

All In

The man opened his eyes to see a most terrifying display. A white electric light loomed above his face, suspended by a metallic frame. On all the walls around the room were diagrams showing the most gruesome images: human hearts, eyeballs, brains and other organs. Colourful lights flashed chaotically, producing beeping noises of different pitches. Thick smoke was creeping inside the room, but the man couldn't pinpoint its source. And in the middle of it all, with his back turned towards the man, stood a short, grey alien.

The alien turned around suddenly and walked towards the man, carrying a metal tray with surgical utensils. The man yanked his arms and legs, only to notice that he was tied to a chair. The alien placed the tray on a small table next to the chair and examined the utensils. One by one, he picked up the scissors, saw, pliers and knife and placed them back on the tray, as if trying to decide what to start with.

Sweat was dripping down the man's forehead as he looked into the black, expressionless eyes of his soon-to-be butcher. The alien grabbed the man's head and looked inside his ears, nose and mouth. The man tried to say something, but fear had paralysed him completely. The alien then picked up from the tray a syringe with a colourless liquid. The man saw the needle puncture his skin before passing out.

Jerome Gold took off his alien mask.

"That should keep you asleep for a few hours." he said.

He dug his hand in the man's pocket and took out his wallet. From the wallet, he took out a driver's license.

"Guy Milton, you look better in the photo than you do in real life."

Jerry put the license back in and took out a stack of banknotes.

“Three hundred dollars, not bad at all.” he said putting the wallet back in Guy Milton’s pocket and the cash to the side.

With one gesture, Jerry flipped a switch and the flashing and beeping stopped. He flipped another switch and the smoke machine turned off. He then walked towards the door, turned the handle and stepped outside.

The courtyard was quiet except for the wind that rustled the trash on the ground. The lamp posts were casting yellow lights on the rows of storage units that all looked the same. Jerry took off the rest of his alien suit and lit a cigarette. As he smoked, he looked around and noticed that a camera was pointing straight at him, so he waved at it.

After he finished his cigarette, he put Milton on the backseat of his car and locked his storage unit. He drove to the gate of the courtyard, where a security guard was waiting for him. Jerry stopped the car next to the guard and said:

“Good shift so far?”

The guard didn’t move a muscle, just looked at Jerry with a combination of tiredness and boredom on his face.

“Why do I even try with you?” said Jerry. “Here’s 100 dollars. Delete the security tapes, as usual?”

The guard took the money, nodded and opened the gate. Jerry drove to where he had picked up Milton and dumped him on the side of the road. He then drove to his building, went inside his apartment and collapsed on the bed.

The night melted into morning, which in turn dissipated as the sun rose to the top of the sky. Jerry woke up right before lunchtime with a rumbling sensation in his stomach. He looked around his bedroom, at the mess that everything was in. The floor was covered in clothes, many of them being expensive shirts and trousers, his desk was covered in papers

and notes about the novel he never finished writing and the wardrobe doors were wide open with dress suits falling out of it. He got out of bed, picked a pink shirt from a pile and put it on, followed by a black suit that he took from the wardrobe.

He went out of his bedroom and into the living room, where a large TV screen stood on one wall, in front of a leather sofa. On the wall adjacent to the TV was a bookcase with its shelves filled with action figures and old science fiction novels that Jerry had read more times than he could remember. Jerry crossed the living room and went into the kitchen. He took a bottle of milk from the refrigerator and a bowl and box of cereal from a cupboard and, with his breakfast in hand; he sat at the table and ate in silence.

When he finished eating, he put on his black shoes, gold cufflinks and watch, before combing the few remaining hairs on his balding head. A deck of cards was lying on the sofa armrest, from which Jerry drew two. "Look at that, a pair of Kings," he thought, slipping the deck in his pocket. "Too bad my gambling days are over." He grabbed his keys, went outside and locked the door behind him.

He walked at a leisurely pace to the newspaper stand around the corner and bought the morning edition. He put the paper under his arm and continued towards where his car was parked. He had just inserted the key in the door, when a woman in tattered clothing appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"Spare some change, good man?" she asked.

Jerry fished a handful of banknotes from his pocket and, without counting them, gave them to the woman.

