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Commander Aaron Eliassen threw the tray across his cell. It smashed against the far wall, covering the white molded plaster in a mix of browns, greens, and reds. The tray slid down to the floor, clattered for a moment, then fell still.

Aaron glared around the small, featureless white room at nothing in particular. For the twentieth time, or the hundredth, or perhaps the thousandth, he ran and smashed himself against the locked door, hoping that perhaps this time he would break apart the unseen hinges.

As before, the door refused to budge. All he succeeded in doing was getting his blue jumpsuit even filthier than before.

Aaron placed his eye against the crack between the door and the wall, again trying to peer through to the outside, to get some idea of what lay beyond. He tilted and twisted his head to get some sort of view, but all in vain.

He shuffled back from the door until he stood in the center of the room, then looked up at the ceiling.

Although he had not yet spotted a microphone or surveillance camera, he assumed he was being monitored. "You hear me?" he shouted. He pointed at the mess of food that lay in a lump on the floor. "Did you see that? I'm not going to eat anymore. Not until I get some answers."

No one responded. Eliassen walked over to the discolored wall and stared at the gloppy mess of stew,

asparagus, and gelatin. His stomach rumbled slightly, but he ignored it.

"Let me out!" he screamed. He beat against the door with both his fists in unison, and then when that got tiring he changed the rhythm. Right fist, left fist, right fist, left fist. He walked around the perimeter of the room, continuing to bang against the wall, until he had come back to the door and his hands felt raw. He dropped his arms to his sides, panting. How many times had he done this? He couldn't say. He couldn't remember.

"Talk to me," he said between breaths. "Someone, anyone, talk to me. Please."

He walked over to the bunk, stared at it, and then, in defiance, he collapsed onto the floor. For the third or fourth time, he cried himself to sleep.

* * * *

Aaron heard the voice, a deep one, calling his name. "Commander Eliassen. Commander Eliassen. Please wake up."

Aaron opened his eyes and immediately shielded his face with his arm. A bright light shone through the open—finally, open!—door. A figure stood in the doorway, with the light forming an aura around it.

Aaron fought down an urge to jump up and run through the door, knowing it would get him nowhere. Instead, he eased himself up, barely noticing that although he had fallen asleep on the floor, somehow he had ended up in the bunk. "Who is that?" he rasped.

The figure nodded to someone outside, and the door clicked shut, once again blending into the wall with but a tiny crack around it. Aaron's eyes adjusted to the ambient fluorescent light. He glanced at the far wall; someone had cleaned all of the food off of it, but a nauseating spot of brown color remained on the floor.

"Do you recognize me?" the figure asked.

Aaron studied the man's face and body for a moment. Black hair, solid jaw, etched wrinkles, blue blazer—it could not be possible, and yet Aaron did recognize the man.

"Director Carter?" he asked softly. "Gabe?"

Gabe nodded, his lips pressed together tightly.

Aaron jumped out of the bed and ran towards his friend, a mixture of anger, fear, and relief playing out within him. He raised his arms, but whether he intended to hug Gabe or choke him, even Aaron could not say. He figured he'd decide once within range.

Before he could get too close, however, Gabe pulled a revolver out of a shoulder holster and pointed it straight at him. Aaron stopped short. He lifted his gaze from the gun and stared into Gabe's eyes, trying to read his friend's blank expression.

"Gabe?" he said again. "Is it really you?"

Gabe nodded once. "Yes, Aaron, it's me. Please do not come any closer." His voice sounded cold but uncertain.

"I don't understand," Aaron said.

Gabe held the gun steady. "If you get violent, I will shoot you. If that doesn't stop you, the soldiers standing outside will fill the room with gas and knock us both out."

Aaron nodded. He backed away from Gabe with measured steps and sat on the bunk. "May I ask a question?"

Gabe slid the revolver back into its holster, but kept his eyes on Aaron the whole time. "Go ahead."

"What the hell's going on here?"

Gabe looked around the room for a moment. When his eyes finally settled on Aaron's face, Aaron noticed that they were bloodshot. "Perhaps you can tell me," Gabe said.

Aaron's jaw dropped. "I should tell *you*?"

Gabe nodded. "Yes. Tell me everything that happened after you returned from your mission."

