Patient Was the Doctor

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Licensed psychologists follow a set of ethical standards enforceable by law. Don't fuck your patients, commit no felonies, refer out if you don't know what to do, stuff like that.

Then there are aspirational principles. More like ideals, inspiring better conduct because actual perfection isn't achievable. "Do no harm" can get ambiguous, as language does (especially where action is concerned).

Much of this code of conduct was built because some of us got involved with historical atrocities. We were not always healers. When the Geneva Conventions stipulated against torture, psychologists developed the workarounds. In 2002, this was legal, but it was never moral. Code was designed to prevent that from ever happening again. Sometimes, of course, it's just not possible to fix someone, but we should never willfully injure mind or spirit.

This history—some combination of all this—is probably why the U.S. military knocks on my office door about their little problem with the aliens.

I've heard about it, of course. When the jets shot the creature down in O'ahu, my wife and I watched all thirteen internationally televised clips. Like most other internet users, we then dug up another dozen viral videos. Perversely, the threat of an alien apocalypse was a welcome distraction from our personal problems.

Six months later, no other aliens have descended from the mesosphere—but the consortium as a whole stopped its voyage. Nearly motionless, they hang in Earth's orbit, their distant presence menacing trigger-itchy world governments. Hobbyist stargazers say some of them look as big as meteors under a full moon, but we can't see them with the naked eye. Meanwhile, the Sun still shines, San Francisco traffic remains crap, and I'm forever stressed about healthcare coverage.

And a brigadier general is standing in my hallway.

He tells me seven military psychologists have seen the "patient" already. The alien is dying. Saving its life, he says, falls outside the scope of the operation, if it were even possible. Instead, I'm critical to a dual objective of peacekeeping effort and discreet intelligence collection.

"We want to keep them happy. But we need to learn everything we can."

My mind spins with questions. Do the aliens really look like octopi? What do they eat, and would they find my body nutritious? But first, I tell him there are no exceptions to the APA's position on torture. I will not be party to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatments and punishments. He points out the subject isn't human. And though I don't remember the exact wording, I state, confidently, the code isn't confined to humans.

(Later, I double-check my manual. I was right. Whew.)

"We will pay you five hundred thousand dollars for the year regardless of termination date," the brigadier general tells me. "To compensate you for the risks."

I pretend to get excited about the money, and then I ask about the benefits package. Soon after, I say yes. But I haven't signed anything, not before I've talked to my wife.

Merely one week later, I've signed a thing. Maya is angry about it in a complicated way. She can't say much, because I'm doing it for us. We want a baby. She might want it even more than me.

I've negotiated an astronomical reproductive health package—testing, IVF meds, embryo transfer, the works—which probably makes me as American as any of the uniformed good ol' boys standing stiffly around the officer's desk.

The brigadier general hands me a tower of papers: documentation from the previous therapists, linguistic specialists, and xenobiologists. A quick glance shows me scores of lines redacted with a heavy hand. What words I see blur. Insomnia's been waking me up at five A.M.

I pretend to take my time, wipe my glasses, saying "Hmm" a lot, reading slowly, with extensive, expert care. The terminology is oddly straightforward: reframing, evidence-based treatment, insufficient metrics, progress unclear. What did they expect? We're dealing with an alien. Even the assumption they have social interests is based on observations of their group flights past Earth for the last two years and their standstill now, scientists inferring something more conscious than gravity, magnetism, or the lateral line sensory organs of shoaling fish.

But I know what the military "expects."

"I will do my best to treat the patient," I say.

He looks at me quizzically. "I don't know what that means, in your specialty."

Few people do. Which suits me just fine.

Maya goes for IVF. Immediately. Before I even hold my first session with the alien. We move with the urgency of fear the opportunity will be snatched away if we're a day late.

We've been trying to get pregnant for years now. Choking down supplements, tracking ovulation, engaging in perfunctory intercourse at dawn. We blew past our deductible with OB-GYN visits in March. I've thought a lot about the ethics of having a kid—ethics way more complex than the guidance for psychotherapy. Humanity is literally under threat of aliens, and persistently on the verge of self-destructing with greed. But I've concluded: the people equipped and motivated to discover and invent our better future haven't been born yet.

I know they'll suffer to change our fate, but so do we all.

