

The Right Path

by Aaron

Section I

Chapter 1

It was a dark and stormy night as I... (Nah, that's too overdone.)

The moon shone brightly as if goading me on... (ugh, no)

It was a part of town I'd never been to before. (yeah, that's good)

One of those neighborhoods off on the edge that you wouldn't notice if you didn't live there. Dust devils played innocently along the dry walking path. Small houses squatted along each side looking as if they were ashamed to be seen above the earth. It wasn't a street interesting enough to visit twice, but I was looking for one specific place.

I stared at the sign out front. "Your future – is my past." It was catchy for sure, but a little cliché. The sign was scrawled on a piece of warped plywood long faded by the mercilessly hot Caribbean sun. The front looked poor even for Jamaican standards. The mud walls barely covered a stick thatch and a few blades of grass held on tenaciously among the chickens pecking around out front.

To say I was critical of fortune-tellers was an understatement. The only fortune-telling I believed in was when my momma told me we would she would never make a fortune. It was only my pride and Elenin's beauty that brought me here.

Anyway, much as I didn't believe any of this hocus-pocus, a dare was a dare, and I wasn't about to let the likes of Elenin and her friends label me a coward. So despite my misgivings, I took a breath and walked in.

It took several moments for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. The place looked surprisingly large given the humble exterior. The low ceiling was covered with those cheap dayglow plastic stars and there were deep red fabrics on all the walls. It was exactly what I envisioned a fortune teller's room would look like in some mystery TV show, a cheap attempt to convince the under confident and the gullible that they'd entered another world. I had only just walked in, when a short woman of about 50 came through one of the curtains. She was surprisingly small for a medium and wore a beautiful dress made of red and green lace. Her complexion was medium-brown and her features looked something between Japanese and Native American. It seemed to complete the otherworldly effect. Her graying hair was tied in an incredibly ornate

braid that stretched down to her waist.

She spoke with an accent that I couldn't quite place, but which was most definitely not Jamaican.

“I am so happy that you have arrived Tannin Boldóne.” she said with a disarming smile. And before I could ask how she knew my name, she continued. “You can call me Señora Bolom. I realize you are skeptical of my profession, so it seemed wise to give you some.....credentials first.”

She paused and ushered me over to a small wooden table. No crystal ball thank god, but a plain slab of flaking wood with a plastic coating.

Most people come to me with some shallow wish to know their future in order to feed their ego. They want to believe that something wonderful will happen to them. These people do not realize that despite the strong wish to know the future, it carries grave consequences.”

“So why...”

“Because Tannin, unlike my other customers....you are here because I *planned* for you to be here. There is a very specific purpose for you and in order for you to fully realize that purpose, you *must* follow my advice.”

“Okay, that sounds great. But it also sounds like something you could tell to anyone who walked through the door.”

A ghost of a frown fluttered across her face, it was the closest I came that day to seeing her lose composure, but like the flight of a gnat it disappeared.

“Tannin, please hold your doubt briefly while I continue.

“You are here because you are going to be a part of something that will be very important to every one of us. Your path in the coming years will have repercussions for each and every human being. You will be faced with certain choices, and while seemingly trivial, it will in fact be profound. If you choose poorly, then each and every one of us will be....” she paused, seemingly deep in thought, then she continued “will be worse off.”

It was clear that she had been about to say something more dramatic. And despite the undertones of her statement, this grand plan sounded very convenient.

“Look” I said, trying to use impatience to cover my discomfort “how in de world am I goin' to be able to make dis *critical decision* if I don' know where or when it's going to happen? For all I know, dis *critical decisun* is wheda I finish my maja in astronomy or start taking electives in nuclear physics. Hell, maybe de *critical decision* is whether I eat breakfast tomorrow morning.”

