

Finalist, Fiction

When Gliese Met Glasgow and Muira Made a Mint
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Muira was a student linguist, professional geek, and the only person to have communicated with the aliens directly. So when they suddenly appeared – not entirely coincidentally - in the sky over Glasgow, she became Earth's impromptu ambassador.

The aliens (who didn't think of themselves as such), were from a dense, parched, and much irradiated planet in the Gliese system (which they also didn't think of as such). As a consequence, they were short, swarthy, and extremely compact. In the time it took to have a few radio exchanges with Muira via SETI, they figured out how to get here.

The politicians were not happy about Muira being Earth's poster girl. Black was ok, after all the aliens might be bright blue (ha ha ha); also Scottish (feisty lot, the Scots – you only had to look at Braveheart). But female? Wouldn't proper First Contact diplomats expect to negotiate with men?

The aliens were not diplomats; they were traders-bordering-on-pirates because that was how their society worked. Find something everybody wanted and everybody was happy. They had no First Contact rules beyond haggling, although some of the preliminaries were not unlike the Glasgow Kiss and would come in handy later when they discovered football.

Another problem with Muira, the men in suits believed, was that she lacked stature, by which they meant height. Her clothes had to be specially made, table tops were inaccessible and, perched on a chair with her legs dangling, she was perpetually at risk of having her food cut up and fed to her on a spoon. But beggars could not be choosers so they had a business suit made for her, put cushions on her seat and a foot stool in the elevator so she could reach the buttons.

They forgot about the toilets which would themselves have benefited from the installation of one sort of stool in order to facilitate the depositing of another.

The aliens were very happy to see Earth (or *Zoclith*, as they called it) because it had commercial potential. The low gravity in particular was exhilarating. They rolled into squat little balls and bounced off the floor and ceiling of their guest quarters (a defunct but lockable nuclear bunker in the Highlands reputed to belong to the British Royal family).

When they were finally released from quarantine – which was just before they flooded the place upon discovering that Earth's water was an abundant commodity – the Gliesians bounded into the hotel conference centre and vaulted up into the vacant seats opposite the official welcoming committee. These were the first humans they had seen not encased in hazard suits, and they spent the next hour and a half doubled up laughing.

This was partly because the committee members reminded the Gliesians of the pale, stringy stuff they grew in caves and used for cleaning their teeth (think

celery), and partly because their high pitched squawking sounded like swarms of copulating *pffidges*. The Gliesians themselves had very deep voices, the lower frequencies of which would have been of interest to orcas, had anyone thought to consult them.

Eventually, it occurred to someone to let Muira have a go, and she was deposited on the table in the middle of the 3D projection of a fish tank supplied as a de-stressor by a hostage negotiation company. Muira raised her arms above her head in greeting and the aliens stopped laughing. ‘*Fidge, pildex de-Zoclith* (We the People of Earth),’ she said, with an exaggerated nod at the row of etiolated diplomats behind her, ‘*Scotle vish, pildex de-Praaxtol*, (welcome you, the People of Gliese).’ She bared her teeth in a theatrical rictus. Then, suddenly conscious of appearing to be surrounded by guppies and probably looking as though she were drowning, she clasped her hands together and slowly brought them to rest on top of her head, for want of an immediately obvious alternative.

This modified gesture served to subtly transform the semantics of her message by slotting seamlessly into previously unexplained Gliesian mythology concerning powerful deities emerging from long-gone primal birth waters, so that what she actually said was, ‘Kneel before me, for I am your Queen and I possess magic that will make you look like this lot (the celery) if you disobey.’ They knelt.

In short order, Muira secured, in her own name, exclusive trading rights with Gliese; established a reality TV channel to follow the lives of people in Essex, parts of Cornwall, and the whole of America (ostensibly for cultural exchange

purposes but really because the Gliesians had never laughed so much at anything before and would pay through the nose for it); and leased out the Moon as a bouncy castle for wedding parties.

Soon afterwards, with a hurriedly created Presidential Seal of United *Zocolith* (Earth), the *De-Praaxtol* (Gliesian) Ring of Perpetual Franchise, and a wadge of commercial contracts in her pocket, Muira left for a new life where she could look her subjects in the eye while she sold them box sets of *Dumb and Dumber*, *Last of the Summer Wine*, and anything featuring Prince Charles; and where it was possible to make all kinds of deposit without need of block and tackle.