When I imagine raising my child, I don't burden them with saving mankind. But I would teach her—him—them to care about the world, and the people in it. There will be joy, too, in the fishy stink of sea lions at Pier 39 and the sugar burst of raw muscat grapes, the magic of static electricity levitating your hair the first time. (At forty, I'm still awed by this.)

If this doesn't work, we'll adopt. Probably an older kid. But I long for the connections of genetics and birth, not better, just different. To see the shape of my eyes emerge once the baby chub ages off, to share mashed mooncake and embarrassing tales of pregnancy cravings and diaper loads, then struggle with the process of individuation as they turn eight, then twelve, then twenty. Maya's talked about this, too. It's problematically bio-essentialist. It's a wholesome desire for bonding similarities. It's beyond reason. It's reasonable. It's all those things at once.

Selfishly, I've just always wanted the baby to be no one's but mine.

Some of that is defiance. There are plenty of Americans who think people like us shouldn't have kids.

In the IVF consultant's office, Maya's nails dig half-moons into my hand. She explains the infant diving reflex ends in six to twelve months, coincidentally about the age babies can start swim class. She can't wait. We're so scared, so excited.

Let me tell you about my wife. Maya's as queer as the sea is blue, which is all the better because she also loves water. She's been scuba certified since thirteen. Diving in the silence of the reefs kept her and her mom connected despite painful political differences.

Our baby, she hopes, will be shared joy, not "despite" of anything.

By day, Maya is a tax accountant. Since I'm not particularly into women, I don't find much about her sexy, but I'm very into her talent for navigating the complexity of the IRS and her opinions on financial legislation. She says it's like an ecosystem that's constantly changing, partially collapsing, rebalancing. Her pro bono forensic accounting work has gotten a lot of people out of a lot of jams, but self-employed health benefits suck.

She's been my best friend since kindergarten. At thirty, we decided if we didn't find true love and start families in five more years, we'd have a kid together instead. The kind of joke that wasn't a joke because we both desperately meant it. We'll be great parents. I wouldn't do this with anyone else.

The day I get my new Federal badge and a shiny USAF lanyard, I ask if Maya ever encountered an octopus while diving. She nods.

"What was it like?" I ask. "Could you tell if it was male or female? Or what species?"

"No, I couldn't tell the sex. I didn't look up the species after. But I think about it often." She ponders, cutting up okra. "It was so playful and . . . smart. We had an understanding without words. It was like playing with a child."

Ding! The fertility report hits our inboxes simultaneously. We pore over the phones together, our breaths shallowing, moistening as we scroll. Our test results look bad. Worse for her. But we have a treatment plan. Finally.

I'm so off-balance, under-slept, and stressed, I don't prepare for the first therapy session nearly at all, except to look over the intake notes from other clinicians.

In contrast, the United States government is over-prepared. Admittedly necessary because logistics were tough to begin with.

Even the smallest of the aliens is much too big for my main facility office, never mind my private practice downtown, and the armed guards at the exits definitely would've overflowed problematically in either setting. The Feds build a makeshift therapy room in an airplane hangar at Travis AFB. I get a platform with a computer setup, raised above a ten-thousand-gallon tank of water.

I suspect this is their plan to expose as little as possible to the prospective enemy. The creature already learned about military aircraft the hard way.

My patient arrives in the back of an armored twelve-wheeler. Pistons raise the flatbed, and the alien sloughs into the water below. Immediately, I see holes gaping in the muscular grey web of its body. I can't help thinking of the skin between the bases of my fingers, and stop myself from rubbing my thumb over my digits in sympathy.

"Why's it in water?" I demand, peering into the water. It was aerial. Celestial? Whatever the word is for "naturally inhabits outer space."

The airman shrugs. "Xenobiologists found out it's amphibious."

That's definitely the wrong term too, but I squint down at the submerged alien. Maybe it looked like an octopus before. Now, it looks like excised meat you'd find in a specimen jar after surgery, cloudy and structurally loose, even as it turns a football-sized eye up at me.

Monitors shows me other video angles. Suckers. Even a shadowy mouth on the underside. Suddenly self-conscious, I adjust my over-ear mic.