"After I returned? But the mission itself—I need to tell you about my discoveries—"

"Don't!" Gabe shouted, holding up both his hands. "Only tell me about everything that happened to you since you landed."

Aaron's anger had disappeared into his confusion; it now returned stronger than before. He repressed an urge to spit. "Don't you already know? Look around you!"

Gabe made no move to turn his head, so Aaron continued. "You locked me in a cell. You must know this already. Why are you torturing me?"

Gabe shook his head so slightly that Aaron could barely see it. "Assume I don't know already. Assume I need to hear it from you. From the instant you made contact with Earth."

Aaron yawned, cracking his jaw. "Well. The instant I made contact, hmm? Houston told me to bring her in at Edwards instead of the Cape. I came in fine, a perfect two-pointer."

"And then?"

Aaron glowered. "And then a bunch of army soldiers grabbed me out of the shuttle and dragged me into this cell. No one listened to my protestations or questions; it's as if I spoke Martian."

"And what have you done since?"

"Done?" Aaron made no effort to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "Why, I took in a show and made out with a dancing girl. I'm planning to introduce her to Mom next week." He tensed up. "What in God's name do you think I've done?"

"I'm sorry. It was necessary."

"Necessary? It was necessary for NASA to treat me like a common criminal? No—worse than a common criminal. No television, no radio, no Internet access—not even a telephone to call a lawyer, let

alone my mom. Is this still America or what?"

Gabe lowered his eyes. "It's still America."

"How long have I been here? Counting the meals pushed through the slot and the cycle of the lights, I'm guessing four days."

"Four days sounds about right."

"Sounds about right?' Don't you know?"

Gabe placed his hand on his chest, near the holster. "Aaron, what's the date?"

"Huh?"

"You remember your mission schedule?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, then. If we assume that you landed four days ago, and have been here ever since, then what's today's date?"

Aaron thought for a moment. "If I returned on October tenth, as scheduled, then today's October fourteenth."

Gabe sighed. "It's not."

"It's not?"

"No. It's May eleventh."

Aaron narrowed his eyes. "Are you telling me I was in space for over a year? Impossible. I didn't have enough supplies to last for that long."

"You misunderstood me. Today's May eleventh, a week before your launch."

* * * *

That evening, still locked in his cell and eating bland food off one of the government-issued trays, Aaron went over the conversation from that afternoon. At first, he had refused to accept his old friend's statement.

"What are you talking about?" he had asked.

Gabe sighed, and slid down with his back against the wall next to the door. He crouched on the floor, looking ready to jump up if Aaron made any sudden moves. "What I mean is," he said, drawing each word out, "you haven't left yet."

"Bullshit! I've gone and returned." He stood up from the bunk and pointed at himself. "See? Here I am."

Gabe appeared to tense up. "Oh, I can't argue with the fact that you've returned, Aaron," he said, waving a hand. "I mean, I'm talking to you right now."

Aaron settled onto the bunk again. "Well, then?"

"Well, then." Gabe sighed. "The thing of it is, I also talked to you this morning."

"This morning? No way. I would have remembered." Even though, Aaron thought, he had no way of knowing the time, since no clock hung in the cell.

Gabe chuckled. "I'm sure you do remember the conversation. I spoke with the real—I mean, the one of you who hasn't left yet."

"And what did we discuss?"

"We talked about the wafer with all the names on it." Gabe stared at his face. "You said—"

"I said that it was a waste of my weight allowance."

"Yes."

Aaron snorted. "I remember that conversation. From over six months ago."

Gabe shook his head. "It happened this morning."

Aaron leaned forward. "Prove it to me."

Gabe stood up again and held out his arms in a gesture of helplessness. "I wish I could."

"Not good enough. If this is for real, then tell me—how did I travel back in time?"

"We believe your ship followed a Gott closed timelike curve, if you know what that means."

Aaron shook his head. "I don't."

"Do you want me to try to explain it to you?"

Aaron smiled. "I wouldn't consider it proof."

Gabe put his fingers together and stared at the wall over Aaron's head. "Think about my dilemma for a moment, even if you consider it just a theoretical exercise. How could I prove to you that you're in the past? You've lived through it already. There's nothing I can show you that you haven't already seen." He paused. "I suppose you could ask me questions to try to trip me up, but I don't see how that would work."

