



Illustrated by Soo Lee

My Hypothetical Friend

Harry Turtledove

Dave Markarian pulled into the Interstellar Master Traders parking lot. He was president and CEO of IMT, so naturally he had a reserved parking space next to the entrance. He thought that was natural, anyhow. If his employees didn't, they had the sense to keep their mouths shut about it. The company made everybody lucky enough to work for it so much money, no one complained. This was the future, right here, right now.

Dave poked a dashboard button. The big Mercedes' engine stopped. It was an electric, so it didn't make any noise while it was running, but killing it also killed the air conditioning. He did notice when the soft sigh faded to nothing. And the passenger compartment started getting hot right away. Summer in Fresno was not for sissies.

He opened the door, stepped out, and closed it again. The bricked path to the entrance—yellow bricks, chosen on purpose, so those who understood would smile—was only a few strides from the car, but he didn't step onto it right away. He'd lucked out. One of the aliens' starships had chosen that exact moment to lift off from the spaceport outside of town.

The spaceport sat out in the middle of nowhere, at least twenty miles from IMT headquarters. Dave had no trouble seeing the starship anyway. That gray globe was big—no, Big with a capital B. Even with the hyperdrive, they had to be, to cross the vast gulfs between the stars.

It rose even more silently than his Mercedes drove, slowly at first, then faster and faster. That wasn't because it was too far away to hear. A faint rumble, as of far-off thunder, did come to his ears after a bit—air rushing in to reclaim the space from which the accelerating starship had momentarily shoved it away.

But that rumble was all he heard. How the Brot hyperdrive worked had driven and continued to drive human physicists, engineers, and electronics experts into nervous breakdowns. The aliens said that made them sad. They tried to explain. Either they were terrific doubletalkers or they were math professors trying to teach three-year-olds to solve differential equations. No one—no one human, anyhow—knew for sure.

They could have conquered Earth without breaking a sweat (if they'd sweated, which they didn't). Instead, they were happy to trade. It hardly seemed fair to Dave, not that he was inclined to grumble. Everything people got from the Brot taught them new things about how the Universe worked. Some of those things made the big brains hope they might actually psych out the hyperdrive one of these years.

If they did, great. Dave didn't worry about it all that much. He had other things, more immediate things, on his mind. IMT didn't just buy things from the Brot and sell them at the biggest markup it could get away with. It also made things for them to take back to their homeworld, or perhaps to sell to other folk out among the stars.

And a Brot—trader? inspector? official?—would be visiting IMT this afternoon. Everything had to be ready for him/her/it then. Everything had to be perfect. That worried Dave. He barely understood the top-end human technology that went into the . . . well, the things he manufactured for the aliens.

When you combined that top-end human tech with some of the additions the Brot had supplied . . . He shook his head. In electronics, the big human brains said the Brot were a couple of busy centuries ahead of mankind. In genetic engineering and biotech, they had a bigger lead than that. A lot of the hard part of setting up Interstellar Master Traders had involved getting them to dumb their stuff down to the point where people could figure out how to deal with it and integrate it into what they already had.

Little by little, humans had learned what Brot things did, if not always how and why they did them. Even now, Dave could flick a switch and have an LED go on without worrying about how electricity got produced.

Or he could walk into the big, bland, boring square building that housed his company and be sure that, no matter how blistering it was outside, it would be nice and cool in there. Air conditioning made summer in Fresno bearable. He remembered how, when he was a kid, his grandfather had gone on and on about how horrible life was before AC got common.

The receptionist in the front hall smiled at him as the automatic doors slid shut in his wake. "Good morning, Mr. Markarian," she said.

"Good morning, Cindy." He smiled back. She was decorative as well as smart. The Brot didn't care about that, but some of the people who dealt with IMT did. He'd been married longer than Cindy'd been alive. He wanted to stay married, too, so he also stayed discreet.

"I hope the meeting today goes well," she said.

In lieu of knocking wood, Dave tapped the side of his head with his knuckles. "Me, too," he said. He'd been working with the Brot since they first came to Earth, not long after he got out of college. He'd done well with them and done well from them. Interstellar Master Traders proved that.

You never could tell, though. If the Brot weren't happy, they just pulled out of their deals.

