

The aliens abducted Andy McIntyre on Thursday evening before the Easter long weekend. Thankfully it ended up working out well for his schedule. He'd initially planned a quiet weekend streaming old sitcoms and slowly becoming one with the couch, so to be taken on an interstellar voyage for free certainly felt like an upgrade.

They'd caught him as he'd come home from work after picking up a roast chicken for dinner. His bachelor's handbag now sat on his lap after he'd been pulled through a series of tubes to arrive in a small room with no windows and a single bench. The warmth of the roasted poultry proved pleasant as the air in the room was chilly. Andy could also snack on the bird whenever he felt peckish. Sadly, though, his phone battery had died. It'd been a long day managing at the veterinary clinic after all. He'd been low on staff due to a variety of last-minute calls off shift. It was also the day the zoo had organised to bring in a lion for surgery. Said lion had then woken up halfway into its procedure, much to the chagrin of Andy's chief surgeon. And while Andy understood perfectly well how distressing such a situation was, he felt it a little unfair that he'd gotten yelled at when it'd been the zoo handler's fault for not using enough tranquilliser. Regardless, they'd eventually gotten the lion back to sleep and through the operation, so Andy had at least wanted to reward himself with a nice, hot, ready-made meal before he started his long weekend holiday. Now, as he sat in the small room with no windows, he chastised himself for not picking up some disposable cutlery, or at least a napkin, as he licked grease off his fingers.

It was his first time being abducted. To be honest, he never thought that he'd get abducted. Despite how common abductions were in this day and age, most people went about their lives assuming that it was just something that happened to someone else. There were 8 billion people on the planet and perhaps only 40 people who would get abducted in a month. The

odds were incredibly small. Although that still had not stopped one Chinese man getting abducted *seven* times in two years, and even twice within the same week! He'd been abducted in his small town in China's Sichuan province, been returned, travelled to Shanghai to visit family, and while there got abducted again. He'd become a minor celebrity overnight and started a YouTube channel called 'Abduction Guides' that had grown a sizable audience. Andy had never watched it himself but was beginning to wish he had as his supply of chicken, as well as the heat from the bag, continued to diminish. Did it usually take this long for something to happen?

A fair while passed before Andy decided to stand up and explore the room he occupied. He ran his hand along the wall, feeling the smooth, cold metal of the alien ship. It felt not at all dissimilar to the hull of the navy ships his mum had served on as a warrant officer when he was a child. Back then he'd learned to associate the metal with his sadness at mum being away for months and months. Now, as he felt this alien ship wall, he felt a strange sense of comfort. He felt as though he was in safe hands.

A slot opened on the wall right across from the bench he'd sat on with his roast chicken. A spider-like, metallic creature with a huge glowing eyeball scuttled through the gap. It located Andy and scanned him with a holographic beam of light.

"G'day," Andy's father had always taught him to take the initiative in introductions. "This is my first time being, uh, you know, taken up. Not really sure on the dos and don'ts."

The spider robot finished scanning him and the holographic light beam dissipated. There was a pause, then an image appeared above the robot's head. A 3D hologram of Andy rotated in the air with *Name: Andy McIntyre* spelled out next to the image. The little mechanical creature cocked its giant eyeball slightly as if asking him to confirm.

"Ah yes, that's correct. Andy McIntyre."

The words beside the hologram changed to *Address: 149 Aberdeen Street*. Another cock of the mechanical eye.

“Yes, I’m still at that address.”

Finally, the words *Birth date: September 11, 1988, Age: 37 Earth Years* appeared beside his virtual duplicate’s head. This time Andy didn’t wait to reply.

“That is my birthday, and I am 37. That’s not going to be a problem, is it? I’m still on the public system.”

There’d been a lot of discussion in Australia about how to handle return from abduction when it came to Medicare costs, particularly regarding age. Quarantine tests for any unknown pathogens, MRIs to ensure no alterations to the nervous system or skeletal structure, and surgery fees for any probes needing to be removed from unusual places really drove up the medical bill. While the United States deemed abduction a pre-existing condition of living in a universe with limitless possibilities, the Australian government had a much harder time convincing the public that they should have to pay out-of-pocket for extraterrestrial-related assessments. A solution had finally been reached by the government at the time. Medicare would cover alien abductions up until the age of 30. However, once someone turned 31, they would need to secure private abduction cover or pay a 2% levy. Andy was one of those people paying the levy. After all, with such small odds as previously mentioned, a small increase in his taxes was preferable to the criminal premiums of private cover. What actually bothered him more was the fact that the government had worked out a scheme for alien abduction but still could not give him dental for a desperately needed root canal. Maybe he could ask the aliens to take a look at it?

A loud series of beeps emanated from the spider robot and Andy took that to mean his age offered no barrier to whatever would happen next. And why would it? The aliens were not in the habit of asking for rebates from the Australian government as far as Andy knew.