"Here you go." he said with a smile.

The woman, wide-eyed with astonishment, took the money in her fist and ran away. Jerry got in his car, closed the door behind him and started flicking through the newspaper. A few pages in, he saw an article that attracted his attention:

“Guy Milton, a 45-year old man, claims he has been abducted by an alien last night in the forest just outside of town. ‘It was terrifying and exciting at the same time.’ says Mr Milton. ‘He had a lot of diagrams of the human body, I think he’s been studying us for a while. He touched my face and I felt like we connected on a deeper level, as if he was touching my mind.’ But the experience did not come without a price to Mr Milton. ‘It’s kind of embarrassing, but I think I’ve lost some money on the spaceship. I hope he doesn’t mind.’ The local UFO enthusiasts will be gathering tonight in the forest in hope that they can catch a glimpse of what Mr Milton has seen.”

Jerry threw the newspaper on the backseat. “Looks like I’ll have a big job to do tonight.” thought Jerry. “I’ll rob all those suckers at once.”

That night, the clearing in the forest was teeming with people, all laughing and talking loudly. Tents had been installed and barbecues were being cooked in front of them, sending clouds of smoke in the air. Empty beer cans were piled on top of each other, next to rows of lawn chairs that people were lounging on. Every once in a while, a reckless mosquito would fry against the zappers with a faint electric spark sound. Cars were parked all along the track that led to the main road, including the one that belonged to Jerome Gold.

Jerry was in the woods watching the scene, waiting to finish his cigarette and sweating underneath his costume. He was lazily raising the cigarette to his mouth, basking in his own pride at how well he had set everything up. The power generator was running, with the smoke machine and spotlight plugged in, yet to be turned on. A second spotlight, also plugged in, was in a tree—which had a rope tied around it—at the edge of the clearing.

Jerry took one last drag from the cigarette, extinguished it in the dirt and put on his mask. “It’s show time,” he thought as he switched on the smoke machine and first spotlight. The light was falling on him from behind, so that the people could only see his silhouette, and the smoke was creeping towards the clearing. Jerry took a few steps, arms raised above his

head, until he reached the edge of the treeline, positioning himself next to the tree with the rope tied around it.

All talking and laughing had stopped, the noise of burning barbecue being the only audible sound. The enthusiasts, some standing, others sitting, were watching Jerry, none of them daring to speak or move. A few good metres stood between them and Jerry, almost as if an invisible barrier prevented them from approaching.

When Jerry lowered his arms, he chuckled seeing that some of the people flinched.

“Greetings, earthlings.” said Jerry. “My name is Jerz and I come to you in peace.”

Suddenly, Jerry heard rustling coming from the crowd, as one man pushed himself towards the front. It was Guy Milton.

“Jerz,” he said with his palm raised, facing forward, “Do you remember me? We met last night.”

“Yes, I remember you, earthling. You are a fine specimen.”

Milton laughed nervously, turning towards the other people for a second, visibly enjoying the admiration on his friends’ faces.

“Earthlings...”

“Which star system are you from?” asked Milton.

Jerry’s hand twitched involuntarily, the question taking him by surprise. “Which star system? Milton, stop being such a creep.” he thought. Jerry’s mind was rushing through all the science fiction novels he’d read and films he’d seen, trying to think of an answer. He could see the impatience that had taken over all the enthusiasts.

“I am from the star which you call Rigel, from the constellation of Orion.”

He paused, feeling a wave of sweat wash over his body, as a low murmur of chatter came from the crowd.

“Earthlings...”

“What’s it like there?” asked Milton.

Jerry clenched his teeth, struggling to keep a sigh of exasperation in his chest.

“My planet’s sky is black like your deepest ocean and we can see the stars on the grand cupola above our heads, except at dawn and dusk, when Rigel paints our heavens in a cobalt blue. At night, the skies turn crimson, and the red giant Betelgeuse can be seen with the naked eye, terrifying and majestic. The planet is covered in lush jungles, with their blue foliage struggling to absorb the life-giving energy of the distant diurnal star, and furious purple seas upon the shores of which the offspring of Rigel have built their homes.”