She sat back, with a look of infinite patience, as if she could not only read my future, but my very mind as well. “This is why knowing the future is so dangerous. If you've ever studied mythology, you know how many countless stories involve someone learning of their future and in the process of trying to prevent it they bring about the very events they wanted to avoid. Eodopus, Hamlet, and many others. In order that you don't spend the next decade second-guessing yourself, I will tell you that this critical time will happen to you far from your home. Farther than you've ever imagined traveling.”

That got me thinking about all the stories I'd read. The Hobbit, The Never Ending Story, The Hope Chest. I imagined myself transported to fantastical land and fighting evil wizards.

She continued, “When that time comes, it is critical that you choose the right path. You must not follow another's mistake, that is most important.” she paused and closed her eyes, as if wondering whether to tell a child that babies do not come from the Stork, “This is not a journey that you can complete by yourself, and while you two may not get along so well, the girl will be critical to the success of your journey.”

While most people probably felt gratified to have their ego fed by this roundabout esoterism, it was trying my patience more and more. I didn't miss the fact that she said 'the girl' rather than naming who this person was. Obviously if she said Delloreen or Claudia then it would be easy to dispute. “Look, I'm sua dat you tink dis stuff is real. An' it might fool a bunch o' people ta tell dem 'bout 'ow dey are goin ta be critical to 'umanity's futa o be worl famous blah blah blah, but aside from knowing my name, you 'aven't said a singel damn ting dat wud convince me dat you doing more dan jus weaving a well scripted tale! Is all 'bout making people feel impo'tant. Like telling someone dey used ta be Ghengis Kahn in a pas' life an all dat. I 'ope dat you not expecting me to pay you far some obscure grandiose story.

Through my whole outburst she just sat there, a slight grin developing on her chapped lips. She looked like a gambler who was about to reveal the most mind-blowing bluff ever seen. Her calm only fueled my anger and I started to get on my feet and leave, when she raised her hand and with the kindest tone I've ever heard, asked me to sit for just a few more moments.

“Tannin, I understand that you don't believe in me and that you only came here because Elenin dared you. That's perfectly fine. Whether you believe in fate or not changes nothing about it's effect on our paths. I

realize that you're attracted to her and that your frustration is all the more intense because she's gay. You'll feel more convinced when you get the email tomorrow.” I could feel my jaw starting to sag as she continued “You must realize that the obscurity is important to prevent you from shying away from your destiny. Look, here's an example you can relate to, if President Jimenez had been told that his son's death was going to happen as a result of him creating the South American Space Agency, do you think he would have done it? We all make decisions with the hope that what we're doing will be for the best, but we do so without knowing whether the good outweighs the bad. And no, I do not expect you to pay me for this. I am doing this as a service to all of us.”

In the merest instant I went from fury to amazement. My doubt was becoming as tremulous as the patterns of the black wall fabric. I just sat there, with my mouth open. Not normally finding myself at a loss for words, I was stunned. For someone to tell me that my decisions are going to have some kind of huge influence on the world was kind of like telling me that my pet mouse is going to get a dumb side kick and try to take over the world. As critical as I was of this voodoo, the gravity of her words and the emphasis with which she spoke briefly set me aback. Nothing like this had ever happened to me, to have some woman that I've never met before suddenly tell me things that I haven't even told my best friend...that was something....something unworldly.

“I...I...don know what ta say.”

“Of course you don't.” she replied.

She paused once more showing obvious caution about both what she said and how much she said.

“There is one more thing. Do not be fearful of taking responsibility for a great man's life. You must have faith in yourself that you have been given everything that you need to be successful.”

Chapter 2

I left feeling shaken, numb, and shocked beyond belief. Not only was I apparently going to have the fate of unknown hundreds...even thousands of people on my shoulders, but I had no idea when it would happen and under what circumstance.

I got home and searched for some way to clear my head. The conversation swirled around in my mind gripping me like a python. I tried kicking the fútbol around but it wasn't helping. I went to a cafe and checked my email just to see if anything mind-blowing would happen, but it was just spam. So I just spent time carving my model rockets. This brought me back to daydreaming about space. SASA was launching a new satellite toward the moon in a week and they were getting more funding for the launch facility. Satellites and rockets were my obsession since grade school.

