



Alien Offer

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"YOU are General James Rothwell?"

Rothwell sighed. "Yes, Commander Aku. We have met several times."

"Ah, yes. I recognize your insignia. Humans are so alike." The alien strode importantly across the office, the resilient pads of his broad feet making little plopping sounds on the rug, and seated himself abruptly in the visitor's chair beside Rothwell's desk. He gave a sharp cry, and another alien, shorter, but sporting similar, golden fur, stepped into the office and closed the door. Both wore simple, brown uniforms, without ornamentation.

"I am here," Aku said, "to tell you something." He stared impassively at Rothwell for a minute, his fur-covered, almost human face completely expressionless, then his gaze shifted to the window, to the hot runways of New York International Airport and to the immense gray spaceship that, even from the center of the field, loomed above the hangars and passenger buildings. For an instant, a quick, unguessable emotion clouded the wide black eyes and tightened the thin lips, then it was gone.

Rothwell waited.

"General, Earth's children must all be aboard my ships within one week. We will start to load on the sixth day, next Thursday." He stood.

Rothwell locked eyes with the alien, and leaned forward, grinding his knuckles into the desk top. "You know that's impossible. We can't select 100,000 children from every country and assemble them in only six days."

"You will do it." The alien turned to leave.

"Commander Aku! Let me remind you ... "

Aku spun around, eyes flashing. "General Rothwell! Let *me* remind you that two weeks ago I didn't even know Earth existed, and since accidentally happening across your sun system and learning of your trouble I have had my entire trading fleet of a hundred ships in orbit about this planet while all your multitudinous political subdivisions have filled the air with talk and wrangle.

"I am sorry for Earth, but my allegiance is to my fleet and I cannot remain longer than seven more days and risk being caught up in your destruction. Now, either you accept my offer to evacuate as many humans as my ships will carry, or you don't." He paused. "You are the planet's evacuation coordinator; you will give me an answer."

Rothwell's arms sagged, he sunk back down into his chair, all pretense gone. Slowly he swung around to face the window and the gray ship,

standing like a Gargantuan sundial counting the last days of Earth. He almost whispered. "We are choosing the children. They will be ready in six days."

He heard the door open and close. He was alone.

Five years ago, he thought, we cracked the secret of faster-than-light travel, and since then we've built about three dozen exploration ships and sent them out among the stars to see what they could see.

He stared blankly at the palms of his hand. I wonder what it was we expected to find?

We found that the galaxy was big, that there were a lot of stars, not so many planets, and practically no other life—at least no intelligence to compare with ours. Then ... He jabbed a button on his intercom.

"Ed Philips here. What is it Jim?"

"Doc, are you sure your boys have hypo'd, couched, and hypno'd the *Leo* crew with everything you've got?"

The voice on the intercom sighed. "Jim, those guys haven't got a memory of their own. We know everything about each one of them, from the hurts he got falling off tricycles to the feel of the first girl he kissed. Those men aren't lying, Jim."

"I never thought they were lying, Doc." Rothwell paused for a minute and studied the long yellow hairs that grew sparsely across the back of his hand, thickened to a dense grove at his wrist, and vanished under the sleeve of his uniform. He looked back at the intercom. "Doc, all I know is that three perfectly normal guys got on board that ship, and when it came back we found a lot of jammed instruments and three men terrified almost to the point of insanity."

"Jim, if you'd seen ... "

Rothwell interrupted. "I know. Five radioactive planets with the fresh scars of cobalt bombs and the remains of civilizations. Then radar screens erupting crazily with signals from a multi-thousand ship space fleet; vector computers hurriedly plotting and re-plotting the fast-moving trajectory, submitting each time an unvarying answer for the fleet's destination—our own solar system." He slapped his hand flat against the desk. "The point is, Doc, it's not much to go on, and we don't dare send another ship to check for fear of attracting attention to ourselves. If we could only be *sure*."

"Jim," over the intercom, Philips' voice seemed to waver slightly, "those men honestly saw what they say. I'd stake my life on it."