Jerry stopped, unsure where all that had come from. One thing he was certain of was that he hadn’t oversold it. Silence and stillness reigned over his audience, many of them with their mouths open, some of them with tears of joy in their eyes.

“Now, earthlings, I require something of you. I am here on a peaceful mission of scientific research. Please, place your items of jewellery, as well as any currency you possess, under the ray of light.”

With that, Jerry turned on the spotlight in the tree, which shone straight downwards, casting a wide beam on the ground. One at a time, the enthusiasts emptied their wallets and placed their watches and jewellery under the spotlight. When they had all finished, a large pile of valuables was lying at Jerry’s feet, begging to be picked up. Jerry untied the rope from around the tree and pulled at it. Immediately, the blanket on which the valuables had been placed, tied to the rope by all four corners, rose into the tree’s leafage, taking the stolen goods with it and hiding them between the branches.

Jerry securely tied the rope around the tree again and turned off the spotlight.

“He teleported them to his ship!” shouted somebody from the crowd.

“Yeah,” thought Jerry, “If that’s what you want to believe.”

Jerry waved at the enthusiasts, telling them that he must return to his spaceship at once to examine the objects. As soon as he turned around, Milton crossed in one leap the distance that still stood between Jerry and the crowd and fell to his knees saying:

“Take me with you, Jerz.”

As if on cue, all the enthusiasts crossed the distance, charging towards Jerry, shouting similar things. Seeing the mob approach, Jerry darted between the trees into the dark safety of the thicket.

The burning in his lungs built up quicker than he expected, as the costume was restricting his movements and heating up his body. His feet were rustling the dead leaves on the ground, alerting his pursuers to his presence. Their flashlights pierced through the night, the gleam reaching Jerry through the vegetation, keeping him visible to the enthusiasts. If they caught him, his gig would be over; he'd be handed to the police.

He hid behind a large tree trunk to catch his breath, hearing the people shout all around him. He took off his mask and dropped it on the ground. He took off the rest of the costume, left it next to the mask and started running, pausing only for a brief moment to tidy his pink shirt and black suit.

As he was running, he heard a voice shouting from behind:

“Guys, the alien's shed his skin. He's a shapeshifter.”

“Careful, everybody,” came the response, “He can look like one us.”

Jerry kept running, neither stopping nor looking behind. He saw a white light in front of him and headed towards it, guessing it must be a house or a cabin. As he got closer, the light became brighter, until it blinded him completely.

When he could see again, he was in a white room with smooth walls and no obvious source of illumination. Multicoloured lights were flashing rhythmically, making the room seem alive, complementing the multitude of gauge displays ornate with senseless symbols. A

row of medical examination tables was against one of the walls, all with clean sheets made from a silky material. The air was sterile, saturated by a strong smell of ozone and iodine tincture, and there was a faint current coming from a source of ventilation that Jerry couldn't see. Computer screens were embedded into the walls, showing images of the Earth, the other planets in the solar system and parts of human anatomy. And in the middle of it all, with his back turned towards Jerry, stood a short, grey alien.

The alien suddenly turned around and faced Jerry.

“Do not be afraid, earthling. My name is Holovax.”

Jerry looked into the black, expressionless eyes and examined the room around him once more, before bursting into laughter.

“Don't try to school me, boy, I've been in this business longer than you have.” he said.

The alien didn't move, his face betraying no emotional response.

“This place isn't even that convincing.” continued Jerry. “Who do you think you're fooling with this cheap plaster on the walls?”

Jerry touched the walls with his palms and immediately jerked away. The walls were cold to the touch with a metallic texture but coated in something slippery. Jerry turned around and faced the alien, who had not changed his posture.

“All right,” said Jerry, “How much money do you want? And take off that stupid rubber mask.”

Jerry grabbed the alien's cheeks, but instead of rubber his fingers met with what felt like paper. The alien blinked once, cleaning his eyes with two pink inner eyelids. Jerry bounced a few steps back, pressing himself against the wall. Next to him, a hatch opened revealing a window through which he saw the forest, miles underneath, rotating at a slow pace.

He was on a flying saucer, face to face with a real alien.

