

LUCKY IN LOVE

a short story by
Amy Briant

I've never been what you might call lucky in love. That is, until I met Kepler Lee Kilkenny and she changed my life forever. The adopted daughter of two renowned astronomers, she is an astrobiologist who works for the same secretive government agency that I do. Trust me, you haven't heard of us. We work in places like the remote mountaintop observatory in the Rockies where Kepler was stationed and the underground bunker in Nebraska that was my home. We'd never met before we both got called into headquarters in Washington for the Neighbors' arrival.

The official translation is N'aa Bgorzh, of course, but they're just so darn cute and friendly, it wasn't long before the media and everyone else started calling them the Neighbors. It's almost comical how non-threatening they are. After decades of dire warnings in science fiction books and movies about terrifying outer space invasions, how ironic is it that our first encounter with aliens turns out to be so, well, cozy? They look a lot like a cheesy "monster" from a 1950s' sci-fi flick: about thigh-high and tubby, a dull Army green in color, a mild propensity for oozing and tentacles--lots of tentacles.

We kept them at bay, well outside Earth's orbit, for nearly a year, while the two sides negotiated and got to know each other. But the Big Day is finally here! At noon, President Khan-Garcia will formally welcome their Ambassador and his delegation in a televised ceremony at the White House. A national holiday has been declared, so even Kep and I have the day off and can tune in from our tiny DC apartment. Our part of the work was mostly finished months ago, although since my two prior protocol-related assignments involved Bali and Bolivia, I wonder how much I've really contributed.

My girlfriend's been in a strange mood lately, a little glum, a little reserved. Saying we need to talk, but then saying it's nothing, forget it. It's probably just the recognition that our temporary orders to Washington are coming to an end--a fact that I've been trying to ignore. She'll go back to her mountaintop and I to my bunker. But I, at least, have hopes of making a long-distance relationship work. Colorado's not that far from Nebraska. Please, please, please don't break up with me, Kepler Lee Kilkenny! Because I've never been in love like this before. We never even got out of bed this morning. That part's still great. And I don't mean just great--try outstanding. I taught her a few things I'd picked up in the hay lofts back home. In turn, she showed me some moves that were truly out of this world. Did I mention I'm in love?

Even my Aunt Mary Margaret gave Kepler the thumbs up when she came to visit last summer. My family of taciturn Midwesterners is not known for their effusiveness, so when my aunt said "That girl's a keeper--you could do a lot worse," I knew it was high praise indeed.

She's no great beauty, but then neither am I. I've always been partial to her type--a quiet, slender girl whose thick-framed glasses showcase her gorgeous green eyes.

"Oh, my gosh, we're missing it!" I yelp as I come up for air and see the clock on top of the television set. I lunge for the remote as Kepler's phone rings. I hear her talking to one of her friends as she steps out of the room. She has a lot of friends, all of whom also seem to be unassuming plain Janes with glasses. What can I say--science nerds.

"Yes, 12:34," I hear her say from the kitchen, which is all of eight feet from the bedroom in our minuscule abode.

I turn on the TV--it doesn't matter what channel, every channel is showing the same thing. This one's got a split screen going. One quarter shows the President on a podium, with various human and alien dignitaries seated behind her. The Neighbors' ambassador is in the front row, awaiting his turn to speak. He has an entirely unpronounceable name, but has good-naturedly accepted the media's nickname for him based on two of the syllables we could pronounce--Larry. Fortunately, his English is flawless and that's a good thing. Even our best linguists couldn't master their language, which sounds like the love child of a steam calliope and a cat caught in a dryer with a couple of bucks in loose change.

Another part of the split screen shows the United Nations, where the Secretary-General and the full assembly are watching from New York. At the bottom left is a roving shot from all over the world showing huge crowds amassed to view the spectacle: Rome, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles. The final quarter of the split screen shows the network anchor, who is letting us know that the President's almost done and Larry's up next.

I scoot down to the foot of the bed and turn up the volume to hear the President saying in her comforting Southern drawl, "...this historic first meeting between humans and the N'aa Bgorzh."

She stumbles a bit over the tricky pronunciation. I and the rest of the viewing audience are certain she stopped herself just in time from saying "Neighbors." The Ambassador seems to think so too. He's chuckling a bit as he steps up to the microphone. (Who knew bug-eyed monsters could chuckle?)

"Actually, Madam President, that's not quite true."

In the background, I hear the President say "Wait, what?"

"Our peoples have so much in common--common goals, common values and the strong bond of friendship which will never waver. And because your friendship means everything to us, we have been careful not to alarm you."

Alarm us? What does that mean? The President's looking a little strained. Secret Service types in dark suits stand a little straighter and mutter into their lapels.

But Larry continues, unruffled. "The truth is, my friends, we have been among you for many years now. Studying you, learning from and about you, and helping you prepare for this momentous occasion."

Definite concern amid the ranks of human dignitaries on the stage now. Hoarse whispering and agitated movements. The Vice President lays a calming hand on the President's shoulder as they confer.

"We have come to you, friends, in this unthreatening guise because we are not a threat to you. I repeat, we are not a threat to humans. We are here in friendship, in love, in peace. But this," and here he waves a few tentacles at his portly form, "this is not our true appearance. We understand that the ability to shape shift may seem frightening to you. But do not be frightened, my friends. Don't be afraid--we are your Neighbors. And the time has come for you to see us as we truly are."

I hear Kepler's phone ping in the kitchen. One quiet tone--sounds like her reminder setting. From the corner of my eye, I see the clock on top of the TV tick from 12:33 to 12:34.

"Keppy, come back, you're missing it!" I hear her climb into bed behind me, but I'm glued to the screen. There's a shimmering moment of riotous color and confusion. My jaw drops. America's jaw drops. In the blink of an eye, Ambassador Larry is gone and in his place stands something amazing. Sort of humanoid--two arms and two legs, at least. No tentacles, thank goodness. But he's a good seven feet tall now and instead of skin, he's covered in brilliantly-

colored aquamarine scales. No more tubbiness, he's rippling with muscle. There's no hair on his head--there wasn't before either, but now his finely-boned skull is topped with a leathery cockscomb that undulates a bit in the chill winter wind. And there's a tail too--a long and sinuous velvety black appendage worthy of a panther deep in the Amazon jungle. Its subtle, lithe movements remind us that this is a living, breathing being, not a mirage. He is captivating. He is beautiful. He is Larry.

But it's not just him--the Vice President has morphed as well, though his scales are rich oranges and reds. Khan-Garcia gawps up at him in stone-cold shock while he continues to gently pat her on the shoulder. Half the Secret Service detail has transformed as well. As has the network anchor and hundreds--maybe thousands--in the crowd shot. At the United Nations, the Secretary-General--the lone remaining human being in an iridescent rainbow sea of seven-foot fish/panther/rooster creatures--appears to be trying to climb under his seat.

"Kepler, stop!" She's been gently prodding me with her toe since she got back into bed. I finally mute the TV and turn to say something more, but what comes out is involuntary. "Oh, damn."

It wasn't a toe. It was her long and sinuous velvety black panther's tail. Her scales are an intense jewel-like green, matching her eyes. I don't think she realizes she is still wearing her glasses. She is undeniably gorgeous, but I find myself searching for any hint of the girl I woke up with this morning. The eyes--the eyes are still the same. As is the voice.

"I'm still me, sweetheart. I still love you," she says quietly, a little wistfully.

A long moment goes by, in which the only noises are the ticking of the clock on top of the television set and the screams from the street outside.

Oh, what the hell. My aunt was right. I could do a lot worse.

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