

THE OFFERING

A well-kept secret.

BY HALL JAMESON

I hadn't entered her room with the intention of snooping. I was dropping off laundry when I smelt it — an assertive, fruity effervescence. The smell intensified as I neared her bed. I peered underneath — nothing but her slippers. I stooped over the bed, the aroma overpowering, and rested my hand on her pillow.

That was when I felt the thing tucked underneath.

Three months had passed since the eradication. According to AKU World News, all traces of alien life had been pinpointed and purged. The infestation had been widespread, a small pod was even discovered in our yard, near the apiary.

Joslyn had spent hours with her father tending the hives. She still cared for them, trying to maintain some sort of connection with him. That was probably when she discovered it.

I lifted the pillow and gaped at what lay there. Out of the window, I saw Joslyn in her beekeeping suit, working honeycomb from a frame. She paused and looked up at the house. I froze, even though it would be impossible for her to see inside with the glare of the sun on the window.

I dropped the pillow back into place and cursed Darren under my breath. This was his fault. If he had stayed, she wouldn't be seeking comfort in dangerous things.

When I turned, Joslyn was standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing in here?"

My cheeks grew warm. "Joss! You startled me." I glanced out the window. How had she got to the house so fast? "I was just leaving your laundry. I washed the red blouse. You can wear it to the ballgame this weekend." I said. "Is Braden playing?"

"You know he is, Mom," she said, frowning. She frowned a lot now, since Darren left. Her eyes flicked over my shoulder to the bed.

I stared at her.

"What?" Joss said, planting her hands on her hips. Before I could find the words, she offered me the information. "It's harmless. I'm keeping it."

I shook my head. "You can't, sweetheart. It's against the law —"

"Nobody's killing him," she snapped. "I won't let it happen, and if you try anything, I'll disappear, just like Daddy."

Her last line was a sucker punch. I propped an arm against the wall to steady

myself. Her gaze softened.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean that." She blinked back tears. "I just don't want them to kill him. Can we hide him here? *Please!*"

So it had hatched. He wasn't just pieces of its shell tucked under her pillow for safekeeping, but the creature was here somewhere. I scanned the room.

"It's not a *he*, Joss, it's an *it*, and it's dangerous. Now *where is it?*"

Joss crossed her arms and shook her head. "I can't... I have to protect him."

"I have to call the sweepers." I cringed at the thought of calling the government thugs with the job of exterminating the aliens.

"No, please don't." Joss paused, her eyes lit up. "We'll make an offering. The bees. The hives. The honeycomb. They did something similar in Tibet. We watched it on the news. Remember? The visitors left without resistance." She took a step towards me.

"Please, Mom. I know you hate the sweepers as much as I do."

I stared at my daughter, considering her words. Then, another sucker punch.

"He told me that Daddy's with them. Safe. Happy. He didn't leave us, see? He wants us to join him." Her face beamed and I gaped at her in horror, unable to speak. My daughter smiled, mistaking my silence for approval. "I'll ask the visitor to send the others an invitation. They'll be here soon. Okay?"

"Okay," I croaked.

She hugged me. "Thank you," she whispered in my ear. She released me, smiling, and picked up the stack of clean clothes.

A splash of stars marked the night sky. I looked up, half expecting to see an alien craft hovering overhead waiting for its prize.

But it wasn't time yet.

Joss joined me on the porch, looking fresh in her strappy red blouse, hair woven into two pigtails, making her appear even younger than her 17 years. She squeezed my hand.

I couldn't help but smile. "You look pretty." "Thanks," she said. "And thanks for not calling the sweepers."

"So... where is it?" I looked around nervously.

"He's over there, beneath the maple tree." A stunted silhouette about the size of a chimpanzee sat on the swing that hung beneath our 60-year-old maple, barely visible in the darkness.

"Do you want to meet him?"

"No!"

"Mom, he won't hurt you. They're kind beings."

"I don't think it's unreasonable to be afraid of those... *things*," I said. "It's my job to protect you. I —"

I didn't get the chance to finish; an arc of gold crossed the sky.

"They're here," Joss whispered.

There was no craft, no saucer-shaped vessel, no raptor-styled ship like in the movies. There was only light.

I reached for Joss's hand and squeezed. To my relief, she returned the gesture, although her eyes did not leave the sky. The light engulfed the boxes, the maple tree and the creature on the swing. My daughter moaned and uttered a word that broke my heart.

"Daddy!"

A moment later, the light slipped through a seam in the night sky and disappeared. In the darkness, I could just make out the empty swing and the squares of dead grass where the hives used to sit.

I exhaled. *That wasn't so bad.*

I squeezed Joss's hand again, but it felt odd, bony. I turned to her, but she was no longer there. One of *them* stood in her place, the strap of Joss's red blouse slipping off its knobby shoulder. ■

Hall Jameson is an American writer and artist who lives in the Northwest with her husband and an assortment of other furry and feathered critters. Her work has recently appeared in *Phobos Magazine*, *Drabblecast* and *Fantasy Scroll Mag*. When she's not writing stories or taking photographs, Hall spends her time kayaking, playing the piano and cat wrangling.



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