A sudden realization hit Aaron. "But I could prove to you I'm from the future, is that it? Tell you what's going to happen tomorrow?"

The color drained from Gabe's face. "No," he said, "do not do that, under any circumstances."

"Why not?" Aaron looked around at the walls. "Isn't that why you locked me in here?"

"No. We locked you in here to avoid any paradoxes."

"Paradoxes?"

Gabe sighed. "Aaron, what would you do if you managed to build a time machine? What would you use it for?"

Aaron's nose itched; he scratched it. "You tell me."

"You might use it to give yourself information about the future, so as to change it. But if you change it, then where did the information come from in the first place?"

Aaron thought for a moment. "I've heard of this. The Grandfather Paradox, right? I go back in time and kill my grandfather, and then I was never born. But then how did I go back in time if I never existed?"

Gabe nodded, a small smile on his face. "Good. You do understand."

Exasperated, Aaron asked, " *What* do I understand? Tell me."

"You understand why we had to lock you up."

Aaron glared at Gabe and clenched his fists. He suppressed the rage he felt. "I do not understand that at all," he said in measured tones.

"We had to keep you away from everyone else to avoid contaminating the present with information from the future."

Aaron grunted. "I suppose," he said, "I could grant that necessity."

Gabe sighed. "I'm glad you can see it my way. My own presence here is a risk. If you told me something about the future, it could destroy the Universe."

Aaron stared at his friend for a moment, then laughed. The hollow laughter rippled and cascaded, and wouldn't stop. After a moment, Aaron began coughing.

"Are you okay, Aaron?"

Aaron waved his friend's concern away as the last of his coughs spasmed out. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just that you sounded so melodramatic." He mimicked Gabe's serious tone. "It could destroy the Universe," he repeated, and he started laughing again.

"It could."

Aaron stopped laughing. "Literally?"

"Yes."

Aaron thought for a moment. If Gabe was telling the truth ... "Then coming in here to see me must be some risk."

Gabe shrugged. "You weren't doing too well, Aaron. Somebody had to explain."

Aaron looked into Gabe's eyes and realized that Gabe himself must have fought for the right to tell Aaron why they had locked him away. For a moment, Aaron felt affection for his friend. But it quickly faded. After all, Gabe might have fought to talk to him, but what Aaron really wanted, really needed—

"Let me go, Gabe."

"I can't. It'll create paradoxes. We need to avoid them."

"You *can't* avoid any paradoxes! Hasn't my presence here already affected the timeline, if you believe your nonsense?"

Gabe smiled. "And now you understand my problem, old friend. According to Doctor—I mean, according to our physicists, I have to minimize your impact here as much as possible."

Aaron shook his head. "The only way you could do that is by keeping me locked away in here until the time comes for me to return."

Gabe stared at him silently for a few seconds, and Aaron suddenly felt cold.

"No," he said. "No way. You can't possibly—"

"What choice do I have?"

Aaron's mind raced through the possibilities. "You've got a million of them! If you believe this crap, just let me out after the shuttle leaves on May eighteenth."

"No good," Gabe said. "We can't explain your quick return. We're going to have to keep you here until October, without any other human contact. But I will push for a TV for you. Think of it this way. It will let you catch up with everything you missed, in real time." He paused. "I'm sorry."

The door clicked open, and Gabe dashed through it. Aaron had rushed him, screaming, but by the time he got to the door, it had shut tightly in front of him.

And now, as he finished his food and left the tray on the floor, Aaron considered his options. He refused to stay locked up, without human contact, for six months. What could he do? He had to escape, somehow. But how? The door remained locked at all times, and his incessant tapping and banging on the walls had revealed no hollowness anywhere around.

Then he realized something. He had never been awake for the delivery of the food. They had to get it into and out of the room somehow...

Aaron smiled. Yawning loudly and deliberately, he walked over to the bunk and lay down. He closed his eyes, fought to stay awake, and waited as if he had all the time in the world. When the door finally clicked open, he was ready.