The next day I was heading off to la Universidad when I saw Elenin and a couple of friends walking towards me. It was of course no coincidence, only a few dozen people went there from our neighborhood. She was only a few centimeters taller than me and her hair was always tied back tightly. She had a great figure and a smooth face with a slightly flattened nose that I always thought cute. She dressed just like her friends in a cut off T-shirt and shorts, probably wanted to fit in. Unfortunately the only time she smiled at me was when she had successfully devised some fiendish prank. The look on her face when she saw me made it clear that she had all she needed to dig into me. She knew what I thought of superstition, and had the most wonderful time tormenting me.

“So what did the great seer have to say?” she taunted

“Oh nothing much,” I tried to act casual “I wasn't impressed.”

I was a horrible liar, and Elenin knew it. There was no way that I was going to tell her what I'd learned, but at the same time, she'd want to know something.

“Nuh true?? You did'na go, did you?”

One of her friends giggled, and the smile playing on Elenin's face reminded me of the look that the psychic had given me yesterday.

“Of course I wen'.” I replied, getting angry despite myself

“Well if you wen', den you had to'a learn *sometin* interesting.”

“I don'a have to tell you nothin.” I feigned. Knowing it wouldn't get me out of this.

“Maybe she tol' you dat Suzanne t'inks you ugly. I mean she pro-a-ly does.”

Now her friends weren't even trying to hide their laughter. My crush on Suzanne was not exactly a secret, but not exactly school wide gossip. It was just enough to push me over the edge.

"Okay, well she did tell me that you're *gay*" I shouted back at her. I'd wanted to save this incredible jab for a time when I really needed it. But she'd really put me on edge, and I was still reeling from the conversation yesterday. Besides, it was both something true AND it shut her up like a steel trap. I grinned as her entire face turned beat red and her mouth opened and closed once before she could get a word out.

The funny thing was, we all suspected it. But of course nobody would ever come out and *say* anything.

Now I'd forced her to admit it not only in front of me, but also her closest friends.

"Well you obviously were right 'bout dem being quacks, cause is no' true an' how dare you make up sometin' like dat!"

Now it was my turn to blush. I'd really gone too far. It was one thing to accuse her but there was no saying what her friends might do or say. I mean, it was no secret that she was always making eyes at Ms. Chacón, the Physics professor. Fact is nearly everyone in the school had the hots for her. But if word got out, she could be beaten or worse.

I walked away feeling disoriented and horribly guilty. I knew she'd backed me into a corner, but I just lost control.

I'd replayed this day hundreds of times over in my mind. Even long after I lost touch with her, I never let go of the fact that I'd hurt her much deeper than I could have imagined.

Chapter 3

“Apply for an internship at SASA”

Now *this* was an e-mail that I would read, even if it might be spam.

“Your mentor has chosen you to be among a select group of students from Jamaica to compete for an exclusive internship at the South American Space Agency”

I barely read the rest of the email. I couldn't get over my excitement at even the remotest chance to be at the prestigious science agency, I just sat staring at the screen like some ignorant shepherd.

I wanted to tell Eddie, hell I wanted to tell the whole school. But then my doubt crept back in and I figured it was a bad idea to tell everyone only to find out that I hadn't won. After all, the email only said that I had a *chance*.

I quickly downloaded the form and spent an agonizing hour and a half going through all of the questions. It would take me days to come up with worthwhile answers to all of this. But there was nothing I wouldn't do to get into an astronomy program such as this.

Chapter 4

Elenin Deville couldn't concentrate on any of her classes. And this time it wasn't the fantasies of Ms. Chacón. Tannin's outburst had thrown her over like one of those leg sweeps they teach in Jujitsu. It wasn't just that he suspected (most of the people she knew probably suspected), it was the horrific danger she was in. Every few months there would be a story floating among the gossipers about someone who was beaten for being gay. Most people convinced themselves it wasn't true, or that it could never happen to someone *they* knew, but the fear was always there nevertheless. She might as well commit suicide for all it would do to mom. And the horror of it was that there was no way she could trust Tannin to keep his big mouth shut. She could see him now grinning wildly and telling everyone they knew. How could she have been so stupid to goad him like that. Thing is she couldn't even say why. Was it envy because he was always coming up with the right answers? None of it made any sense.