I introduce myself as I would with any other client, with clumsy simplification from the dossier. Aliens apparently don't have the words for "license," "psychologist," or "evidence-based treatment." But I try "healer," and a guttural word whooms through the speakers after the AI translates. The tech is incredible.

I repeat what we know about human reactions to trauma. It seems to remember from previous therapy. I describe the limits of my therapeutic skills. I ask a lot of questions.

It answers a few, burbling weakly in the bottom of its enclosure. It's two hundred and thirty years old and it remembers the other human "healers." There's a blank space where its name is untranslated, but gamely I try to enunciate the frequency I can hear. A nictating membrane shifts across its eyes, which glint at me like bollards of rain-washed stone.

We get nowhere for the first two sessions. I'm not phoning it in anymore—optimism in my personal life, admittedly, improves the quality of my practice. The overlap of our two languages is amazingly cogent, all things considered; the government science team did a good job. Seated above the tank, I look at the screens, occasionally peering down through the jiggling, shadowy water at the mutilated form underneath.

It's just stuck. We're stuck.

The creature just repeats the injury narrative every session. It was shot. Unconscious, it fell. Terminal velocity took it past jet fighters and a few outstretched arms from its friends attempting to help. Merely four hundred feet from the ground, the wind ripping through its wound woke it, and in the last instant before impact, it flared its mantle and softened its landing just enough to survive.

The translator unspools lines of dialogue across my screen, almost the same every time, except for the occasional word here or there. Probably translation error. The alien talks slowly; each iteration takes a full session.

Adjusting my glasses, I study the ragged, pulpy mess of it. I think of horror stories—prone horses suffocating under their own mass, pet betta fish dropped down a garbage disposal, humans suffering crush syndrome. There's something stomach-churning about meat turning into liquid. The alien is dying. Why it must do so among strangers instead of its own family and friends, I don't know. How unjust.

And regardless, this shit isn't working.

This is the third session, the third telling. I'm getting bored, which any decent therapist will recognize as a sign to change it up.

I try basic reflection and active listening, the open-ended existential questions from dignity therapy, even a pack of Karuna Cards face-down. But the creature barely pauses, giving me a short response that might be strategic evasion, electronic mistranslation. Or, I dunno, the alien equivalent of brain damage.

Discontent, I climb down the platform steps. Wiping my sweaty hands on my pant legs, I circle the tank, watching as the creature's stare follows me as far as it can without turning its body. I step closer to the glass. Right up to the tank.

This close, the alien towers overhead, too massive to see properly. But that's not why I moved.

From there, I look up.

The surface of the water shivers in patterns of the alien's speech. Like the sands of the Tibetan ritual mandalas and vibrating Chladni plates that visualize sound, all fused into one. Beautiful. As I watch, the familiar roar and thwop of the alien words emerging from the speakers has a different cadence.

I have an idea.

In a mania of inspiration, I rearrange the workspace. I need to be on the same level as the alien, looking up. The monitor stand must rise up at an angle so I can read it like subtitles while watching the water and the creature simultaneously. The translation inconsistencies have not been glitches, but reflection of intentional, intelligent change.

I begin to wonder.

In Chinese writing, every written word is a pictograph, and each pictograph is made up of radicals. The meanings are often symbolic and rooted in nature, but some refer to tools and other aspects of human experience.

玄 [xuán] means "profound." 比 [bì], "compare"—though in actual conversation, "more-so than." And 力 [lì] is "power."

The alien language reminds me of those elements, that vague sense of history both tantalizing and opaque. But I don't know what I'm looking at until I'm home, reading the linguists' findings.

They have at least twenty words for grief. Some are pitched so low I can't hear them. And that's the problem. Or was, until I saw the shapes in the water.

Their spoken vocabulary is deeply emotional, ornamented with prefixes and suffixes that pair shades of emotion with every subject, every verb. Every clause wells up with suffering, desire, or piercing ecstasy; an object only exists once you know how you feel about it. The linguists aren't sure if this is specific to oral communication, which I guess means I might be working with alien fanfiction instead of autobiographical narrative. Whatever. What is an epitaph if not a one-sentence story by your biggest fans? But it's confusing to focus on the middle morphemes—resisting the instinctive primacy and recency effects.