“Please, earthling, lie down on a table.”

With shaking legs, Jerry complied with the request, lying down on the silky bedsheets, facing upwards. Holovax waved a rectangular box over Jerry’s body, which produced for each body part different light patterns that reflected in the alien’s black eyes. Jerry was gripping the edges of the table, afraid of what would come after the alien would finish the preliminary examination.

Holovax placed the box on the side.

“Computer, begin recording.” he said. “Medical log 22451, specimen number 2. This specimen is of unusually short stature and seems to be suffering from a condition that prevents hair growth on his head.”

“You’re bald too, buddy.”

“His lungs appear to be contaminated with an unknown substance, perhaps as a result of exposure to a toxic atmosphere. More research is necessary to deem whether or not this deviates from normal human biology.”

“Smoking helps me lose weight.”

“Mind probe commencing.”

The alien suddenly placed his fingers on Jerry’s face. The lights, the walls and everything else disappeared from before Jerry’s eyes and all he could see was blackness. He felt as if the alien was inside his mind, looking through his memories, forcing him to share his secrets. Everything he had tried to bury inside was being brought out to the surface. He had grown up in poverty, with only his books and television to take his mind off his miserable existence, until one night, when he had decided he wanted to make something of himself, and ran away from home, never to return. His dreams had been crushed when the only job he could find was that of a janitor, where people humiliated him at every step. His job only lasted a few years and afterwards he started gambling.

It started with a game of poker, which he'd won. And another one, which he'd also won. The thrill and the joy of winning kept him coming back for more every day. When he was sitting at the poker table he forgot all about himself, surrendering to the delight of his obsession. His losses were small, minor setbacks compared to his earnings.

"This specimen shows interesting characteristics." the alien's voice resounded in Jerry's mind. "Selfishness and greed have created a brain chemistry never encountered before."

Jerry was sitting on the side of the road, underneath a street lamp, in front of a casino. He remembered that evening well and all the details he was now seeing were exactly as they had been many years ago. It was the evening of his biggest loss. He'd known he should have folded the hand, but he'd played it anyway, going all in on a slim chance. That mistake had cost him a lot of money.

After losing he had left the casino and had sat down on the side of the road, blaming himself for what had happened. He sat there until a passer-by came along, an elderly man with blue eyes and silver hair. The man stopped in front of Jerry, looking straight down at him.

"What's the matter, son?" he asked.

"Go away."

"That's no way to talk, young man."

"I just lost all my money in there," said Jerry pointing to the casino, "So I don't care what you have to say."

The elderly man sat down next to Jerry.

"Why do you gamble, son?"

"It's all I have left."

“That’s not true. If you sort yourself out, a lot of good things will start coming your way.”

The man stood up, grabbed Jerry by the forearm and pulled him on his feet.

“You’ve made a few mistakes, so what? We’ve all made them, son. But that doesn’t mean everything’s lost.”

The man searched through his pockets and placed a few banknotes in Jerry’s hand.

“Take it. It’s not much, but it’s a start.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t let me down.”

The man turned around and walked away, the only person who had ever been kind to Jerry.

The interior of the spaceship appeared once again before Jerry’s eyes. Warm tears were running down his face. That memory had been the one he’d buried deepest. He didn’t know if he was happy to have met the elderly man, or if he was sad that he’d spoiled that kind gesture through his life of crime.

“The specimen’s brain offers some most interesting research possibilities.” said Holovax. “The subject will be prepared for brain removal for further study. Computer, stop recording.”

Jerry sat on the bed, sobbing, feeling as if he had just lived through those memories again. When the alien pointed towards the door, Jerry wiped the tears off his face and stood up, reeling all of that emotion back in. He followed the alien out of the medical bay.

They were walking down a corridor, with walls just as white and smooth as the medical bay’s and the faint air current carrying the same smell of ozone and iodine tincture. Other greys, all of which looked identical to Jerry, were walking along the corridor talking in a strange language.

“Where are we going?” asked Jerry.

“To the holding cells.”

“Hold on a second,” said Jerry stopping in place. “Did you just say you’re going to extract my brain?”