"All of us are, Doc." He flipped the off button. Just thirty days now, since the scout ship *Leo's* discovery and the panicked dash for home with

the warning. Not that the warning was worth much, he reflected, Earth had no space battle fleet. There had never been any reason to build one.

Then, two weeks ago, Aku's trading fleet had descended from nowhere, having blundered, he said, across Earth's orbit while on a new route between two distant star clusters. When told of the impending attack, Aku immediately offered to cancel his trip and evacuate as many humans as his ships could hold, so that humanity would at least survive, somewhere in the galaxy. Earth chose to accept his offer.

"Hobson's choice," Rothwell growled to himself. "No choice at all." After years of handling hot and cold local wars and crises of every description, his military mind had become conditioned to a complete disbelief in fortuitous coincidence, and he gagged at the thought of Aku "just happening by." Still frowning, he punched a yellow button on his desk, and reviewed in his mind the things he wanted to say.

"Jim! Isn't everything all right?"

Chagrined, Rothwell scrambled to his feet, the President had never answered so quickly before. He faced the screen on the wall to his right and saluted, amazed once again at how old the man looked. Sparse white hair criss-crossed haphazardly over the President's head, his face was lined with deep trenches that not even the most charitable could call wrinkles, and the faded eyes that stared from deep caverns no longer radiated the flaming vitality that had inspired victorious armies in the African war.

"Commander Aku was just here, sir. He demands that the children be ready for evacuation next Thursday. I told him that it would be damned difficult."

The face on the screen paled perceptibly. "I hope you didn't anger the commander!"

Rothwell ground his teeth. "I told him we'd deliver the goods on Thursday."

Presidential lips tightened. "I don't care for the way you said that, General."

Rothwell straightened. "I apologize, sir. It's just that this whole lousy setup has me worried silly. I don't like Aku making like a guardian angel and us having no choice but to dance to his harp." His fingers clenched. "God knows we need his help, and I guess it's wrong to ask too many questions, but how come he's only landed one of his ships, and why is it that he and his lieutenant are the only aliens to leave that ship—the only

aliens we've ever even seen? It just doesn't figure out!" There, he thought, I've said it.

The President looked at him quietly for a minute, then answered softly, "I know, Jim, but what else can we do?" Rothwell winced at the shake in the old man's voice.

"I don't know," he said. "But Aku's got us in a hell of a spot."

"Uh, Jim. You haven't said this in public, have you?"

Rothwell snorted. "No, *sir*, I don't care for a panic."

"There, there, Jim." The President smiled weakly. "We can't expect the aliens to act like we do, can we?" He began to adopt the preacher tone he used so effectively in his campaign speeches. "We must be thankful for the chance breeze that wafted Commander Aku to these shores, and for his help. Maybe the war fleet won't arrive after all and everything will turn out all right. You're doing a fine job, Jim." The screen went blank.

Rothwell felt sick. He felt sorry for the President, but sorrier for the Western Democratic Union, to be captained by such a feeble thing. Leaning back in his chair, he glared at the empty screen. "You can't solve problems by wishing them away. You knew that once."

His mind wandered, and for a minute he thought he could actually feel the growing pressure of three billion people waiting for the computers of Moscow Central to make their impartial choice from the world's children. Trained mathematicians, the best that could be mustered from every major country, monitored each phase of the project to insure its absolute honesty. One hundred thousand children were to be picked completely at random; brown, yellow, black, white, red; sick or well; genius or moron; every child had an equal chance. This fact, this fact alone gave every parent hope, and possibly prevented world-wide rioting.

But with the destruction of the planet an almost certainty, the collective nervous system was just one micron away from explosion. There was nothing else to think about or talk about, and no one tried to pretend any different.

Rothwell's eyes moved involuntarily to the little spherical tri-photo on his desk, just an informal shot he'd snapped a few months back of Martha and her proudest possessions, their rambunctious, priceless offspring: Jim, Jr., in his space scouts uniform, and Mary Ellen with that crazy hair-do she was so proud of then, but had already forgotten.

"Damn!" he said aloud. "Dammit to hell!" In one quick movement, he spun his chair around and jabbed at the intercom. "Get the heli!" His voice crackled.

