

Keep the Lights On

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The fluorescent lights overhead buzzed and flickered as they clicked on at exactly 0630 Houston time. Collins lay in his hammock, searching for the will to open his eyes, while damning the clock for finding him too soon. Finding his motivation, he poured himself out of his hammock, his feet gently making contact with the floor at less than one sixth the gravity of Earth. With barely enough space for a grown man to sleep somewhat comfortably, a silver metallic hammock stretched across the corners of the ceiling. The walls were cold and hard; grey like gunmetal.

A smooth synthesized female voice cooed from a speaker mounted in the ceiling. "Good morning, Mister Collins. The date is May fourteenth, year twenty-sixty-nine. The time is zero-six-thirty, Houston standard time. Today you and Mister Frakes have a weekly status report over video-com scheduled for zero-seven-hundred. Have a pleasant day, Sir."

"Thanks, sweetheart. I'll be right down," Collins muttered to the voice from above as he walked towards his wall locker. He didn't even know why he always responded to her. It. He knew full well that it couldn't hear him. It wasn't alive or anything; Just the computer's artificial voice. Hell, even if she wasn't really there, it gave him another reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Collins opened his small locker, and looked at his duty clothes, seven identical orange jumpsuits with grey elbow pads arranged in perfect order, half-hanging, half-floating in the lunar gravity. They were all evenly spaced, zippers facing left, with the shoulder flag patch of the

Confederated North American Alliance looking at him. Collins grabbed the leftmost jumpsuit and caught a glance of his face in the reflection of the small mirror mounted inside the locker door. His square jaw covered in stubble, and his blue eyes looking tired and getting duller by the day, he couldn't help but feel like his lifelong ambitions and potential were being squandered. Wasted. His whole life he'd dreamed of coming to this place. He looked at the picture of his inspiration next to the mirror, Astronaut Michael Collins.

Michael Collins was an astronaut aboard Apollo 11, which made the first landing on Luna nearly a hundred years ago. Michael Collins was the only one of those three astronauts not to set foot on the surface. Instead, Michael Collins stayed in orbit, circling the rocky grey satellite of the little blue ball until the two on the ground had completed their mission, ready to head home.

Collins was related to the famous astronaut, but not directly. A second cousin of a half-brother of a nephew twice removed across so many generations, or something of the like. Regardless, Collins felt pride in the name he carried, and throughout his entire life strove to do what his predecessor did not: Set foot on the lunar surface. Sure, in that regard he'd already succeeded, but certainly not in the way that he wanted to. Collins had prepared for being a professional space-faring all-American "badass" his entire life. He'd served in the US Air Force before The War, as a "flyboy" sub-orbital pilot. He'd earned a graduate degree and a PhD in Deep Space Navigation and Astrophysics (respectively) from the Air Force Academy and MIT. He had the smarts of any entry-level scientist, and the "right stuff" and bravado of the test-pilot space cowboys from the glory days of the early space race, nearly a hundred years ago. He was as trained, motivated, and groomed for this role as anybody could be. But he never let overconfidence get the best of him. He was polite when he had to be, friendly to those around him, and did his best to maintain an appearance of humility. Nevermind the mild-mannered exterior, deep down he knew he was made to do "cutting

edge research on Luna to advance humanity as a species, and celebrate the day when humanity could populate itself among the stars.” Collins always recited that sort of babble in his mind with an overdramatic announcer’s voice, picturing himself in Agency uniform, standing proudly in front of a waving flag.

But it didn’t pan out that way. When The War started, Collins had just been accepted into The Agency. His contract promised him his dream job and title: Advanced Lunar Physics & Research Specialist (referred to as ALPS within The Agency). He would have the highest level security clearance, and would be working on the most exciting, cutting edge stuff the government could dream up. But when The War broke out, The Agency couldn’t afford to fund high-level scientific research projects anymore. They already had an outpost on Luna, with automation so reliable and precise, it hardly needed looking after. But The Agency didn’t want to leave their outpost abandoned to fall into disrepair in the event that the systems failed, so they needed a few people stationed there just to keep watch on things. In light of the budgetary constraints, The Agency gave him a choice. He could either take a demotion in status, pay, and security clearance, or he wouldn’t be going to Luna at all. Collins chose Luna. But he sacrificed being a scientist on the brink of the cutting edge, to what basically amounted to a mere groundskeeper. A babysitter. He thought of it like getting a job with your dream company, and finding yourself stuck in the mailroom.