Things they'd supplied stopped working, and humans couldn't get those things going again. It had never happened to IMT, but it had to other firms. Sometimes the people who'd run those had cut corners. Sometimes . . . Sometimes God only knew.

Other humans were hard enough to understand. Aliens? Dave Markarian shook his big, heavy-featured head and went upstairs. A ramp ran alongside the stairway; the Brot didn't do stairs well.

He walked along the hallway, then opened a door and stuck his head into the big central room. A few people looked up from their stations and smiled or waved or nodded. Most just went on with their work. It wasn't an assembly line; it was nothing like an assembly line. Workers did what they needed to do to put together the things the aliens wanted put together.

Some of the blends of semiconductors and neuroconductors and Brot devices defeated Earth's sharpest people. Dave knew that; he'd hired some of those people. But as long as the Brot stayed happy paying outrageous sums for the widgets that met their specs, he and his employees would keep smiling all the way to the bank.

Some of the workers made more things than others. Back when Dave was just starting out, he'd thought about paying for piecework: so much for each completed Brot device. Being a careful fellow, he'd run that by his chief alien contact before he started doing it. The Brot took in stride almost everything humans did. They were much more different from people than cuttlefish or termites were. And they'd dealt with other species before. They knew every intelligent race did things its own way.

But he'd really shocked Old Salty when he suggested piecework. As far as the alien was concerned, the slowest worker who could do the job at all deserved as much as the quickest. The Brot had a point of sorts. Not every human who tried could make things the way the aliens wanted them to, whatever that way was. In that sense, the slow workers who could were about as valuable as the fast ones.

If Old Salty and his folk didn't want piecework at their gadget manufactories, there'd be none. Dave was a careful fellow; he couldn't imagine anything more important than keeping the Brot happy. He might lose a little by not doing things just how he wanted to, but not much. And Lord, how the loot rolled in!

He drew back, letting the door click closed, and ambled on down the hall to his office. Like those of the other IMT honchos, that had an outside view, not that there was a whole lot to see out the window. But his office was also the biggest and fanciest.

He suspected the Brot thought human notions of hierarchy were ridiculous, even if they never came out and said so. That didn't worry him. A lot of what the Brot did seemed silly or pointless to humans. No matter how silly they were, though, they were also rich and powerful. Wealth and strength had a logic of their own.

He punched the keypad on the door. It checked to make sure he got the passcode right. It also checked to make sure his DNA pattern was authorized to use that passcode. And, because it had some Brot technology built in, it made sure he really was himself, not someone who knew the passcode and wore the right DNA on gloves or fingershields.

Dave sold products with that technology. He knew and could glibly describe what it did. How . . . He was fond of *Shakespeare in Love*, a movie a little older than he was. They said "It's a mystery" a lot in that movie. People said "It's a mystery" a lot about Brot tech.

The ones who didn't say "It's a mystery" said "It's psi." As far as Dave was concerned, that didn't explain anything, either. Unlike a lot of humans, he was willing to admit how much he didn't know.

When he went inside, he left the door open behind him. He'd be here for a while. Some of his collection was in a locked, glass-fronted cabinet behind his desk. The locks had Brot security enhancements, too. For a while, he'd displayed replicas and a few duplicates out in the open. They kept disappearing, though, so he didn't do that any more.

He sat down and got to work. A Greater Cambodian phone-making firm was complaining about the price he asked for the latest Brot dejunking systems. If your phone had one of those, you wouldn't get any messages you didn't want or need. How the systems knew what you wanted

or needed, no one human fully understood. That they knew, nobody could doubt.

I KNOW WHAT I PAID. I KNOW WHAT I NEED FROM YOU TO MAKE A DECENT PROFIT, he wrote back. THAT'S THE FIGURE IN THE QUOTE YOU HAVE. IF YOU CAN'T LIVE WITH IT, SOME OF THE LOWER-END MODULES AREN'T TOO BAD. DO YOU WANT SUGGESTIONS?

He sent the message. With luck, the dejunking system the phone firm's CFO was using now would let it through. They were a top-end outfit. A couple of their competitors had already bought the new module—at Dave's price. He figured these guys would fall in line. If you didn't keep up, you got trampled.

On a different set of Brot systems, this one for monitoring animal life in a newly rewilded stretch of Romania, he did come down a little. Another trading outfit offered a similar set of tools, and staying at the very top of the heap mattered less when you were keeping tabs on wolves and wisents.