* * * *

Only one guard came in to retrieve the tray while Aaron slept. Only one, probably to reduce "contamination" from the future, as Gabe had put it. A lucky break, but Aaron had managed to surprise him. The guard now lay unconscious in the cell as Aaron dashed through the corridors of the base, wondering where he could run to.

As Aaron ran, a feeling of familiarity snuck up on him. He knew the base, he knew it intimately, and this place looked very much like the way he remembered it.

He stopped. Could he really have traveled into the past? Was today really May eleventh—perhaps now May twelfth?

If it really was a week before he launched, then Aaron—his earlier self—would still be here in California, doing some last minute prep work before flying to Florida. They kept him at the base, going over the details of the mission, checking his health, and generally giving him busywork until the time came to leave.

Aaron had nowhere else to run to, and an idea had already begun forming in his mind. Quickly, he navigated his way to his old quarters, in the residential part of the base. He found his door and jimmied it open, glad to see that he still had the lock picking skills he had taught himself in college.

The door opened onto a dark room, with the ambient light of the corridor illuminating the nondescript bed, desk, computer, and chair. He snuck into the room, closed the door gently behind him, and flipped on the light switch. The man lying on the bed groaned and moved an arm to cover his eyes.

Aaron strode over to him, shook the man awake, and found himself face to face with—himself. Despite his expecting this on an intellectual level, his breath still caught in his throat.

The other Aaron's eyes filled with fear. He opened his mouth, and Aaron quickly placed his hand over it. God, this felt weird.

"Aaron, don't shout, don't scream. I need to talk to you. Please relax. I'm not going to hurt you." He paused. "Do you understand?"

The other Aaron nodded, although fear still showed in his eyes. Slowly, Aaron removed his hand.

"How are you?" he asked.

The other Aaron sat up in his bed and pulled his body back into a defensive position. "What the hell's going on? How did you get in here?"

"Take a good look at me, Aaron. I'm you."

Aaron waited while his younger self studied his features. Finally, the younger Aaron said, "This isn't possible."

"That's what I've been trying to tell Gabe. Apparently, when you—when I—went on the deep space mission, we followed some sort of closed something something loop. I ended up back here, in the past."

"How is this possible?"

Aaron shook his head. "I can only think of one thing, and I tried to tell Gabe, but he wouldn't listen." He sat down next to his younger self. "Halfway through the mission, at the edge of the solar system, I found something, a colorful wall of light. I didn't discover it until I hit it, but it must have been that closed something something curve Gabe told me about. When I passed through it, I must have traveled back in time."

The younger Aaron scrunched his eyes closed and shook his head. "I'm dreaming."

"I wish. For a while I thought I was. But apparently, it's all real. I must really have traveled into the past."
He looked off to the side. "Except—except that I don't remember this conversation."

"What?" his other self asked.

Aaron laughed as something occurred to him. "Listen, you. If I had traveled back in time, and met my past self—meaning you—shouldn't my future self—meaning me—remember this conversation? Wouldn't I be forming new memories for every second of this conversation?"

The other Aaron shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what's going on."

Aaron shrugged. "Well, I don't know much of the science of time travel either. But it seems pretty likely to me. And that means that I'm not in the past."

"So where—I mean when—I mean, what's going on?"

"Stop babbling," Aaron said. "It makes you—me—look like an idiot." He sighed. "Now I don't know what's going on. Maybe the anomaly thrust me into a parallel universe, similar to mine but a few months out of sync. Perhaps if I search around, I'll find something different, a clue that I really have jumped universes. Or maybe—" He cut off, thinking.

"Yes?"

"I don't know. But I know this much—I'm not in the past. And I didn't even have to kill my grandfather to prove it." He grinned at his other self. "Or you."

The younger Aaron suddenly jumped out of the bed and lunged towards the desk.

Oh, shit, Aaron thought. He's going for my gun.

Aaron lurched at his younger self, his right shoulder aiming directly at the other man's chest. The younger Aaron went down, bent over and panting to get his breath back.

"No, I'm not going to kill you," Aaron said. "But I'm not going to be able to convince Gabe to free me either. Unless—" He walked over to the desk, opened the top drawer, and pulled out the gun. He pointed it at Aaron and said, "When you get your breath back, take off your clothes. We're switching places."

