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HOME WITH A NO-RETURN POLICY



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There was a humming noise with frequent intervals of fluttering and whoosh. It sounded like a bird flapping its wings inside a vacuum cleaner. Then, all of a sudden, it stopped. It seemed the bird had finished its flying lesson in a restricted space. Three minutes passed in silence. Then, suddenly, a knocking sound came out of the airlock.

Rewind back four months. It is the year 2128 and the mission to Mars is ready for launch.

You might be wondering how humanity got to this point? Let us rewind a further eighty years to 2048. A World Parliament had been established in the previous decade, and the space program had received more attention ever since national armies had been dissolved and peace had become the norm. Humanity planned investments in space colonization. The first step to make Earth-borns known in the wider universe was a short-lived colonization program on the dark side of the Moon. The project was shut down because humans had already set sights on a bigger goal, Mars.

During this time science made enormous leaps forward. It was even possible to spend holidays on one of the several space stations orbiting Earth. Despite scientific and technological progress, the human mind could not keep up with the mental effort to understand and grasp change. Instead of individuals being scared of travelling on airplanes, they were generously granted the option of being afraid of spacecrafts as well. The number of phobias and related incidents rose to new heights. If the world had gained in abolishing wars, humanity was still the same with irrational limitations. The space age had

arrived, finally not only in fiction, and it scared the hell out of people.

Beyond Earthly Matters With An Interlude

In the aftermath of the failed Moon colonization, the representatives of the World Parliament sent a monitoring mission to the recently constructed outpost on Mars. The objective was to inspect the possibility of turning the outpost into a self-sustainable colony.

Engineer Arvo Lampinen was among those selected for the mission aboard the spacecraft *Liberté*. Before the crew set off, Arvo wondered whether he would eventually move to an outpost. He would miss Nordic pine trees and the Baltic Sea with its dreamy silence.

Arvo thought that it would not be cheap to live on Mars, the living expenses were enormous. He knew that regional authorities had organized popular lotteries among those able to afford a relocation to Mars.

For Arvo, there was nothing wrong with the planet Earth. It had not become uninhabitable and masses of humans were not forced to leave Earth and live on space stations, but he guessed people had different reasons.

The Martian outpost was a huge sealed dome located in the upland region of Terra Sirenum, in the southern hemisphere of the planet. Frequent cargo flights between Earth and Mars ensured a steady flow of supplies before Mars would become self-reliant. If everything went as planned, in the coming years, it would host over two thousand inhabitants.

Anxiety lurked in Arvo's mind as he was about to arrive in an unknown territory. The Mars outpost seemed like a new continent in space. Two days before arrival on Mars, Arvo called his husband Anders over the spacecraft radio.

"I had a dream I was not human", Arvo whispered over the microphone to Anders. He continued: "I was only under the

impression of being a human. Instead, a researcher-looking gentleman confided in me that I was the result of robotic research, a unique product of science. The whole baggage of being human vanished and I felt relieved.”

Anders chuckled lightly. Arvo could not see but he imagined that Anders smiled almost unnoticeably. He wished Anders was there with him.

“I felt I was no longer responsible for my actions, and the lightness of being descended upon me. I realized that only humans can be held accountable. As a robot, one is a product of humanity, and hence only a tool. When I woke up I felt disappointed. I almost wished I was a robot so that I could escape the burden of responsibility.” Anders was silent but Arvo could sense his hesitation.

Not long after the call, the landing platform of the outpost had become visible to the naked eye. Arvo felt excited about the mystique of what awaited yet unrevealed, like he was about to step on no-man's-land. The moment passed but the feeling lingered in Arvo's mind.

He felt tired after the long journey, but the assignment ahead kept him alert. It was like the excitement of childhood when something is about to happen, like the suspense before a school play where one has a part to play.

The view on Mars seemed to manifest dark red colors. The redness put a hint of Earthiness on the planet. It had a touch of home in it. As they landed, the redness became darker and blended into a soft brown.

The Thin Line between Fantasy and Nightmare

The inspection work started without delay once the crew had landed. During the second week of their stay, the future colony resembled an anthill, bustling with synchronized movement. Construction was nearly finished and their temporary residence was close to being a new place for humanity to live in. Arvo

felt proud of their accomplishment, but he could not wait to return to Earth.

A few weeks later when their work was done, there was a feeling of triumph in the crew. The completed outpost proved to be a technical masterpiece, like nothing witnessed before in the history of space exploration. Humanity had made tremendous progress over the course of the last century, they had launched their first spacecrafts into space and now they were ready to colonize another planet. The final frontier had been crossed.

Arvo and his colleagues had gathered in the dining hall to watch a news broadcast from Earth. Apparently, the World Parliament had adopted a bill on tax deduction for doctors working on space stations. The news anchor announced that employees of the intercontinental shuttle service had gone on strike. After the headlines, a report followed on the global film festival organized in Tokyo. Four million people had gathered on the streets of the great megalopolis.

Arvo discussed with his fellow engineers why certain persons would choose to live on the outpost. For all human history, Earth had been the only place to call home. Arvo was usually quiet, but this time he wanted to share his thoughts.

“I feel that the human heart cannot cope with too many homes with emotional attachment. There is a limit for how many emotional homes people can collect. At first, they seem worth fighting for, but soon they turn grey and distant. In the end, one is left with nothing but unrequited emotions of an imaginary place that does not exist.”

He stopped and thought to himself: “One seeks after this place of imaginary wisdoms, never finding it - a common ailment among travellers.”

After the cultural report, sports should have followed, but the screen was black and silent. Arvo did not care much for sports, but he wondered what was wrong. Nobody said anything, it was as if the clocks had stopped ticking and

everything stood still. After a while, somebody moved and broke the collective paralysis.

