HOW TO TALK TO ALIENS 101

Or: Fly, Don't Fall

by Rebecca Ahn

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Cast of Characters

Everest: Young adult. Dry but with a hint of childlike wonder still left in their heart somewhere. Dressed in an oversized varsity jacket and slacks.

X: Young adult (ostensibly). Initially comes off as serene but hiding a volatile streak. Wearing an alien headband, possibly as an ironic statement.

Setting: Rooftop. There is a flimsy railing that shows where the edge of the roof is. City sounds can faintly be heard from somewhere far below. The backdrop shows a cityscape at night.

At rise: EVEREST is leaning against the railing with a cigarette in their hand. They're not smoking it yet.

EVEREST
(Looking down at the street below)
Jesus, there goes another fight.

(They put the cigarette in their mouth and pat themself down, only to realize that their pockets are empty.)

(Enter X from stage right. They remain unnoticed by Everest.)

EVEREST (Cont.)
Shoulda worn the other jacket. Stupid letterman's never been good for anything.
(To the people on the ground, mockingly)
I don't 'spose any of you have a light to spare.

X
Sorry, I don't.

(Everest jumps and turns back, removing the cigarette from their mouth.)

EVEREST
What—I have permission to be up here. Ask the security guard.

(X ignores this, instead joining them at the railing and looking down.)

X
Woah, that's a far drop. For a human, anyway.

(Everest moves a few steps away, giving X an odd look. X looks right back at them with a perfectly pleasant expression.)

EVEREST
Can… I help you?

X

Well, of course. I've come all the way here to find you.

EVEREST

You know who I am.

X

I would certainly hope so. You really are the perfect target, Everest.

(Everest, at a loss for words, slowly backs away from X.)

X (Cont.)

Oh, lighten up. It was a compliment. I didn't say what you were a target for. Besides, doesn't it feel good to be wanted within an inch of your life?

(Beat.)

By the by, do you have any plans for tonight?

EVEREST

If you're trying to hit on me, you've got horrible game.

X

(Making a face)

Don't be disgusting. You're at least a few millennia out of my age range. I would never suggest something as tawdry as a romance. No, Everest. I'm proposing an ultimatum.

(X advances, holding out their hands as if offering Everest something—or like Jesus, take your pick.)

X (Cont.)

Choice one. You die a gruesome death at my hands. Choice two. You answer three questions honestly and to the best of your ability.

(Everest starts walking away toward the other end of the rooftop. They're shaking their head at the insanity of it all. X jumps in front of them with their hands still outstretched. Everest tries to sidestep them.)

EVEREST

Fuck off. I'm not buying whatever it is you're selling.

X

And if what I'm selling is a ticket to a glorious life?

EVEREST
Especially then. Jesus, I'm sick of your MLM types. Don't you have anywhere better to be?

X
MLM? Oh-ho-ho. You've got it all wrong. I'm [Insert series of random sounds], from the planet [Insert another series of random sounds], come to Earth to fulfill my mission.

EVEREST
Which is…

Q102

X
(Talking over Everest)
You can call me X, for short. Also, I really did mean the ultimatum.

(X pulls out a knife, pushing Everest back until they're at the edge of the roof again. Everest holds his hands up in surrender.)

EVEREST
Woah. Uh—Wait a second. I choose the second option, alright? The three questions. Hit me.

X
(Suddenly bright)
Great choice. This should be easy. As a heads up, I'd like to warn you that murder is still on the table if you decide to lie. Believe me, I'll know.

EVEREST
Whatever you say.

X
Question number one. Why are you on this roof?

EVEREST
I don't know.

X
That's a lie.

EVEREST

Fine, I guess the view is nice. I'm a people watcher. It's what I do. And I can *usually* get some peace and quiet up here.

X

(Tilting their head)

Not a lie, but not the full truth, either. Remember, you have to answer to the best of your ability. Or else—

EVEREST

Murder. Yeah, I get it.

(Everest is distressed. They pace, run their hands through their hair, raise the cigarette to their lips and lower it again, realizing that it's unlit.)

X

You're scared of heights, aren't you?

EVEREST

How'd you figure?

X

There's a way people look at things they're scared of. Like it's going to bite their hand if they reach out far enough. They can't keep their eyes off it.

EVEREST

(Quieter)

I wasn't always scared of heights.

(X takes a seat where they're standing. Everest, to their own surprise, does the same.)

EVEREST (Cont.)

I used to not be scared of anything. I thought I could fly when I was seven. My mom had to stop me from jumping off our roof a good half a dozen times. I still remember her yelling at me from the yard, all mad. *You get down here right this second, young man.* Stuff like that, y'know? But she was ready to catch me. I could tell.

X

That's very sweet.

EVEREST

She—She was scared, too, I think.

X

Of you jumping?