It took most of the afternoon to figure out what she was going to do. She played maybe a hundred different scenarios out in her mind. Should she send him an email, and avoid him in person? Or should she just grit her teeth and have a face to face conversation.

Unfortunately she never got the chance to make that decision.

Chapter 5

Claudio and I were in the yard playing fútbol. My place was smaller than his and the yard was just a postage stamp compared to some of the nicer ones in the neighborhood. But with his girl still upset about his decision to go to college in the United States, he was spending a lot of time with me. It wasn't a problem. I loved having him around and swapping fútbol stories over beers. When I saw the mailman walking toward my house my entire body froze. I'd been stressed out for the past two weeks. I was becoming a wreck over this whole SASA thing. I mean, it's not like I could really expect to be a full astronaut or anything, but to even work at the agency and help develop the satellites was an incredible chance. One that I didn't think I could be worthy of.

While I just stood in the yard frozen, he picked up the mail and waved it enthusiastically. That could only mean one thing..

“I can't believe you're such a coward man. Just open the damn envelope.” Claudio couldn't possibly imagine how terrifying this was for me.

“Can...can you open it for me....”

Before I could finish, he tore open the envelope with enough excitement that I could imagine for a second that it was addressed to him.

“Dear señor Tannin Boldóne;

It is with our sincerest regrets....” my heart sank half a meter into my abdomen as he continued “that we inform you that your useless and sorry ass has been accepted to the South American Space Agency....”

He didn't get a chance to continue because I all but threw him on the ground and was fully prepared to beat the living crap out of him. But of course he outweighed me by at least 12kg and I knew that I'd never win. Besides, I was too enthralled that I had *actually* been accepted.

“...We believe that your unique qualifications will be a valuable asset to the agency. You will be given clearance to work as a part time intern upon completing your studies at La Universidad.....”

I felt like I was dancing on air. It was a career path that would set me among the most successful Jamaicans in history.

Chapter 6

“Peru had such an incredible rugged beauty to it. Although she didn't get to see a lot of it on her time off, there had been plenty of awe inspiring views on the flight in. The enormous mountains, rugged cliffs, and beautiful rivers were such as she'd never even dreamed of in Trinidad.

Living in Peru was a great deal more relaxed for Elenin. Besides the awesome scenery, the people were so amazing, and the Air Force was an easy place to be for someone who wanted to learn weapons technology. There were so many wonderful challenges in the military. It was easy to stay in top physical shape, she could practice jujitsu with the best martial artists, and she learned several different types of guns. And the food! Lima had the most amazing food she had ever tasted. She'd already tried everything from Creole to something called Cebicherias.

But most importantly, she could work on her electronic rocket motor without wondering where she would get money for each screw or plate. She got to the lab at her usual time, 6am after doing a short workout. The place was little more than a quonset hut, but the equipment was the important thing. There was every kind of electronics tool she could imagine. It was so gratifying to finally be given the chance to work on her motor. The electronics package looked like it had the potential to put out an incredible amount of power. She'd upgraded the transformer three times already and finally this one remained stable.

“Major Quiñones, may I 'ave a word with you?”

“Sí Cadet, que este?”

“Señor, I believe dat the engine is ready for testing. I would like permission to utilize de testing frame to measure power output.”

“Well of course Elenin. It's no matter to use the rig. You believe the engine is stable now? There's a pile of burnt out capacitors which would show otherwise.” he gave her a smile to show he was only toying with her.

“Yes I'm aware of dat sir. I've tested de current configuration at multiple settings on very low velocity without incident.”

“Okay, well I would like to join you to observe this test.”

