

## Outreach

A knock at the door woke Whitney from her sleep. The tv was still on; a news host and a microbiologist were going over the recent discoveries on Iapetus.

She pulled herself upright, shoved aside a chip packet, and waved at the tv to turn it off.

The door knocked again.

Whitney wiped the sleep from her eyes, and looked out the window. It was dark. The lights in her house slowly blinked to life as she trudged to the door.

She looked through the peephole, then froze.

The door swung open a few seconds later. A man, Whitney's age, dressed in business casual with a jacket around his arm, was standing on the pavement outside her house. He turned to face her as she took a step outside.

"Arlen?"

He smiled. "Hey Whitney."

His expression changed. "Are you alright? I didn't mean to..."

Whitney noticed her attire. "Oh, shit." She wiped a few chip crumbs off her shirt. "Do I look that bad?"

"Oh, no, that's not-"

"Sorry," she said. "I fell asleep watching the news. There's a whole lot going on nowadays, it's hard to keep up."

"... Yeah..."

Whitney scratched the back of her neck.

"Uh, do you want to come in? I can... make you tea. Do you still drink tea?"

"I do."

She motioned him inside. Arlen looked around as he entered. Silently taking in his surroundings.

They both headed down the hall, and entered the kitchen. Whitney wished she had cleaned up.

She looked back at Arlen. He looked calm, content; mature. She turned around to grab the kettle, then spun back around.

"This is fuckin' weird," Whitney said. "Sorry."

"Don't be."

"God, how long has it been?"

"8 years."

"Why now?" Whitney asked, "were you in the neighborhood or something?"

Arlen sat down at the table between them. Whitney quickly put on the kettle, then did the same. Arlen took a breath before speaking.

"I've signed up for the Outreach Program."

Whitney blinked. "... Oh."

She looked down, and ran her fingers along the edge of the table.

"When are you leaving?"

"Any day now," Arlen said. "Assignments are random."

"You... don't know where you're going?"

"Could be anywhere," Arlen said. "TeeGarden, Ross 128, Proxima B. They're far enough away that it doesn't really matter."

"... And that doesn't terrify you?"

"... No."

He paused. "Sometimes."

Whitney looked around the kitchen in silence.

Arlen cleared his throat. "How's your mum? Is she still...?"

"Oh. No," said Whitney. "She passed a few years after we moved."

"... I'm sorry."

"The lower gravity helped, and the Lunar healthcare was good... But it wasn't enough."

Whitney got up to grab the tea.

"But you like it here?" Arlen asked. "I mean, you stayed."

"Yeah, I do," Whitney said. "It's a different way of living; the nights, the gravity. But you get used to it."

She pulled two bags out, and grabbed the kettle.

"Outreach," Whitney said to herself as she dipped the tea. She turned around. "Why? You're not married? Kids?"

Arlen shook his head.

Whitney handed him his cup, and sat back down. "What about your parents?"

"... They died," Arlen said. "One month and 22 days ago."

"Oh my God," she said. "What happened?"

He said nothing for a moment. "You know the latest microbes they found? The ones on Iapetus?"

Whitney nodded.

"They were pretty hostile. Acted like a virus." He wrapped his hands around the cup.

"They both got sick. They didn't last very long."

"I... That must've been horrible... Did you get to see them?"

"It's a 2 year trip out to Saturn," he said. "At light speed it's over an hour; I couldn't even call them."

"I'm sorry," Whitney said. "That was a stupid question."

Arlen shook his head. "They sent me a video."

"Yeah?"

Whitney waited to see if he wanted to elaborate. He did not.

"... Is that why you signed up? To the Outreach Program?"

"... Partly."

Whitney shifted in her seat. "You don't think that's a little fast?"

Arlen looked up at her. "Do you think I'm making a mistake?"

"I... don't think I can answer that."

"You've known me since we were twelve," Arlen said.

"I haven't *seen you* since we were 23."

"Whitney, you *know* me."

"*Do I?*"

They both said nothing. Whitney broke eye contact, and took a sip of her tea. She waited a moment before saying anything.

"I can't answer that for you," she said. "But... If that's what you decided, then... I think you should."

"My parents were brave enough to travel 2 years out into the solar system for the chance to change things," Arlen said. "I don't want to sit at home on Earth for the rest of my life."

He stared at the table. "The universe used to be so *empty*, but now life's popping up all over. It's not that it's new, it's that we're finally able to go find them."

He paused for a second.

"I want to be a part of that."

"... Is that worth leaving behind everything you've ever known?"

Arlen sipped at his tea. "Well I'm not leaving much now."

"You'd be leaving me."

"8 years we hadn't seen each other," Arlen said. "I could have left without you ever knowing."

"But you didn't."

Their eyes met. Arlen looked away first.

After a moment, his phone pinged. He slid it out of his pocket, and read it for a few seconds.

He frowned. "There's someone at your front door," he said.

“What?”

Arlen got up, Whitney quickly followed. He strode over to her door, and opened it. A young man stood out the front, dressed similarly to Arlen. He took a second to catch his breath.

“We’ve been trying to reach you,” the man said.

“What is it?”

“There’s been some... complications,” the man said. “The entire Outreach Program’s been put on hold. It’s pretty hush-hush for now.”

“Hold? For how long?”

The man shook his head. “I don’t know.”

He gave Arlen a letter, and they shared a few words.

Whitney watched him from the end of the hall.

Eventually the man left. Whitney’s heart was pounding.

“Arlen!” she called out.

He turned around, she was staring straight into his eyes; a glimmer in hers.

“I changed my mind.”

“... About what?”

She took a single step towards him.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said. “Not now.”