“Precisely, earthling,” said the alien as he kept on walking. “But do not worry, you will feel no pain.”

“Pain?” said Jerry rushing after the alien. “It’s going to kill me!”

The alien didn’t have time to reply, as another grey posted himself in front of him and Jerry.

“Holovax, how are the medical examinations proceeding?” asked the newcomer.

“Excellent, Yucholl. This specimen is most promising. I’m taking him to the holding cells, in preparation for brain extraction.”

“I shall accompany you, Holovax.”

Holovax and Yucholl led Jerry along the hallway and through one of the doors on the side, into an empty room which contained a single, large glass cell. And in that cell, curled on the floor, was Guy Milton.

Jerry grabbed Holovax’s arm with all his strength, prompting a shriek of pain from the alien.

“What have you done to him?”

Holovax pulled his arm away and raised his hand, signalling to Yucholl, who was preparing to attack Jerry, to stop.

“He has not been harmed, earthling. He is merely fatigued after the medical examination.”

Yucholl opened the cell door with a sneer thrown in Jerry's direction and motioned him to step inside. Jerry did so without arguing, kneeling beside Milton as soon as the door was closed behind him.

"Are these the only two subjects onboard, Holovax?"

"So far. The forest below us is full of earthlings. We are ready to commence their collection on your order."

Jerry clenched his fists at the sound of those words. They were going to abduct all the enthusiasts and then experiment on them. But what did he care about them? All he wanted to do was get off the flying saucer and go home.

"By the way, Yucholl," said Holovax as the two greys were walking out of the room, "Is there one among us named Jerz? The first earthling was asking about him."

Jerry took Milton's head in his hand and slapped him gently across the face, until the man opened his eyes.

"Are you alright?" asked Jerry.

"What's happening? Where are we? What are they going to do to us? Help me!"

Jerry held Milton down, as he was getting more and more agitated.

"It's okay, you'll be fine. We're going to get out of here."

"They're aliens. I knew it, but they wouldn't believe me."

Milton collapsed back on the floor, hugging his knees, and whispering something unintelligible to himself. Jerry had to help him somehow, he couldn't just leave him there.

He stood up and walked to the glass wall, knocking on it a few times. It was a few good centimetres thick, made out of several layers and felt sturdier than anything Jerry had seen before. And even if he could escape the cell, what would he do next, find a laser gun and shoot his way out?

Jerry sat down on the metal floor. The memory of the elderly man was still lingering at the back of his mind. He had let him down over and over again, which is why he had tried to forget that single kind gesture he'd ever known. Now was the best time to make amends, by saving the enthusiasts from getting abducted. He owed it to them, since he had gotten them there, and he owed it to the elderly man who had been credulous enough to believe in him.

After a few minutes, Holovax and Yucholl came back into the room, dragging after them a medical bed. Holovax was holding a syringe in his hand and, as he opened the cell door, spoke to Jerry:

“Lie down on the bed, earthling. I will give you this anaesthetic before we proceed with the brain extraction, so that you will feel no pain.”

Jerry stepped out of the cell, looking for something to fight the aliens with. Yucholl was standing right in front of the door, cutting off Jerry's escape. He shoved his hands in his pockets, determined to stall as long as he could, when his fingers wrapped around the deck of cards. He took it out and began shuffling it nervously, trying to decide whether or not the aliens even had laser guns.

“What are you doing, earthling?” asked Yucholl.

Jerry stopped shuffling as his eyes widened and a grin crept on his face.

“You've never seen this before?” he asked.

Both aliens shook their heads. Jerry walked around the medical bed, putting it in-between himself and the aliens. He placed the deck on the bed, face down, resting his index finger on the top card.

“On Earth,” said Jerry, “We like to gamble. We like the exhilaration of risk and the promise of winning. Do you have anything like that?”

“Nothing the like.” said Holovax as the two greys drew closer, staring at the deck of cards.

“Well, my favourite game is one called hold'em poker. Would you like to try?”

Holovax looked at Yucholl with a pleading face.

“It would be an interesting research opportunity.” he said.

“Very well, earthling.” said Yucholl. “But afterwards, we must start the brain extraction without further delay.”

