

The Astronaut

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The mission had been to test the speed on the new XM-83. After breaking atmosphere, the pilot was to bring the ship to full power, stop at the nearest planet, and report back to base with any findings. Mission Commander Jason Prophet was chosen for the mission, and on the day of the launch, he was suited up and ready to go.

At the launch site, he said goodbye to friends and family and boarded the ship. He kissed his daughter Tabitha goodbye and reassured her that every precaution had been taken; nothing was left to chance.

In the mission briefing, he was told that the ship was supplied for several years in case of unforeseen difficulties. He supposed any difficulties that arrived were unforeseen; that's why they were difficult.

After boarding the ship, Prophet ran through a routine checklist. Plenty of oxygen, food for years, and enough fuel to take him anywhere in the known galaxies – this was the kind of mission astronauts dreamed of. When the final checkmark was made and the flight configuration was set, the 83 was ready for launch. Prophet strapped himself into the bed and clicked the bedside radio to a station he enjoyed on Friday nights. Currently it was playing *In the Hall of the Mountain King* - one of his favorites.

In ten short seconds he felt the wonderful pain of space navigation spread throughout his body, strangling his stomach. It always surprised him – the pain. Such vast improvements had been made in space travel, yet scientists still hadn't completely fixed the gravitational pull at launch.

The trip would take a few days at least, and he was instructed to rest whenever possible. Always being one to follow orders, Prophet's hand found the

knob for the radio volume and the classic sounds of the Molo Symphony gradually swirled throughout the ship. As the notes danced their way to his ears, Prophet's eyelids drooped, and he gently drifted off to sleep.

It was a recurring dream. A bright shining day and he was in one of those tree-filled areas – forests they were once called. As he stood among the trees, he simply watched. He watched the leaves go by, watched the bushes sway and the dirt swirl around when the wind picked up. Suddenly, he noticed something moving. He turned his head to catch a glimpse of whatever it was, but he missed and woke up.

When his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see the Landing Alert flashing on a nearby screen. The alarm was beeping to inform him that the ship had slowed down and located a planet at which he could stop. It was the beeping that woke him. According to the computer, the planet was known Nova Avalon and was suitable for landing; which was exactly what the 83 was doing.

When he reached the planet's surface, Prophet noticed something odd. His communicator wasn't working; it seemed like he couldn't get a signal. He also noticed a problem with his scanner - a life sign that hadn't appeared before.

It seemed odd to him that the life sign had gone unnoticed before. He had distinctly remembered the computer saying that the planet was empty when he arrived. *Damn thing must be busted*, he thought. With his scanner out of commission, there was no telling how many creatures might be roaming the surface. He decided an immediate investigation was necessary to put any fears he might have to rest. This was a scientific mission - he wasn't prepared for

unexpected battles. He grabbed some tools off the ship - a scouter-bulb and a locator - and he was on his way.

The life sign he had picked up was about 3 miles north of the ship; not far. As he walked, he gradually became more interested in the mysteries of Nova Avalon. For starters, there were signs of intelligent life everywhere, yet no intelligent life was present. Every so often he came across fragments of history dumped long ago: a ship, a computer, a bed, but no people.

Finally the locator was practically shouting at him and he could see the life form he was searching for. A tall wall of rock stood directly ahead of Prophet. Within the wall there was a small barred-off area. And there, behind the small barred-off area, stood a creature. *This was the planet's only inhabitant?* thought Prophet, *A prisoner?*

Training and just plain common sense taught Prophet to handle prisoners of another world with extreme caution. Normally, they were not even to be approached. Unfortunately, as the planet's only inhabitant, Prophet was left with no choice. He needed to learn more about Nova Avalon, and this prisoner was his only chance.

"You there!" Prophet shouted.

As he came closer, he noticed that the prisoner didn't seem to be human. It was very dark, almost an outline of a man. He was unsure of its sex, and whatever species it was, he had never encountered it before. *He must be studied,* thought Prophet. There were so many questions to be answered. Here was an empty world and this creature was in prison. *Where the Hell was everyone? What was this creature? Were there more? Who put it into prison?*

“Hello!” Prophet shouted again.

“Yes?” it replied.

“Who are you?”