Dropping the price did the trick, too. The woman in Suceava made the deal. It was late there, as it was early tomorrow in Greater Cambodia. That he got a prompt answer from Romania didn't surprise him, though. If you had the chance to take hold of goodies from the stars, you grabbed with both hands.

And the phone-makers came around, too. THANKS, Dave messaged and stuck the phone back in his pocket. A slow smile spread over his face. He leaned back in his comfortable chair and allowed himself the rare luxury of just staring up at the ceiling for a minute and a half. All things considered, a pretty damn fine morning, thankyouverymuch.

I just hope the afternoon goes this well. The thought made him sit up straight so fast, even the fancy chair creaked.

He'd do his best. That was all you could do with the Brot—with anybody, really, but especially with the Brot. And things would go however they went, and he'd deal with whatever he had to deal with. He hoped.

He ate lunch at the cafeteria in the building. Part of that was being able to talk with the troops in an informal setting. And part of it was that he liked the food. It wasn't fancy or expensive, but it was good. He made sure of that. IMT could afford cooks who knew what they were doing and top-notch ingredients.

How many New York City restaurants with Michelin stars seasoned their burgers with bathily or their fries with dieng? Spices had driven trade since ancient days. They perfectly combined high value and low bulk. That proved true even across interstellar distances. The Brot bought as well as selling. On their homeworld that no human had ever visited, they enjoyed cassia and nutmeg and chili powder, the hotter the better.

Dave wondered what that world was like. He'd looked at the same pics and watched the same videos as everyone else. They told a little, but not much. The Brot weren't forthcoming. He suspected they thought people were barbarians, savages. They were polite about it, but . . .

Even Old Salty, with whom he'd worked for more than half his life, never opened up. For all Dave knew, Earth was a hardship post, one where the aliens sent their screw-ups and their drunks. Old-time human trading networks had had places like that.

He shrugged as he bussed his plate and cutlery and headed back to his office. What could he do about it? Nothing except to be the best barbarian he could.

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He went up to the roof at 1:45. Old Salty had told him he/she/it would be there at two o'clock sharp, and a Brot who said something like that meant it. Better to cook out in the hot sun for a little while than not be there when the alien arrived. Dave took no chances.

Shading his eyes from the glare with the palm of his hand, he peered west. Old Salty would be coming from the Brot compound by the spaceport. Dave chuckled. Unlike human merchants of bygone days, the aliens couldn't intermarry with the locals. No, not hardly. How much they missed that—was one more mystery.

He got his first glimpse of the paranympic glider a couple of minutes before two. Paranympic wasn't exactly an English word, but it was how the Brot rendered what they called their light aircraft into language suitable for Earth. It showed every sign of sticking now.

For that matter, the glider wasn't exactly a glider. To Dave's eyes, it seemed all gossamer and moonshine, even under the fierce Fresno sun. Parts of it seemed hardly there at all. To the extent he understood, some of it was mechanical, some biological. No human knew just where one stopped and the other began. The question seemed to amuse the Brot.

What breeze there was blew from the IMT building toward the paranympic glider. It had no motor, not that anyone born on Earth had been able to detect. It came on anyway. How? The best answer Dave had been able to find was *It just does*.

At 2:00:00.00, the paranympic glider touched down on the roof. Had Dave's phone shown the time to be a hundredth of a second earlier or later, he would have assumed it was wrong, and never mind that it took the time straight from Earth's master atomic clock. A Brot who said two o'clock sharp meant two o'clock *sharp*.

Old Salty got down from the glider and walked/moved/flowed toward Dave. He/she/it looked something like a prune, something like a sea sponge, something like a slug. Several eyestalks stuck up from his/her/its front end; they looked every which way at once. The alien's underside had lots and lots of little tiny legs.

He/she/it said something in his/her/its own language. Inside his head, Dave heard (he supposed he heard; that came closer to describing it than anything else), "I hail to you say, my hypothetical friend." People who were able to work in Brot establishments and make Brot widgets picked up on the meaning in Brot noises. To the rest of mankind, those remained alien gibberish.

"Good to see you, Old Salty," Dave answered. The Brot didn't mind the nickname. He/she/it could understand the same smallish set of humans who could follow the speech and subspeech of his/her/its kind. Communication had been dicey when the aliens first landed: lots of pointing and pictures. Little by little, things got better. Not good, not yet, but better.

"This the last time we meet is," Old Salty said. He/she/it smelled like old, damp newspapers. What humans smelled like to Brot, assuming Brot had a sense of smell, was something they politely didn't discuss.

Dave had other things than that on his mind, though. "The last time? How come?" he asked, trying not to sound anywhere near so alarmed as he felt.

"Next starship out, I home go. New Brot with IMT deals," the alien answered.

"Oh." Dave thought that over. "We've worked together a long time now, you and I."

"Yes," Old Salty said, and not another word more.

If this was the last time they'd be together . . . "How do you feel about that?" Dave asked. Brot did have feelings. Whether those feelings mapped to ones humans also had was something humans spent a lot of time arguing about. Brot didn't seem to care one way or the other.

Was Old Salty sad to leave a place where he/she/it had done business for more than thirty years? Was he/she/it ready to go out and party because he/she/it'd never have to set eyes on another human being again? He/she/it answered, "I away from home a while have been," and left it there.

What did he/she/it mean by a while? How long did Brot live? One more thing Dave didn't know, nor did any other human. Would he/she/it die of old age two weeks after stepping off the starship? Or was close to half a human lifetime more like a few months for him/her/it? Dave tried, "Do you have other Brot on your homeworld who are missing you?"

"Yes." Again, Old Salty didn't go on.

With a small mental sigh, Dave gave up. Sometimes the Brot were forthcoming. More often, they stayed opaque, as Old Salty did here. In business, though, they were just about always businesslike. "Do you want to make the inspection tour, then?" Dave Markarian said.

"Yes." This time, Old Salty did elaborate: "I to my successor must say, I with my own appendages of this operation have felt."

"Okay." Dave nodded. Old Salty got gestures, either because they were the human equivalent of subspeech or just because he/she/it had been here a long time. "Why don't you come with me, then?"

"You lead. I follow."

Lead Dave did. Humans thought the rearmost position in Brot groups was the one of greatest importance. To Old Salty, he was just a useful barbarian. The star-traveling alien had more clout. Dave opened the rooftop door that led down into the building. Old Salty got ahead of him for a moment when he lingered to hold it for the Brot and make sure it closed again so the Fresno heat couldn't follow them in. They assumed their proper places as the human went down the stairs and the alien down the ramp beside them.

The ends of Old Salty's swarm of little legs made soft rustling noises as they took him/her/it along the slope. Monitors in the stairwell would show the people in the big workspace that Dave and the alien were on their way. Or maybe the monitors wouldn't. When humans tried to spy on the Brot, their native tech mostly wasn't good enough. Neither were the devices they built with what they'd learned from the aliens. The Brot, no doubt sensibly, kept some cards up the sleeves they didn't wear.

Dave held the door to the hallway open and let old Salty precede him through it. Old Salty knew the way to the working area; he/she/it had visited here ever since the building went up—and he/she/it had dealt with IMT for years before that.

"Everyone will be excited to see you and talk with you," Dave said as they went down the hall. "And everyone will be sad you're leaving."

"Excitement foolishness is. I a very ordinary person am," the alien replied. "Sadness likewise foolishness is. They glad that I homeward am going should be."

"I understand you'll be glad to see your own world and more folk like you than are in your community here. But we admire you and respect you. We'll be sorry to have to deal with someone else."

"Ah. Yes, I self-interest understand," Old Salty said, which only proved he/she/it didn't understand everything Dave was trying to tell him/her/it. Dave supposed he should be glad humans and the Brot communicated with one another as well as they did. The Brot told stories about races undoubtedly intelligent with whom they could find no mutual frame of reference at all.

Again, Dave opened a door for Old Salty. Again, the alien went through it before him. As Old Salty glided into the workspace, people burst into applause. Some of them took photos to show they'd been in the same room as the Brot. Maybe, depending on how Old Salty felt, the photos would do that. Or maybe not. Of course, you could say *Or maybe not* about most things that had to do with the Brot.

Dave held both hands in the air. When that didn't get quiet soon enough to suit him, he clapped them together once. Attention swung his way from Old Salty. He might be only a human, but he was the big boss human.