As they walked to the testing lab, Elenin reflected on how much she appreciated the man. There were very few people in the military who would put their trust in her. Not only did she have to prove herself as an engineer and a foreigner, but also as a woman. Eventually her knowledge of aircraft design and her brilliant improvements to the mechanical and electrical systems had earned the respect of at least some people in her department.

She carefully set the motor into a testing frame designed for aircraft engines. This was the real sweat equity that they always talked about. After spending several weeks on this idea, they both knew that she had better have something to show for it or Corporal Rodrigo would have her head. Despite the major's support, it was clear that Rodrigo was skeptical either of her design or the fact that it was being developed by a woman. He was clearly a very 'traditional' person (meaning he thought good ideas could only come from boys).

She double-checked every bolted connection to the frame and after getting behind the blast shield she slowly dialed up the current. The hum of the motor grew louder as the pressure readings were taken. The creaking of the steel frame was easily audible over the sound of the motor (which would never have been possible with a jet engine) and the readings indicated it was putting out 1 kiloNewton of power.

“Incredible!” Martin her coworker commented, “that thing is just sipping power and yet it's putting out enough force to launch a missile.

Quiñones was also smiling, “It sure looks like you have yourself a success Elenin. Even Rodrigo is going to have to admit it.”

She was positively beaming. It was a big gamble to get the department to support what looked like a nebulous project. If this didn't prove her merit in the service, nothing would.

Chapter 7

Major Edwardo's Mig could be heard long before it was visible. The sleek plane banked easily and headed towards the rusted ship hull parked behind Isla San Lorenzo. It was the only artificial sound on the otherwise serene bit of coastline. But at this point there was too much excitement for her to admire the scenery. Elenin stood on the shore alongside Major Quiñones, Corporal Rodrigo, and several other crewmen.

'Major, you have a green light to launch.' the radio had been chattering away for the entire flight with tests and readings. But this was the moment she and the whole team had been waiting for.

Instead of a loud his and the roar of a rocket motor, the Nazca powered missile flew away with a quiet hum. The missile flew with amazing speed at the rusted ship. The entire 15 meter ship lifted out of the water with the force of the explosion. And the three cameras mounted on the starboard fin, nose, and underbelly as well as the old ship, recorded every microsecond for analysis.

Cheers were erupting throughout the makeshift control room.

It had taken years for Elenin to be accepted within the Peruvian Air Force. But this new design was the biggest risk she'd ever taken so far (aside from going out with Dolores). Not to mention the misgivings of Corporal Rodrigo who seemed to take it as his personal responsibility to belittle her every success. All of her hard work could have evaporated in a tiny vapor trail. And yet there was enough support to approve this test of her new 'quiet missile.' The electrically powered high-efficiency motors were trickle-charged from ultra-capacitors which could store and release huge amounts of energy without the drawbacks of standard batteries. The quiet missiles weren't hot enough to show up on thermal imagers and would be so fast that it would be nearly impossible to see or track.

By the end of the test even Rodrigo initiated a respectful salute which was the biggest compliment she could have ever expected from him.

Chapter 8

Carlos Zelega sat in his office on the top floor of SASA headquarters. It was modest compared to President Jimenez, but still nicer than most anyone in Sao Paulo. Two walls were filled with bookcases and books on astronomy, astrophysics, economics, psychology, and more. The third wall was glass curtain-wall with views of the city stretching out to the horizon. Carlos was tall compared to most Brazilians, but not excessively so, and his slender frame and receding salt and pepper hair gave him an unimposing appearance. The thick reading glasses that he used to read the report completed the persona. But Carlos had always made a reputation through his hard work, and dedication to science. His work at SASA was no different. It was said he would work 16 hours a day (which sometimes he did) and knew more about near Earth astronomy than anyone south of the Equator (which was a small exaggeration).

