about half the cases where we've progressed to serious discussions, we have been able to persuade dominant alters that our proposal will benefit them and their primaries. Once they agree to work with us, Nizer puts them through a week of training and conditioning to prepare them for what we want them to do up there. Of the seven who have graduated from Nizer's program and then passed the alien's preliminary, one has already gone up to the Rotunda. And that one—his primary personality, that is—successfully got through his widrix screening interview three days ago. Our original estimate was we would need at least two men under our control on Z6. And now we have one, so we feel optimistic about our prospects." McQuaid looked over at his boss and saw a thin fleeting smile and nod, evidently signifying that the presentation had accomplished its purpose.

He returned to his seat and Barnhill continued: "Once Jack has two men in place up there on Z6, we'll have a window of opportunity with maximum advantage for Uspa to take control of that giant space project. It should be a technological gold mine for us. And just as important, the takeover should persuade the zini to exit this solar system while they still can. With this staged as a liberation of the slave workcrew in revolt, the political risks down here on the planet will be minimal. But the window of opportunity when Uspa will have unfettered control is limited. In six months, when the European battlecarrier is finished, we'll have the EU as a partner whether we want it or not. Assuming the League goes ahead with the program that Rod just told us about, eighteen months from now all our big rivals and a hundred or so adjunct members of the League will be looking for a piece of the action, too."

As Henry settled back in his chair, the National Security advisor nodded agreement, "Thank you Henry. This program you've been working on may have possibilities. Are there any comments?"

Admiral Patterson waggled a finger, "If Jack's guys manage to stir up some kind of minor crisis on Z6, Henry's plan may work. While that crisis is in the making, Henry, are you suggesting we move the Alaska all the way out there to the edge of the asteroid belt, within striking distance?"

"I think we'll have to," said Barnhill. "Taking over this undefended space construction project isn't going to be a giant military challenge. The key element is public perception. All the polls show a majority here in Uspa think the aliens have been hiding their true intentions. Before we actually make our move, we would want the public media characterizing the Alaska's presence out there as a goodwill visit. With Z4 and Z6 orbiting a mere ten thousand miles from each other, obviously our battlecarrier would put out defensive patrols, routinely approaching the 250-mile perimeter around Z4 that the treaty allows. If the aliens make trouble, it'll set the stage for a Gulf of Tonkin type incident. And meanwhile, our propaganda people will be doing the heavy lifting..."

"You mean the heavy leaking?" quipped the salty Marine Corp Commander.

Noticing the change in tone from skeptical to jocular, Jack's sixth sense told him their plan had passed its test.

"All right Gentlemen," grumped the Advisor, evidently not one for levity in a meeting where every word was recorded, "now that we've finally slipped an operative past the widrix, it looks like there may be some real advantage to sending Jack out there. I'll be in touch with you, Henry. Let's have a follow up meeting in two weeks. Give this careful thought; we certainly don't want to overlook any risk factors." DuBieux ran his eye around the table, projecting an air of satisfaction. "Meeting is adjourned." He took Representative Lloyd in tow, and the two of them disappeared through a side door.

* * *

Ken Roberts exited the DC metro at the Eastern Market stop on Capitol Hill and walked toward Lauren's apartment, near 5th and Independence Avenue. It was a pretty neighborhood and a beautiful afternoon, but Ken was locked to his depressing thoughts. Having recently resigned his commission in the Air Force, he was looking for a job. The North American labor market had a 30% gap between its able-bodied labor force and actual employment. Ken's 6 years as a military pilot hadn't impressed the people he'd interviewed with—neither that day, nor during his previous two month's of interviewing.

In the foyer of Lauren's building he checked her mailbox, as was his habit. He tossed the junk mail in a convenient trash receptacle. Among the letters remaining was one for him. It didn't identify the sender, but came from a return-postage-guaranteed address in Virginia. Without opening it, he took the elevator up, let himself in, and got comfortable in front of her computer. Then, hopeful but steeled for disappointment, Ken opened the envelope.