"Folks! Listen up, folks!" He pitched his voice to carry through the wide room. "Of course we're delighted whenever Old Salty visits us. But I just now learned this will be the last time we have that honor. Old Salty will soon be going back to his/her/its own homeworld, and we'll be doing business with a different Brot after this. Maybe with more than one—I don't know."

"I also ignorance about this have," Old Salty said. The humans in the room, being who they were and doing what they did, all understood him/her/it. He/she/it went on, "All well will go. I certain of this am. Interstellar Master Traders my folk as well as any humans knows."

The Brot had never said anything like that before. Tears of pride stung Dave Markarian's eyes. By the way the IMT workers stared at Old Salty, they also understood the kind of praise they'd just got.

"Thanks. Thanks very much," Dave said huskily after a moment pulling himself together. "Thanks from the bottom of my heart, in fact."

Old Salty extruded a tentacle with a couple of gripping digits at the end of it from a region a bit farther down his/her/its cephalothorax than his/her/its eyestalks. The digits wiggled briefly. Then the appendage disappeared again. Dave had never seen this Brot use that gesture before. He'd seen it on video, though. People who studied the Brot thought it meant something like *Think nothing of it* or *The pleasure is mine*. He hoped they were right.

As if embarrassed at an unseemly show of emotion, Old Salty said, "Let me some of the

newest productions see, if you so kind would be.”

Humans fell all over themselves bringing him/her/it what he/she/it wanted. He/she/it might have had them wrapped around that seldom-seen tentacle. Old Salty stuck out a different, larger, less intimate tentacle to hold a sample of the most complex Brot-influenced gadget IMT made, one so abstruse that even some workers who did fine on simpler, less complex widgets found themselves unable to succeed with this one.

Old Salty poked it here, prodded it there, and inspected it at very close range with one of his/her/its eyes. Sometimes it lit up. Sometimes it changed shape. Once it made a noise that sounded too much like a wet fart. Somebody giggled. Somebody always giggled when the gadget produced that effect.

Everyone waited anxiously for the Brot’s verdict. Old Salty’s eyestalks swung away from the Brot product and toward the anxious humans. “Satisfactory. It satisfactory in every particular is,” he/she/it said.

A few muffled cheers rang out. Relief flowed through Dave. “That’s good to hear, real good. You’ll be traveling with a cargo hold full of them when you go home,” he said.

“My world glad them to have will be,” Old Salty replied. There were times when the English the Brot made humans perceive should have paid a sin tax for its syntax. Experts speculated—a fancy word for *guessed*—that that syntax reflected the way their own language worked.

“May I ask you something, Old Salty?” Dave said.

“Ask.” The Brot could hardly be more straightforward than that.

“Can you tell me, tell *us*, what that one does? Sometimes we can work out the kind of thing we’re assembling, but not this time.”

“Ah.” Now Old Salty paused a moment, perhaps considering. Then he/she/it answered, “This one in entertainment producing involved is.”

Did they use it in their movie industry, if they had one? Was it a game? Or was it more on the order of, say, a sex toy? Dave didn’t know much more than he had before. But, again, what could you do? He did it: he said, “Thanks,” and then, “Do you want to see some of the other lines?”

“Oh, yes. By all means.” The Brot did examine samples from different products IMT made for his/her/its species to the aliens’ specs. Dave had the impression he/she/it was less careful, less painstaking with his/her/its inspection, than had been the case with the top-of-the-line item. And sure enough, Old Salty said, “If you the first device so well produce can, I no doubt have that these likewise properly made are.”

Dave puffed out his chest, not only because he was proud of how well the IMT staff worked but also because he’d actually understood what was going through a Brot’s mind. That didn’t happen every time he dealt with the aliens, not even close—not even with Old Salty, whom he’d known longer than he had most of his human acquaintances and whom he knew about as well as a human could know a Brot. They called the aliens aliens for a reason.

He did remember to say, “You’ll certify our compliance, right, so your successor will understand from the start what good work we do?”

“With gladness, I care of that will take,” Old Salty answered. Everyone in the big workspace smiled like Christmas. A few people quietly clapped their hands together. Dave wouldn’t have been amazed if a couple or two who liked each other but hadn’t yet done anything about it wound up in the sack tonight. Hearing Old Salty say something like that was worth celebrating every way you could.

“Do you need to check anything else on the shop floor?” Dave asked.

“I that I everything needful here have done believe,” the Brot said.