There is a process happening in the alien's retellings, I think. Something therapeutic. In English, moving the emphasis to another word will change the meaning of the entire sentence. In Chinese, changing a stroke changes the radical, renders the word a meaningless error or something new.

I have to open my mouth uncomfortably wide to get the syllables even remotely right, kind of like Irish Gaelic on YouTube. The alien's jaws are thirty times bigger than mine, but I nevertheless practice in private, mouthing the leviathan words into the dark bedroom.

Flight. Fall. Its vision warping black.

Fear.

My wife turns restlessly in a sleep over-heated by hormone therapy. Every time I've asked, she's said she "feels fine." I don't think she's lying. Words are inadequate for the paradox of joy and fear, the way the cringing anticipation of daily injections fades to genuine indifference, while everything else, Maya growls, gets so fucking swollen and uncomfortable. The aliens could probably put it into words, but we can't.

All I can do is turn up the AC before coming to bed and, in the absence of sleep, I whisper of palm trees below, the Pacific Sun above, how vivid the Earth. Better than thinking if this fails, if I fail Maya, the family I've always wanted will be over.

To keep myself busy, I learn about the aliens. One of the previous psychologists is local, active duty at Travis AFB, so we get lunch at the cafeteria. We run through her notes.

"We did Prolonged Exposure," she says. "At least, that's what I attempted to do."

"Manualized trauma therapy?" I frown. "That's conceptually odd. You can't recover from trauma when the trauma is actively killing you in a hostile environment."

She doesn't flinch. "Yes. But the alien expressed interest. It grasped the psychoeducation and rationale for treatment quickly. We had a rich discussion about the mechanics of avoidance and long-term anxiety, how they prevent metabolizing stress."

"Why did you believe their trauma response would be like ours?"

She doesn't answer. I'm pretty sure they had no idea. Pretexts of healing have been used to cover up nonconsensual examinations throughout the history of medicine.

But the alien probably is actually doing exposure, of a kind. That'd make sense of why its emotional language changes even as it's repeating the same story over and over again, integrating the horror. Coming to terms. Accepting.

"It didn't give very much away," she says. "There were many efforts to extract information."

I stifle the urge to shift in my seat. "It's not very cognitively sophisticated at this point."

"There was a decline." Something like regret gleams in her eye. "I wish you could have seen it before. It was magnificent. The colors on its skin. Such a shame."

You're a dick, I think, staring at her. I suppose I'm a dick, too.

When I get home, I realize I forgot my glasses at the cafeteria. I drove without them.

We make three embryos. One gets discarded straight away, low-quality, unviable. Two remain—a good size, they say, shape, developing rapidly. We schedule implantation for Monday. Our odds are one in ten.

I sleep poorly. When I wake, the sunlight on our dining table looks neon, overexposed, and my hand seems to shimmer as I stir the grits. Maya's trying to eat organic. I'm supporting her. Maybe it'll make me feel less shitty in more ways than one.

Reckless and desperate, I pace around the tank. "I lied to you."

It doesn't react, mantle billowing softly in the water.

"I'm not a healer."

It barely breathes the question: **WHAT ARE YOU?**

"I was hired because I have more hospice experience than anybody else in the state. And I needed the money because . . ." I throw up my arms. "Because hospice pays jack."

WHAT IS HOSPICE?

Of course that was untranslatable. I shrug. "I help you die."

I am the opposite of a healer. I am death's usher. The agent of final, ultimate harm.

There's no line between self-disclosure and therapy work; it's a Venn diagram. The minute the therapist is observed, they've disclosed something—factors of race, gender presentation, health, ability, even socioeconomic status. Those things can help or hurt rapport. Patients sometimes harbor more trust for those who resemble them, sometimes less.

After first impressions, there are the forms of disclosure more commonly recognized as such. Like opinions less clearly related to treatment—politics, pop culture. Venting stress, sharing personal events.

Or exposing your participation in military subterfuge, while under military surveillance.

I say, "You're not getting better. But you know that. You've been murdered by mankind and now you're sitting in a cuboid bowl of you soup."

Text squiggles across the screen, but it's gibberish that resolves again into "[untranslatable]." The patterns of light move at the top of the water. I recognize the sinusoidal pattern from the first part of the trauma narrative, the idyllic flight, sunny, when one of its brethren rips off a big alien fart. Happiness. Wait, no.