The letterhead said "Joint Intelligence Command of the Union of States and Provinces of North America." Glancing downward he saw it was signed by a Special Assistant for Special Projects, John McQuaid. "Wow" exclaimed Ken. He hadn't even applied for a job at the JIC!

Dear Mr. Roberts,

Recently you sent in a personal recommendation for Mr. Carlos Hernandez in connection with his application to participate in a drug company study being funded in part by a NASA grant. This is to inform you that Mr. Hernandez has received preliminary approval. Final approval is conditional upon selection of a person of his choosing to keep in regular contact with him during the study and any subsequent period while he remains off-planet. He has named you as his first choice for this function.

National Security is of concern in this study, as is the case with all operations in space while the Earth is faced with the uncertain intentions of an alien power in our solar system. A thorough security check of your background and character will be required, to be followed by an interview. At your earliest convenience kindly fill out the forms at the secure net address set forth below. If you are approved to monitor Mr. Hernandez, you will be compensated at a rate to be determined at your interview.

It is mandatory that you not discuss this matter with anyone, not even Mr. Hernandez, nor allow anyone to see this letter. Any such security breach will automatically disqualify Mr. Hernandez. Should such breach be deemed intentional or negligent, you will be prosecuted under amendment 43 of the Homeland Security Act of 2194.

After you submit the security questionnaire we will advise if you qualify for the interview.

Below McQuaid's signature was a net address, an ID#, and a password. Ken connected to the site, logged on, and looked over the forms. In addition to basic background questions reminiscent of security questionnaires he had filled out during his Air Force years, this one had pages of questions about his personal life, and opinions.

Ken got himself a cold beer and went to work on the questionnaire. When the bottle was empty he went back to the kitchen for another one. Finally, when he reached the last page he went for his third beer. Just at that point Laurie came in the door. Not until he greeted her with a kiss did it occur to him she wasn't supposed to know about the letter from the JIC, which was in plain sight. But it was already too late.

She detached herself from his embrace and eyed her computer screen with curiosity. Then she picked up the letter. "What's this, Ken?"

"You're not supposed to know about it," he said with a grin. "Top secret."

"Ken! You got a job?"

"Not really. I mean, not at all. This is about Carlos. I gave him a reference, and the JIC wants to be sure I'm legit."

"Oh. You had me going there for a moment!"

"Hoping?" Ken asked with a big smile.

"Of course...even though I would never hope you'd go to work for the JIC."

Ken pouted. "I suppose not."

"So, what's Carlos applying for?" The three of them had known one another as undergraduates, ten years earlier.

"It has to do with NASA. They're paranoid about the zini. That's why they're checking everybody out, I guess."

She shrugged, sat down and started to read the letter.

Ken extended his hand and made an effort to smile. "Sweetheart... could you not read it, please. It's important that you don't!"

She handed him the letter. "A drug company study funded by NASA? I don't buy this information freeze, Ken. We live together...in my apartment. We don't keep secrets."

"I don't know any more about it than you do." He gave her back the letter. "Go ahead, read it."

In addition to being his girlfriend and a most attractive lady, Lauren was a doctor, trained at the expense of the National Health Service. Now she was assigned to the geriatric division of the downtown NHS hospital. She studied the letter carefully for a minute. "This is weird, Ken. Why is it such a big secret?"

Ken shrugged. "Let's put it on ice, sweetheart. It'll screw up Carlos' chances if somehow they find out I've talked to you about it.

She nodded. "OK stud. I'll keep quiet about it. Now I've got to change my clothes.

* * *

A few days later McQuaid was pleased to learn that Hernandez's prospective correspondent, Ken Roberts, had been cleared by the JIC's personnel division. Preparing to interview him, Jack opened the man's file. The page count was twice the typical length. Jack patiently read the entire background portion, and then jumped ahead to Ken's Air Force records. In addition to having flown high performance fighter/missile-platforms, the man was simulator qualified to fly the AS-22, a current generation space plane.