After sliding into his jumpsuit, Collins hopped over to the door and pressed the square button on its right. The button flashed from red to green, and with the whooshing sound of hydraulics, the door disappeared into the floor almost in the time it took Collins to blink. Collins turned left and moved through the corridor, hopping from one foot to the next. In zero gravity, it almost looked like a dance. Collins was steadily arcing to the left, as he was in a circular corridor on the edge of a giant domed structure. On his right, he could see the lunar surface of Earth’s moon outside, as the skin of the dome above and around him was

as clear as polished glass. In spite of his bitterness about his present career path, Collins never took his view for granted.

It was terrifyingly beautiful. Through the dome's transparent shell, there was sharp contrast between the sunlight on the dusty grey surface and the deep blacks of shadow behind rocks and inside small craters. Sometimes above the arc of the station's domes you could see the vibrant blue Earth, bathed in brilliant sunlight; a beautiful marble of sapphire and white; like a beacon from across the great black void.

Collins made his way to the end of the corridor and opened the door to the Central Command station. The room's surfaces were flat and smooth, colored a vibrant bright white, entirely unlike the drab interiors of the personal quarters. Computer systems, meters, and racks of blinking equipment lined the walls. Inside, a man identically dressed sat slumped in a chair looking bored.

"Collins. You're up. You ready to do this thing or what?"

"Oh yes," Collins rolled his eyes. "I love these weekly briefings we do. Considering nothing ever happens here. How 'bout you, Frakes?"

"Yeap." Frakes said with his Georgia drawl.

Frakes was half-sitting, half-laying in the strange low-gravity chair, obnoxiously chewing gum, languidly tossing a red rubber ball into the air, and mindlessly watching it drift slowly down to his hands and catching it.

"How was your shift?" asked Collins.

"Oh you know. The usual. Nothing goin' on. The computer's got everything taken care of. As usual." He turned his head towards Collins. "Oh. Wait! Yeah, there was one thing."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

“Sally was tellin’ me about a new round of solar storms comin’ up.”

Sally was the name that Frakes had affectionately given to the computer’s female voice.

“She say when they’d start? I hope they don’t interfere with our scheduled videocom. You know how much The Agency bureaucrats can’t stand missing a scheduled report.”

Frakes chuckled as he smacked his gum, still tossing the ball. “Yeah, well she said it could be any time. Hell, for all we know, they might have already started and it just ain’t affectin’ us yet.” Collins sensed what was coming. Frakes had a propensity for trivia, especially trivia related to physics. Maybe he wanted to impress Collins, somehow make up for the fact that Frakes didn’t have a PhD, let alone a graduate degree. Frakes had a bachelor’s degree in Physics, which anywhere else would get you pretty far, but not within The Agency.

“You see, light travels at a velocity of one-hundred-eighty-six-thousand, two-hundred-eighty-two miles per second. And nothing in this un-i-verse can travel faster than that.” Frakes smacked his gum and raised his left eyebrow at Collins. Collins turned his back, and acted like he was fiddling with one of the control surfaces, rolling his eyes. “And based on our prox-i-mi-ty to the Sun, it would take light, or anything else released by the Sun approximately eight minutes to get from there,” Frakes gestured to the ball in his left hand and moved it across his chest. “to here.”

Collins looked at his watch. 0643. There were over fifteen minutes until the scheduled videocom report. Collins hopped over to a chair across from Frakes and gently slid into a comfortable position. Frakes very delicately tossed the ball to Collins; in the reduced gravity, it moved like it was in slow motion.

“How you doin’ these days? Ya know, with the way The Agency stiffed you.”

Collins sighed almost imperceptibly.

“I’m doin’ alright, man. I’d rather be here like this than not at all, I guess. I just wish I had more to do here than just keepin’ the lights on, ya know?”

