

Doug Kessler of Mars

Doug Kessler looked around his cabin.

He lay in bed, covers up to his chin. His pillows were soft and, try as he might, he could not get them to raise his head more than four inches, no matter how he fluffed them.

There wasn't much to see: to his right, a small end table with his clock, and his phone resting on the clock; ahead, the funky comforter puffing up over his straight form, and beyond that, his open, messy closet and the closed door to the hall. And to his left, a lamp, a chair buried in laundry, and the window looking across a hundred miles of cold, rusty Mars.

He was late again. He didn't want to get up. He was trying to remember the feeling of his body weighing a deep imprint against the springs of his mattress, with the pleasant crush of a heavy, comfy comforter across his chest, but the Martian gravity made that impossible and he was disappointed at how the memory was fading.

He turned on his side, away from the view and the bright orange morning, feeling some grit against his elbow as he turned; the damned dust got into everything. He'd been told it wasn't as sharp as moondust, which never had an atmosphere or water to wear down the edges, but it was bad enough; he remembered the time he'd slid off a path hiking in Colorado, and this was grittier.

He got up.

He fixed himself a bowl. The pot took the edge off. He knew he didn't need it, but there wasn't much he did need up here. The colonists had enough to eat, nice quarters, a good view, and Doug had made some friends, all of whom had been blessed with the same idea to sneak some seeds up here. When they commandeered a small patch of the garden, the other colonists were cool about it.

It was a one-way trip to get here, and they all tolerated each other's individualism.

He felt a small vibration through his feet and looked out the window. There was a ship landing. It wasn't the right date for the quarterly drone bringing supplies; also, it was the wrong shape. He'd never seen one of these: blue and white, sleek, not built for cargo, windows on the front and sides...so...passengers. It wasn't clear at this angle and distance, but Doug thought he saw the logo for NASA.

Colonel Irene Rudzinski walked into the mess hall. She smiled warmly, gazing around at everyone with an equal distribution of attention, even when she wanted to linger. She had a knack for faking eye contact. She'd kept the space suit on, aware it looked more official and cooler than the polo shirt and baggy cargo pants underneath.

Sun Waldo, manager of the colony, stepped forward. "My fellow Martians." He loved to address his fellow colonists as Martians; it was true, and lent both coziness and a sense of history. It was rare to have all forty of them crowded into the mess hall, but it was their largest community space without people stepping on the farm plants. There used to be sixty; after two years he was grateful they were still below the expected mortality rate. In six years there would be at least two-hundred-and-forty colonists, if the arrivals kept on schedule. This Colonel Rudzinski was not part of the schedule.

“This is a big day for us,” he continued. “We are the first humans to colonize another planet. When we arrived two years ago, after years and years of preparation, we knew it was a one-way journey. We knew we could never go home. We knew we could never survive the radiation of a return trip, even if the rockets could carry enough fuel and resources to maintain us on the long months back.” Doug, in the back, always looked away when Waldo used that line, to hide the way he rolled his eyes. “We also knew others would follow. We knew that what we were doing was a major step for humanity. It was – it is– the first step to the stars. We knew there was no going back.”

Waldo paused dramatically, and the Martians waited patiently for him to get to his point. It usually involved spoiled supplies and temporary food rationing. Eyes drifted to the stranger.

“At this point I will turn it over Colonel Irene Rudzinski of NASA.”

The normal hecklers stayed quiet.

Rudzinski looked around the room. She liked the way the colony manager accidentally built up suspense. Any advantage helped her.

“Hi, everyone,” she said with a big smile. The second tooth on the top right was slightly misaligned; Doug noticed how attractive he found her.

She continued, “Mr. Waldo was asked by NASA to keep our arrival a secret. Even the ‘Earthians’ back on earth haven’t heard about it yet. We wanted a chance to speak to you before there were a lot of rumors and misinformation going around. And honestly we weren’t sure we were going to make it – traffic around Phobos can be a bear in the morning, am I right?” Her first officer had assured her that joke would be a good icebreaker; now she understood why he stayed behind in the ship. She blamed her delivery and moved on.

