

At The Crossroads

After these unexpected developments, the professor was troubled and decided to give up his habit of listening to the latest news so as not to clutter his mind with trivia likely to hinder his analysis of the situation and the necessary decision-making.

Logically, he thought, I should accept this offer, but it implies moving again and some instability. However, since my role here is about to end and since my current quarters are furnished, rented and equipped by the CERN, there is no need to procrastinate, and it would be better to hasten rather than postpone my departure. Moreover, my successor is already designated and anxious to take over the management of the Annex (which he probably considers to be his rightful due) as soon as possible. The follow up of the observations around the *Trench* do not require my presence at all and the only inconveniences will be for Sarah who will have to rush her plans, regarding my succession.

Um, she didn't seem very moved or concerned when she told me... So, I should look out for my own job security and leave without unnecessary regrets, although I am not happy about the prospect of having to deal with *Singh* again. I will discuss the issue tomorrow with *Sakura*, then with *Antoine* on my next appointment with him and we shall see for the rest! As for my subordinates and the team, this territory is potentially hostile. With my departure, complications will be avoided, while demonstrating to those concerned that I have no desire to hang on to the job nor to impede local candidates.

Good! That is the right decision to make, I think. And now let's hit the sack and replenish our strength to be ready for tomorrow!

However, the professor had trouble falling asleep. He felt slightly feverish and not in his normal state, no doubt a little tormented by the implicit breakup that was brewing. His sleep was restless, and he had in his dream a vision of himself floating in the vicinity of a supermassive black hole...

Orbiting at high speed around the latter, he spotted a group of stars that, after a while, turned into so many familiar faces, Sarah being the closest to the event horizon and then, the people of his own entourage.

After an indeterminate period of subjective time, these spectral visions accelerated their motion while getting closer to the black hole, which gave him a feeling of vertigo. With horror, he saw each face turn slowly on itself, then disappear into nothingness as he woke up with a start, frightened, then relieved, realizing that it was only a nightmare stemming from his irrational fear of change.

Phew, he thought to himself, I should not give free rein to my subconscious, otherwise my sleep and my health will suffer. Fortunately, you don't need a dream interpreter to understand what's going on. This is only the product of my apprehension in the face of this backwards step of fate. A good breakfast and a black coffee will quickly put me back on track.

Later, regenerated and satiated, the professor left his home and slowly walked towards the lab, thinking about what should be done... Lost in his thoughts, at the last minute he stepped aside to avoid a few hurried passers-by returning from their night shift, then took an escalator leading to the floor of the lab. At the reception, he stopped and greeted *Sakura*, while begging her to schedule a time slot for an interview with him after the coffee break. She gave him a piercing look and nodded silently. The professor did the same with a knowing look and went to his office...

After opening a session at his workstation, he quickly scanned the inbox and saw only emails of little interest, except that of the technicians confirming his order of a permanent observation post at the site of the discovery of *Odo Brookensis*. Wincing at the idea of this name, he remembered that, at least, Sarah had not used his full name, so that he would not necessarily be associated with this embarrassing nomenclature.... Later, he took the coffee break at his own desk and finished reading his journals while waiting for *Sakura* to show up. When she arrived, he motioned her to come in and begged her to close the door and sit down....

So, she says, I suppose this interview is somehow related to our conversation of last night?

It is, indeed. I was offered to resume my former job at Headquarters, my replacement having opted for an early retirement due to poor health. Since my assignment here is about to end anyway, it is better to accept this proposal in order to avoid finding myself unemployed, but this would mean leaving the *Colony* sooner

than expected. The response time is only a few weeks. I assume this will be a fixed-term position, but at least it will allow me to make the transition more easily.

As you are aware of the staff mood, I would like you to discreetly observe the state of the team *Gestalt* and report back to me. Do not reveal what will happen right away, because I have not yet formally agreed, but keep an eye out. I intend to discuss the matter with *Sarah* shortly and we will then consider making official announcements accordingly. My only regret is having to lose touch with good friends and colleagues, but that's life. It's a shame, I was becoming used to living in the *Colony*, but this will prepare me for a stay on the *Moon* or on *Mars*. When things have settled down a bit, I will be happy to accept your invitation and, who knows, we might meet again in the future...

Wow! I wasn't expecting any such developments so soon. You are surely in luck... Okay, I agree. I'm going to play *Mata Hari* for you and my invitation still holds. I confess too that I don't intend to stay here forever, therefore our paths may cross again if I succeed in getting a better job at the Administration...

At any rate, the professor added, I will keep you posted. Thanks again for your cooperation! [...]

After a routine day during which he however felt a growing nervousness building up in him, the professor went straight home and settled for a snack that he kept in the freezer as an emergency ration. He had barely finished that meager meal when the phone rang:

[Audio-only communication - Private caller: Accept Y/N]

* Hello? This is *Van den Brook*...

Good evening, *Monsieur*! This is *Antoine*... I apologize for this impromptu call, but I am not at home, and I must update you on developments.

No problem, *Antoine*, go ahead!

I am afraid that we will have to give up the meeting we had planned to discuss the recent developments. You will remember that I had a vacation on my agenda. I had taken that in anticipation of the forthcoming end of my five-year period in the Pacific. I received a message from the Kraken Management.

The owner of the franchise is about to open a new restaurant of equivalent class and an unexpected opportunity has arisen for a very profitable and highly competitive location that I may not disclose...

I must get there quickly and negotiate the terms of the lease. Once the contract is signed, and the staff hired, I will be responsible for opening the place and managing the staff, at least for another five years. A great promotion, but important responsibilities and a quick move in perspective. My departure is imminent! I hope things will settle down for you...

Don't worry, *Antoine*, I also have something new for you. I was informed that my replacement at Headquarters wants to retire early for health reasons, and the Personnel Department offered me to resume my employment at the Administration, together with a better pay and benefit package. As my assignment here is about to end, I intend to accept the offer. It likely won't be a permanent position, but I happen to need some time to reorient myself professionally, if necessary. Nothing is signed yet, but I hope to be able to finalize my resettlement within a few weeks. I will inform you of the situation at the right time and we will exchange email addresses as soon as possible to stay in touch. Have a nice trip and success at your new location!

Thank you, *Monsieur*. Good luck to you too! *

[Later, in the evening]

After contacting *Sarah*, and explaining what it was all about, she appeared upset, but said:

I think you're making a mistake. The next change in the presidency, when it happens, may well see you having to move again, but that is your life, after all. I can, however, arrange your succession at the Colony without too much problem since the person concerned will be only too happy to take over the management more quickly. Let's see... a bonus for the interim should be in order. Make arrangements with Headquarters staff to coordinate your move and keep me informed. They may also contact me directly, since they already know my whereabouts...

However, I definitively want to see you at the next congress in Geneva. It won't take place until next year, so you'll already be in office long enough to prepare for the trip. Plan at least a fortnight, because at that time I shall have more concrete results to discuss with you about the consequences of your discovery...

I must admit that you have a gift for being in the right place at the right time, together with foresight, but the dice will not always be in your favor. Take care!

Don't worry about me, he replied. As to the deadline, I have only a few weeks of reflection. Therefore, I will advise them right away that I agree to restack, and things should fall into place in a month or two. Barring unforeseen circumstances, I agree to a face-to-face meeting at the next convention. Good day!