“Okay. Before you go back to the spaceport, will you come to my office with me for a little while? I want to say goodbye properly, and I want to give you something you can use to remember your time dealing with Interstellar Master Traders here on Earth.”

“Yes, I come will. But no gift necessary is, I you assure,” Old Salty said.

“I understand that. I’m not giving it to you because it’s necessary for business or anything. I’m giving it to you because farewell presents are a human custom and because I want to,”

Dave answered.

“Custom always respected should be,” Old Salty said gravely, “and I your wish to honor pleased am. It as you say let be.” He/she/it glided toward the door that would take him/her/it and Dave out into the hallway closest to Dave’s office. Yes, he/she/it had been here often enough to know the layout. Getting the Brot who replaced him/her/it used to the way IMT did things was liable to take a while. One more time, though, what could you do? Roll with the punches, and that was it.

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In the office, Dave took a bottle of apricot brandy out of his bottom desk drawer and poured a knock for him and one for Old Salty. The Brot could handle methyl alcohol, ethyl alcohol, and isopropyl alcohol. They thought methyl alcohol tasted best, but they did recognize that poisoning their human drinking buddies might not help business.

Dave raised his glass. “To a safe trip home for you, and to success at whatever you want to do next!” He drank.

“I you for your kindness and good wishes thank. I also you success wish.” Old Salty drank, too, extruding something that looked like a pink soda straw and seemed to serve the same purpose.

“Thank you very much, my . . . my hypothetical friend,” Dave said. Some of the weird things the Brot came out with started to make sense if you looked at them sideways enough. Or maybe the hundred-proof brandy was smacking *him* sideways.

“Seeing the homeworld good will be. Maybe, one day, you that journey will make,” Old Salty said. Dave gaped. No human had ever been invited to the Brot homeworld. Of course, this invitation, if it was one, seemed pretty hypothetical, too.

He filled his glass again with potent local hooch, then held the bottle over Old Salty’s. When the alien didn’t say no, he also refilled it. Could you fly a paranympic glider while impaired? Would two slugs of brandy impair Old Salty? Dave had to figure the Brot knew his/her/its limits.

With ceremony Old Salty probably didn’t even notice, Dave opened the glass-fronted cabinet behind his desk. Old Salty was plenty sober enough to be paying attention. “You to air these things you keep expose,” he/she/it said. “You not this before have done.”

Dave nodded. “That’s right. I’m doing it now for a reason. I’ve spent a lot of time and a fair bit of money putting my collection together, and I want to give you something from it to take back to your homeworld with you. Something to remember me by, like I told you out in the big workspace.”

“I the gift in the spirit it is meant appreciate,” Old Salty replied.

“Good. Can’t hope for anything more than that.” Dave took four small plastic figurines and set them on his desk. “Do you know what these are?”

“They somewhat—only somewhat—anthropomorphic seem, but I their purpose cannot determine,” the alien said.

Unless he/she/it had studied up, that was bound to be an understatement. The Brot had picked up a lot of off-the-wall Earthly lore, but . . . “These are the California Raisins,” Dave told him. “Do you know what a raisin is?”

“A grape in the sun for purposes of preservation and flavor enhancement dried.” After a moment, Old Salty added, “These imperfect representations seem.”

“Animated images of these figures were used to promote sales of products with actual raisins in them,” Dave said. “The figures became popular in their own right. This is one of the prize sets from my collection. I’d like to give it to you for a couple of reasons.”

“You perhaps these will explain?” Old Salty said, reasonably enough.

“Sure. For one thing, the area around Fresno still produces a lot of raisins. When my ancestors came to the United States from Armenia in the 1920s, quite a few of them worked in the fields, grew grapes, and spread them in the sun to dry.”

“This a connection is, yes,” the Brot agreed. “But you ‘a couple of reasons’ said. What the other one is?”

“Most of the California Raisin toys, like most of the others I’ve got here, were made in the

1980s. They were given away with children's fast-food meals, so the kids would have something to play with—and so they'd want to come back and buy more meals and get more toys. They were advertising aimed at children. But the set there was the last one with the California Raisins. It didn't come out till 2001, which also happens to be the year I was born."

"I see," Old Salty said, which gave not the slightest clue about what he/she/it thought. He/she/it picked up one of the Raisins: Beebop, the drummer. His/her/its eyestalks swung toward Beebop for a close inspection, and tentacles felt of the small plastic figure. "On the bottom of one foot I the inscription 'Made in China' find."