“This is awkward. No easy way to say this.... When you came to Mars, the trip took nine months, ten for some of you. There were hardships when you arrived. You understood, from the beginning, that you could never go home, never see your families again. Your story is a famous landmark in the history of the human race. And your dedication to spending the rest of your lives here is an inspiration and a source of awe to every living person on earth.”

She looked into their confused and anxious faces and could put it off no longer.

“A little awkward...it turns out you *can* go back. We’ve invented a new engine that can make the trip in four days instead of nine months. That includes loading luggage and the airport security check.” There was the expected quiet pause and rising murmur. Before it became too loud, she finished up. “Anybody want a ride home?” Then it got loud.

Doug went to his workstation in the lab building. His duties included six hours monitoring experiments, which he realized three days after landing he could do in twenty minutes; and a few hours a week tending the community farm, which he didn’t mind because he liked to check on his pot plants. He spent a quiet morning, avoiding the conversations about the changing plans for the colony, and headed back to the mess to pick up a sandwich and some chocolate pudding to eat in his cabin.

Colonel Rudzinski was there, sitting with a few of his fellow colonists: the perky Ayla, who fancied herself an explorer; and two men, William and Bo, who, even after two years, Doug could still not tell apart. He stiffened as he saw Rudzinski get up and walk over to him. She had removed the bulky space suit. Her polo shirt was littered with stiff little mission patches that looked uncomfortable. Her inexperience with Martian gravity was a joy; in walking to Doug she moved too quickly and her inertia carried her into his arms, sending them both into the salad bar,

Walt Maguire

thumping loudly off the sneeze guard. He noted she smelled of sweat but not the mix of farm-dome basil and that metallic recycled odor the rest of them had picked up from the recirculation and laundry systems. Her clean hair was an aphrodisiac he made a mental note to resist at some point. Doug felt her look of mortification somehow humanized her for him.

“I understand you’re kind of an opinion leader around here,” she said, gently rubbing her forehead. He liked the way her dark blonde hair draped over the growing lump above her eyebrow.

“Who told you that?” he asked.

“Ayla,” said Rudzinski.

One of Ayla’s little jokes, Doug thought; Ayla was referring to Doug’s unofficial role as pot distributor.

“I think we all listen to each other here,” he said. He assumed that sounded more in the official line.

They sat down with some coffee. Rudzinski had brought a hundred pounds of the real stuff and the colonists had been lining up all morning.

“I know it’s a shock,” she said. “One minute people think they’ll never see their friends and families again, the next minute—”

She let that hang in the air.

“This isn’t Gilligan’s Island,” he responded. He let *that* hang in the air.

“It must be a little like the Pilgrims suffering the rough voyage on the Mayflower, then landing at Plymouth Rock to find a jetliner had made the round trip from Heathrow to Logan Airport over a hundred times since they left.”

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They sat in silence. He was taking in the pungent coffee aroma and whatever hair product she had; it occurred to him part of his interest in marijuana was the non-mechanical smell of it inside the base.

“Different from where you came from,” she smiled. “Brooklyn?”

He looked a little confused, then smiled. “No, not Brooklyn. I was in Brooklyn when I applied for the program. Before that I was in Portland.”

“Which one?”

“Both. Wanted to see the difference. Before that Toronto, a summer waiting tables in Jamestown outside Boulder, before that Lansing, before that Columbus.”

She sipped her coffee.

“Ohio,” he added.

“Yes.”

For a moment, silence. She watched him. He kept his eyes on his cup. She noticed he hadn't touched his coffee. He finally looked up, asked her a question with little curiosity, no anger.

“Are you here to take us all back home – back to earth?”

She noted his self-correction.

“Only if you want to leave here,” she said. “Some people gave up families to be here.”