“Each player gets two cards,” said Jerry as he dealt. “Look at them, but don't show them to anybody else.”

The aliens looked at the cards in their hands with puzzled expressions.

“There are four suits,” said Jerry peeking at the 2 and 7 of diamonds he had in his hand, “And these are hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades, I'm sure you can figure out which is which. There are also ranks going from 2 to 10, followed by Jack, Queen, King and Ace. Are you following me?”

The aliens nodded, still frowning at the cards in their hands, trying to take in the rules of the game.

“What is the purpose of this game?” asked Holovax.

“I was just getting there. You need to have the best hand on the table, the best set of five cards. In order, these hands are a high card, a pair, two pairs, three of a kind, a straight (five cards in a sequence, not of the same suit), a flush (any five cards of the same suit, not in a sequence), a full house (three of a kind and a pair), four of a kind and a straight flush, which is five cards in a sequence, all of the same suit.”

Jerry paused, giving the greys time to talk to each other in their language and go over all the rules he'd just explained.

“Very well, earthling,” said Yucholl, “You may proceed.”

Jerry drew the top card and placed it, face down, next to the deck.

“This card is burned. We don’t use it.”

He then drew three cards, one at a time, and placed them in a row facing upwards.

“These three cards are called the flop.”

The cards on the flop were an 8 and a 9 of clubs and a 4 of spades. Normally, Jerry would have folded as soon as he saw the 2 and the 7 in his hand and the flop was of no use. He knew he would lose that hand, but he kept playing, hoping that the aliens would enjoy their win enough to play again. He burned another card and placed an Ace of clubs next to the other three cards.

“This one is called the turn.”

Afterwards, he burned another one and placed a 10 of diamonds next to the other four.

“And this one is the river. Now you make your hand with the two cards that you’re holding and any of the five on the table. Are you ready to show what you have?”

Jerry and the aliens revealed their cards at the same time. Holovax had an Ace and a 3, while Yucholl had a King and a 2.

“Well, I have nothing,” said Jerry. “Looks like Holovax beat us.”

Holovax smiled awkwardly, trying to conceal his excitement from Yucholl.

“But I thought I would win with my King,” said Yucholl.

“Holovax has a pair of Aces, buddy. Don’t be a sore loser.”

Yucholl sneered at Holovax, who was still trying to conceal his smile.

“That was a very interesting experiment, Yucholl. Should we conduct another one?”

“Yes, I think that would be most instructive.”

Jerry smiled at them, knowing that he had them exactly where he wanted. He picked up the deck and shuffled it, dealing two cards to each player. Setting the deck on the table, within close reach, he looked at his own cards, which were a 5 of spades and a 6 of hearts. He

burned one card and revealed the flop, which was made of an Ace of spades and a 4 and 7 of hearts. While the Ace of spades did concern him, in case one of his opponents had another Ace in their hand, he only needed a 3 or an 8 to have a straight. The evening when he met the elderly man he had been in a similar situation and had played all he had hoping a particular card would show up. It had been a mistake then, but he had no other choice now.

“Listen, guys,” he said, “A game of poker is no fun if there are no stakes.”

“What do you propose, earthling?” asked Holovax.

“If I win this hand, both myself and the specimen over there in the cell get to go free. But if either of you wins, you get to do your brain extraction. We’re going all in, how does that sound?”

Yucholl stared at the cards in his hand, tapping his three fingers on the medical bed. Holovax was looking at Yucholl with keen eyes, eager to play his hand, which led Jerry to believe that he could be holding an Ace.

“Very well, earthling.” said Yucholl eventually.

Jerry’s heart was pounding as he burned another card and dealt the turn. He swallowed a noise of despair as he looked at the 6 of clubs that was on the table. His only hope was that he’d get the 3 or the 8 on the river. Last time he’d played poker, the card he needed never showed up. His hands were sweating on the silky sheet as he rubbed his two cards together, trying to discern what his opponents were thinking. Yucholl was frowning, still tapping his fingers on the table, while Holovax was simply looking at his cards smiling. Jerry was sure that Holovax had an Ace in his hand, he was too confident.