It seemed like a possible stroke of synergy. Two birds with one stone? Jack wondered. He called Roberts and scheduled an interview with him the next morning at an office the agency maintained in downtown Washington.

Roberts was sitting in the waiting room the next day when Jack arrived. He showed Ken into an interview room, which had a nice view over the National Mall Oval.

"So you were an Air Force man?" said Jack in a genial way. "Why did you quit?"

"My girlfriend," Ken answered with a grin.

The man was unusually handsome and athletic. Clearly sex would be high priority. "You're qualified on the 22?"

"Yeah. But the actual operational assignments go to guys who re-up." Ken's eyes widened thoughtfully. "Anyway I wasn't sure I wanted to live in a tunnel on the Moon for a year."

"And your girlfriend didn't want that, either?"

Ken made a comical expression and shook his head. "Nooo..."

Jack nodded, sympathizing. "OK. Let's get down to business here. Do you have any idea what we want you to do for us?"

"Does it have something to do with the zini?"

"It sure does. What do you think of them?"

Ken looked blank; then smiled in a humorous way. "My mother has friends who think they're devils."

The two alien species living on Z4 were constantly being shown on TV. Both the zini and the widrins looked like capable carnivores. The widrins were big, with the killer jaws of bull baboons. The zini were small, but... "With those sharp teeth they have, it's easy to see how that kind of thinking gets started," said McQuaid with a wolfish grin.

"Yeah," Ken nodded, "It's hard to figure what they're after. Maybe a supply of meat!" He laughed. "Actually, I think they want us to buy into their system...their government...maybe their beliefs."

"You're thinking we'll be coerced?"

"That's what we're all afraid of," Ken admitted.

"Forced to abandon our cultural heritage." McQuaid watched Ken intently.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Would you be interested if there was a way that you might be able to help prevent that possibility?"

Ken shrugged. "Sure."

"OK. Your friend Hernandez wants to go up to the Rotunda for an interview with their screening office there. If he makes it through he'll go on to Z6. We'd like to hire you to keep in touch with him while he's there, if he gets there, that is. It's too far away for real-time voice conversation, so you'll be communicating by email. Your messages will be monitored. Once in a while we'll give you information to pass along to him. We'll pay you, of course. How does that sound?"

"I always like to know all the details before I say yes," Ken replied with a faint expectant smile.

"Fair enough." Jack nodded. "Let's start out with the fundamental fact that you'll be working for the JIC. This is a security agency. Before I proceed, I need your commitment not to talk about what is said in this room; not to tell anyone you're working for the JIC; not to talk about the job, the work you do for us, or any information you may acquire on this job." Jack looked Ken in the eye.

"OK," said Ken, inured to bureaucratic secrecy by 5 years of working with highly classified Air Force weapons systems. "I'll keep my mouth shut. But what do I tell my girlfriend? We live together."

"As the letter you received from me indicated, you'll be prosecuted if you break security. Do you understand that?"

Ken nodded. "Yes sir. I do understand that."

Jack leaned back in his chair. "Tell her you're working for Orion Ventures. It's one of those outfits hauling freight out to Z6. We'll send you a letter on their stationery and you can use that with the cover story we'll give you. But no matter who asks you what you're up to, keep a tight lip. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Good man. Now, let's talk about the money. If all you do is email, we'll pay you the equivalent of one sixth of your final Air Force pay scale. If you are interested in using your experience as a pilot, we might be able to use you up there..." Jack trailed off and eyed the young man expectantly.

"Piloting a '22?"

"Maybe. But maybe a transport. Sound interesting?"

Ken's eyes dilated. "What's the pay scale?"

"Three times your rate as an Air Force captain."

Ken blinked, hesitating for a second. "I would need to understand what I'm supposed to do."

