

# OUT OF THE BLUE

Reality check.

BY MOHAMAD ATIF SLIM

“Yargh-thr! You Chinese?” The ten-eyed Gorgon stared at me, drunk.

“No, I’m Malay.”

“Wussat?” His spittle flew like rockets.

“Human subclass.”

“Human? You sure you’re not Chinese?”

Goo oozed from one corner of his mouth.

I gave him a sympathetic look. This is why I don’t drink. “You should go home. Wife might be worried.”

“Wife? What wife?” All ten eyes went blank, then bulged in recognition. “Oh. Yargh!”

I left the bar by the back door. On a crowded night like this, usually, if one alien picks on you, the rest will too. Lone human in the bar, let’s ask him if he speaks Chinese and eats carrots, if he can get us bootleg ethanol. But I guess I can’t blame them — the Chinese were the first humans to venture out to space since First Contact, after all. Still, you’d think the rest of the Universe would grow out of stereotyping minorities — I don’t think I’ve ever met a carrot-eating Chinese in my whole life.

Outside the bar, it was quieter. The Chicken Nebula — named after an extinct legendary beast from Old Earth, I was told — shone like a parade of angel starships in the blue interstellar sky.

I pulled out my banjo, leaned against the dingy wall of the building, and started plucking a few chords.

That was when Shankarlatti appeared.

“Hello, stranger.”

I looked up and saw her standing.

“Why, hello there,” I said, taking my hat off. She smiled. “You’re quite the gentleman.”

“My auntie brought me up after my parents died in a drowning skyscraper, taught me all I need to know. Brush your teeth, eat your legumes, and most of all respect women ... particularly ...”

“Particularly ...?”

“Say, are you ...?”

“Part-human?” Each blue tooth stood out like the ridge of a knuckle in her grin. “I am.” She twirled around, as if to prove she wasn’t hiding a tail or an extra head somewhere. “I saw you there, lone cowboy, thought I’d say hello. Rare to see another human — full human, especially — in this sector, you know.

“But you must know, of course.”

Well I did, and I also knew why she was *really* here. I’ve been approached by girls like Shankarlatti too many times not to know immediately what the deal is before they even breathe the ‘h’ in their ‘hello’. The



hair pulled tight into a neat bun. Old-fashioned aluminium tweed coat. Horn-rimmed glasses. The pile of books under her left arm. Crafty lips, like she had debated her way out of her mama’s womb. The pens in her skirt pocket. Oldest profession in the Universe.

“Like what you see?” She twirled again, then took out a pen, as if to make a point.

I clicked my tongue. “Sorry, ma’am. I mean no offence — you’re a very pretty lady, you are — but, unfortunately for you, I’m Muslim.”

Shankarlatti seemed momentarily stunned. Then she burst out laughing. “Are you really?” she asked, disbelieving. “A Muslim cowboy? Well I’ll be damned. Did your auntie bring you up to be the generic human poster boy?”

“Afraid she did, butt of everyone’s jokes back in school.” The way I said it, it was as though she had just given me a compliment.

She paused, eyeing my features. “Don’t tell me you’re Chinese, too?”

“No, I’m not, but —” I twanged my banjo almost guiltily — “I am a country singer.”

That seemed to make some fireworks inside her sputter and explode. She laughed so hard, she dropped all her books: *Astro-physiology of the Pleiadean 298th Century*, *Martian Art History through the Lightyears*, *Cosmo Sutra* ...

“As one does, I sing about religion and sex after marriage, too,” I added, gratefully soaking in every inflection in her laughter, every crease of reaction in her face. I’ve always known I was a walking stereotype — just

short of the right subclass to meet the alien encyclopaedic definition of humanness. Trying to hide who I was

from my friends (who were all aliens) was pretty difficult, especially having to pray five times a day, so I’ve got used to being everyone’s favourite punchline.

But to meet someone who can laugh at me — not *mockingly*, but *appreciatively*, and not in expectant surprise, but with an utterly pleasant manner of shock — was new.

Wonderful.

Exciting.

Incredible, even.

Shankarlatti was clutching her stomach, laughter now fading into hiccupy sobs. Finally, she straightened up. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be, I laugh at myself too sometimes. Heck, when I told my auntie I was going to be a country singer, she almost passed out — there isn’t a human who’d want to do country music these days if he weren’t a parody of himself.”

Shankarlatti had picked up all her books. “I guess you haven’t made it anywhere yet?”

“Tried all seven sectors, ma’am. Am still trying,” I said, striking a chord on my banjo, as if to prove that I was.

“Well, you keep trying, aspiring human country singer. If I hear you on the space-waves, I’ll buy your album.”

“I’d appreciate that.” There was a momentary silence between us, more filled with a comfortable timidity than awkwardness.

“Hey, I know a place just two lightstops from here,” she said, finally. “You want to get coffee or something?”

“I’d be happy to,” I responded, almost too quickly, then made up for it, as quickly. “I’m sorry, ma’am, I forgot to introduce myself — name’s Yismaël.”

Her azure dentals flashed again. “Yismaël, I’m Shankarlatti.”

*Shan-kar-la-ti*, I pronounced in my head, letting each viscous syllable ring full. My heart gave a whoop.

“Shankarlatti,” I repeated. “Like the butterfly?”

“Like the butterfly.” She extended her hand. “Come.” I hesitated. “Anything wrong?” she asked.

“No. It’s just that I think I want to write a song about you. And I think I’ve got a tune already.”

“What’re you going to call it?”

“*Out of the blue.*” ■

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