Humor.

Of all things, it laughs. Then it asks, **HOW DO YOU HELP ME DIE IF YOU DON'T FLY AN AIRPLANE?**

The space fish is fucking with me. "Are you asking about hospice techniques?"

YES, it says, the water dancing with mirth.

"I try to bring comfort. Peace. Sometimes, just clarity." I stop walking and look at my own translucent ghost in the glass. He looks terrible, sucks to be him. "Sometimes, we make meaning before the end. Once, we believed it ends with acceptance, but our thinking changed. Now, we have numerous theoretical models for grief."

The shape of laughter fades from the water, replaced by a pattern of ripples that isn't the opposite, but different.

Humor is a sophisticated defense mechanism. Dr. Freud is giving thumbs up.

My parents hated that I decided to do hospice care for a living. Chinese traditions have lots of magical thinking about the spiritual contagion of death. But I ignored them and went where I was needed. HIV patients, destitute gig workers, those dying alone because their family was in shelter, those were the ones I liked working with. Perhaps for the exact reasons my parents didn't want me to. Mom and Dad weren't the only ones who thought I wasted my talent, but my professors were too politic to say the quiet part out loud.

The alien says, **I ACCEPT THIS. I ACCEPT ALL OF THIS.**

But the motion of the tank surface looks different than what I expect, jarring, spiky, uncomfortable to look at with its words. *Wrong*, somehow. The alien's making sounds I can't hear, even if the government audio analytics pick it up.

In a rush, I realize my efforts have been pointless. Like the last five years Maya and I struggled to build a life that's falling apart, dissolving into nothing.

"I accept." The words just like my jagged signature on the dotted line of my Federal contract.

"But don't you ever get fucking angry?" I demand.

The alien's body never changes, a squashy lump of puree in the bottom of the tank. But words flow across the screen. **OF COURSE. YOU POISONED OUR CHILDREN. YOU SHOT ME DOWN WHEN I WENT TO TAKE THEM BACK.**

I throw my arms in the air. "Then why don't you do something?"

I AM DOING SOMETHING, it answers. **I AM DYING**.

For an instant, I'm excited. The statement rings true.

Then the shock hits me. What have I done? Yes, I've been angry. I'm impatient about being stuck, having to wait—to have my kid, for this alien to get out of my life. For us both to be less in pain. But I can't blab about the heart of the issue when it could lead to an intergalactic species war! Every session, the government is watching, waiting for proof of weakness or hostility, any excuse to do harm.

How utterly irresponsible.

Outside the hangar, my worst fear comes true. The brigadier general claps me on the back. "You did it, Doc." The gravelly congratulation comes as close to an exclamation as he's ever been; he looks genuinely impressed. "They exposed themselves. We got 'em. Though you had us going there for a minute."

I don't understand what we got, exactly. Uneasy, I ask what he means, nonchalantly as possible.

"They're planning to take resources from Earth," he says. "Straight from the horse's mouth."

"Resources?" In my head, I replay the words I saw on the translator. Am I missing something, or does he mean "children"?

Implantation fails.

It's been six weeks since therapy began, seven since we started IVF. I have no baby, yet I'm already an incompetent fucking father. My wife cries in the passenger seat beside me. I'm a useless husband, too.

My left eye feels familiarly blurry. I blink at the rearview mirror and, in a wrenching moment of nausea, I see it: the alien's liquid, moon-iris eyeball squeezes into the pit of my skull beside my own. The second lens is too-thick, glossy, the pupil pinched into an alien line. But I blink again, and it's gone.

I realize I haven't used my glasses since that lunch.

Unable to sleep, I decide to learn more about octopuses. The top of the Wiki article describes them as, "a soft-bodied, eight-limbed mollusk of the order Octopoda." Instead of contracting or relaxing like the lenses of human eyes, theirs focus by sliding back and forth like a camera's—perfect vision, motion-activated. Each tentacle operates semi-autonomously, yet therefore cooperatively with brain and body. It's a form of sentience I cannot imagine because of the limits of my own sapien ass.

According to peer-reviewed papers, plenty of biologists have speculated the octopus has extraterrestrial origins. DNA sequencing reinforces this idea. Their makeup is unlike any other animal we know of.