"I can't explain the whole operation to you now, Ken. You'll be working for special ops, which is the gritty side of the JIC. When I said 'maybe a transport', it's because special ops people need to get to where the operation is going down. So, does that sound interesting?"

Ken grimaced. "Well...I do need a job!"

Both men grinned. They stood up, shook hands, and Jack showed his prospective pilot out to the elevator lobby.

* * *

The next morning Lauren was sleeping late, having worked at the hospital till midnight. The phone rang. Semi-conscious, she waited for Ken to get it, but it continued ringing so she reached out and got hold of it.

"Hey Lauren!" said a southwest accent.

"Oh..." she whispered, consciousness engaging as she recognized the voice, "Carlos Hernandez! Where have you been?"

"Been thinking of you, girl"

Lauren smiled and subsided back into the pillows. "I haven't heard from you since last Christmas. Where are you?"

"Philadelphia."

"Really? Will you be coming here?"

"Sorry Laurie. I'm on my way to Florida."

"Florida? As in Kennedy spaceport? Is this your Z6 thing?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, Carlos! That's so-o exciting!"

"Yep, I'm going up for the interview. If I make it through, I go right to Z6."

"Wow!"

The conversation went on like this for another few minutes until Lauren's radio turned itself on. That was her signal to get started so she wouldn't be late for work.

"I got to go, Carlos. My alarm clock just went off!"

"Is Ken there?"

"He must be out; I think he has a job interview in Virginia. And I have to go to work. I'll leave him a message to call you, if you want."

"Yeah, would you? Great talking to you Laurie."

Lauren clicked off the connection and headed for the shower.

Thirty minutes later she was dressed in her uniform and heading for the door. Then she remembered: the message for Ken! She read the last incoming number from the house phone display, ran back to the computer and typed "call Carlos" on the email subject line and then put the phone number in the message itself. As soon as she sent it, she saw "call Carlos" fly back into the inbox. Of course, she pouted, the machine must be logged into his account. As she glanced at the screen to confirm her thought, she couldn't help noticing there was a message there from jMcQuaid@jic.uspa.gov. She started for the door again, but reflecting that she would spend the day wondering what the JIC's e-mail said, she went back and opened it.

Dear Mr. Roberts,

Further to our conversation yesterday, the pilot selection process for the mission we discussed is already underway. Selection will be on experience and by testing. The tests are being evaluated by a panel of medical and aerospace officers. If you wish to be considered you need to contact the coordinator, Alexi Sluzkaiov, at the phone number below. The selection process is on a tight timetable so do not delay if you are interested.

Very truly, J. McQuaid

A pained expression contorted Lauren's face; "Aerospace officers? Pilot selection?" She stared hard at this message before stabbing the key that closed the e-mail program. Then she hurried out of the apartment.

* * *

The NHS was a special service, like the Coast Guard or NOAA, with its own uniforms and hierarchy of commissioned officers. Lauren was a Lieutenant and, like many others in that grade, she was planning to get out and go into private practice as soon as her contract expired. Her separation date was coming up in another month and she had been thinking about it a lot.

In addition to geriatrics, they had cross-trained her to assist in disasters so she was also qualified in emergency medicine and surgery. Consequently, when she arrived at the hospital and checked her schedule, she was not surprised to see they had assigned her to the ER for the day. Usually there wasn't much emergency room business early in the morning, but she soon found out there had been a gas leak in a hotel kitchen, and an explosion. She went to work on a burn victim. He had other injuries, too, but the burns were critical.

She worked non-stop for more than three hours cleaning up horrible burns and getting the poor fellow into a hyperbaric unit. Her last step was to cue orders for specialists and technicians to handle follow-on procedures. Then she retreated to the physicians lounge and flopped down on a couch.

Immediately she started thinking about Ken again. It looked like he was getting himself into something really ugly. She did love him. He

was the only serious boyfriend she'd ever had, or wanted. But with the prospect of him working for the JIC?...in space?...she found herself thinking about their relationship in a critical mode. She was a professional now, and her goals were taking on a new direction.