The spider robot slipped back through the gap in the wall, which widened until it was the size of a narrow doorway. Andy wandered out into a pristine hallway with overhead lights that illuminated everything in a soft, greenish hue. Ahead of him, the spider robot clattered up the corridor, turning to look back every once in a while to make sure Andy was still following. The similarities to the frigates his mother had toured him through as a child grew. His footsteps made the same plunks on the metal grate floors. The ceiling above him creaked deeply every so often. Even the smell was eerily similar. He wondered how far away from the Earth they were now. Travelling into the vast depths of space, potentially at the mercy of solar winds or the rough waves of subspace. No-one knew how the aliens travelled. No-one had thought to ask. It generally wasn't the first thing on your mind when you were plucked up out of the blue.

The corridor eventually wound its way into a wider room, entirely circular. Once the spider robot arrived in the centre of the room, it halted and waited for Andy. He felt a little nervous to enter the room. Not because he feared he might come to harm, the aliens never harmed anyone, but nervous in the sense of being watched. As though some voyeurs lurked on the other side of a holographic camera feed. The spider robot tapped one of its legs impatiently. That got Andy moving. Any sense of trepidation would never hold up to his deep fear of being conceived as an inconvenience. He strode to the middle of the room. In turn, the spider robot hurried between his legs and back the way they'd come, the door opening turning back into a wall. Andy hadn't even gotten to say thank you or ask if he needed to remove any clothing.

A bright red light formed a circle around him, contrasting with the emerald lights that lined the walls. He couldn't move. Now he understood why no one had been able to film the actual process. The light held him in place, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. Rather it felt like he'd been wrapped up in a rug, cushioned on all sides by a soft pressure. He breathed normally and waited. And waited. And waited for what felt like half an hour. Andy had never thought that alien abduction would require so much waiting. Surely an advanced species could streamline the process of kidnapping and analysing the human body? He'd foolishly left the roast chicken bag in the other room. Then again, it wasn't as though he could actually eat it in his current situation. At least the red light seemed to take the weight off his feet.

"Hello?" Andy called. His voice echoed around the room. "I'd like to get on with the probing now, if that's not too much trouble?"

No response.

"It's just that I'm starting to get a bit bored. You haven't got a TV playing ABC on mute that I could watch, do you? SBS?"

Again, nothing.

"I'd even settle for Seven?"

There was a clunking sound above him, followed by a low whirr. Andy couldn't look up to see, but eventually the source of the noise came into view. A mechanical arm with a set of toy keys for children. It rattled them back and forth in front of Andy's unimpressed face.

"Okay, now you're just taking the piss. I wanna talk to someone."

The mechanical arm quickly retreated up the way it had come. A series of beeps accompanied it, but Andy could not deduce if it was an apology or an expression of sarcasm.

The opening in the wall where Andy had entered once again reappeared and, at last, one of the aliens entered the room. It wore a mask to cover its face, only two round azure eyes peeking over the brim. The alien towered over Andy in height and was quite broad, its body undulating beneath a single piece garment that covered nearly all of its dull yellow skin. In one long arm, or more accurately tentacle, there was a machine that looked similar to a tablet. Unknown symbols and pictures flashed across it. The alien, like the spider robot, had multiple legs that scuttled along, producing a pleasant and surprisingly light tip-tap sound. It moved around the room in a hurry, placing another tentacle on various instruments which lit up in response. Eventually it came to a rather haphazard stop in front of Andy. It said something out loud, muffled by the mask, in sounds Andy had never heard before. He stared at the creature for a moment in confusion. It pointed repeatedly with its tentacle at the tablet. Andy lowered his eyes to see the strange symbols on the screen forming into English words.

*Sorry to keep you weighing.*

“Um, do you mean ‘waiting’?”

He saw the words he’d just spoken transcribed to the tablet, then transformed into the alien language. The alien read the words and hastily mumbled back.

*Yes, my apologies, it has been a day around here.*

“Trouble with the crew?” Andy joked.

A sort of rumbling sound came from the alien as it read Andy’s reply before mumbling its response.

*[LAUGHTER] The crew is singular.*

“Singular? You’re doing this all alone?”

The alien inclined its head.

*It is difficult to get abductors on vessels in less populated areas of the galaxy. And the ones there are often call in feeling unwell.*

Well, no wonder the abduction numbers were so small. A single alien was doing all the work in what was apparently the sticks of the cosmos. It was outrageous really. Surely whatever government that ran this abduction program had to know this wasn't good enough. As Andy watched the alien flutter around the room turning on machines and making notes, he saw the tell-tale signs of burnout that he saw in himself every day. The same drained look he'd seen on his mother's face every time she came home from deployment. Crushed under the weight of responsibility and high expectations. When all of that was on top of you, no relief in sight, sometimes it helped to just hear one thing.

"What's your name?" Andy asked. The alien paused as it moved over a machine that looked very much like a laser.

*There is no human word for my name. You may call me Abductor. It is the closest word.*

"Well, Abductor, I just wanted to say I think you're doing a good job."

There was a pregnant pause as the words translated into the alien symbols. Abductor's azure eyes moved back and forth across the screen several times. It tentatively raised a tentacle to its mask and pulled it down to reveal a mouth with far too many teeth and no lips. The mouth moved awkwardly around the sounds as it spoke English for the first time.

"Thank... you..." The words came out guttural and slow, but Andy could feel the emotion behind them. Hell, his eyes even welled up a bit.

Abductor raised its mask back up, mumbling in its own language once more as it lifted the cover of a switch.

*Now, this might pinch a bit.*