* * * *

Despite his conviction that he had fallen into a parallel universe rather than the past, Aaron's life for the week before the launch followed an eerily familiar track. He couldn't possibly remember every single detail of his life from six months ago, but nothing happened that seemed out of place. He finished his training, flew to Florida, boarded the DSS, and launched.

And, halfway into the mission, Aaron found himself back at the anomaly, the weird colorful, curving wall of light he had encountered just outside the orbit of the Pluto-Charon system, which currently sat on the other side of the solar system. He remembered planning to tell Gabe about it just before Gabe told him not to reveal any details of the mission. Well, he thought, Gabe loses out.

It suddenly occurred to him that his escape, his approach here—both felt far too easy. Why didn't he

remember this second, long trip to the outer solar system? Why couldn't he recall launching a second time either? What in God's name had happened to him?

He passed through the wall of light and found himself in empty darkness.

* * * *

He opened his eyes and found himself back in his bunk in the cell. Two alien creatures stood in the room with him. They were tall and thin, with human-looking features that appeared stretched out, like in a funhouse mirror.

"Aaron Eliassen," one of them said in flatly accented English. "You were only partly correct. You did not go back in time, at least not directly. But neither did you fall into a parallel universe."

Slowly, Aaron eased himself out of the bunk. He kept his back to it and paced towards the wall. "Who are you?"

The aliens glanced at each other, and the smaller one spoke. Aaron couldn't differentiate between the voices. "Our name would mean little to you if we gave it in our language. Your species calls itself the Wise Ones; we call ourselves the Ones Who Speak."

Aaron looked back and forth between the two figures, and felt the urge to make a joke. "I'll call you Jabbers."

They looked at him without expression. "As you feel the need," the smaller one said.

"Do you have names?"

"Again, yes, but—"

"But I wouldn't be able to pronounce them or something. Fine." He pointed at each in turn, first the larger and then the smaller. "You're George and you're Gracie."

"As you feel—"

"—the need, yeah, I heard you the first time. So why did you tap into my mind and create that illusion for me?"

"You are quicker than we would have anticipated," Gracie said. "You have already figured out that we had a role in the creation of the illusion of your recent experience."

"Thank you, but I still want answers. What's going on?"

It hesitated, then said, "Did you ever wonder about first contact, Commander Eliassen?"

Aaron thought back to all the movies and TV shows he had seen about aliens. "Sure, who hasn't?"

"We represent an alliance of sentient beings. Whenever we discover a solar system in the process of developing intelligent life, we set up a special wormhole."

"The anomaly," Aaron said.

"Yes. We placed a boundary at the edge of your solar system, like a giant soap bubble. When you crossed it, it pulled you through a wormhole and transported you here."

Aaron quelled his fears by dwelling on the mundane. "Does that mean that the Pioneer and Voyager space probes were taken off course?"

"No. The system is designed to activate only in the event it detects an actual lifeform, not an artifact."

"Why?"

"Because only then do we know that a race has achieved the ability to colonize the galaxy."

Aaron stifled a laugh. "Humans are a far cry from colonizing the galaxy."

"Nevertheless, your race is at a beginning. And if we let you continue your explorations, you would soon discover wormhole travel and our alliance."

"We just have," Aaron said.

The aliens remained silent for a moment. Then the larger one took over the discussion. "Actually, you have that the wrong way around. *We* have discovered *you*. We needed to study your world. Our alliance needed to make sure that your species had developed to the point where you could accept our existence, become a part of our alliance. So we reached into your mind, let you think that you had returned to Earth, and let the scenario play out. So that we could understand your race as completely as possible."

The smaller alien said, "Unfortunately, your will was most resistant."

Aaron cocked his head at it. "What does that mean?"

"You were unwilling to create a present for yourself, so you replayed your experiences in the past, over and over, until finally your subconscious realized that you were trapped in a loop."

"I don't remember that."

"Of course you wouldn't. Your long-term memories have been recorded once; there was no need for them to code the same exact experiences again. So, instead, you broke out."

He looked around the cell. "How long have I been here?"

The aliens exchanged a glance. "On your scale, about a month."

"So I haven't been gone long enough to be missed. But you can't keep me here much longer."

"They will assume your mission has failed. Besides, soon it will not matter."