There was a long silence. *It must fear me*, thought Prophet, *it's likely I'm the first person it's seen in years*. He decided that the best course of action was to state his name and number and explain his mission; he felt that this might encourage a free exchange of information.

“Mission Commander Jason Prophet, number 212-614, I have landed here to radio home and inform them of my test results...”

“Go away...” it said.

“Where is everyone?”

“You are it.”

“Just me and you?”

It gave a small chuckle.

“How can that be? There must be someone besides you on this planet.”

“Just you.”

“What happened to everyone else?”

“It's just you.”

“How did you get here?”

“Oh. It's complicated.”

“Who imprisoned you?”

“Me? Prisoner?”

“Yes. ‘Prisoner.’ ‘Captive.’ Who is it that locked you up?”

“Am I that stupid?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the question.”

“I guess I am.”

“What?” asked the astronaut. He was completely bewildered by the creature’s last statement. Then it occurred to him. Maybe it wasn’t a prisoner; maybe it was just insane. There was no telling how long the creature had been locked up. Perhaps over time, he thought, the creature had lost its mind.

In any case, he wasn’t going to worry about it for now. There was very little light left and the astronaut was exhausted. *With a little time and a little rest*, he thought, *I’ll solve this mystery*. He decided he would deal with the lunatic in the morning.

That night he dreamt. He was playing with Tabitha at her third birthday party. There was a very large piñata and, of course, birthday girls go first. He spun her around and around, but suddenly he stopped. He felt odd, out of place. It was as though he wasn’t supposed to be there.

Suddenly he noticed Tabitha staring at him with tears in her eyes. “Who are you, mister?” she said. She pointed right at him. Horrified, Prophet began to run.

A flash of light and he was in the forest again, and someone was following him – hunting him. Just as he turned around to see who it was, he woke up.

The creature was staring at him, chuckling.

“Who are you?” asked the astronaut.

The creature chuckled still.

“Why didn’t your life sign initially appear on my readout for the planet?”

“How should I know?” it said. And then it added, “Jason, look around you.”

There wasn’t much to look at.

“What about it?”

“Have you noticed anything *odd* about this place?”

“I do have a few questions.”

“Good.”

“It’s a vast planet. Filled with signs of life, but no inhabitants? How is that possible? You are the only intelligent life I’ve found and you’re behind bars. It’s *all* very strange.”

“Yes, I suppose that is odd, but let’s start smaller, shall we?”

“Alright,” said Prophet.

“Ask the little questions first,” the creature said. “Tell me, have you noticed the sky?”

He looked up. He hadn’t noticed that. There was no sky.

“The things your mind takes for granted, Jason. You see the light; you assume there’s a sun. You feel the wind; you assume there’s weather. Clouds plus sun equals sky, yes?”

“I don’t understand,” replied Prophet.

“What about this wall? Doesn’t it seem like it goes up quite far?”

Now that the creature mentioned it, the wall seemed to stretch off into nothing.

“You know, Jason, it’s a funny thing – assumptions. Take cages or prisons. You always assume that the person on the other side of the bars is the prisoner.”

“What?”

“Of course, I suppose in a way you’re right.”

“How could I be wrong?”

“Oh, you’re wrong too. Jason, when did you train for space?”

“I, um...”

“Can you remember why you’re on this mission?”

“Um...”

“Jason, I’m not an alien life form.”

“But you can’t be human.”

“Correct!” he laughed.

“What are you?”

“10 years ago you were sent here, Jason. For murder.”

“Murder?”

“You went insane. Killed a little girl – Tabitha was her name. They made you believe that it was a space mission and you were given memories to back that up. Once you were here, I was here - to watch you.”

“Who are you?” Jason shouted.

“Who am I?”

“YES!”

“Jason, what’s been following you in all of your dreams?”

“What dreams?”

“Come now, Jason, you’ve had them every night.”

“I don’t know-”

“You know.”

Suddenly Jason passed out. His mind trailed off and he was in the forest again. He could still hear the creature's voice.

"Look up," it said.

Jason saw the bright shining sun ahead of him.

"Turn around."

The rays felt warm on his back.

"Look down."

And as his eyes reached the ground, Jason crumbled. Lying there was nothing but a pure, black reflection of himself.

"Who better to watch you?"