"Yes, that's right." Dave nodded. "I know that, these days, China's right up with the United States or maybe even ahead of us. That wasn't true then, though. China was just starting to turn into a big industrial power. Peasants would come off the farms and move to the big cities to work in factories."

"We this phenomenon on other worlds also have observed," the Brot said.

Dave Markarian nodded again. "Yeah, I figured you would have. Some of those peasants would have made their livings painting eyes or gloves or shoes or whatever on the California Raisins, over and over again. Same with the detailwork on all of these other little plastic toys. They wouldn't have known why the figures were supposed to look the way they did. They wouldn't have seen the advertising campaigns or games or films the toys were based on—they lived in a faraway country that used a different language. I sometimes wonder what they thought while they painted every toy the same way while they went through their shifts day after day."

Old Salty lifted his/her/its eyestalks away from their examination of Beebop and subjected Dave to a stereoscopic scrutiny human vision couldn't hope to match. Slowly and carefully, the Brot set the California Raisin back on the man's desk.

"This most interesting is," Old Salty said. "For one time, I the feeling have that one of my kind one of your kind completely understands. I never this feeling here to have expected. It a great gift you me have given is, along with the physical gifts of these statuettes, which I on my home-world for the rest of my years will treasure."

"Um, thank you," Dave said carefully. "I'd know more how to feel about that if I knew just what gift you were talking about." The Brot might think he/she/it completely understood a human being. The human being in question knew only too damn well he didn't understand the Brot.

Old Salty extruded a tentacle, apparently for the sole purpose of giving Dave a vague wave. "It of no consequence is," the alien answered. "But I the unlooked-for sensation of congruency between our two kinds to feel continue."

"Okay." Dave wasn't at all sure it was, but he was sure he couldn't do anything about it. Trying to get information a Brot didn't feel like giving or didn't think was important enough to talk about led to frustration. If an intrepid or snoopy human pushed too hard, it led to disaster. Dave thought about the mirror-surfaced crater where half of Reno, Nevada, used to be.

"You an intriguing species are. If you yourselves to destroy fail, someday before very long you too among the stars will fare," Old Salty said. He/she/it picked up the California Raisins, then withdrew his/her/its tentacles till the plastic figurines seemed to be growing out of his/her/its hide. "Despite new intriguingness, I to the spaceport must return. I you for this intriguingness and for your productions for my race one more thank."

"Let me come up to the roof with you and say goodbye there," Dave answered. The Brot didn't tell him no, so he climbed the stairs while he/she/it glided up the ramp alongside them.

Even close up, the paranympic glider didn't look quite real. Neither Dave nor any other human could prove all of it was. As soon as Old Salty took his/her/its position on the thing, it rose several feet in the air. How? Dave didn't know. He knew why, though: because it did.

Dave waved to the Brot. "Goodbye! Good luck! Safe trip!" he said, as he might have if the alien were flying to Pittsburgh, not crossing however many light-years he/she/it was crossing.

"I you thank, for wishes and for gifts," Old Salty answered. Away went the paranympic glider. Dave thought the light breeze blew against it now, but it didn't seem to mind.

He stood on the rooftop till Old Salty was out of sight. Then, with a sigh, he turned and

walked back into the Interstellar Master Traders building.

* * *

Raukio k' Breyvic had trouble getting used to the homeworld again. He/she/it didn't admit that to anyone. It was such a cliché, everybody would have laughed. On every third drama you experienced, you viewed/felt a trader just home from one outplanet or another complaining about how the light was wrong, the gravity was wrong, the smells were wrong, or the food was wrong.

If the drama's creators had a little more sophistication, the newly returned trader complained that the homeworld's *people* were wrong. Some traders got very used to the small, tight-woven Brot colonies on the outplanets and had a hard time dealing with a world's worth of folk again after a long time.

Others—fewer, but it did happen—went native, coming to prefer the ways and customs of the aliens among whom they lived and worked to those of their own kind. Raukio k' hadn't done that, or didn't think he/she/it had. Humans differed from the Brot by too much for any trader to empathize with them very much or to decide they'd found a truly desirable way to organize their society.

Raukio k' felt that way most of the time, anyhow. Every once in a while, he/she/it did wonder. . . .

