

Visiting Myself Again

My doorbell chimed, followed by my groan. I'd just settled into my comfortable recliner with a can of beer to watch TV.

I glanced at my phone on the table beside me. I'd linked it to the camera installed on my front door four months before. The phone showed only a blur, making this the first time the system had ever failed.

The doorbell chimed again. I muttered, "Son of a bitch," and slammed the can in my hand onto the table.

I rocked myself up from the chair and stomped to the door. The doorbell chimed yet again as I reached for it. I yanked it open and my stomach seemed to sink through the floor. The man standing in my doorway looked like me wearing different clothes. He duplicated my bald head, olive tone skin, hazel eyes, and other distinguishing features down to the small scar under my left eye. And the same thing had happened a bit over four months earlier.

I said, "Not you again!"

He extended his right hand. "Hello, Brad. May I come in?"

I didn't shake his hand, but did wave him in. He crossed straight to the stone-colored sectional sofa in my family room and sat down on one side. I closed the door and followed him.

Memories of his previous visit rocketed through my mind. He'd wanted me to guess what he was and why he looked like me. After my series of incorrect guesses, he'd

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told me he was a nonorganic being. He'd proven it in my garage by lifting the front of my Mustang with one hand the way I picked up a box of cereal. And he had another superhuman ability. He could touch me and make a suggestion, which I would follow. The one I remembered most vividly occurred at the end of his visit. He'd asked me to stay put and left me in my garage unable to move for several minutes. At least he'd said something about his purpose before walking away. I'd been selected as one of 8,192 people tested to determine our potential as a species.

I plopped down on the opposite end of the sofa from him. "Why the hell are you here this time?"

"You told nobody about my prior visit."

"Most people would have considered me a nut ball and that would have been death for my career. But I'm willing to bet you're not here to discuss my silence."

He nodded. "You would win your bet. I have come to answer the questions you asked as I left you in your garage."

"How nice. By making me guess the answers, no doubt."

"Your sarcasm is understandable, but misplaced. You need do no guessing. You had four questions. Why were my people testing human potential? What was the test? How did you do? What happens after the testing?"

"I remember."

"My people assessed you and the other 8,191 humans to determine if humanity could benefit from our help. I cannot explain the test. Your people do not yet have adequate psychological knowledge of yourselves. In addition, the test was different for each subject. There was no grading. There were no pass/fail answers. It was an

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evaluation, a bit like your crude Rorschach tests. And for what happens after the testing, we either leave your planet alone or help."

"Okay. What did you decide?"

"Humans demonstrate potential, but your social wisdom lags your technological abilities. Allow me to show you two scenarios that summarize your planet's possible futures. I will need to hold your hand." He paused and stared into my eyes for a couple of seconds before continuing. "You are hesitant because of the actions I forced on you last time. You have my assurance I will not make any suggestions during the showing."

I inhaled and exhaled a deep breath. "Fine."

He slid over to me and put his right hand on my left.

A movie played in my mind. The Eiffel Tower soared upward as if trying to touch the spotty white clouds sailing at a lazy speed in a beautiful blue sky. Skyscrapers beyond the tower sparkled in the sunshine. The newer ones were the lofty and gleaming spires of science fiction. The movie zoomed in. Colorful flying cars darted above and among the structures. Several landed and rolled down streets. Green spaces full of grass and trees dotted the area and people walking between the buildings all appeared happy.

The movie cut to a dull-gray overcast sky. The Eiffel Tower still stood, as a monument to rust. Some of the buildings beyond had become rubble. Those still standing looked dark and dirty, with broken windows and holes in their walls. The movie zoomed in. Gray dust or ash seemed to cover everything. Wrecked vehicles and debris littered the streets. What had been green areas were burnt out with blackened sticks for trees. A few people wandered the streets. They wore dirty ragged winter clothing, and seemed as wretched as any characters seen in apocalyptic movies.

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He released my hand. After a few seconds of collecting my thoughts, I asked, "How likely is the grim future?"

"We calculate a 74.89% probability for a dystopia before the end of the century. If we help your people openly, the probability for the dystopia drops to 49.14%. That is not as great an improvement as we would like. Further refined simulations showed humanity would accept our aid, but in many cases soon see us as oppressors and accuse us of overbearing social engineering. A resistance movement would then form and we would leave. Afterward many humans returned to their previous behaviors, resulting in a dismal future."

"Well, at least the apocalypse is less likely if you help us?"

"We decided to help you after determining a course to make the dismal future yet more unlikely. The probability for a dystopia decreases to 23.21% if we help you surreptitiously. Therefore, we will plant useful information with your scientists and engineers to improve your technology. Examples include providing the knowledge to make fusion work, to create better electrical storage methods, and to develop pollution cleanup techniques. Humans will need to solve their social problems themselves, but improved technology will help in that endeavor. However, solving those problems on your own means a dystopia is always possible."

"We can certainly use your help, but why do you care about us?"

"In our travels we have discovered several species that had become extinct or been reduced to subsistence level. The causes vary, but include astronomical events and an inability to deal with technology in a mature manner. We now attempt to prevent such disasters for species that are worthy."

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"Well, that must be quite a job your people took on. You know, I have a lot more questions. One is: are you responsible for all the UFO sightings?"

"We are not, and we do not know of anybody who is. You will next want to ask questions about others in the galaxy. The galaxy is often a hostile place and humanity is not yet ready for such knowledge. It is time for me to leave. Thank you for helping us decide what to do."

"Don't leave now. There are so many things I want to know."

He touched my hand and said, "You should remain seated."

He left my house, leaving me frozen in place waiting for the suggestion to wear off. I needed no time to decide what I'd do afterward. Nobody would hear a thing about this visit, just like the last time. I would begin watching for leaps in technology though, and for signs we were becoming more considerate of each other.

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