

## Arrival

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## Arrival

### A short story by V.H.Folland

"I lost the auction." Jim slung the kitbag down and slumped in a chair. Shaking his head, Jake stepped across and closed the door Jim had left swinging behind him.

"Just as well. What would you have done if you'd won?" he asked, and Jim stared at the floor.

"I dunno. I'd have worked something out. I hate to think of her in the hands of strangers."

"And it took you a week to tell me?" Jake sounded unimpressed.

"I didn't think it would take that long to get home. Didn't want to talk about it." Jim wasn't being quite honest; he didn't even want to think about. Jake raised an eyebrow.

"Were you even close?"

"Not a chance. She went for more than my entire backpay."

"Just as well. I don't know what you were doing bidding in the first place? Why didn't you try to buy something less life-changing, like a house?" Jake was utterly unsympathetic, and Jim scowled at him.

"Just sentiment, I guess. I need a drink." Since he was nearer, Jake grabbed two beers from the fridge and sat down, tossing one to his maudlin brother.

"Shouldn't you wait until you're out of uniform for that?"

"Who's going to care?" Jim cracked the top of the beer and downed a swig, staring moodily at the floor. Jake chuckled, and his brother looked up and glared. He held his hands up in a soothing gesture.

"Jim, seriously, looking at this from the point of view of a rational person and not an obsessive pilot, what the hell would you do with a defunct nuclear bomber?"

"She's a search and rescue craft, not a nuclear bomber!" Jim's defense was instant, and Jake snorted.

"Is it capable of carrying a nuclear device, yes or no?" As Jim paused indignantly, he pressed. "Well?"

"Yes, but she only dropped lifeboats." Jake raised an eyebrow.

"Which doesn't answer the question of what you would do with it. You don't own an airstrip for a start - "

"I'd have begged Matt." Jim admitted.

"And Jill would have laid out completely reasonable hanger fees that you couldn't afford." Jake pointed out. Matt's airstrip and crop spraying operation was run on a tight budget and Jill, the business manager, was not the type to let friendship get in the way of common sense. Jim glared for a moment as the truth of the comment sunk in, and then slouched in his chair.

"Why are you having a go? I lost the bleeding auction anyway."

"Because I don't want you doing something silly. You know, like spending two years savings on a plane that can't even fly -"

"Oh shut it!" Jim had had enough. His brother was being eminently reasonable, and somehow that made it worse. "So you're so much older and more responsible -"

"Yes, which means saving my little brother from being an idiot is in the job description."

"Eighteen effing minutes." Jim muttered, finishing his beer, and his brother grinned back.

"Still older." Jake retorted, leaning against the fridge and blocking Jim from grabbing for another can.

"So why don't you bugger off and let me get drunk in peace?"

"Because before you get completely hammered, I think you want to have a look at Matt's place." Jim looked up about to say that he had just lost a plane, the last thing he wanted to do was look at someone else's, and then he saw the look on his brother's face. Jake was entirely too smug.

"I'm not driving all the way to the other end of the valley." Jim said.

"Then try these." Jake handed him a pair of binoculars, all-too-conveniently to hand, and Jim took them. They had obviously been fished out of a cupboard and recently cleaned.

"What've you been setting up?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Go and look." Realising that he wasn't going to be left alone to get drunk quietly, Jim stood up.

"Fine. Sooner I get this done, the sooner I can get down to drinking." Jake chuckled, stood up and, gripping Jim's shoulders, propelled his brother towards the door.

Out in front of the house, Jim shrugged free and turned away from the airfield, reluctant to be reminded of his aircraft, now on its way to the breaker's yard. The faint hum of a microlite in the distance did nothing to improve his mood.

"So what's so important?" he asked irritably, and Jake shook his head.

"Look, idiot." Jim's eyes followed Jake's pointing hand automatically, and his retort died unsaid.

He didn't need binoculars to know the silhouette even at that distance. The grey frame, with its stub nose and the long glider-like wings with their eight unique propellers was unmistakable. He gaped for a moment before collecting himself enough to speak.

"Is that -?"

"Yep. Matt heard there was a plane up for sale, and you know what he's like." Jake sounded rather pleased with himself. "Thought he'd get a gate guardian, and god knows he's got the hanger space."

"He spent that much on a gate guardian? He's just going to let it sit there?" Jim sounded incredulous and Jake sniggered.

"And what were you going to do with it? Tour flights?" Jim ignored him, lifting the binoculars to take a closer look. The markings were all still in place, and he knew without a doubt that this was his aircraft. Even if he now had to acknowledge it was Matt's.

"How?" he asked quietly, slightly stunned.

"She arrived this morning. You must've been too busy sulking to notice or you'd have seen her when we drove passed." It was true Jim knew. He had deliberately avoided looking, since the last thing he had wanted was to watch Matt's planes when he had just lost the auction for his own.

Turning the magnification up to full he surveyed the aircraft, the eight propellers gleaming before four engines. The faded grey livery showed that this was an old, old, lady, and yet she still looked ready to fly. As he looked along the wing he stifled a chuckle. Matt was already up on a stepladder with a bucket and cleaning supplies, attacking the grime on the grey surface.

"Hold on. That means you already knew I lost." Jim lowered the binoculars and gave his brother an accusing glare.

"Yeah. Who'd you think had to do the fire assessment for Matt when he decided to bid for it?"

"You could've told me." Jake waved a reproving finger at him.

"No I couldn't. Professional confidentiality. Besides if you're too dumb to check who actually won the auction, or look left at the huge grey *nuclear bomber* that you drove right passed -"

"Ok, Ok." Jim went back to watching the old crop sprayer pilot scrubbing industriously at the paint. "Who's he planning to get to help him look after it?"

"I don't think he planned that far. You missed him trying to get Rose's help, through an odd mix of begging and barking." Jake's tone was light, and Jim grinned. The crop sprayer pilot had never been good at asking for help, even when he needed it.

"You know she's not qualified to work on it, right?"

"That's what she said. Think you might know anyone who could give him a hand?" Jake's suggestion was deliberately casual and Jim sucked his breath through his teeth in mock thought.

"A few. Say ten or so." He knew her old crew would be more than happy to have a quick look up here and see what had happened to their old lady. Looking down at Matt, now shifting the stepladder along the wing to a new spot, Jim smiled. She might not be his, but his grey lady had definitely found a good home.

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### Author's Note

Arrival is a prequel to Fire Season, set several years before and covering the arrival of Matt's rather unique gate guardian.

Originally Arrival was released on Twitter, on <http://www.twitter.com/vhfolland>, in one tweet a day before Fire Season's release. Coming up to Christmas it has been uploaded in its complete form online as a free download.

Hope you enjoyed the story.

VH Folland.

###

### Fire Season by VH Folland

*For Matt and his flying club, there weren't any options left. Trapped residents, threatened towns and one small airstrip safely upwind of the fire line.*

*It's not a promising position, but they volunteer to help anyway, hoping a protected position and a close base might make a difference to the fire fighters.*

*And then the wind changes*

"Thought provoking, emotional and compassionate, this is a book I could read again. A recommended read."  
Clover Hill Book Reviews

"tense and brilliant debut"  
Steph Hall, StardustandSparkles

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