Aaron tensed up. "What do you mean, it won't matter?"

The two aliens remained silent, and Aaron felt cold. "Does this mean—you're not planning to destroy the Earth, are you?"

The aliens made a noise that Aaron couldn't understand, but it felt like laughter. "No, we do not destroy the incompatible emerging races. We simply lock them away."

"Lock them away?"

"The wormhole boundary becomes a barrier. Any living creature that enters it on one side of the solar system finds itself emerging on the other side of the solar system. A cosmic loop."

"A torus," Aaron said, drawing on memory of long-ago mathematics courses. "A four-dimensional donut."

"Exactly. We will lock your solar system into a toroidal shape, so you can never emerge to threaten the galaxy."

Aaron shook his head, and clasped his hands together to keep them from trembling. Still, he shivered. "If you lock us away, when the Sun dies, so will my entire race."

"But that is billions of years in your future. You personally would be long gone by then. It will not matter to you."

Aaron glared at it. "You haven't really learned much about humanity, have you?"

"We have learned enough. What we do may be regrettable, but it is necessary. Your race is too paranoid and violent to allow into the galaxy. You would threaten our alliance."

"We wouldn't," Aaron said softly. "On the contrary, we're not that paranoid."

The larger alien took over the conversation. "You cannot deny the paranoia that is inherent to your species. Your own people did lock you up when you returned before you had left."

Aaron felt a sudden need to respond to the alien's stupidity with his fists. But he knew that wouldn't help, and in fact, would just make things worse. He took a few deep breaths and then spoke in measured tones. "You know, it's really unfair for you to use a scenario that you yourself created to judge my species."

"Ah, but we did not actually create the scenario in its entirety, Commander Eliassen. We merely initiated it. Your own subconscious mind elaborated it, fleshed it out, and gave it reality. As we said before, we merely allowed the scenario to play out from the starting point. It was our way of learning more about your species, so we could judge you accordingly. And in the reality that you created for yourself, your own people locked you away."

"So they locked me away. Big deal. It was only because they were faced with something unexpected, something they had never seen before."

The aliens just stared silently at Aaron as the seconds passed. After a moment, he realized the implications of his comment, and he sighed. "Okay. I get it."

"Then we shall commence reshaping the space occupied by your solar system."

"Wait!" Aaron's mind raced with desperation. He knew he had to find an argument to ensure the future of the human race, and he reached for the only one that came to mind. "What if I offered you an

alternative?"

The aliens gave him a quizzical glance. "Explain."

"Instead of locking us away forever, why not give us more time? Recreate your wormhole boundary twice as far away."

"What would that accomplish?"

"It would give us more time to develop, to mature." Aaron smiled. "The next human who comes this far might be years away. By then, we'll be less violent, less paranoid."

The alien gave him what appeared to be a sad look. "You cannot guarantee that."

"No," Aaron admitted. "I can't. But I can tell you this. We may be violent, but we aren't looking to enter space to conquer intelligent life. We're looking to befriend intelligent life, to work together in harmony."

He resisted an impulse to fall to the floor and beg. Instead, he pulled himself a little taller and stared directly into the eyes of the larger alien. "I know you have the power to look into my mind. Do it again. Now. But look at everything it means to be human, not just the violent stuff that you're assuming is all there is."

"What do you expect us to find?"

"You'll see images of paranoia and fear, but also those of joy and hope. You'll see humans hurting each other, but you'll also see us helping each other. You'll see that we have the capacity for a higher morality."

"But why should we recreate the wormhole twice as far away? What is the point of delaying the inevitable?"

Aaron fought to stay calm. "That's just my point. It's not inevitable. We'll grow in that many years. And if we don't, so what? If we're still not acceptable to you, lock us off then. But give us more time, give us a chance. Please."

The aliens looked at each other. "Let us look into your mind, as you have offered."

Aaron nodded, and felt a sudden intrusion into his thoughts. His guts told him to resist, but his mind told him to let them see his life, his experiences, and his world.