Assuming similarity between ancestor and descendant, I think this means injuring its body destroyed part of the alien's mind. Or soul.

I cannot imagine loving kindred hundreds of millennia removed from me, or returning to a primordial environment. I don't even feel connected to the air force guys I work for, never mind swinging through the trees of West Africa.

Last, I study octopus senescence, the final stage of life. Once they reproduce, their bodies kick off a breakdown process. All healing stops. Digestive glands stop working, skin ulcerates. So depressing. I should find a different Wikipedia black hole to fall into while having a nervous breakdown about fertility problems.

For some terrifying reason, the brigadier general wants me in a meeting. I'm surrounded by men and women in crisp lapels bristling with various configurations of colorful medals. None seem to notice I'm practically hallucinating from stress. I practice deep breathing, listening to the theories about raiding, predation, and parasitism.

I could not have modeled my minority status better than this, sitting pretty, their obedient, mercenary psychologist who lip-serviced an ethics disclaimer right before using his powers for evil.

Perversely, I want to be here. I'm burning with the need to know what I've done.

Apparently, ever since I shifted the therapy equipment, military scientists have been analyzing the water waveforms, using sophisticated difference algorithms to match it to the audible language. It's helping to "clarify the threat" and "communicate resistance" to the aliens waiting in orbit. All because of me.

I'm not trained to defuse cosmic interspecies conflict, so I just say, "Can we not shoot anybody else?"

I guess they think I'm just being a fish-hugger or whatever because they reassure me, "Violence is a last resort."

The untested modifications make the translator temporarily useless. The grammar mostly hangs together, like prepositions, the sentence structure overall. But every second verb and noun are off, sometimes inverted to an opposite term, rendering the encoding gibberish for my purposes.

I only know what the alien is saying because it's repeated this so many times before.

The fighter jet shot it. It careened (flew) down thousands of feet through (out) the sky. Friends (enemies) tried in vain to break its fall (flight), but gravity dragged (welcomed) it down. It blacked out from pain, only to wake (sleep) from more: the wind blasting through its wound. In the last instant before impact, it flared its mantle and parachuted hard into the Earth.

I know enough of the language, all those emotional morphemes, to realize it is no longer as sad, as terrified, as angry as it was before—thanks to exposure, probably.

But more than that, I find myself seeing the scenario as if I'm there.

The air crushes up against my belly. Death (life) roaring up from the ground, the pain of injury (growth?) screaming through my nerves.

The alien is still talking when I, seized by frustration (insight), step away from the monitors and climb up above the tank, and put my hand into the roiling water.

Huge mistake.

Vibrations erupt through my arm, wrench my shoulder and electrify my nerves, chatter my ribs like teeth. My vision spirals into black. Did someone rip my lungs out? Both feet slide out from under me. I pitch headfirst into the quaking water, freezing up my nose and throat. I scream bubbles.

My eyes open to armored men hauling me into the air. A massive tentacle releases from my waist, a pizza-sized sucker kissing my ribs good-bye.

Airmen decontaminate me afterward. Frothy neon yellow soap and bristly brushes, two new vaccines that give me a headache. I, too, then become a subject of study: they draw my blood, spin it through centrifuges and DNA analyzers. Altogether, I stay at the base for three days, undergoing examination in a serenity that borders on hysteria. The brigadier general is not upset with my risk-taking so much as he's disappointed at the void of unique results.

Sure, the alien is not violent even upon contact, but that is apparently immaterial.

When I finally get home, Maya is quietly furious. I wasn't allowed to contact home. Relief throbs under her voice and beneath the clack of aggressively rearranged dishes; she thought they'd disappeared me.

She was nearly right.

She says, "You've always said you never touch a patient. You obviously don't touch an alien. You don't abandon your partner in a crisis because of a whim in a military operation." Releasing a bowl to the suds, she turns to me. "What were you thinking?"

I know it's a real question because I know Maya. "I'm not sure. But I didn't mean for anybody to get hurt."

She stares at me, then turns around again. "Sit and eat. You got skinny."

Still at a loss for words, I sit and eat. Clumsily. My dominant arm is in a cast, bruised brutally purple. My fingers should've shattered to pulp.

I struggle to remember the choice I made. How I felt. I know I'd been upset, but also curious.