But of all the months and years that he had been employed as a scientist and then administrator, this was a day he would remember for the rest of his life. The mission report looked plain enough in its drab brown folder, but what it held was nothing short of world-changing. He read the report for what seemed like the 15th time, and each time it felt inconceivable. That something so astronomically profound could have existed for decades without being detected by anyone?

The bigger question was.....what was to be done about it. Certainly they couldn't make its existence known to the world, but on the other hand, SASA did not have the resources to explore it to the depth that would be necessary (no pun intended). How could he finance a mission around this without international cooperation? He needed fresh ideas.

Chapter 9

Carlos walked into the meeting room. It was boring, like every meeting room was. Drab materials, fake wood veneers, and dull fabrics. Carlos was thinking of some TV shows he watched where all the characters were young and attractive people with brilliant and catchy lines. It seemed almost a shame that there weren't more young people participating in these brainstorming meetings. After all it was well known that young people have less rigid thinking. But then again, these people were the best in their field. He looked over the half-dozen people who formed the administrative hub at SASA. Here were the most respected and well educated minds in the agency. Hopefully some game-changing strategy would come out of it.

“I've called you all in here to discuss a matter of monumental proportions ladies and gentleman. You've all received non-disclosure agreements which are bound in the highest authority. This information absolutely can not leave this room. What you are about to see is information known to only a couple of people in SASA.”

A motorized screen slowly and dramatically descended at the short end of the room, and Carlos dimmed the lights accordingly. The first image that showed on the screen was a fancy computer rendering of a space probe, the foil covering it's long cylindrical body shining with unrealistic brilliance against a far-away crescent-shaped Earth.

“I'll begin with the latest data from the Lua probe of which most of you have worked or are at least familiar with. As you know, the probe made 5 orbits of the moon with easily predictable results. It was a PR risk I admit could be viewed as a terrific failure.”

“It *is* seen as a terrific, and *very expensive* failure,” Esteban commented seemingly under his breath though not quietly enough. But he was just saying what everyone was thinking.

“You're right Esteban. It is indeed seen as a failure not just technically but politically. Believe me there have been some very curt messages from President Jimenez as well as Cristina Fernández and Chavez. But what you are about to see will convince the very few of you cleared to see this, that the mission was successful far beyond our wildest dreams.”

He took a long drink of water before continuing. “Most of the probe's images have been made public to help garner support for SASA. But the next images you see are for your eyes only.”

The slide changed and a grainy image of an oblong void filled the screen. The gauge at the bottom clarified that the void was four kilometers long and over a kilometer wide. Though to the untrained eye it looked like any cavern on Earth, it did seem a little too rectilinear.

“We set Lua to make a low-slow pass over the as-yet least explored portion of the moon. On the far side near the southern pole, the probe's ground sonar picked up this image. It was a unique feature, something that none of the nations have discovered. Probably because in years past, the technology wasn't commonly used in satellites. We decided that the unique nature of this cavern justified closer scrutiny. It was a tough call, in order to make a closer pass, the satellite would be traveling dangerously slow. There was no way to expect that it wouldn't get pulled in by the moon's gravity, which as you know is what happened.

I weighed the risks and eventually took the terrific gamble of giving the green light to make adjustments to Lua's orbit. On the next pass, we dialed in the ground sonar as high as we could and got this image.

The next slide came up and there was an audible gasp in the room. The same oblong void was visible, but there was no mistaking the distinct grid of square shapes within the cavity. This was clearly an artificial construct....and it couldn't have been made by humans.

“This cavity is approximately 30 meters below the Lunar surface. It is now clear beyond the shadow of a doubt that there are forms of consciousness out there who are technologically capable. Who created this, when did they build it, for what purpose, is simply impossible at this point to imagine. These are the questions on everybody's mind. Finding out more about this construct is the most important thing on our agenda.”

Now the slide image switched to a bold red question mark. “The question is, how do we, especially after this perceived failure, garner support for a more advanced mission to the moon. The Estados Unidos has done it, the Chinese have done it, and several others are well on their way to getting there as well. Not to mention the fact that nobody has, as yet, brought back anything that's valuable enough to justify the expense.”