Jerry burned another card. With trembling fingers, he flipped another card upwards, muffling a sigh of relief when he saw the 8 of hearts. As it stood, the cards on the table were the Ace of spades, 6 of clubs and 4, 7 and 8 of hearts. Jerry had a straight with the 4, 7 and 8 on the table and the 5 of spades and 6 of hearts in his hand.

“Well, guys, let’s see what you have.” he said.

Holovax revealed his cards first. To Jerry’s surprise, he had not one, but two Aces in his hand, of clubs and of hearts, but Holovax’s three of a kind wasn’t as good as Jerry’s straight. Then, Yucholl showed his cards, and Jerry had to prop himself against the table to avoid falling. Yucholl had the 5 and 9 of diamonds and, with the 6, 7 and 8 on the table, he had a higher straight than Jerry.

The memories of all his losses flooded Jerry’s mind at once, but all of them combined were still lesser than this most recent one. “I doubt they’d want to do two out of three, they’re already impatient to get on with their work.” thought Jerry. He was miles above the ground, surrounded by aliens who wanted his brain, on a spaceship where he didn’t even know how to open the doors. His mind was racing through all his options, encountering only laughable ideas, as he placed his hand absent-mindedly on the deck. He bent the corner of the top card just enough to see that it was a 5 of hearts. His hand instantly pulled away. With the 5 of hearts instead of the 5 of spades in his hand, he’d have a straight flush and win the game.

“Well, earthling? What is your hand?” said Yucholl.

“Let me see your cards better.” said Jerry.

As soon as he spoke, he bent over the table, with the top half of his body almost lying on top of the deck and his arm underneath him. He examined Yucholl’s cards, followed by Holovax’s, trying to keep them guessing as to what it all meant. With the hand that was hidden underneath him, he took the 5 of hearts from the top of the deck and replaced it with the 5 of spades. He straightened his back, making sure the table looked exactly as it did before. He flipped his cards with a short gesture, revealing the 5 and 6 of hearts.

“Straight flush, guys, I’m sorry. Holovax, you played those Aces well. And Yucholl, you almost beat me.”

Yucholl's nostrils dilated and a blood vessel began pulsating on his forehead. Jerry picked up the cards and shoved them in his pocket, before either of the greys could demand another game. Yucholl grabbed the table and flipped it on its side, walking out of the room in a fit of rage.

"He is sore loser." said Jerry.

"A deal is a deal, earthling, regardless of how fond I am of your brain." said Holovax.
"You and the other specimen are now free to go."

After a few minutes, Jerry and Milton had been dropped back in the forest and the flying saucer was nowhere to be seen. As he helped Milton to his feet, Jerry's mind was thinking about different ways in which he could convince the other enthusiasts to leave. There was no way he could scare those people, he knew that already. Maybe he could get them to chase him and lead them away, but they wouldn't just leave their stuff in the clearing and he didn't want to risk getting caught. There had to be a better way.

"Milton, listen to me." said Jerry, gently slapping the man across the cheek.

Milton looked at Jerry with confused eyes, gripping the collar of his shirt.

"Milton, listen, you need to go that way, as fast as you can." said Jerry pointing towards the clearing. "Get in your car and go home."

Milton let go of Jerry and took a few steps back, still looking confused and agitated.

"Go, Milton, go."

"Yes, sir. Please, don't take me away, I promise I won't tell anyone what happened here."

"I won't. Now go."

Milton turned around and ran in the direction of the clearing, leaving Jerry alone. "So, you think I'll take you away, Milton?" thought Jerry. "Well, you've been most useful tonight."

Jerry dashed in the same direction that Milton went, making his way towards the clearing. When he finally reached it, he stood in the cover of the treeline for a few minutes and examined the scene. The enthusiasts had regrouped there and were now talking as loudly as before, discussing the events that had transpired with a mixture of frantic excitement and slight disappointment. More cans of beer had been opened and some of them had put fresh meat on their barbecues, having discarded the burnt pieces. Jerry heard a car engine being turned on and then speed away, meaning that Milton had left.