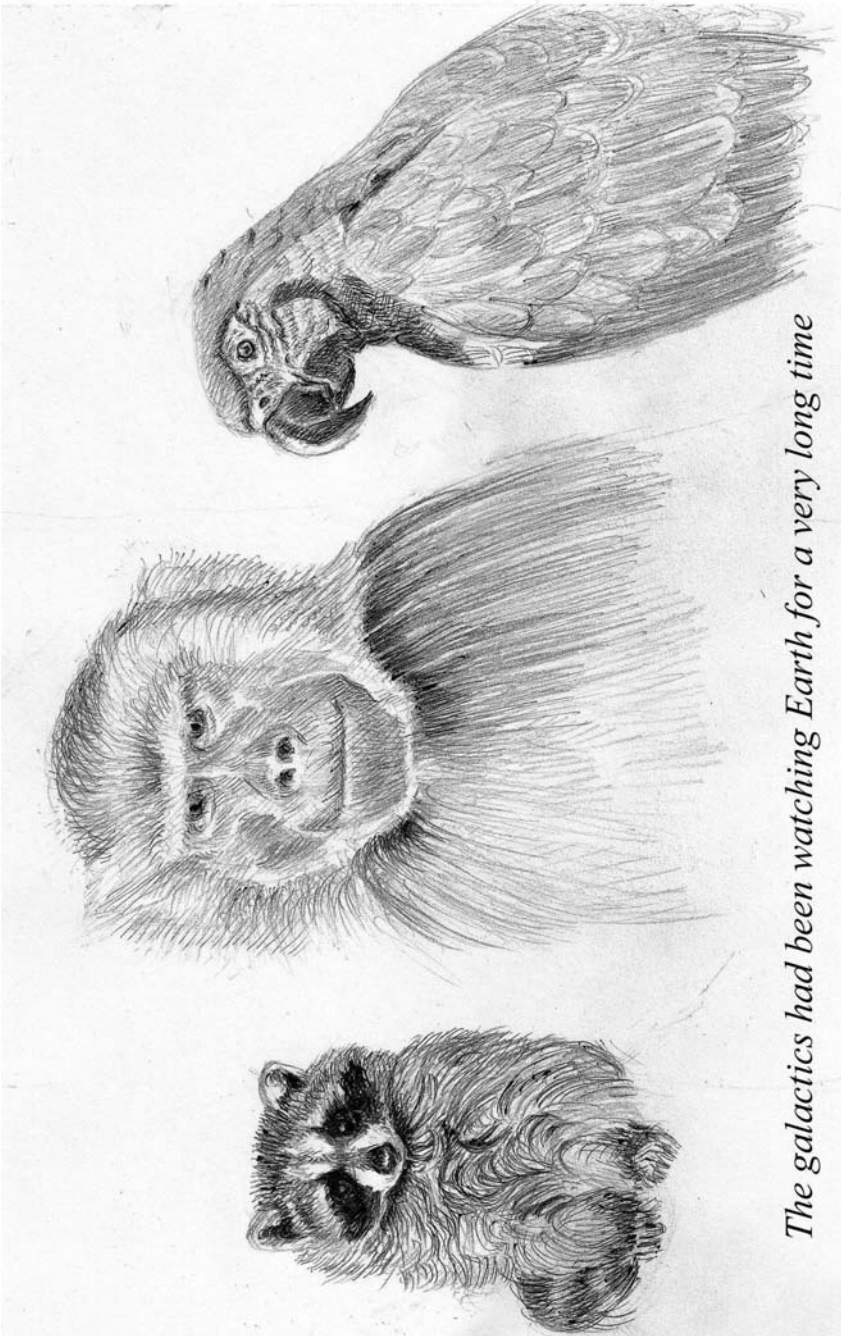
Her personal ambition was to do something about the problems of the elderly. In the NHS, the policy was not to be aggressive with older folk: keep them happy; give them painkillers and a decent hospice. This hands-off approach was wrenching to Lauren. Irascible, interesting old characters would come in with advanced cancer or heart disease, and before long they'd be dead. Others would fade away into dementia, which was sad and humiliating. It was hard for her to sit by and prescribe palliatives. Nor did she think it would be greatly different in private practice. Medicine as she knew it simply had limitations that were difficult for her to accept.

Now she had to make a personal decision. The idea of Ken being involved with the JIC was repulsive to her. The agency had a bad reputation. It seemed obvious they were about to suck Ken into something devious and nasty, which seemed to depend on whether Carlos got to Z6. But she felt confident he would. His engineering experience certainly should qualify him for the zini's hi-tech construction project.

The reality of the zini presence in the solar system was still a huge shock to the world, and even to Lauren herself. When the ILC treaty had been signed seven years earlier, she had entertained hopes of dramatic technology transfers from the galactic civilization. She had waited for zini physicians to visit hospitals on Earth. But they never came any closer than Earth orbit.

Why wouldn't they help? The story about Twillinger's hearing adjustment so he could decipher the minute modulations of the Zini language had thrilled her. It showed that functions like hearing, digestion, and any number of problems could be fixed by non-invasive neurological adjustments instead crude surgical carving.

There had been a few colloquia involving medical school people from Earth and zini doctors up at the "Rotunda," the squirrel-cage hotel in Earth orbit where Carlos was going for his interview. Lauren had read all the reports from those meetings. They held out tantalizing prospects for medicine. It seemed obvious to her that the zini should be able to help humanity find a cure for Alzheimer's. Thinking about this got



The galactics had been watching Earth for a very long time

Lauren agitated. She went into the pantry and bought a container of soymilk from a vending machine. Drinking it, she paced the lounge. Then she lay down on the sofa again, upset and perplexed.

An idea seemed to come out of the blue: why not go to Z6 herself? If Carlos could do it, maybe she could too! It was such a beautiful thought that she laughed out loud. Then, almost immediately, she started to think of conflicts, not the least of which was Ken. What if she was on Z6 and he was working for that dirty tricks agency...? It was obvious that Uspa's government was hostile to the zini. She didn't like to think what they might be planning.

Why didn't the zini come to Earth, she wondered for the thousandth time? Why couldn't Uspa's government just relax? The galactics had been watching Earth for a very long time. Until the era of gunpowder they could have taken over the whole planet any time they wanted. It infuriated her to be reminded that her lover, fly-boy Ken, was about to be co-opted by the one government agency that she really hated.

Perhaps if she put up a fight she could make him back off? Lauren got up and paced the room. But if she did that...would the JIC get tough with him? This was an unpleasant thought. Finally she opened the French doors to a narrow terrace and stepped out into the sunlight. It was a perfect, cloudless Indian summer day. "I will go to the counterplanet," she whispered to the sky.

She stood still for a long time. If it could only happen! The zini had never asked for doctors. Reports on the net news-sites said the zini were using their own doctors. But that had to change eventually because Z6 was being built for human habitation. She went back into the lounge, closing the doors carefully behind her. How many other doctors had harbored these same thoughts? Why should she be any different? Then it occurred to her she had a connection...Carlos! He had always been attracted to her in an impossible, fenced-off way. The poor guy was pathetically devoted to her, and he was going to have an interview up there. Maybe he could put in a word for her? It was surely worth a try.

She danced over to a sofa and bounced onto it, making up her mind to call Carlos. A chilling thought stabbed her: there wasn't much time before he went up for his interview. If she was going to do it, she had to act now. She sat up and thought for a long moment, her determination gathering momentum. Carlos's number was in Ken's email box. She connected her phone to the net, logged into Ken's account and got the

number. But instead of ringing when she tried it, the call switched right into Carlos' message box.