Suddenly, Aaron no longer found himself with the aliens. He looked out into a bright light, and realized that he was watching the world from his own eyes at the moment of his birth. The world around him looked hazy, and people moved slowly around him. Then the world sped up, and Aaron became a detached observer in his own life. From a hidden corner of his mind, accompanied by the alien presences, he watched his life unfold. Elementary school, high school, college, the air force, his first kiss, the first time making love, the first time he flew solo, all the tragedies of his life, all the hopes, all his desires, all his dreams...

He blinked, and once more stood in the room with the aliens. They stared at him in silence. The seconds passed, and Aaron continued to wait while they continued staring. Finally, just when he thought he couldn't bear it any longer, the larger alien spoke. "Your proposal is acceptable."

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief. "Good." He paused. "So, I know you're giving the human race a second

chance, but what happens to me now?"

"We will send you back, of course, after wiping your memory of our existence."

Aaron nodded. "I understand," he said. But, he thought, he would fight to keep his memory as intact as possible.

* * * *

"Houston, this is Deep Space Shuttle One. Please reply. Over."

Gabe's voice came over the radio. "DSS One, this is Houston. How're you doing, Aaron?"

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief. "Much better, now that the lightspeed lag is gone. It's good to be back home. Over."

"Well, you're not quite home yet," came the amused reply. "We'll get you out of orbit as soon as we can." Gabe paused. "One thing, Aaron. Weather's a little stormy in Florida, so we'll need you to land at Edwards. Hope that's not a problem."

"No, not at—" Aaron began, and then something nagged at the back of Aaron's mind. "Um, Houston?"

"Yes?"

"What's today's date?"

"The date?" Gabe laughed. "It's October tenth. You've arrived home right on schedule."

"Good."

"Why, what did you expect? Relativity kicking in and bringing you far, far into the future? You never went fast enough for that."

"No, not that. I expected—" Aaron thought for a moment, but nothing came to mind. "I don't know what I expected."

"Well, you should expect a parade, at least. You'll be a genuine hero when you return. Just like Neil Armstrong."

Aaron leaned back and smiled. What does a hero do? He promotes causes, of course. And Aaron knew that it would be vitally important for him to use his new status to speak out against fear, against hate, against violence and wars. He couldn't say why. He just knew it had to be that way.

* * * *

Their current job completed, the beings Aaron had called George and Gracie studied the naked bodies of thousands of other primitive aliens suspended in separate plasma baths, which kept them alive as they lived out their illusions.

The Younger asked the Elder, "Have you ever done such a thing before?"

"Never," the Elder replied. "Never in the history of our existence."

"Will you not get in trouble?"

"No. It is my decision to make, as it will be yours to make when I am gone."

"But to make such a promise to a primitive, violent alien, and then to carry it out."

The Elder's countenance took on the equivalent of a smile. "That very promise is the reason for our jobs. Have you never wondered why we do not just lock up every other solar system with the potential for intelligent life? Why are we here, to intercept each race as they emerge from their shells? What is our function?" He paused. "Do you now understand what you are being trained to do?"

The Younger thought for a moment. "I think I almost understand. Please make it clear for me."

"The humans," the Elder said. "They were the first to discover the secret."

"Which is what?"

"That it is not a race's capacity for violence that condemns us, but rather, the decisions that we choose to make. This human, Aaron Eliassen, made the right decision." The Elder swept his arm around, indicating all the aliens floating in their plasma baths. "Every other alien representative that we have encountered has always reacted the same way, claiming that they will conquer the Universe, and along with it, us. We had no choice but to lock their races away forever. But this human chose wisely. This was the first representative that expressed a different hope, that his race would one day be more acceptable to us, rather than requiring us to be more acceptable to them."

"I understand."

"Perhaps one day, they will be partners with us. For now, though—"

An ultraviolet light blinked on, and at the same time, a high frequency whine began.

The Elder turned to the Younger. "Another race has emerged from its shell. Let us attend to it."

The Younger closed the door of the chamber behind it, pausing only briefly to study the hundreds of aliens suspended in their plasma baths. He recalled how many in turn had threatened the Elder with violence, and had claimed that their race alone would own the Universe. He had reached the beginning of understanding, and sorrow filled his being.

He turned to the Elder. "It is good that we could decide as we did for the human. But what a pity that we could not decide otherwise for the rest."

"They decided for themselves, young friend. We do not judge them; they chose their own verdicts."

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