EVEREST

That, and heights. And a lot of other things she never wanted to talk about. Maybe if I really could fly, she wouldn't have had to wait for me in the yard. She wouldn't have had to worry half as much. Maybe if *she* could fly, the jump—

(Taking a second to compose himself)

She wouldn't have died from it.

X

I think you've got your answer to my question.

EVEREST

Yeah. I'm going to see if I can fly, like mom did.

(Beat.)

I'm here to die.

X

There you go. Isn't it ironic, that you admit your desire to die only under the threat of death?

EVEREST

That's the only reason why anyone dies. You don't kill yourself unless you think you're going to die if you don't. I saw it in Mom the night before. Her roof wasn't this one, but I figure they're all the same once you're falling.

X

I wouldn't know. I can't die.

(Everest raises his eyebrows but doesn't comment.)

X (Cont.)

You know what, Everest? I'm in a good mood. Let's renegotiate your sentence, shall we? A kidnapping. Yes, I like the sound of that.

EVEREST

I'd rather die.

X

Nonsense. We'll take a little trip on my spaceship. It'll be grand, like—

(Falters, smile fading)

Like the best movie you've ever seen. How does that sound?

EVEREST

Absolutely horrible.

X

Well, that's settled. Now that we're in the mood for some truth-telling, here's the second question. Who am I?

EVEREST

That's it? You're not going to make me explore my relationship with my mother? No psychotherapy bullshit?

X

Why would I possibly want to do that? Answer the second question, and we'll see if it leads somewhere with the first.

EVEREST

Dunno why it would, unless you're connected to Mom. Don't tell me you're some kind of guardian angel that she sent from above. That'd be the worst idea anyone's ever come up with.

X

Far from it. This might be a little tricky, so I'll give you a hint. We've met before.

(X stands up and starts to strike a series of poses. It's almost like they're playing charades. There are a few animals in there, what vaguely looks like a superhero landing. It eventually devolves into patternless flopping. Everest watches on, bemused.)

EVEREST

Uh… Alien mating dance?

X

Why must you always bring up the idea of mating? Think harder. Reach into the depths of your subconscious, what lies at the border of reality and sublimity. Close your eyes if you must. Meditate on your dreams.

(As X speaks, the sounds of the city completely fade away and are replaced by a meditative humming. It swells enough to completely engulf Everest's senses. The lights dim and redden.)

X (Cont.)

Where are you? What are you doing?

EVEREST

(With their eyes closed)

I… I don't know. Where am I supposed to be?

(X circles Everest, perhaps predatorial, perhaps protective.)

X

Think back to a time when you were freer to move into a land of imagination. Remember, I've been with you for a long, long time.

EVEREST

Will you cut out the new-age hippie bullshit?

X

(Crescendoing)

Think. Think, think, think, think.

EVEREST

I am thinking.

(Everest tries to swat at X, but they miss thanks to their eyes still being shut.)

X

(In a higher-pitched voice.)

You can do it, Ev. I believe in you. You can climb the highest mountains and dive into the deepest seas. Maybe you can even fly.

Q104 fast right after before falling back

(Everest falls backward, eyes flying open. The music stops. Everest and X are frozen in place. There is silence, then a recording starts to play:)

YOUNG EVEREST (RECORDED)

Who are you?

X

What a silly question. I can be anything you want me to be.

YOUNG EVEREST (RECORDED)

Can you be my friend?

X

Of course. We can be the best of friends, for the time being.

(The lighting changes in color. Everest is still frozen, but X is free to resume their slow circling.)

Q105

YOUNG EVEREST (RECORDED)

Let's go play in the forest.

X

Sure, Ev. Whatever you like.

(X starts playing charades again. Everest follows them with their eyes, stuck in a daze.)

EVEREST

(Slowly)

Wolf, rabbit, eagle, elephant, horse. Galapagos Giant Tortoise.

X

Have you ever even seen a Galapagos Giant Tortoise?

EVEREST

(As if repeating words whispered into their ear)

Only on TV. But I've read a lot about them, too.

X

Remind me to take you to see a real one someday. We'll take a ride in my spaceship and—

(Mimics a spaceship sound)

Off we go.

EVEREST

Cool. Okay, now do Superman.

when X lies down Q106

X

You have odd ideas of what constitutes an animal.

(But X does it anyway. The second memory fades with the sound of young Everest's laughter and X mimicking a dead possum on the floor. The lighting changes again, and this time, Everest is the one who can move. They lean over X, kneeling to better see their face.)

EVEREST

(With more confidence in their words)

What does it mean to be friends?

X

It can mean the world. It can mean nothing. I like to think that it's somewhere in between.

EVEREST

You're being confusing again.

X

All creatures are as complex as the stars above.

EVEREST

Tell me about the one you're from again. I can't sleep.