I am sorry, but I don't regret it.

"I won't do it again," I say. That is also true.

Because I have a different idea. But I don't want the military to find out about it, and I won't hurt Maya anymore.

The brigadier general chuckles with all his teeth. "Doesn't this violate your ethical code?"

"No," I say, clutching my third cup of espresso, not quite lying. "I'm just communicating boundaries, and your priorities in protecting humanity. Reinforcing known information."

That makes enough sense. He lets me back in the hangar with the alien. It looks worse than our last session, but not by much. The aliens don't have salutations as we understand them, so I don't try one.

"I'm not angry," I say. "But you hurt me. Be careful. You must never agitate water that comes in contact with a human again. You're a patient and you're also a threat. Two opposite truths can coexist at once. There is no lie. It's a dialectic."

The audio translator switches to English for the word.

I swallow hard. "Do you understand?"

For the first time, the alien changes color. Its muddy, thick grey skin shivers through with radiant neon spots.

It says, **YES.**

I reach out to touch the tank. A donut-shaped sucker slides up against the other side, muscular and supple, strong enough, I know, to have killed me; strong enough to smash through and crush me, even now. But it doesn't even speak again, hanging motionless.

Stepping back, I know I didn't teach it anything new just now. No, I just learned why the translator is broken. Why we can't understand its experience. The alien doesn't conceptualize health, life, or even death the way we do. To them, everything is dialectical—except for emotion. Joy, rage, the ardor and gut feelings and stifling boredoms, these form the only objective basis of their reality.

But the air force guys are only excited it acknowledged the show of force. They'd hate to know their understanding of the word also betrays weakness.

Our second round of IVF fails completely. Zero embryos.

Thanks to her mom, Maya isn't much of a crier. She hides it, waiting 'til I sleep, but frugality gives her away: I find her hand-washed pillowcase hung up to air dry three times a week.

The meeting with the IVF clinic is hopeless. They say we've done nothing wrong, but that doesn't help. It just means we have no control. We sit in the parking lot.

I ask, "What's going through your head?"

"Don't psychologize me," she retorts.

"I'm not psychologizing you. I'm asking a question. If you don't want to answer, just say that." Mad too, I could say it better, but at least I keep my tone even.

We stare at the garage wall awhile before she answers. "I feel like it's my fault. All those awful things my mom said are coming back, but this time it's from the inside. Inside my mind. My body. All those lies about what's 'natural.' What's good. How I'm not. That's why I can't have a baby." Her voice pulverizes into itself. "I'm so sorry; it's my fault we can't have a baby."

I grab her tightly and squeeze. Against her sweater, my fingertips feel like they're puckering from bathwater. I steal a glimpse of my hands and see—my skin bubbling. Popping. Tiny holes opening in my fingerprints, freakishly bloodless, spreading in a suppurating cluster, almost a disease pattern. Holy shit. But I blink and it's gone, leaving me with Maya's heart beating against my chest like it wants to escape from us.

I cannot allow that, so I redouble my grip. I hold her together, desperate and only human, or close enough.

If you asked me if I believed in linguistic determinism, I would say, "Kind of." That's how I believe in most things. Lukewarm.

I also "kind of" believe thriving is a form of protest, while I also "sorta" believe in standing for your convictions, that anything you aren't willing to die for, you don't live for either. See, I've worked with dialectics a long time. The term is Latin in origin, the contemporary practice heavily influenced by Buddhism. "Dialectics" represents the ability to hold contradictions, without hopping onto a hormonal rollercoaster of extremes. It's useful for surviving life. It's critical for accepting death.

For example: I'm a hypocrite and a sellout for giving my skills to the American military-industrial complex so I can have kids.

And also: I'm an ideological radical and warrior pure of heart, subverting the system to steal my share of the reproductive rights of the majority.

This has always been my problem: I can hold opposites, but I am too much of a coward to take the extremes—especially action. Perhaps the most courageous act I've ever committed was to speak in code to a dying alien under the government's nose. I'm not out here trying to save anybody. Except, you know, I totally am.

I hold up a marker. "Before you start, I'd like to do an exercise."

The alien doesn't move. I take it as assent.