He smirked at that. “On the other hand, might be a little awkward to come back from the dead. “

“You're not dead up here.”

“Exactly,” he said. “We have a life up here. We have our work, we have a nice place to live, and all we're asked in exchange is to stay here forever.”

Rudzinski had singled this guy out in her mission preparation. She knew many of the colonists were oddballs, loners chosen for the hermitic lifestyle required. She'd met people like this at the Antarctic Station and again training in New Mexico.

"The new shops will change that," she said quietly. "You have a small community here. It was always going to be a small community; for every twelve new people who arrive there's an average of one death. But with the new shops, you'll have tourists, business travelers."

"On their way somewhere else."

"Mars will eventually be bypassed. This isn't general knowledge, but Mars has switched from being the furthest frontier to a local stop. Shawler's EM Drive is the next step. Within ten years we'll be launching our first interstellar ship. This place will become the equivalent of Colonial Williamsburg in Space." *More qualified people will replace you*, she thought to herself.

Doug smiled and shrugged. "Good," he said. "As long as the original deal still goes and I get to stay, rent-free, all fine with me." *I have nothing to go back to*, he thought to himself. But she knew what he was thinking.

Doug signed out one of the suits. He had not been outside the dome in eight months, when he'd walked once around the outside of the colony because he was stir crazy. He picked a size M but he unhappily noted how much more snug it was around his middle than when he'd last worn it. But an L was too long in the arms and the gloves kept slipping off his hands, hanging like kiddie mittens. The helmet felt snug too. His head was getting fatter. He decided it was the low gravity reshaping him, not space munchies. The helmet smelled of Cheetos and baby shampoo and traces of snot. Either Ayla or Sun.

He fought down his usual panic as the hatch opened and he was inside the sparse atmosphere. He always held his breath and stiffened until he was certain he'd attached the helmet correctly and everything was safe, or, at least, "safe". He stepped out onto the rocks. He could hear the radio chatter, all normal news, sports, stocks, colonial dinner plans. (Never weather, except when they were expecting something to fall from space.)

He walked over to the weather station, not wanting to seem too obvious about his true path. The weight of the spacesuit felt good, giving him a reminder of earth gravity. He also remembered the inner cushions on the helmet were adjustable; Ayla must have inflated them to be snug on her tiny head. This meant his head had not grown. Or that he had not grown, or that he had not gotten any better at technology.

He finished pretending to poke at the weather instruments and turned to the rocket. He walked to it quickly, and then circled it. It wasn't fair to call it a rocket; up close he could see it had no thruster exhaust; *rocket* was too old-fashioned. He'd read about these things, a sealed chamber that creates an ion field from excited particles. Fancy. He tried to work out if they had deliberately made it look like something out of a Cold War B movie. He touched one of the tripod fins. They wouldn't need these ailerons for the Martian atmosphere, but it suggested it could land smoothly on earth, no need to stop at the orbital platform.

He looked up at the shiny white and steel bullet of a hull, with its blue racing stripes. The NASA logo was echoed in the shape of the windows on either side of it. It was only then that he realized there was a man in one of the windows, looking back.

He gestured for Doug to come in.

"I'm good," said Doug automatically, not sure the ship was picking up his channel. He tapped his wrist and pointed to the colony dome, to get his point across. He turned and trotted

back. Halfway back he'd built up enough inertia to leave the ground for twelve feet. This freaked him out and once he'd recovered his footing he walked very slowly the rest of the way.

Re-entering the airlock he had a full mind, beyond dreading the moment he took his helmet off and discovered if the airlock was working. He'd been thinking about the rocket fins. Why even send a ship to Mars that's designed to land on earth? *For the trip back, idiot*, he reproached himself.

Well, in the end who cares, he thought. *It's their money*. He popped the helmet off and plunged into the air. It tasted of the old familiar stale bread and disinfectant.

Daria Folkestone was happy to sit with Colonel Rudzinski. "We're the first. We truly are the Martians now," she explained to the outsider.