X

There are three suns, each as bright as one of yours. Below, a milky white ocean that burns everything it touches. Only the black glass sand can survive the rage of the waves. Around the shore is a forest, with animals you've never seen and sounds you've never heard echoing through crooked trees.

EVEREST

And the caves?

X

Full of technicolor gemstones. You know all this. Hush now and go to sleep, so I can stop being your imaginary friend.

EVEREST

Did you have any friends back home?

X

No.

(Hesitating for the first time)

You have the honor of being my first.

EVEREST

I like that. Make me a promise.

X

What kind?

EVEREST

The kind that lasts forever. Because you'll live forever, right? Longer than the sun and all the stars?

X

Smart child. Alright, then. I promise that I'll come to help you when you need me the most. No matter where you are, or where I am in the galaxies, I'll hear your soul reaching out to me.

EVEREST

Why?

X

(Mocking but without any bite)

I don't know. Because you're special. Is that what you wanted to hear?

EVEREST

(Smiling)

Yeah. Good night.

X

Good night. For now.

(The lighting reverts to the normal state of the roof, and city sounds start creeping in again. X props themself up on their elbows. Everest leans over them.)

Q107

EVEREST

You were gone by morning.

X

Indeed I was.

EVEREST
You were real. You were real, and all this time I thought I'd dreamed up an imaginary friend. How didn't I recognize you? You look exactly the same.

X
The subconscious is capable of powerful things.

EVEREST
You sound the same, too, Jesus.

X
Age is fickle. I've found that what matters is your outlook on life.

(X stands, making a show of straightening out their clothes.)

EVEREST
Don't get moralizing on me. You're the one who left. I haven't seen you in fifteen years.

X
Duty called. I can't stay on one planet for too long, otherwise the entities of the galactic travel agency grow suspicious. I did watch you whenever I could.

EVEREST
Did you… Were you there when Mom died?

X
Missed the specifics of that one, I'm afraid. It happened between my visits. But now I know.

EVEREST
Fat lot of good that does. You promised.

(Everest, face-to-face with X, pushes their shoulder hard enough to make them stumble back.)

EVEREST (Cont.)
You promised that you'd be there when I needed you. I needed you at the hospital. I needed you at the funeral, and at home, and—and in the two years I spent thinking I was alone. Now I find

out that you were watching all along and just never bothered to say hi? What a great friend you are.

(X lets Everest push them around without complaint.)

X

I'm here now. Does that count for anything?

EVEREST

Too late. Get out of my sight. Q108

X

(Hurt but trying to hide it)

You still have one more question to answer.

EVEREST

Forget about it. Forget about the deal, forget about me. You've been doing a great job of that so far.

X

I never forgot about you. It's only that time passes differently on my planet. I would have been by your side all these years if I could.

EVEREST

Bullshit.

X

You remember, you're the only friend I have. Would you believe me if I said I was scared? I didn't know if you'd remember me. Or need me, for that matter. I've only ever been good at watching.

(Everest almost softens, but they turn away, looking anywhere but at X.)

EVEREST

I don't care. Go bait another gullible five-year-old and watch their life fall apart. Sounds like you get off on that.

X

Third question, and I'll leave you in peace. Forever.

EVEREST

(Still angry)

Fine. Shoot.

X

Who are you, Everest?

EVEREST

Seriously? That's your question? How the hell am I supposed to answer that?

X

I recommend you start with the basics.

EVEREST

Everest, age 20, taking a break from school and living in the suburbs.

(Breaks off, shaking their head)

Why don't I tell you my favorite flavor of ice cream while we're at it? Actually, just give me a list of icebreaker questions and we'll go through those.

X

Do you think those questions would define you?

EVEREST

Hell, no.

X

Then, those aren't the answers I'm looking for. Who are you, Everest? Who were you when you were five years old?

EVEREST

A happier person? I don't know. I've changed. I've changed too much to know who I am.

X

Not nearly as much as you think. I recognized you, didn't I? Whenever I visited, I had no trouble recognizing you, no matter how much you grew, or changed your hair, or changed your clothes. There's something else that defines you.

EVEREST

If you're so sure, tell me what it is.

X

I have full confidence that you can find it yourself.

EVEREST

(Muttering)

Don’t believe in me too much. It tends to backfire.

X

For a starting point, I suppose you’ve always been on the pessimistic side.

EVEREST

Is that a dig?

X

Only trying to help. But I believe that your pessimism comes from a place of trust. You trust, and you want to trust, so you protect yourself by not believing in your own trust.

EVEREST

(Staring straight at X)

You should have stayed.

X

(Acquiescing)

I should have stayed.

EVEREST

Maybe I’d be an optimistic person if you’d taught me how. I never did see a Galapagos Giant Tortoise in person, y’know. I won’t ever see one before I die.

X

See, here’s my point. Doesn’t your desire to see a Galapagos Giant Tortoise say something about you? All these small things, they matter.