He walked around the clearing, still keeping himself out of sight. The generator was on its side, still running and humming softly, but the smoke machine and spotlights were switched off. They had been unplugged, perhaps when the generator had been knocked over by one of his exhilarated pursuers from before. The blanket with all the stolen goods was still dangling in the tree where Jerry had left it. As far as he was led to believe, they still hadn't figured anything out.

Jerry straightened his shirt's collar, dusted off his black suit and ran a hand through his thin hair. He entered the clearing with long, purposeful strides, walked into the middle of the encampment and cleared his throat before speaking:

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please? You are to collect all your belongings and vacate these premises immediately.”

Jerry looked around, grinding his teeth, at the startled people who stared at him in disbelief. A tall, well-built man approached Jerry from the crowd and planted himself in front of him, flexing his muscles.

“And who are you?” said the man.

Jerry took a deep breath, raising his eyebrows.

“I am special agent Mojo Ledger. I have been sent here on behalf of the intelligence services with a message for all of you.”

“And why should we believe you? Show us your badge first.”

Jerry smirked, trying as hard as he could to look unintimidated.

“People like me don’t carry around badges, because we don’t exist officially. And if you’re going to be a problem, I’ll simply make you disappear.”

The muscular man took a few steps back, then sprinted to his tent. The rest of the people formed a semicircle in front of Jerry, all keen to hear what he had to say. Jerry paused for a few moments, letting everybody settle down, keeping them in suspense.

“Ladies and gentlemen, pay very close attention, please.”

He took another short pause, murmurs propagating through the crowd. He paced around the semicircle, crunching the dead leaves underneath his shoes.

“You have seen nothing here, tonight. Do not search for answers or explanations, because you will find none.”

“Have we been visited?” asked a voice.

Jerry stopped pacing, clasping his hands together.

“The truth is...yes. I know you’ve been looking for this validation your entire lives. Even when people told you how wrong you were, you knew better than to believe them. But there’s nothing else for you to see, so go home.”

Nobody protested as the people quickly packed their barbecues, tents and lawn chairs and threw them in their cars. Even the muscular man packed everything up, got in the driver’s seat and drove towards the main road. Everybody else, one by one, followed his example until Jerry was the only one left in the clearing.

Suddenly, a gust of wind erupted, and a white light rose over the treetops. Jerry ran to the cover of the trees and looked towards the sky. The flying saucer was hovering close to the ground, its searchlights looking for potential abductees. They flew around the area for almost

half an hour, unable to find what they were hunting for. Jerry sat on the ground, watching the searchlight come and go, curious to see what the aliens would do.

Eventually, they turned the light off, just before the flying saucer started rising vertically. Jerry watched the spaceship turn into a red dot on the night sky, which then zoomed away, leaving behind a short-lived trail.

“Nice meeting you.” said Jerry. “Don’t bother coming again.”

Jerry stood up and stretched his aching back, before unlocking his car, the only one left along the dirt track. He packed his generator, smoke machine and spotlights in the trunk, then walked back to the tree where he had hidden the stolen valuables. He untied the rope and lowered the blanket on to the ground and then looked at all he had taken from the enthusiasts: watches, rings, necklaces and more cash than he’d ever seen in one place.

A fleeting thought passed through his mind. None of that was his, he’d taken other people’s possessions and the right thing to do would have been to return them. “Nah,” he thought. “Besides, I’ve just saved their lives, it’s the least they could do.”

He made the blanket into a sack, threw it on his shoulder and carried it to the car. He placed it in the back and got in the driver’s seat, turning the engine on. He stood with his hands on the wheel for a few moments, replaying the evening’s events through his head. He got what he wanted and yet, he didn’t feel happy about it. He looked at the sack in the rear-view mirror, fully knowing that no matter how many excuses he came up with, he was no hero. “This was the last time, no more stealing.” he thought.

The car started moving along the dirt track, as a smile sketched on Jerry’s lips. “Besides, if I invest the money I got from tonight intelligently, I won’t need to steal anymore.” The car got on the main road and Jerry accelerated, taking a deep breath and puffing it out.

As he got closer to the city, street lights appeared at the edge of the road, in front of small houses with sleepy windows. “Plus,” thought Jerry as he drove towards home, “In all that’s happened tonight, there has to be a bestseller.”