Grabbing his hat, he yanked open the door and strode into the sudden quiet of the small office. He turned right and went out through a side entrance to a small landing ramp, arriving just as his personal heli touched down. He climbed in. "To the ship."

As he settled back in the hard seat, Rothwell offered a silent thanks that, instead of asking which ship, Sergeant Johnson promptly lifted and headed for the gray space vessel that dominated the field.

A few hundred yards from the craft he said, "You'd better set her down here, Sarge, and let me walk in. Our friends might get nervous about something flying in at them."

He jumped out, squinting against the hot glare off the concrete, and then, with a slight uneasiness, stepped into the dark shadow that pointed a thousand feet along the runway, away from the setting sun. He walked towards the ship.

A few seconds later, his eye caught a small, unexplained flash and he threw himself flat just as a section of pavement exploded, a dozen feet ahead.

Cursing, Rothwell picked himself off the ground, brushed the dust off his uniform, and stood quietly. He didn't have long to wait.

A small cubicle jutted out from the ship and lowered itself along a monorail running down to the ground. The side nearest him opened revealing, as Rothwell expected, Commander Aku and his lieutenant who both hurried over to where he was standing, as if to keep him from coming forward to meet them—and in so doing coming nearer the ship. As the commander trotted rapidly towards him, Rothwell noted that he was still buttoning his jacket and that the shirt underneath looked suspiciously as if it hadn't been buttoned at all. Funny, he thought, that my presence should cause such a panic.

"General, what a pleasure." The commander's disconcerted look belied his words, but even as he spoke he began to regain his composure and assume the poker face that Rothwell had come to expect.

"I do hope," said Rothwell, "that my visit hasn't inconvenienced you."

Aku and his lieutenant traded swift glances, neither said anything.

"Well," Rothwell began again, "I am here to convey to you the good wishes of the President of our country and to submit a request from him and from the other governments of the Earth."

Aku straightened. "Though merely the commander of a poor trading fleet, I feel sure I speak for my empire when I wish your President good health. The request?"

Rothwell spoke evenly, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Commander, when the attack comes we expect that Earth with all its life will be annihilated. But your offer to transport a hundred thousand children to your own home worlds has prevented despair, and has at least given us hope that if we will not see the future our children will."

Aku nodded slightly, avoiding his eyes. "You take it well."

"But it takes more than hope, Commander. We need some assurance, also, that our children will be all right." He took an involuntary step nearer the alien, whose facial muscles never moved, and who turned away slightly, refusing to meet Rothwell's eyes.

"Commander, you and your lieutenant are the only members of your race that we have ever seen, and then only on official business. We would like very much to meet the others. Why don't you land your ships and give the crews liberty, so that we can meet them informally and they can get to know us, also? That way it won't seem as if we are giving our kids over to complete strangers."

Without turning his head, Aku said flatly, "That is impossible. Do you want reasons?"

"No," Rothwell said quietly. "If you don't want to do something, it's easy enough to think up reasons." He ached to reach out and grab the alien neck, to shake some expression into that frozen face. "Look, Commander, surely the friendship of a doomed race can't bring any harm to your crew!"

Aku faced him now. "What you ask is impossible."

Ashamed of the desperate note that crept inadvertently into his voice, Rothwell said, "Commander, will you let me, alone, briefly enter your ship, so that I can tell my people what it is like?"

Aku and the lieutenant traded a long, silent look, then the lieutenant almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders. Without moving, turned partly away from Rothwell, Aku said, simply, "No." The two started to walk back to the ship.

"Commander!"

They stopped, but didn't turn.

"Commander Aku, if you have any sort of God in your empire, or any sort of honor that your race swears by, please tell me one thing—tell me that our children will be safe, I won't ask you anything else."

The two aliens stood still, facing away from him, towards their ship. Minutes passed. Rothwell stood quietly, looking at their backs, human appearing, but hiding unguessable thoughts. Neither of them moved, or said a word. Finally, he turned and walked away, back towards his heli.

He leaned back in the little heli's bucket seat and ran a large hand through unruly yellow hair that was already flecked with white. The first evening lights of Brooklyn and Queens and, off to the left, Manhattan, moved unseen beneath him as the craft headed towards his home. Dammit, he thought, is it that Aku just doesn't care what we think, or that he cares very much what we would think if we knew whatever it is he's hiding?

He banged his fists together in frustration. How the hell can anyone guess what goes on in an alien mind? His whole damn brain is probably completely different! Maybe to him a poker face is friendly. Maybe he's honestly not hiding anything at all. He looked out as the heli slowly started its descent. No evidence, he thought. Not a shred, except a suspicious mind and, he glanced at the dirt on his trousers, and a shell exploding in my face.

He slapped his hat back on and whirled to the surprised pilot. "Dammit, I don't make the decisions, I'm just in charge of loading, and if the President says it's okay, then it's okay with me!" He stepped out onto the grass of his yard, and quashed a little shriek of conscience somewhere in the back of his mind.

Blinding lights pinned him in mid-stride. A familiar voice sprang out of the glare, "Here he is now viewers, General James Rothwell, commander of the western armies, and head of the Earth evacuation project. General, International-TV cameras have been waiting secretly in your yard for hours for your return."

As his eyes adjusted, Rothwell distinguished a camera crew, their small portable instrument, and a young, smooth-talking announcer that he had seen several times on television. He forced the annoyance out of his eyes. This, he thought, is all I need.

"What the general doesn't know," the announcer went on, "is that earlier this evening it was announced by Moscow Central that the computers had picked his son as one of the evacuees!"

The shock was visible on 150,000,000 TV sets. Completely unexpected, the surprise of the announcement hit Rothwell like a physical blow; his eyes widened, his chin dropped, and for an instant the world's viewers read in his face the frank emotions of a father, unshielded by military

veneer. Then years of training took command, and he faced the camera, apparently calm, though churning internally. The odds, he thought confusedly, the odds must be at least ten thousand to one! Then he realized that someone was talking to him, waving a microphone.

"Er, I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch ... " he mumbled at the camera.

The announcer laughed amiably. "Certainly can't blame you, this must be a really big night! How does it feel, General, for your son to be one of the evacuees?"

Something in the back of his mind twisted the question. How does it feel, General, to turn your only son over to a poker-faced alien who shoots when you walk near his ship? "I'm not sure," he said, "how I feel."

Talking excitedly, the announcer drew closer. "To think that your name will live forever in the vast star clusters of the galaxy!" He lowered his voice. "General, speaking now unofficially, as a parent, to the thousands of other parents whose children may also be selected, and to the rest of us who ... " he seemed to stumble for a word, and for an instant Rothwell saw him, too, as a man worried and afraid, instead of as part of a television machine. "Well, General, *you've* had contact with the aliens, are you glad your son is going?"

Rothwell looked at the strained face of the announcer, at the camera crew quietly eyeing him, and at the small huddled group of neighbors hovering in the background, and he knew that his next words might be the most critical he would ever use in his life. In a world strained emotionally almost beyond endurance, the wrong words, a hint of a suspicion, could spark the riots that would kill millions and bring total destruction.

He faced the camera and said calmly, "I am glad my son is going. I wish it could happen for everyone. Commander Aku has assured me that everything will turn out all right." Mentally he begged for forgiveness, there was nothing else he could say. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he tried to fight down the memory of Aku turning his back on the plea that echoed in his brain—"tell me that our children will be safe."

The front door of the house banged open and all at once Martha was in his arms, crying, laughing. "Oh, Jim, I'm so glad, so very glad!" Rothwell blinked his eyes as he put his arm around her and waved the camera away. Tears sparkled on his cheeks; but neither Martha nor the viewers knew why.

The next morning Aku and his ever-present lieutenant were waiting when Rothwell's heli set him down in front of the administration

building, a few minutes later than usual. They followed him into his office.

"Coffee?" Rothwell held out a paper cup.

"No, thank you," said Aku, as expressionless as ever. "We are here to make final arrangements for the evacuation."

"I see. Well," said Rothwell, "Thursday will be a very painful day for us and we will want to expedite things as much as possible."

Aku nodded.

Rothwell went on. "I have made arrangements to have a hundred air fields cleared at various population centers around the world. That way your ships can land simultaneously, one at each field, and the loading can be finished in very little time. Now," he opened a desk drawer, "here is a list, of ... "

Aku held up a fur-covered hand. "That will not be possible."

Rothwell looked down at his desk and closed his eyes briefly. I knew it, he thought, I knew this would happen, sure as hell. He raised his head. "Impossible?"

"We will first land twenty ships. These twenty must be fully loaded and back in orbit before the next will land. We will use the first twenty air fields on your list."

Rothwell took a deep breath. "But I thought you wanted to get away as soon as possible! It will take at least an extra day to load according to your scheme."

"Will it?" Aku moved to go, his lieutenant reached to open the door.

On an impulse, Rothwell stepped forward. "Commander, if you had a son would you send him away like this?"

Aku stopped, and looked directly at him with even, black eyes; then the gaze moved through and past him, to the window and the ship beyond. For a minute his expression altered, changing almost to one of pain. When he spoke, it was almost to himself. "My father loved his children more than ... " He started as his lieutenant suddenly clapped a hand on his shoulder. The expression vanished. They left together, without looking at Rothwell or saying another word.

For several minutes Rothwell stared frowning at the closed door. He walked thoughtfully back to his desk, and lowered himself slowly into the chair.

He sat for a long time, trying to puzzle through the picture. Finally he stood and paced the room. "Suppose," he said to himself, "just suppose that not all of those hundred ships up there are really cargo ships.

Suppose that, say, only twenty are. Then, after those twenty were loaded ... " He swung around to look again at the long, slim silhouette poised high against the main runway. "With ocean vessels, it's the fighting ships that are lean and slender."

Bending over his desk, he nudged an intercom button with his finger. "Doc, how would one go about trying to understand an alien's reactions?"

Philips' voice shot right back. "Well, Jim, the very first thing, you'd have to be sure they weren't exactly the same as a human's reactions."

Rothwell paused, startled. "It can't be, Doc. Why, if Aku was a human I'd say ... " He stiffened, feeling the hair rise at the back of his neck. The short, curt answers, the refusal to meet his eyes, the frozen expression clicked into pattern. "Doc ... I'd say he was being forced to do something he hated like hell to do."

Tensely, he straightened and contemplated the lean, gray spaceship. Then he whirled around and slapped every button on the intercom.

Thursday. The sun pecked fitfully at the low overcast while a sullen crowd watched a squat alien ship descend vertically, to finally settle with a flaming belch not far from the first. Similar crowds watched similar landings at nineteen other airports around the world, but the loading was to start first in New York.

An elevator-like box swung out from the fat belly of the ship and was lowered rapidly to the ground. Two golden-hued aliens, in uniforms resembling Aku's, stepped out and walked about a thousand feet towards the crowd. Only children actually being loaded were to go beyond this point; parents had to stay at the airport gates.

"When do I go, Dad?"

"Shortly, son." Rothwell laid his hand on the lean shoulder. "You're in the second hundred." There was a brief, awkward silence. "Martha, you'd better take him over to the line." He held out his hand. "So long, son."

Jim, Jr., shook his hand gravely, then, without a word, suddenly threw his hands tight around his younger sister. He took his mother's hand, and they walked slowly over to the sad line that was forming beyond the gate.

Rothwell turned to his daughter. "You going over there too, kitten?" The words were gruff in his tight throat.

She wiped a hand quickly across her cheek. "No, Dad, I guess I'll stay here with you." She stood close beside him.

Aku, forgotten until now, cleared his throat. "I think the loading should start, General."

Raising his hand in a half-salute, Rothwell signaled to a captain standing near the gate who turned and motioned to a small cordon of military police. Shortly, a group of fifty of the first youngsters in the line separated from the others and moved slowly out onto the concrete ribbon towards the waiting ship. The rest of the line hesitated, then edged reluctantly up to the gate, to take the place of the fifty who had left. They waited there, the children of a thousand families, suddenly dead quiet, staring after the fifty that slowly moved away.

They walked quietly, in a tight group, without any antics or horseplay which, in itself, gave the event an air of unreality. Approaching the ship, they seemed to huddle even closer together, forming a pathetically tiny cluster in the shadow of the towering space cruiser. The title of a book that he had read once, many years before, flashed unexpectedly in Rothwell's memory, *The Story of Mankind*. He looked sadly after the fifty, then back at the silent line. Were these frightened kids now writing the final period in the last chapter? He shook himself, work to be done, no time now for daydreams.

As the fifty reached the ship and started to enter the elevator, Rothwell turned and beckoned to some technicians standing out of sight just inside the entrance to the control tower. Three of them ran out and set up what looked like a television set, only with three screens. One ran back, unreeling a power cable, while a fourth flicked on a bank of switches, making feverish, minute adjustments. Rothwell felt the sweat in his hands. "Is it okay, Sergeant?"

The back of the sergeant's shirt was wet though the air was cool. "It's got to be, sir!" His fingers played across the knobs. "All that metal, the whole thing is critical as ... Ah!" He jumped back. The screens flashed into life.

Aku stiffened. His lieutenant gasped audibly, made a jerky movement towards the screens, then suddenly became aware of three MPs standing beside him, hands nonchalantly cradling blunt-nosed weapons.

All three receivers showed similar scenes, the milling youngsters and the ship, but from up close, the pictures jerking and swaying erratically as if the cameras were somehow fastened to moving human beings. Then the scenes condensed into a cramped, jostling blackness as the fifty crowded into the elevator and were lifted up the side of the ship.

Next, were three views of a large room, bare except for what appeared to be overhead cranes and other mechanical paraphernalia of a military shop or warehouse. For a while the fifty moved about restlessly, then the cameras swung about simultaneously to face a wall that slowly slid apart.

Rothwell froze. "Good Lord!"

Six murky *things* moved from the open wall towards the cameras, which fell back to the opposite side of the room. Each was large, many times the size of a man, but somehow indistinct, for the cameras didn't convey any sense of shape or form. For an instant, one of the screens flashed a picture of a terrified human face, and arms raised protectively as the shadowy things moved in upon the group.

A projection snapped out from one, grabbed two of the humans, and hurled them into a corner. Then it motioned a dozen or so others over to the same spot. With similar harsh, sweeping movements, the group of humans was quickly broken up into three roughly equal segments. One of the groups seemed to be protecting someone who appeared seriously hurt. A black tentacle lashed out and one of the screens went blank. Then another.

The third showed a small group pushed stumbling through a narrow door, down a short passageway, and abruptly into blackness. Something that looked like bars flashed across the screen, then a dark liquid trickled across the camera lens, blotting out the view.

Eyes blazing, Rothwell whirled on Aku. "Throughout our history, Commander, humans have had one thing in common, our blasted pride! We will not turn over our young to slavery, and by hell if we die, we'll die fighting!" He jerked up his coat sleeve, barked an order into a small transmitter on his wrist, and, grabbing his daughter, threw himself flat on the concrete.

Hesitating only an instant, Aku, his lieutenant, and the MPs hit the ground as both spaceships vanished in a cataclysmic eruption of flame and steel.

Raising his head, Rothwell grinned crazily into the exploding debris, imagining nineteen other ships suddenly disintegrating under the rocket guns of nineteen different nations. He saw Earth, like a giant porcupine, flicking thousands of atom tipped missiles into space from hundreds of submarines and secret bases—the war power of the great nations, designed for the ruin of each other, united to destroy the alien fleet.

He turned to Aku, "Midgets, volunteers with miniature TV cameras ... " he stopped.

The commander and his lieutenant had flung their arms about each other and were crying like babies. Tentatively, Aku reached towards him. "Those things, the *Eleele*, from another galaxy." He struggled for words. "They captured your scout crew and implanted memories of thousands of ships to create fear and make it easier to take slaves before blasting you." He glanced up at the flashes in the sky. "This was their only fleet."

Rothwell glared. "You helped them."

Aku nodded miserably. "We had to. They thought you'd trust us because we look almost human. It was a trick that worked before." Tears streamed across his face, matting the golden fur. "You see, the radioactive planets your men reported, one of them was—home."

THE END

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