The engineers scurried over to the corner of the room around the satellite connection controls. The satellites were the only means of communication with the space station on Earth. A shy communications officer called Eric Neurman sat at the monitor and shouted: "Let me try to fix this in peace and quiet!" He immediately got everyone's attention.

Someone shouted that the problem with the signal could be a malfunction with the outpost receiver antenna. A team was sent to check if this was indeed the case. After they got back, they reported that the antenna had been damaged by a small meteorite. The repairs were already underway. Arvo looked at the flickering stars visible through the outpost dome. Their presence made the Universe look endless. It was unusual to be without a connection with Earth for such a long time. All they could do was wait.

After the repairs were finished, the search for a working frequency began, but there was nothing. According to all reason, the contact should have been established with the means available. Somebody suggested to check the last recorded messages from Earth on all channels. New information might be available since the connection had been gone for some time. Seconds went by, turning into minutes. After several minutes, a cry was heard from the control room. Somebody had made a discovery, but it did not sound cheery, rather helpless and pessimistic.

The latest data on the recordings indicated that there had been a major catastrophe on Earth, wiping out all life. The disruption seemed to have originated in the Yellowstone National Park. A massive volcanic explosion had erupted from under the surface.

Arvo was standing in silence in the dining hall. He found it difficult to comprehend that billions of individuals would suddenly cease to exist. For him it was inconceivable that there

was no longer a place to return to. Everything had changed as fast as a lightning.

The Aftershock

The Universe had served humanity a cruel twist. Within a blink of an eye, the Martian outpost had become a shelter for the last remnants of humanity.

Arvo experienced a new level of homelessness he could never have imagined. Returning to Earth, the one thing he had dreamed of for all this time, had turned into a nightmare. He thought how it would feel to be on Earth right now, in the dust and chaos. A planet of Death. He could not think about Anders, the loss was too devastating.

The trials to find any signal from Earth continued. The engineers tried to find a location on Earth where somebody might still be alive. They did not know if anyone could have survived but they had to keep trying.

Arvo sat on his bed and he felt an emptiness of belonging. A surge of utter sadness and melancholy filled his heart and he tried to fight back tears. After he calmed down, he came to the realization that the people on the outpost might be everything that is left from Earth. They had only each other to rely on and to make sure humanity would survive.

Later in the evening, Arvo joined the oversight team in the control room. Time passed incredibly fast and the beeping sounds from the machines filled the room with an even rhythm.

After two days of constant search for frequencies, there was a breakthrough. A signal from Earth was received. Russian engineers working at a training station for cosmonauts close to the Ural Mountains responded to their contact.

The signal was weak, so it was nearly impossible to decipher how the Russians had survived. They reported that the eruption at Yellowstone had destroyed most parts of the North American continent and had caused tsunamis and earthquakes

at a global scale. According to the Russians, the eruption had emitted massive ash clouds that had covered Earth's atmosphere causing a sudden drop in global temperature.

The signal with the Russians survived two days, then it died.

Slowly the reality started to sink in for the survivors on Mars. Some isolated themselves from others or became obsessed with trying to re-establish the signal. Arvo did not want to acknowledge that human existence was hanging by a thread. "What a nightmare, how does it end?", he thought. It was both sad and disturbing that he could easily count the number of human beings left in the Universe and he knew almost all of them.

"What should I do?", Arvo considered. He feared that some of his fellow survivors might become suicidal or lose their minds, tear their spacesuit open, cut their wrists or fall into apathy. Or they might ask someone to suffocate them with a pillow when they were asleep. What if they started to turn against each other? Arvo wanted to scream until his lungs gave out. What was the purpose of living at all if living was like this?

Arvo could not grasp how something so green and blue as Earth could suddenly turn into shades of grey and black. He imagined ash clouds covering the once beautiful planet in grey, mixed with hues of red – the color of blood.

Arvo had been an optimist at heart. Now that optimism had died with Earth. Just when humanity had been finally on the path towards finding common understanding and getting along, everything changed. All that slow progress now seemed in vain.

The atmosphere on the outpost was tense. Some had not slept for days and everybody looked stressed, sad or plain apathetic. There had not been laughter for days but later during dinner a few people dared to make jokes trying to ease the pressure.

“Now would be a perfect timing for some results on the Fermi Paradox”, somebody quipped. “Though, all we need is for someone to come and rescue us. It could even be aliens, I wouldn’t mind.” “The aliens don’t even have to be green”, somebody else retorted and everyone laughed. “Yeah, blue would be fine, too, right?” another voice echoed.

Arvo laughed with the others but could not help thinking that part of him was lost. Anders could never be replaced with anyone green or blue. He was gone forever.

The Prodigal Returns

Despite continuous trials to find other signals from Earth or the orbiting space stations, none were located. It seemed the Martian outpost had become both a safe haven and a museum for humanity. In the meantime, plans for survival were made since food and water supplies were limited. One team would remain on the outpost and another was to take off in the *Liberté* to search for any spacecrafts in the orbit of Mars.

Arvo pondered whether he should stay or go. In the end he signed up for the exploration team. After two weeks of scouring the orbit around Mars, the team returned for resupply to the outpost. A new search mission begun towards the outer orbit.

With each day passing, Arvo felt more hopeless. With the diminishing scope of human existence, the expanse of the Universe seemed to grow. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The stars glimmered but space remained silent. Arvo thought that humans were insignificant in their current state. Maybe good fortune had become a concept of the past.

On the fifteenth day after resupply, a small flickering of light emanated from the distance. Three days later the source of light had grown in size, it was approaching *Liberté*.

It took two more days for a more clear visual on the vessel the light turned out to be. The spacecraft looked like nothing

Welcome to the year 2128! A space mission
is ready to launch for a settlement on Mars.
Get ready and buckle up!



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