The slide show ended and there was not a single closed mouth in the room. Carlos let the silence hang for several moments while he let everyone digest the monumental discovery.

Fransesco was the first to speak up. He was a taller man and he was the lead administrator for several of the setellite missions including a flyby of Venus. His many years at the administration had given him a seniority and a close connection to Carlos.

“Sir, is it not possible to explore this phenomenon....for lack of a better word, with robotic probes? I realize

that drilling something like this is unprecedented, but Los Estados Unidos has done some impressive work with robot probes so far. It would drastically reduce the cost of the mission.”

“Thank you Fransesco. While it’s true that robotic probes can do very good analysis and even some digging, the fact is that an operation of this complexity could become an utter failure if even a small part of the probe fails. I mean think of the last Mars mission. The probe was fully functional, but because it’s believed the antenna had not unfurled properly, it wasn’t possible to get signals to or from the probe. The entire mission had to be scrapped. Besides, this spot is on the far side of the moon, meaning further communication delays. Despite the greater risk of sending a human being, I feel that unexpected complexities can be better handled by having a human there to deal with them.”

Maria spoke up next. She was the lead scientist on the Densidade Oceânico satellite last year. She was a small woman with a brilliant mind. Her rise within the agency had been the stuff of office gossip.

“I’m assuming that you don’t think the public will react well to the idea of an alien construction on the moon. Do you really think there will be panic in the streets? I really don’t believe that you give our people enough credit. Just because the North Americans and the Rússians choose to hide everything behind a secret military veil, doesn’t mean that we have to follow suit.”

“A very good point Maria. It would be worthy of discussion if it weren’t for another more delicate matter. All of our space technology and expertise was imported either from los Estados Unidos or the Rússians. Given that both countries have sent satellites to the moon without discovering this, it would be quite an affront, would it not, for us to suddenly reveal that we alone are the ones to discover proof of alien life. We have to play this card *very* carefully.”

Johanson spoke next. He was the undersecretary, and as such, brought with him an administrative viewpoint. “Do we absolutely need to inform everyone. I know it would be good PR to have a manned mission announced to all the papers, but it *is* possible to just keep the mission a secret and pad the budget through other means.”

“That thought had crossed my mind as well sir. It’s common practice for the North Americans and without it they wouldn’t have all those fancy military satellites. But our budget is under much closer scrutiny. I report not only to President Jimenez, but also to El Sociedade Astronômica de Brazil and several other

astronomical organizations on the continent. I guess we simply don't have a population as gullible as los Estados Unidos."

"Why don't we combine these two ideas?" Selena was SASA's PR liaison and as such was less capable with technology, but more than proved her merit in dealing with the public and the press specifically. "We could announce a planned mission stating that we had found new evidence of valuable underground water, or frozen oxygen...something less monumental that would allow us to justify such an elaborate mission."

Esteban raised his hand, "Sir, we could never hope to finance such a mission by ourselves. The only way we could afford a manned moon landing would be to collaborate with someone else. But if the agreement is to not make this public, then we will have to find some way to do this quietly *and* most importantly to find a partner who can keep it secret. What if we made this a joint mission with the Chinese?"

"Esteban, I appreciate your creative thinking. But do you think we can trust another country, even China, to keep a secret of this magnitude. Even if they could, there's nothing stopping them from simply using the knowledge and taking on the mission themselves. Look what they've done to North America and Europe, taking every invention and selling it back at a lower cost. Despite the Estados Unidos flag, the moon is like Antarctica. No single nation has jurisdiction there."

It was clear that the creative energy in the room was beginning to wane. "Thank you everyone. This is exactly the type of creative thinking that I was looking for. I like Selena's idea. And while the concept of bringing in the Chinese, makes me terribly nervous, I will keep it on the back burner. Whichever path we choose, we will have to be very careful in how we frame this. The other nations have some brilliant scientists and we can't afford to look like charlatans."

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