Getting off the monoslide was a relief. Too many people packed too close together weren't enjoyable to someone who'd spent a long time on a planet full of wide open spaces like Earth. Raukio k' glided along till he/she/it got a whiff of the builtcave where his/her/its swarmsister and her/his/its subfamily lived.

He/she/it extended a tentacle and touched the identifier by the doorway. The door rose into its socket. In glided the trader. Behind him/her/it, the door slid shut. Forward came Vygtre v' Breyvic. "Greetings, stranger!" she/he/it said. "Yes, a while it has been."

"That true is," Raukio k' agreed. His/her/its eyestalks all swung in her/his/its direction as they touched affectionately. "You in all this time not a bit have changed. That also true is."

"I you what true is will tell," Vygtre v' said. "You me the same way as the aliens on your far-away outplanet flatter."

"No such thing. I of you an image before I left taken have, and you still it perfectly match," the trader said.

"You with me joke. Before you left, I so many jokes you making do not remember," his/her/its swarmsister said. "You for yourself well did before to the homeworld coming back?"

"Oh, yes. The usual story with races that to the stars themselves cannot travel. They from us cheap junk get, and to them it a treasure because they it cannot match seems. And they so hard for this junk work!"

"You never guilty feel?" Vygtre v' asked.

"I do. Everyone does. But I myself by remembering console, they from us also benefit and learn," Raukio k' replied. "And sometimes, even on a backward planet like Earth, the natives amazingly Brotlike can seem."

"Really?" His/her/its swarmsister sounded as if she/he/it had trouble believing that.

But Raukio k' thrust his/her/its eyestalks out farther to show that he/she/it meant what he/she/it was saying. "Really," he/she/it answered firmly. "And that me reminds. I presents from that backward planet for your offspring have."

"You do?" Vygtre v' raised her/his/its voice: "Banak v'! Porsanger k'! Come hello to your star-traveling uncle say!"

The youngsters hurried in as fast as they could glide. Only good manners and a few veiled threats had kept them in the back chamber while their coprogenitor talked with her/his/its swarmbrother. "Ortho-uncle Raukio k'!" they both thrilled.

"I you greet, my hypothetical kin," Raukio k' said.

"What you for us do have?" Porsanger k' asked. It/he/she was still too young to disguise greed very well.

"That rude is," Banak v' said. It/she/he didn't miss the chance to score points off its/her/his

swarmbrother, especially when their coprogenitor was listening.

"It also rude is someone to tell that it/he/she rude being is," Vygtre v' said.

"Never mind." As ortho-uncle just back from an outplanet, Raukio k' could afford to be indulgent. He/she/it opened a carriesack and took out two of the fancy widgets the workers at Interstellar Master Traders struggled so hard to keep within spec.

"Oh!" Porsanger k' said, at the same time as Banak v' was going, "Eee!"

One toy had an orange, bumpy case; the other was green and smooth. After a brief squabble refereed by their coprogenitor, Banak v' got the green one and Porsanger k' took the bumpy one. They did remember to thank their ortho-uncle without any promptings from on high. Then they hurried away to play.

As Raukio k' handed his/her/its swarmsister's offspring the toys, his/her/its tentacles brushed the small Brot glyphs that, to untrained human eyes or fingers, would just have seemed part of the design. *On Earth Made*, they read. If the cheap toys broke too soon or never worked well, the Brot who'd bought them could sneer at the ignorant aliens that made them, not at the traders who took advantage of the outplanets' cheap labor.

He/she/it thought of the statuettes the human named Dave had given him/her/it, and of the Chinese peasants who'd painted them. Not many peasants left in China now—not by Earthly standards, anyhow. As Raukio k' had said to Dave, maybe humans would get star travel for themselves one day. Then none of them would be peasants, and they'd go looking for other races to work for them.

The trader had fluffed a little, though. He/she/it didn't expect that any time soon.

Harry Turtledove earned a PhD in Byzantine history from UCLA, and has used it mostly to make his fiction seem more plausible. He writes alternate history, other SF, fantasy (often historically based) and sometimes historical fiction. His latest book, a contemporary supernatural thriller called Alpha and Omega, came from Del Rey in July 2020. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife, fellow writer Laura Frankos, and three spoiled cats. They have three daughters and two granddaughters.