“Yeah. It’s a paycheck. And not too many people can say they’ve been to Luna, ya know: ‘The Moon’.” Frakes grinned wide, shimmying his head side to side. “At least when they get this place running again, you can get your promotion. Get the job they orig-nally promised you. Me?” Frakes shook his head in mock disapproval. “This is the best I’m gonna get, man. Hey, maybe if I’m lucky I can be your assistant when they put you with the big boys, eh?”

Collins’ chest heaved with a silent laugh. “Yeah, as long as I keep my nose clean I can hope for that job. But if I ever do get it, you know you’re comin’ too.”

“Thanks for that, man.” Frakes hesitated for a moment. “So I know they pulled your security clearance and all, but did they tell you anything first? You know, they ever talk about what they were doin’ here? Somethin super-secret, I bet.”

“Frakes. Buddy, you know I have no idea what the ALPS were up to before we got here, and even if I did,” Collins leaned in close towards Frakes and said sarcastically, “I wouldn’t tell you shit!”

Frakes playfully bounced his rubber ball off Collins’ head. The ball comically bounced around the room.

“I may have heard some things,” said Frakes. “You know what I think?”

“No,” Collins said playfully. “Tell me. What do you think?”

Frakes leaned towards Collins, eyes’ deadlocked, while holding up his right arm with the palm open.

“I heard they got somethin’ big. You know, like an artifact.”

“An artifact?” Collins said with sarcastic disdain.

“An alien artifact.” Without breaking his gaze, Frakes squeezed his fist around the rubber ball that had just made contact with his palm, as if to punctuate the statement.

Collins tone was sarcastic. “Right. An alien artifact. That’s exactly what they’re doing here. Playing with alien sci fi gadgets. C’mon, man. Gimme a break.”

“What the hell do you think is in there, man?” Collins pointed towards the end of the room, at another door. Above the door was a sign that read “Dome Alpha – Security Clearance Required – ALPS Only.” The door led to another dome, but Collins didn’t know what was inside. Dome Alpha was the only place on the lunar facility that they didn’t have access to. It’s where the primary research happened on the base. The door was kept locked by an encrypted signal from Houston. There was no local access. A light panel above the door glowed red, a constant reminder of the forbidden nature of what lay inside.

“I have no idea what’s in there, but I’m sure it’s not anything as ridiculous as you’re thinking!” Collins glanced at his watch. 0658. “Hey, shit, it’s about that time. Let’s get ready for this broadcast.”

Collins and Frakes stood in front of the video-com screen in one of the terminals. At 0700 on the dot the screen lit up with the image of a man in a suit.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Let’s begin this morning’s briefing with the stand-“The audio from the transmission abruptly cut off. The picture became pixelated and broken.

Collins said, “Oh, Sir, we’re having trouble hearing...” The ceiling lights flickered and various control

surfaces went seemingly haywire.

“Shit!” Frakes exclaimed in surprise. “What in the hell is goin’ on?!”

The ever-calm female voice cooed from the ceiling, “Gentlemen. I’m sorry, but it appears that the solar storm has disrupted my communications systems. I’m experiencing fluctuations in the main power control, but my backups are online and ready if they become necessary.”

“Well I guess that’s good to know,” said Collins sarcastically. As soon as Collins uttered the sentence, the pitch-dropping sound of systems powering down was audible, and the room went completely black. Every screen, every surface, and every light was off. For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Unsure of even what to say, they stood there, hearing only each other’s breathing.

“Sally?” Frakes whispered tentatively. Suddenly, everything powered back on.

From the speaker, “Gentlemen, my apologies. We had a minor solar storm event, and I have main power and life support systems under control. However, communications are currently offline as the solar storm has not yet passed. Also, I am picking up an energy reading from Dome Alpha which I have never encountered.”

The two men looked at each other, wide eyed and slack jawed. In unison they turned to look at the doorway to Dome Alpha. The light above the forbidden door shone green.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Frakes. “Should we check it out?”

“Hell no we shouldn’t ‘check it out’! Neither of us have the clearance to go in there!”

