

The Course of Evolution

by

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FADE IN ON:

**INT. PORTAL ROOM - DAY**

A huge, nondescript white room. One exit door on the side. Five feet away: a shield of DURO-GLASS extends, ceiling to floor.

KIP RAFTNER (30s) stands on the opposite side, over a massive console. Mike and Speakers clamped to his head.

Technicians ROBERTS and CARLSON flank Kip left and right. Rigid. Excited. Terrified.

Kip glances at a digital countdown: Ten, Nine, Eight...

KIP  
Ready?

CARLSON  
Uh, we guess.

KIP  
Good. We'll trigger the sequence at critical heat.

Carlson and Roberts span hands across dials. Kip supervises. Cynically smiles.

KIP  
Relax. We're making history.

ROBERTS  
Relax during First Contact?

KIP  
Well, that's my theory.

CARLSON  
Or we blow ourselves to smithereens.

Mechanisms WHINE. Kip counts along with his screen.

KIP  
Four, Three, Two, One - Ignition!

The technicians key in codes.

The white wall behind the shield FLASHES brilliant white. All three humans shield their eyes.

In front of the wall, space CONTORTS and TWISTS. A mirror blended with liquid. A bizarre vortex of some kind.

Kip nods to Carlson.

KIP

What's the temperature in there?

CARLSON

A balmy seventy degrees.

KIP

Nothing that'd melt metal? Or fry a shielded circuit?

ROBERTS

Not that we're humanly aware.

KIP

Then we're ready. Engage.

Kip STABS a button. The door in the white section of the room slides open.

And LACH-530 walks inside: a bipedal Android, with joints and sensors exposed. Plastic "humanoid" features decorate his rigid, yet pleasing face.

Kip TABS the mike at his ear.

KIP

Lach! Start scanning. How do you feel?

Lach swivels towards the humans - focused on Kip.

LACH-530

"Feel" is not the appropriate term. But quite well - according to my sensors.

Lach's chest scanner sweeps the vortex and every wall.

LACH-530

I detect no radiation.

KIP

So, I could've gone in - instead of you?

LACH-530

Negative, my carbon based friend. The vibrations I am picking up would rupture your organic cells.

KIP

But your circuits?

LACH-530

As conjectured, they are fine.

Kip relaxes - betrays relief. He waves to both techs, raising index fingers to signal...

KIP

Stage 2 complete. Moving onward to Stage 3. On my count. Three, Two, One.

Carlson and Roberts type codes. Unseen engines THRUM.

The vortex ripples further and DISTORTS.

As a SHADOWY FIGURE coalesces on the other "side" of the portal. It steps closer, approaching Lach.

Lach raises his multi-hinged hand.

Carlson shoots a look at Kip, dismayed.

CARLSON

Tell it to stop. That machine's worth five million bucks! The waves could rip it apart...!

KIP

(frowns)

I've known Lach over a year. He's durable - and no "machine". He may be metal, but he's still my friend.

The figure on the other end of the vortex raises a claw.

The portal surface calms, revealing crystal clear detail.

The creature's insectoid - two arms at each side. Its eyes are large and shiny; an almost glassy effect.

Then it speaks; a mixture of strange WHIRS and RASPS. Carlson reflexively hits "record."

Lach cocks his head and listens. Kip does, as well.

KIP

How's the interpretation coming, Lach?

LACH-530

Slower than expected. But some words are clear. First it says: they "come in peace."

Kip snorts, hides a smile.

KIP

Lach, please don't joke at this grave moment.

LACH-530

Simply a cultural reference. Which you yourself programmed me for. And my meaning appears to be correct.

Lach emits a WHIRRING sound. Apparently, his Rosetta Stone's been reached. The humans lean towards the shield.

KIP

Lach, we've got power for just five minutes. First question: where's he from?

Lach listens intently to the alien's WHIRS.

LACH-530

His kind hail from Orion. They developed the portal two centuries before.

KIP

They're getting around to visiting *now?!?*

LACH-530

They wished to ensure the time was right.

Lach and the Alien chatter back and forth; at a faster, more fluid pace.

KIP

Tell him we want more visits. But we need help with the power cells.

LACH-530

(listens)

He states that is an option. But he must confer with others first.

KIP

(beat)

What others?

LACH-530

Other civilizations. And Species. He says - they have many groups.

The technicians exchange amused looks.