Referring often to the picture on my phone, I draw on the glass: a labyrinth. ([mígōng], but perhaps more accurately, [qūjìng].) Unlike a maze, it has only one entrance, one inevitable path, and one exit—and this too is a dialectical experience when so much of life is fraught with wants and barriers. A French cathedral contains the most famous version, but global history is rich with them, including gardens in China. I can't guide the alien on a therapeutic walk, but I provide instructions, then watch a tentacle weave through, hesitating on the turns, the switchbacks. I find myself hoping Wikipedia was right about the sophistication of octopoid sentience. That something of terrestrial spatial reasoning is relatable to a being of extraterrestrial expanses.

My arm aches from the effort of drawing the picture as big as I could. My heart aches from something else.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "What did you feel?"

One last time, the alien ignores my question to tell me the story instead, laced with emotion beyond human language.

And this time, finally, I ask, "What happens after?"

The word for death (birth) is _____. I hear it once—I am the only one to hear it, unadulterated by digital filtration or misunderstanding. I memorize it, and under my breath, I pronounce it until I have it perfect, or as perfect as my own hearing will allow.

For an instant, the alien lapses into silence. Then its wheezing siphon begins to glow blue. Abruptly, the water floods with bright, bioluminescent liquid, leaving nothing solid inside.

It's gone.

The airmen crash in, shouting, seizing the monitors and probes. I don't let myself cry until I'm driving away.

Once I'm home, I tell my wife the word.

"The kid might not be ours," I warn her. "They'll be different somehow. But I think they'll start out healthy and love us. And I'll do everything to protect you both." It feels like a piss-poor promise.

Her eyes are so big. She nods eagerly. "Teach me again."

All night, I dream of flying (falling). When I wake, my phone says it's 3:00 A.M. and, breaking news, the stationary aliens over O'ahu have moved on. Another group is due to pass by.

The bed is empty beside me. Through the door, I hear my wife splash in the bath, humming an unfamiliar tune, though I recognize the syllables under her breath.

Twenty weeks later, my wife is pregnant. She pees on so many sticks. We're sure.

"Are we really gonna let them examine me?" she asks, but we're already at the clinic.

"They'll notice if we don't. We've delayed too long already," I reply, but we both already knew. Saying it out loud helps because it's better to be scared together.

Holding hands, sweating, we go in.

There's a brief, fraught moment, when the OB-GYN stares at the scan in confusion, and Maya's fingers tighten around mine. But then: it's a girl!

We go from panicked to ecstatic.

Then we start a list of names.

I don't know if this child will be mine. I can't know. Even if they're born looking like me, grow to my height or cultivate my eyebrows, it could be a camouflage like whatever prevented the military from detecting the genetic changes underlying my improved vision. But I already feel equal love and fear for this child.

Maya tugs the baby name book from my hands and looks in my eyes. "When I say the kid will be 'mine,' I don't mean ownership. Not belonging to, but belonging with. We won't be just like other families, but that's old news."

I nod.

She's right, of course. She's always been able to reconcile the numbers lost in chaos to everyone else. While the rest of us lament essentialism or compromise, either-or, she sees opportunity for expansion. The best part of being queer.

My daughter coos in my arms. The hospital is quiet around us, Maya dozing, walls decorated with pastel animal decals—a regular civilian facility that's undoubtedly ill-equipped to deal with the first alien-human hybrid birth on this planet and the DEFCON 1 threat the U.S. Military would flag, if they knew. But they don't know. My fears pass through like a bad smell.

In this moment, I am a father. Nothing sticks but the tiny weight of the person resting on my chest. We look alike in terms of limb count, eye count, all the species-particular features they'll care about. Except I'm pale, tall, and skinny apart from my gut. She's brown, technically very, very short, and so perfectly fat that her arm rolls look like a quilted jacket made of herself.

I whisper, "Hey Gayle, it's Dad."

She screws up her face at me. She probably farted. But when I kiss her cheek, she smiles and I'm so happy I could die.

I lift my daughter so she can see the animals in the tank. The Giant Pacific Octopus doesn't bother to open his eyes. But when I turn to talk to my wife, Gayle touches the glass and faint Chladni figures blossom in the sand. The octopus sneaks a tentacle in the corner of my eye. The suckers open like a kiss under my daughter's fingertips.

结束

[Jiéshù] ■