“Oh don’t be such a goody-two-shoes, man! They ain’t gonna know! Besides, Sally said there’s some strange energy reading from inside! It’s our responsibility – no, our

duty to go check it out!”

“You’re crazy, Frakes. Crazy. We can’t--“

“--Look. During that storm, something happened in there. We’re in charge of this place. It’s our job to figure out what happened. C’mon! We’ll just take a look!”

Collins sighed. “Jesus, I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this. Alright.” Collins looked at the green light, and with his breath held, pressed the airlock button. The men walked through the tunnel before them to the other side. Collins’ heart was beating hard. Not only was he breaking the rules, he was going to see something that hardly anyone got to see, let alone knew about. He didn’t know what he was going to find, but he knew it would be interesting. As they reached the end of the airlock, they could hear a low pitched sound, humming slowly, from inside Dome Alpha.

“Ready?” asked Collins.

“Ready, buddy. Let’s do it.”

Collins took a deep breath and pushed the button. The airlock opened. The humming intensified. Collins and Frakes were bathed in cool blue light. Collins shielded his eyes from the blinding glow, until his eyes adjusted. The dome had no floor, only the rocky lunar surface, free from dust. In the center of the dome was a cloudy crystal, standing neck high, glowing blue, and protruding from the rock. Its sides were perfectly hexagonal. The crystal’s glow pulsed slowly, in unison with the humming sound. Crystal tendrils snaked across the lunar surface as if they were rooting the crystal into the ground. The center of the room was encircled by yellow caution tape.

“Je – sus – Christ,” said Collins.

“You can say that again.”

“My whole life...” Collins trailed off.

“I told you, man. Aliens! Heh-ha!”

“Yeah.” Collins said absentmindedly, transfixed by the sight of the crystal in the center of the dome. It was as if a switch flipped in the center of his brain. Nevermind Agency protocol. If he would ever have a defining moment in his entire career, this was it. His childlike eagerness and desire for glory began to overwhelm his military-ingrained compulsion to do the right thing, to be a “good soldier”. The anticipation of the unknown was almost intoxicating. This was finally his chance to live up to his name.

Collins walked underneath the yellow tape and stood in front of the crystal.

“Hey man, what are you doing? I know I said we should check it out, but you shouldn’t get that close! We don’t even know what it is!” yelled Frakes. Collins couldn’t even hear him. All he could hear was the blood pumping past his temples as his heartbeat intensified. Slowly he reached out his hand. With his fingers trembling, it was poised just shy of touching the crystal. Collins, standing slack-jawed, hesitated for a moment and blinked. ‘No turning back now,’ he thought. He inhaled and held his breath as his index finger made contact with the crystal. The instant it touched the smooth surface, a loud crack like a bolt of lightning boomed from the hexagonal monolith, as tendrils of electricity split through its core under the translucent surface. The azure glow faded from the crystal and the humming ceased. In a sudden flash of reality, his newfound sense of awe and childlike wonder drained out, along with the color from his face. He realized that he had just broken what he wasn’t even meant to see.

“What the hell did you just do?! I said we should check it out, not touch the damn thing! Let’s get out of here, man!”

Collins just stood there with his mouth open, his face the pallor of a prisoner awaiting his sentence, staring at the dead artifact in shock. Frakes grabbed Collins by the shoulder, and pulled him towards the door. The men

sprinted back through the airlock to the control room.

“What do you think that thing was?” asked Frakes in a panic.

“I don’t know. Shit! God, that was stupid! Why did I touch it?”

“Why did you touch that thing? Damn it, man. Who knows what the hell you just did?”

Collins shook his head, looking out of the window towards Earth, bathed in sunlight. They both stood there, motionless and silent for several minutes, trying to calm their nerves. As Collins gazed at his home planet, shockingly and without warning, it completely vanished from the sky. The light on the lunar surface evaporated from sight. The men were enveloped in darkness.

“Frakes, about how long do you think it’s been since I touched that thing?”

“About eight minutes I’d say,” Frakes said knowingly as he squeezed his red rubber ball. Collins blinked in the darkness.

“I think...”

“I think, my friend, that that thing you just touched... turned off the sun.”

“Well, so much for that promotion.”