"I'm giving you a chance to come back, tell your story, and see your family."

Daria was a very optimistic person, generally, but this was a humiliating blow to her sense of history. "It knocks the wind out of the Martians here."

"Nevertheless," said Rudzinski, "the ships are coming. Choosing to not see your family won't change that. You can come back. Maybe..." this was stretching into a lie – "Maybe they could come back with you."

Daria looked up with astonishment, hope, fear. Rudzinski could tell she had a passenger. The colonel was relieved she didn't have to resort to bringing up Daria's medical records.

Doug roamed the base, quietly walking corridors he knew and all the ones he had not seen since the first month. There were not many choices. He hadn't spoken to anyone all day. He'd *seen* people; he *could* have; everyone was unsettled by the new arrival and had tightened into

brittle knots of conversation, no more than three to a hitch and suddenly it was clear who the real friends were. It was easy to be alone, but slightly disappointing. Plus, they had all been drinking seven or eight cups of dark-brewed Kenya AA, which was poor timing. He regretted not going into the ship when the man offered. Maybe the window man thought he was someone else. That would have been awkward. Maybe tomorrow. How long were they staying? He pattered into the mess hall around eight-thirty. Empty. He hadn't had any of the fresh coffee, and there was a little left. He couldn't bring himself to drink it, telling himself it would be a betrayal of his principles, knowing he was just sulking. He made some tea; also from Earth, but part of the regular cargo. He speculated as to Rudzinski's whereabouts. There were some extra cabins. Or maybe she was back on her ship.

Rudzinski sat across the table from Sun Waldo and marveled that, for all the advances Mankind had made, for all the advanced spacecraft and interplanetary communications and cures for cancer and baldness and ebola, Mankind still relied so heartily on cheap round plastic patio tables that wobbled on any shape of floor. Colony Manager Waldo was slowly making his way through a complete history of the colony and its historical antecedents in the Jamestown Settlement, his pitch rising higher and higher as if the low Martian gravity were making the words float away. The buckets of coffee he had consumed had not accelerated his delivery, but did seem to have given him the stamina to keep droning until the oxygen recycling wore out. She thought about the nine-month trip to Mars and marveled at yet another hardship these first colonists endured, as he must have chatted away every second of the weightless, legless drift through the black pinhole disorientation of space.

“The first colonies in North America, of course, were company outposts,” he was saying. She was certain he’d made the same point an hour earlier; it felt like at least an hour. “The Hudson Bay Company, of course. The Virginia Company in Jamestown. Everyone remembers the pilgrims on Plymouth Rock and the Quakers in Pennsylvania, but most of the colonists were there for commerce, not piety. Furs. Timber. Tobacco, eventually. And that’s what we are here—a company town. We’re conducting experiments every day, every second, just by being alive.”

She tried to give him a look that conveyed both that she understood and not that she couldn’t believe he was proud to be a guinea pig.

“I’m a company man,” he said. “The return on investment right now is from research. The ROI next year will be from tourism and outfitting deep space exploration. Plus the research will continue here. Could become a college town someday.... It’s all good. Onwards and upwards.”

“So you don’t want to go back?” she asked.

He leaned back. “Why should I? My job is here. The commute from West Milford, New Jersey, would be terrible.” He looked serious.

“No, but what I mean is—“

He interrupted her with a raised palm. “When it’s time to retire, sure, Orlando or Toronto. Some place with fresh air and plenty of civilization.”

She wanted to know how he picked those two cities, but she decided to keep her mouth shut and make the universal gesture for going to the bathroom. He didn’t understand and continued on his history of anti-radiation insulation upgrades so she was forced to interrupt him and explain. And thus it was she escaped into the hall.

She wasn't sure where she was going; Manager Waldo had assigned her the guest room next to his quarters, but the base was not large, nor complicated to navigate.

In a few short sharp turns to the left she arrived in the farm dome. The night sky was clear beyond a remarkably large glass ceiling curving above her. She'd seen pictures, flown over it this morning, but hadn't realized how big and how glassy it was. It could not possibly be safe, she reasoned.

A familiar smell and a small motion in the bushes informed her she was not alone. Doug dropped his joint and moved out of the shadows. She recognized him after her eyes adjusted to the star light. He drew her attention to a bench. They sat.

"That's Jupiter," he said, assuming she knew where to look. "And that's Deneb, in Cygnus, and that's Erakis." She was not experienced seeing the sky from this horizon and was not sure if he was making this up, but the names were real and he must have had some qualifications to get to Mars.

"It's nice in here," she said quietly.

"Radiation shields rotate over," he explained. "About half the day it's open like this. I've never been sure if they were installed correctly. I usually have the place to myself this time of night."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the ice-clean stars. The only sound was the click and snore of the ventilation system every few minutes. The smell of basil and tomatoes and marijuana was soothing yet not as incongruous as it might seem in daylight. All the mood needed was a dog bark in the distance. They were about the same age. She caught herself imagining how nice Kessler might be if he cleaned up. That's when she decided to go. If she was quiet she might be able to slip past Waldo and get into her cabin without further conversation.

She smiled at Kessler. “Well. Big day tomorrow.”

They stood.

He said nothing but gestured for her to precede him to the door. As they separated in the hallway, he said, “You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. Probably after lunch.”

“I expected NASA to be more precise than ‘after lunch.’”

She laughed a little.

“Many passengers?” he asked.

“A lot. Some might stay until the next flight, now that they know there’s a way back. But, yes, a lot of your friends are coming along tomorrow.”

He said nothing. The hall was bright as they stepped into it. She couldn’t read his face.

“Want a ride?” she asked. She smiled in a friendly way.

He took a moment. “To Earth?”

She did not see him the next morning.

He was not at breakfast, or the group meeting, or the farewell lunch. Another third would leave on the next trip, once their experiments or other duties were wrapped up. Doug Kessler’s name was not on any of the lists. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Shortly after they left the atmosphere, once the passengers were free to move about the cabin, Captain Rudzinski found Daria looking back at Mars fading away on the monitor screen. “We’ll be home in four days?” she asked, astonished and anxious.

“Four days,” said Rudzinski. She leaned in closer, so no one else would hear. “The ambulance will be waiting. Your family will meet you at the hospital. The cancer treatment team will be ready to start almost immediately, once they examine you in person. It should all be good.”

Daria hugged her. “I wonder how long Sun Waldo will stay,” she said, separating. “I think he considers this a promotion.”

Rudzinski smiled at that. “Do you think Doug Kessler will stay?” she asked.

Daria looked back at the diminished planet onscreen. She looked Rudzinski in the eyes, not sure she would be understood. “It suits some people.” Daria floated away to look out the real window in the next cabin.

Rudzinski looked at her passengers. They were pilgrims, and as ill-equipped as any past ones for the tasks they had faced. She was relieved the colony was being dismantled. Mars would be an old-fashioned trading post outfitting the new fleet of star ships. It still astounded her it was all happening so quickly now. She felt bad for Doug Kessler. Lost in the stars. Lost in his homeland. The new management would have to honor their agreement to let him stay, but they had no use for someone like him and he’d be sent on his way at the first opportunity. She couldn’t imagine him doing well back on earth. Where would he go?

As Doug Kessler had watched the modern, graceful chrome arrow propel itself off the orange powder of Mars, he thought about his exchange with Irene the night before. He was a little sad she had misunderstood his question. He hoped she figured it out before she returned.

“Want a ride?”

“To Earth?”

Walt Maguire

He knew they were coming, the sleek silent ships with their aerodynamic tails designed to negotiate atmospheres thicker than the one on Mars. He knew he wasn't going back to Earth.

After the ship was out of sight, he turned his head and silently identified half a dozen stars visible across the opposite horizon.

He didn't want a ride to Earth.

Something would come along.

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