It wasn't until about nine that evening, while Lauren was in the geriatric unit, that he finally returned the call. "Carlos? What happened to you?" She went into a temporarily empty room and shut the door.

"I had to turn the phone off. Been taking these tests..."

His voice sounded funny. "Have you been drinking, Carlos?"

"No. Just a little groggy. I'm OK."

Lauren was a doctor. This didn't sound right. "Why are you groggy?"

Carlos explained what he was doing in Philadelphia. It took a few minutes for Lauren to understand, and she didn't like what she heard. "So you don't remember what they did to you?"

"I'm just doing it for the money. It really doesn't matter what they're doing, does it?"

"Sounds totally bizarre. Why should they have to hypnotize you to test some drug that suppresses nausea? That should be a simple physiological agent."

"I don't know, Laurie. Something to do with stress, they said. Hey, guess who helped me hook onto this deal? Ken. He was one of my references."

Lauren was about to tell him she knew all about it, but then she realized she couldn't.

"Carlos, I don't have much time, so let me explain why I called you?"

"Sure, doll."

"There's something I want you to do for me."

"Sure, Laurie. Anything at all."

"You can't tell Ken about this. OK? Not a word."

"It's not a secret forever, right?"

Lauren laughed. "Oh, he'll find out, eventually! Let me tell you my idea. The zini don't have any human doctors on Z6, do they?"

"You want to go to Z6?"

"They're way ahead of us Carlos. It would be a postgraduate course for me. In a couple of years I'll come back and be able to do something wonderful here."

"You sure would!" Carlos sounded thrilled. "That's exactly what I want to do. As an engineer, of course."

"So you'll help me?"

"Of course, but what can I do?"

"You've got an interview, right?"

"Yeah, it's scheduled in just three days."

"The interview people make the decisions about whether you go, or not...they'll be zini, I imagine?"

"I don't know. But I can try to give them a letter from you. If they give me a chance to explain, I'll tell 'em your story."

"Oh that would be wonderful, Carlos. But let's give them something that won't be so easy to toss in the trash." Lauren had spent six years working for a government agency, and that experience told her a simple letter would not do it. "When you applied, how did it work?"

Carlos explained the several stage process, each replete with applications, questionnaires and tests. "I've kept a file of everything," he concluded. "It's all in my cloud account. You could look at it if you want."

"Oh, Carlos, you're too good to me!"

He gave her the net-address, and his access codes. "Maybe you'll get some ideas from my stuff. When you get together what you want to submit to the zini, just send it to my e-mail account. But don't wait till the last minute."

"I wish you were coming to Washington," said Lauren, feeling grateful. "I'd much rather give my application to you in person."

"A nice idea," agreed Carlos. "I always wanted to do things with you in person, Laurie."

"You're sweet Carlos"

"That's the trouble. I'm too nice a guy. You need a macho man, Laurie, because you're such a sexy doll."

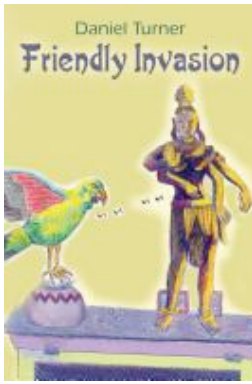
"You wouldn't want me to be anything else."

"No, I guess not."

"Remember, this is going to be a surprise for Ken. Don't say a word, OK?"

"No problem, Laurie."

After they wrapped up the conversation Lauren fairly skipped out of the empty room and hurried back to work.



The Zini are flying saucer people who built a comfortable observation station in our asteroid belt thousands of years ago, and have been studying Earth, waiting for the right moment to make contact. But, the wait is over. Humans have discovered the zini "counterplanet." The shock of this discovery is reverberating, posing huge social, economic and political challenges to Earth's establishments. Friendly Invasion is a fast-paced read, replete with conflict, romance, humor, and friendly persuasion.

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