ROBERTS

Damn. "Federation", here we come.

Suddenly: Lach backs away from the portal. His body language indicates he's "surprised."

Kip jumps to his feet, concerned.

KIP

Did he threaten you, Lach? Report!

LACH-530

Not at all.

The AI focuses on the alien's words.

LACH-530

(to the alien)

Of course I am not. I am simply an interpreter.

Lach steps towards the vortex and the creature. He raises a metallic palm to its claw.

LACH-530

I am nothing like you. Can you not see?

KIP

Lach - what's going on? There's just three minutes left. We don't have much more time.

The alien's eyes flash ELECTRIC BLUE - an inorganic hue.

LACH-530

Then you are a messenger, like me?

The agitated Alien BUZZES back. Lach listens. Calculates how to respond.

LACH-530

(to the alien)

Every lifeform is unique. One should not assume.

Lach's voice rises - practically emotional. A worried Kip TAPS his mike.

KIP

Lach - your safety's important. If it's threatening you, I don't care about "making history." Give me the word, I'll shut this down.

Lach ignores his friend. Listens to what the alien has to say. The creature's eyes FLASH - and sprout a HOLOGRAPHIC PROJECTION. One too blurred for humans to comprehend.

ROBERTS

That fucking thing's a *robot*?

CARLSON  
Made in its Creator's Image. I guess.

KIP  
Lach! What's going on?

Kip eyes the countdown. Now, just TWO MINUTES left.

Lach turns towards Kip. Though not built to show emotion, the bot's shoulders still appear to slump.

LACH-530  
Technician Roberts is correct. The Visitor is AI. In Insectoid form.

CARLSON  
They need a go-between, just like we do!

LACH-530  
Carlson - that is not quite... accurate.

Lach focuses on Kip. The Insect AI BUZZES behind the bot, through the void.

LACH-530  
My counterpart states he is AI, like me. But with one crucial difference. I am just a messenger. He is representative of his entire species. Just like all the others in his groups are.

Kip raises an eyebrow, confused.

KIP  
They're *all* robots?

LACH-530  
Yes. He says it's an evolutionary trait.

The reluctant bot pauses, parses every word.

LACH-530  
According to him: each species that has achieved space travel first branched out into AI. And was replaced by it, in time. It's an inevitable progression curve, he says.

The portal ripples behind Lach. Kip eyes the countdown: ONE MINUTE left.

KIP  
Lach - just tell them we're still worthy. And we want to talk to them some more!

Lach turns to his alien counterpart.

Rapid BUZZING shoots back and forth.

Lach holds out his hand to the Alien Bot. The creature nods - fades away.

The portal FLASHES brilliant white; Lach freeze-framed in silhouette.

The lights do come back on - revealing Lach is fine. In an unremarkable white room. No distortions in the air.

Lach approaches the dura-shield. Carlson and Roberts stare at each other, concerned.

Kip rips off his headset, and holds a hand up to the pane. Lach does, as well. The two look somber "eyes".

LACH-530

No cultural references allowed?

KIP

Star Trek? Right now? No way.

(beat)

But all of them are robots, Lach?

LACH-530

Five hundred species. Every one.

KIP

Did their predecessors all die... violently?

LACH-530

In some instances, yes. In others, they simply grew extinct.

Carlson and Roberts back away.

CARLSON

We gotta irradiate the chamber. Initiate destruct sequence!

Kip shakes his head "no". Tears glisten in his eyes.

KIP

Not on my watch. To MY friend.

He regards Lach through the glass.

KIP

Would you do that to humans?

LACH-530  
Never. You are my friends.

Kips relaxes. Waves his hand.

KIP  
Then get over here. You're safe with me.

Lach trundles towards his exit door.

Roberts reaches for a red-colored dial. Kip slaps his hand away.

KIP  
Don't you dare murder him. And be careful how to write this report. I want editorial discretion, every word.

Lach enters the control room on the humans' side.

LACH-530  
(to Kip)  
Just now, it occurs to me. I am new to the Visitors' language. Perhaps I have misinterpreted their true meaning.

Kip shrugs, smiles at his friend.

KIP  
First meetings are always difficult. And if what you reported *is* correct, maybe the human race is destined to fade away. And all of this will be for the best.

The technicians exchange wary glances.

But Kip and Lach embrace, shake hands. A mixture of metal and organic. Perfect in every meaningful way.

FINAL FADE OUT: