



As part of the Bishop's Mission Aaron had access to Data Set Z, the message captured from a distant civilization. He eventually decoded it and with Maria, they learned its secrets.

AARON AND MARIA: A Love Story

By William Collins

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AARON AND MARIA

A LOVE STORY

The Bishop's Mission sequel

WILLIAM COLLINS

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CHAPTER ONE



Disparate ideas that might never otherwise connect themselves will, under certain circumstances, cross paths closely enough in a distracted moment of an ordinary day to be detected. If the half-attentive individual, while attempting to break free of a current distraction, snaps out of reverie just long enough to notice those converging disconnected-now-connected disparate notions, a revelation will overtake and capture him. One such overtaking occurred when Aaron curiously and inexplicably linked the fixed word length and spacing of his newspaper's encrypted quotation to the three-digit numerical assignments for background and text colors within the do-it-yourself Karaoke software he'd been using earlier that morning. These juxtaposed fragments of thought rendered, "I wonder if that data stream is not a message? I wonder if it's some kind of encrypted string of number-set defined pixels?"

Aaron Michelson had been one of the many cryptographers who worked on the massive trove of data transmissions received from the Shepherd probe as part of the now famous Bishop's Mission. He had been pulled off his work on one especially large transmission string that became known as Data Set Z. Set Z included billions of discernable data bits. The actual total was never clearly determined.

After concluding his obligation on the secondary assignment that took him away from Set Z, that is, final proofing of the public release of the Ham-Opr-Shun message, the problem of understanding Set Z lingered. This morning's reawakening of it, along with the possibility offered by his number-set defined pixel idea rekindled his desire to unravel Set Z's enigma. A rapid series of what-if's froze him into a deep state of concentration. The first smidgeon of thought sent him back to how the data was collected and how it might have been contaminated and/or purged of vital qualifiers along the way. He recalled that all data that was sent to Earth by the Mission's Shepherd probe was actually collected by the various accompanying probes. The data was harvested by the Shepherd, filtered to remove extraneous static and interference, and otherwise scrubbed before it was subsequently transmitted to Earth.

From that, Aaron concluded that a primary clue for differentiation might have been inadvertently deleted. That is, grouping and spacing. Those would be the parts of the data string that contained no value; rather nanosecond pieces of time that served no purpose—except to delineate what preceded and what followed.

He decided to stay with this current track by making two assumptions about Set Z. First, that it was representative of pixels, hence intended to generate an image and not a textural message, and second, that the string of data represented colors or hues that had been assigned number values. The width and height of such a display were complete unknowns. Much configuration experimentation would be necessary, but he was not deterred by its obvious enormity.

Aaron still had access to the original data center where almost everything that had been in place during the Bishop's Mission remained as it was; almost museum-like. The actual data transmissions were preserved on secure external hard drives and were stored in what became known as the vault, which was actually a fairly small wall safe. His security clearance and previous involvement with the project guaranteed him the right to visit the lab and its treasure of extraterrestrial data transmissions whenever he wished to do so. That morning's revelation prompted today's visit.

He was a little surprised that he remembered the combination to the safe. He then quickly opened it and retrieved the drive that contained Data Set Z. He copied the entire set to his own portable hard drive that he had brought with him. Even with the updated equipment in the lab, the process took longer than he expected. But, eventually the transfer finished and he left for home where he would begin his efforts to translate bits of ones and zeros into what he hoped would become an image.

Making sense of what seemed like miles of data strings turned out to be a major undertaking. However, Aaron was convinced he was onto something, so he continued; almost continuously. Eventually and after an untold number of applied permutations of groupings and manipulations of segments of the large Set Z string, he realized and recognized the telltale hints of hues and tones that tended to coincide.

Hours, days, weeks and months vanished almost without his notice. But then, one early evening when the setting late summer sun glared at him through his home office window, a fraction of an image appeared on the computer screen. He immediately preserved the crucial key he had discovered by copying it to a thumb drive. It seemed as though he was right all along. The hues were indeed represented by distinct groupings of three digits—the numbers 000 to 999. The hard part had been determining the length that each successive line of what would become pixels should be. Once the stacking synchronicity was learned, the image, although at first crude and fuzzy, started to reveal itself. After further improvements and successive reductions in scale were applied, the screen gave up its secret.

Data Set Z was an exquisitely digitized image of deoxyribonucleic acid—DNA.

Aaron endeavored mightily to contain his delight and enthusiasm. He celebrated to no one's notice with muttered, "Yes! Yes!" and knockout fist punches of air. Realization quickly followed. What would he be able to do with a fabricated image of DNA that had come from a distant civilization that no one knew even existed? Even worse, he didn't know if there would be any way to ascertain exactly where it came from.

But, it was there on the screen in front of him. As soon as his euphoria subsided, he saved the image to several drives, and then printed a section of it on his high definition color printer. As the printer slogged through its work, he soon realized that the image and what he was able to print represented only a small slice of the complete DNA sequence. Nevertheless, it was significant and potentially historic. The excitement of it overwhelmed him. He realized he was onto something really momentous!

A good night's rest usually occurred almost by default for Aaron. Like most humans, after the time-to-retire routines required of hygiene and shedding clothes, he would slip between the sheets sandwiched upon the coziness of a Queen-sized mattress and lie on his back until all the day's mental unfinished loose ends were resolved. Rolling over on his side and half on his stomach would be the signal for his mind to cease

paying attention, and then to release him to the unconsciousness of pleasant sleep.

Alas, the DNA image he had discovered earlier that day loomed brightly in his mind. The excitement of that discovery alone was enough to suspend sleep. But, the question of what to do next demanded immediate attention. He eventually admitted that he possessed little knowledge and no expertise in the scientific discipline of genetics. Gnome and bioengineering were known to him, but his understanding of them was limited. Hence, in order to do anything at all with his discovery of what appeared to be a bit of alien DNA would require the help of someone who had that knowledge. With that thought, a familiar name popped into his head. That name was Maria Giordano. It was a name that, under other circumstance would evoke different memories, but the DNA image overshadowed. So, with its recollection and then temporary dismissal as tomorrow's business, he rolled and slept soundly.

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In the morning, he pulled up Maria's work number from the notes he had. For reasons of his own, whenever he happened to see any news that mentioned her as the noteworthy technologist that she had become, he would file whatever he could grab and place it in a PC folder named simply, "Maria." No one else had access to his PC so there was no need to be protective, or to explain. The information he had captured included where she worked, the address, and the main telephone number, which he immediately called.

"Good morning, Nanoscalor Biotechnonics Inc. How can I help you?" He was a little surprised that a real person actually answered, and that she sounded so pleasant.

"Good morning. I'm Aaron Michelson and I'd like to talk with Maria Giordano, if she's available." He used the most professional sounding voice and manner of speaking he could muster.

"Just a minute, please," the receptionist advised.

The long, curiously silent wait allowed a bit of unease to creep into his posturing. But, then Maria was on the line.

“Hello. This is Maria. How can I help you?”

“Hello, Maria. This is Aaron Michelson. I hope you don’t mind that I called, but I have a very special favor to ask of you and it’s kind of important. Do you have time to chat a bit about what I have in mind? As I said, it’s kind of important.”

“Aaron! How are you? It’s good to hear from you. Yes, I have some time to talk. What’s so important that prompted you to call?” She was as upbeat as ever and once again delivered every word with the enthusiasm that had always seized his attention.

“I’ve made what I believe to be a very significant discovery. I can’t really explain it over the phone, plus there’s a need for confidentiality. Is there any way we could talk in person? I’m sorry to ask, but there doesn’t seem to be any other way to go about this. I really need your help. Your area of expertise is exactly what I need. To go any further with what I’ve discovered requires knowledge that I don’t have, and coincidentally, knowledge that I know you do have. You would really be helping me out and doing me a huge favor. Unfortunately, what I’m hoping to do isn’t covered financially by any of my company’s funding from which I could pay you, but we’d probably be able to work something out. I know once I explain it to you, you’ll become intrigued. I don’t think you’ll be able to resist,” Aaron explained.

“Well, you’re certainly excited about it yourself. Sure, we can get together if for no other reason than for you to let me in on this mystery. There’s a really nice employee cafeteria here in this building. If you don’t mind coming here, that would work for me.” Maria was making it as easy for him as she could.

“Absolutely! That would be great. When’s the best time for you. Almost any time is okay for me.” Aaron’s excitement was mounting.

“How about tomorrow morning around eleven? I have some things to take care of first, but I should be free after ten-thirty or so.”

“That’ll be fine. Do I just come into the main entrance, then?” he asked.

“Yes. You’ll have to wait in the main lobby for me to retrieve you. The receptionist will call me when you arrive. The cafeteria isn’t far from there. There’s plenty of room so we can talk without being overheard if that’s a concern. I’ll see you then.”

“See you tomorrow at around eleven. And thanks for agreeing to see me.” Aaron’s joy was starting to bubble to the surface.

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CHAPTER TWO



Aaron was awake before the alarm sounded. He turned it off and then rose with the cheerful anticipation of seeing Maria again. Even though he had communicated with her from time to time, it had been quite a while since he last saw her. The excuse of meeting her to talk about the DNA discovery he'd made was legitimate, but he was pleased that it gave him that excuse. He admitted to himself that he missed her. The excitement of that thought rippled through him. But then, he returned to first things first and proceeded with the business at hand. That was, to prepare himself and what he would need to take with him for Maria to examine.

The meeting wasn't scheduled until 11:00 AM, so he had plenty of time to go over every possible detail in his head. He prepared a secure thumb drive that contained the entire string of Data Set Z, his devised unlocking formula for decoding it, and a graphic representation of what the DNA would look like if printed. He also planned to show her one of the full color printouts he'd made. Even though the print was only representative of one section of the DNA, its visual representation would be sure to get her attention and fully engage her curiosity. He knew from reading some of the articles she'd posted that what could loosely be called 'cutting and pasting' DNA elements was her area of recognized expertise.

After puttering around his office just to kill time, he gathered all his discovery evidence, and himself, and then headed to Nanoscalar Biotechnonics. The corporate headquarters is located only about twenty minutes' drive from his apartment building.

Nanoscalar Biotechnonics' business campus is part of a much larger expanse of low rolling hills where similar major corporations progressively fill the valleys and meadows with glistening modern structures. Each commanding vista was designed to please executives and employees alike, most of whom ignore the ambience as they impassively come and go. The long drive to the main entrance weaves gracefully over the terrain. Aaron imagined the road with its annoying

sweeps of devoured landscape and lazy curves would be a nuisance to clear of winter snow. The main entrance was fitted with canyons of glass. He parked obediently in a visitor's spot and walked the short distance to the lobby's revolving door.

Inside, he immediately spotted the receptionist, whom he offhandedly assumed was the same young woman who had answered the phone the day before. Because she was as pleasing to look at as he imagined she would be, he considered his assumption to be correct.

"Hi, I'm Aaron Michelson. I think I talked with you yesterday when I called. I'm here to see Maria Giordano. She's expecting me."

"Oh, yes. I remember," she replied with an obligatory smile. "Please have a seat. I'll call her. It will probably take a few minutes for her to get here." With that, any connection Aaron might have imagined, the receptionist deftly dispatched.

He took a seat and waited. The delight at the prospect of seeing Maria again returned. Just as quickly, she appeared and strolled across the lobby to him.

"Aaron! It's good to see you again," giving him a generous, uninhibited hug as she always had. Aaron struggled slightly to maintain his composure.

"It's good to see you, too. You look great. 'Lovely as ever. I've missed you.'" Every word carried the weight of a long ago friendship they both treasured.

"Come with me. We can find a quiet spot in the cafeteria. There will be people starting to gather for lunch, but as I said on the phone, there's plenty of room for separation and reasonable privacy," and with that, she led the way.

They did find a quiet corner apart from most everyone else. She suggested coffee or a soft drink. Aaron opted just for water. They settled in and then Maria asked, "So, what's this big discovery of yours?"

Aaron was prepared. It was as though he was about to give a presentation to colleagues at a seminar.

“You remember that I was involved with the Bishop’s Mission a couple of years ago. I was initially working with the space mission part of the team, but later, after we had actually received some data transmissions from unknown sources, I was part of the team that attempted to decipher those signals. For a long time, we concentrated on the possibility of the signals being messages. That is, language texts that we had hoped to decode. We only had success with one of the huge number received. That single message was all over the news. You must have seen or read about it.”

“Yes, I did. A fascinating discovery, but mysteries remain, as I recall,” Maria replied.

“Well, after the program essentially ended, I remained curious about one large chunk of data I had been working on. I later returned to trying to learn what that huge set of data contained. And then I had kind of a brainstorm; an epiphany, if you will. I wondered if it was an image that had been transmitted in pixels, and not a coded text message.”

“That’s a pretty ingenious leap!” Maria interjected enthusiastically.

“Yes, I guess it was because it turns out that I was right. That huge data set—known originally as Data Set Z—did turn out to be an image.” He paused for dramatic effect.

“And what is it an image of?” Maria asked impatiently.

“It’s an image of a very long segment of DNA!” As Aaron revealed his secret to Maria, he felt like the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He was no longer alone in holding that secret.

“That’s unbelievable! That’s remarkable! You mean you’ve actually captured and deciphered a big sample of alien DNA. That’s incredible!” Maria was now as excited as Aaron.

“Well, it’s not actually a real sample of alien DNA. It’s only an image of alien DNA. It’s very long. I didn’t print the whole thing. It’s too large. But, I did translate the whole data file and saved it to the largest capacity thumb drive available. I have it in my bag.” He now waited for Maria to realize why he wanted to tell her about his discovery, and what the next step in this momentous achievement should be.

“If it’s only an image and not an actual sample, there’s not much you can do with it. It would be interesting to study, but to grow lab samples or to do anything else with it wouldn’t provide for any kind of biological analysis. I really don’t know if I can do anything with it other than study it for comparisons with our earthling DNA. It’s fascinating, but I really don’t think I can help you.” Maria’s voice revealed her disappointment in having nothing to offer Aaron.

“I gave this problem a lot of thought. I have an idea for a way you might be able to make use of this image as a transformed biological sample.”

“And, what is that?” Maria asked.

“What if you were able to superimpose or overlay the pattern of the alien DNA on a biological sample of human DNA?” This is where Aaron wanted to go all along.

“That’s interesting,” Maria replied. “Let me think about that. Let me do some research first. Give me a day or two to see what I can find or come up with.” Maria was now feeling herself get involved.

“I’d prefer it if the existing human DNA that you might use as the biological base for exploring the alien DNA image be my DNA. Do you have test or sampling kits available here? I could give you my DNA right now, before I leave. That way, you’d have it handy if you decide to investigate it. And, I’m sure you realize that this has to remain strictly confidential between the two of us and no one else. Sorry to have to say that, but I’m sure you understand all the ramifications. Do you agree?”

“Yes, of course. This is seriously epic. There are those who would want to seize it and take it over and smother it for their own purposes, or, to suppress it altogether. Yes, I agree. It will be known only to the two of

us. This is really exciting! Wait here while I get a DNA sampler for you. It only requires a swabbing of the inside of your mouth. You can probably do that right here. I doubt anyone will pay attention to what you're doing."

"Will there be a problem with you working on this in the company's lab, and on company time," Aaron asked.

"Well, not really. I have the advantage of considering the lab my domain and very few even know what I might be concentrating on at any given time. I'm pretty sure I can find a way to do some experimenting without the risk of being shadowed by people who might be curious. Don't worry. If there's a way to translate an image to a biological sample for study, I think I can do that without calling unnecessary attention to it. But, first I have to find a way to do that," Maria explained enthusiastically.

She left the cafeteria to retrieve the swab kit and then returned with it only a few minutes later. Aaron gathered his sample without creating much of a fuss. No one else in the room seemed aware. Maria secured the sample, inserted it in its accompanying vial, and slipped it into her lab coat pocket.

"I'm really glad I called you and that you agreed to see me. You're the best. I'll give you the thumb drive that contains the data and image. I have copies for myself, but you should keep these in a secure place; perhaps at home instead of here at work." He was becoming a little more comfortable with Maria's involvement.

"I agree. Give me a couple of days and then call me," Maria suggested.

"Okay. 'Will do. Thanks again for seeing me. It was really good to see you and chat with you again," Aaron was overjoyed at the apparent success of his recruitment.

Maria escorted him back to the lobby where she offered another generous hug before they parted. Aaron wondered as he walked to his car if the receptionist had any inquisitive thoughts about his and Maria's relationship. But then, the joy of seeing and embracing Maria again pushed the receptionist completely out of the picture.

William Collins

He navigated the serpentine driveway to the main road with ease. It was as though there were no turns to negotiate at all. The satisfaction he felt was not just the possibility of having Maria involved in helping him to understand what the alien DNA might reveal, the deeper excitement was generated by the sight of her, and her hugs. Oh, how he had missed those hugs!

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