

# REQUIEM

*Return journey.*

BY CHRISTINE LUCAS

Is it an invasion if it's only one alien? Some media did call it so, even if this alien didn't come with guns a-blazing. Was he even male? No one could tell, but from the start the media defaulted to their perceived gender of an assumed conqueror. He came down from the sky in his craft of light — his pod, or capsule, or perhaps cocoon. With a smooth, effortless descent he landed in the Sahara Desert, on a stretch of dirt and yellow shards where millennia ago, before Ramses and Alexander, intense heat had turned sand to glass. And then the web erupted with triumphant screeches about the old gods returning to lead mankind to ascension.

Only he didn't.

He strolled through the streets of Cairo with the familiarity of someone born there. He didn't actually walk — he *glided* a couple of centimetres above the ground, clad in his ankle-long, shimmering garment that could be a robe or a kaftan, and browsed the stalls and booths of Khan el-Khalili just like another tourist. His dark, lidless eyes scanned fabrics and glassware, and perhaps lingered a little too long on the miniature cat-shaped statues displayed on the *souq* stalls before seeking the wide-eyed, living cats that had inspired them.

Long fingers — an artist's fingers, some argued, too delicate for warfare — brushed against spice racks, dried fruit and flat-bread amid other, non-edible wares. Then he stopped before a street-food cart and its selection of grilled meats: *kofta*, *kebab*, *shawarma*. Under the flabbergasted gaze of the petrified vendor, he broke off the tiniest piece of lamb meat and brought it to his mouth. Something that could be a smile lit up the expressionless face, and something that could be words left his thin lips. Then he stood there for a moment that stretched on, awaiting a response that never came, save from the vendor's white-knuckled grip around his *nazar* amulet.

And then he vanished.

He appeared again sampling noodle soup in Hong Kong, then a shot of espresso in Rome, then in Peru and Mumbai and Singapore, and several other places around the world. He ventured through local markets, sampled their food and, some believed, tried to engage the locals in conversation. The media crews flocked behind him with every possible recording device, and they all failed. His garments emitted a force field that



rendered all electronics useless after a certain radius. Electronics *and* bullets. Because when the lunatics came — how could they not? — assigning human stupidity to one deity or another, no bullet or bomb affected his stroll through the eateries of Earth.

And while theories on his origin and purpose raged, while the cooks and vendors he visited became celebrities overnight, his glow seemed to diminish with every new visit. Something did affect him.

And then he was gone. No one saw him for two weeks, and many assumed he'd left. Or died.

Until he appeared again, this time on a backwater island of an indebted country in the Mediterranean. No markets this time, only an old fisherman cooking fish fresh from his nets, and the alien perched upon a boulder a few metres away. The lone drone that caught this exchange recorded the alien's lips moving, and the fisherman, grey and withered like his boat, shaking his head.

"Ithaca? No Ithaca," he told the alien in broken English. A tourist is a tourist — what else would he speak? Then the old man pointed westwards. "This, Aegean. Ithaca, other sea. Ionian sea."

The old man poked the pile of embers and ash where something was roasting. He retrieved a package wrapped in aluminium foil and unfolded it. He held up a sardine enclosed in a thick salt crust.

"Here. Try, *phile*."

*Phile*. Friend. Did the alien eyes widen at the word?

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The fisherman leaned closer. "Good. Old recipe. My grandpa's grandpa's. Older.

Back to Odysseus."

"Odysseus," said the alien and shattered the crust to reach the fish meat inside. He took one bite. "Good."

As the old man reached for a second sardine, a woman emerged from the little house behind them, with the whitewashed walls and the blue windows. The drones that had swarmed to the area ran her face through every possible database: a retired schoolteacher, the fisherman's wife, who once taught an ancient, useless language to bored teenagers. Just another nobody in the long string of nobodies the alien had approached. She came bearing gifts of alcohol, and the alien mumbled something to her.

A moment of wide-eyed silence, then a slow shake of her head. "No. Not *oinos kekramenos*. We don't drink that anymore. Here. Try that. Ouzo. Good. Better than ambrosia."

If doubts slowed the alien's initial gulps of the star-anise-smelling liquor, they were washed down with the second bottle and the sardines that accompanied it. Then other dishes came out: olives and grilled peppers and hard bread softened with olive oil and topped with goat cheese.

"Not your first time here?" she asked the alien.

He licked the oil from his fingers and nodded.

"Long ago?"

Another nod.

"Why now?"

A long stare. He held out his open palm. The visage of an ancient copper *drachma* flickered on it. His palm closed a little too slow, as if in pain.

She sighed, and nodded, and offered him more *ouzo*. "One more for the journey. And for the Ferryman."

Beneath the crescent Moon, three old-timers ate and drank their night away, two of them counting their lifespans in decades, the third in millennia. When dawn came, they were gone. Only then did humankind realize how much the alien craft had looked like a coffin. But they never found it to confirm it, nor did they find the old couple, and soon they were all forgotten.

Until another ship came. ■

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