EVEREST

I’ve always liked animals, I guess. I like how they have little lives of their own, even though we don’t really understand the stuff they do. And they look perfectly happy living their little lives.

(Beat)

I wish I were a tortoise. Or a wolf, or a bunny, or whatever else it was that I was obsessed with as a kid. I think I’d be comfortable then.

X

What is it that you want, Everest?

EVEREST

I just want a simple life. The simpler the better. One where I'm happy and comfortable and feel good in my own skin. I want my mom back.

X

You want to live?

EVEREST

As long as it's good.

X

You want to love.

EVEREST

As long as it's my mom.

X

She doesn't have to be in front of you for you to love her. You miss her, don't you?

EVEREST

All the damn time. I missed you, too. Even when I thought I'd dreamed you up. I always wondered why I couldn't do it again. But you'll leave, just like Mom did.

X

I'll come back. Do you trust me?

EVEREST

No.

X

No lies, Everest. That was our deal.

EVEREST

I hate you.

(Everest digs out their pack of cigarettes from their pocket and throws it at X. X picks it up without comment. After examining the box, they open it and take one for themself.)

X

You only hate me because you love me.

EVEREST

I don't want to. I want to let go of everything so I can die in peace. Maybe then I'll see Mom, and it'll be like it was before. Can we go back to the original deal? Can you kill me and be done with it?

X

No. A deal's a deal.

EVEREST

So, you're going to kidnap me? Because I sure can't think of an answer to your question.

X

Perhaps I will. I can take you to my home planet to see the three suns, and the white oceans, and the gemstones in the caves. Would you like that?

Q109

(Everest is overwhelmed at their own emotions. They wrap their jacket tightly around themself and return to the edge of the roof, as they originally were before X barged in.)

EVEREST

Yeah, actually. I think I would.

X

More than dying?

EVEREST

I—

(Looking up at X)

Even if I go along with you, you'll dump me back here after, right?

X

Every adventure has an end.

EVEREST

Why do I do this? Why do I love the wrong things? Mom left, and you'll leave, and I'll just be here, same as I always am. I'm never the one who gets to say goodbye.

X

At my age, you realize that everything is fleeting. If you don't love because it'll pass, there's nothing to love. And that's no life at all.

EVEREST

Life.

(Beat.)

I do want it. Almost as much as I want to die. Maybe even a little more. I want that life I thought I could have as a kid, and I know that's a lot to ask for, but… I thought I could actually do it, y'know? Build up walls around me and fill it with everything I love. Everyone. Guess I never learned how to adjust my expectations.

X

Never too late to start.

EVEREST

(Mulling over each word)

I'm scared of wanting to live.

(Abruptly, X walks off-stage. Everest starts to run after them.)

EVEREST (Cont.)

Where are you going? Was that the answer you were looking for? Hey, at least—

(X returns with a space helmet in hand. It looks plastic and cheap, like a kid's toy—it is—but X presents it to Everest, completely serious.)

EVEREST (Cont.)

You kept this?

X

Of course. It's the only birthday present I ever received.

EVEREST

No shit, you don't have a birthday.

X

I did try to tell you at the time, but I don't think you were convinced. There was also something about helping me breathe in outer space.

EVEREST

Huh. I'm fairly sure that thing's from Walmart, so maybe don't trust it too much.

X

It's served me well in my travels. Kept me safe all these years, brought me down to, ah, earth, as you say, whenever I needed it. I think that it'll help you breathe, too.

EVEREST

On Earth?

X

An anchor is an anchor, wherever you are. It might also come in handy should you ever want to come find me.

EVEREST

Find you. You're leaving? Just like this?

X

Congratulations, Everest. You've answered all my questions. Our deal is complete.

EVEREST

No, I'm not ready yet. Kidnap me. Take me wherever you're going next.

X

That would be unethical. You're now free to live your life however you please, so make good use of it.

EVEREST

What if I want to follow you on your spaceship?

X

No can do.

EVEREST

You're the one who threatened to kill me if I didn't talk. You can't do that to someone and just leave.

X

Sorry about that, Ev. You wouldn't have talked to me at all without the ultimatum. Remember, too, that one spy movie you played until the DVD wore out?

(Grinning)

Fun times. We had some fun times together.

EVEREST

You said I could come find you? How do I do that? Do I just start asking around? X isn't even your real name, and I can't pronounce where you're from, and—

X

You'll figure it out. I believe in you.

(Everest sees that there is no use in arguing further. They square their shoulders, coming to a resolution.)

EVEREST

You better be ready when I show up at your doorstep. I'm on your ass.

X

I've been ready forever.

(X extends their hand for a handshake. Everest lowers the helmet and takes it.)

EVEREST

Goodbye. For now.

X

Goodbye.

(Cut to black. CURTAIN)