

FAILSAFE

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Major Andrew Deeth had never been this far from Earth before. None of them had. They had spent months in space, but it was only in orbit. This was the real deal. They were going to Mars. No one had been to Mars in almost eighty years. They would be the first and probably the last.

Things had been steadily deteriorating between Earth and the Martian Colonies for the last ten years. They wanted nothing to do with Earth. The government thought they had stopped everyone from leaving, but not even they were certain. Why anyone would want to live on a cold, semi-frozen planet was beyond him. Earth might not be perfect, but at least you could step outside without an oxygen tank. Relations between the two planets had been going downhill for some time. Three months ago, the UN Space Forces had sent three large ships to the red planet full of troops and equipment. They were under orders to round everyone up and bring them back to Earth. Something happened to the three ships. They were destroyed before they ever set down on the planet. That was the final straw. There would be no more negotiating or arguing. The Earth governments decided to put an end to all of this nonsense once and for all.

The colonists were going to be destroyed.

The ship had no fancy name. It was just UN-121. Specifically built for this mission. It had a special cargo bay that housed five-ten megaton nuclear warheads. Each of the Martian colonies were to be destroyed. They all had their own unique names like *New London*, *New Moscow*, *New Africa*.....and his personal favorite, *Jamestown*.

Within a few days, each of them would be reduced to rubble. The crew had been specifically chosen for the mission. He and Captain Barnholz had volunteered, the other one, Major Rivera had been ordered to participate. They had given their ship a different name, one that was sure to raise heads if it were ever discovered. They called UN-121 by its nickname, *The Enola Gay*.

They were promised a promotion to full Colonel. That meant a huge pay raise as well as their own lavish compounds and villas. Deeth's wife was already ordering new furniture. Their identities had been kept a secret. Their mission was above top secret. Only a handful of people knew of their real mission. The nukes had to be smuggled aboard. It had to look like an accident. A story was being floated back on Earth about an asteroid strike on the red planet that could be devastating. Most in power suspected the story was bullshit, but no one dared speak out. Speaking out in the year 2631 was simply not tolerated. It's what almost destroyed their planet centuries earlier. Everyone on the planet posting their thoughts on the internet. Every bottom-feeder idiot was given a platform. Earth barely survived, but out of the ashes rose a new culture. A new more progressive culture, where dissent was not tolerated. Everyone was given an equal footing now, no more billionaires or trillionaires dictating life for the rest of Earth's inhabitants. The rich and powerful had been cut down to size.

That is why the colonists posed such a threat. The Earth government could not stop them from broadcasting back to Earth. Every night Martian TV was exposing the government's dirty secrets and death camps. Earth had become such an overpopulated mess that war and destruction were inevitable. Decisions had to be made, difficult ones, but necessary. The population had to be reduced *and quickly* if our species was to survive. The global population was now at 472 million. Everyone was much happier....well for the ones that survived anyway.

The colonists had to be destroyed. They simply would not listen to reason. They were repeatedly asked to stop interfering with life on Earth, but they just wouldn't listen. None of them had ever been to Earth. Their parents and grandparents were born on Mars. They were born on Mars. No one had been able to figure out how the colonists had managed to destroy the ships. They had not been able to transmit much, just that something massive was speeding towards them. Then, nothing. It had stunned the UN. The mission had been a secret. No one was supposed to know about it. There had been several inquisitions and some executions, but nothing solid had ever been produced. No one knew who tipped them off, or what type of weapon they had used. Not that it mattered now, a few days from now, the colonists would be vaporized and all of this would simply be forgotten or erased from the history books.

Deeth looked over and saw that someone was trying to signal them. They had to respond, they had to be careful. The nukes could not launch themselves, they had to be in orbit to launch them. Deeth and Rivera were awake. Burnholz was still sleeping.

"Should I answer?" he asked.

"Yes, stick to the cover story. We escaped from Earth and we have supplies and medicine. Don't screw it up." said Deeth.

"Attention Mars, this is UN flight 121, requesting permission to enter Mars Orbit," said Rivera.

"Good morning gentlemen. What brings you to the red planet?" said the voice over the intercom.

"We have escaped Earth and its oppressive government. We made it. We have people on board wanting to start a new life on Mars. Will you allow us to land?"

"Well, if what you are saying is true, then of course. It's just that I don't think you are coming here with peaceful intentions."

"Of course we are, why else would we spend forty days in space?"

"You have come here to destroy us." said the Martian.

"That's ridiculous. We have women and children on board that need medical attention, can we enter orbit?"

"Gentlemen, please. The only cargo you have is tactical nuclear weapons." said the Martian.

Rivera switched off the radio.

"Okay, what the hell do we do now?"

"We have to make them think we have women and children aboard. The onboard AI can sound like women and children," said Deeth.

Rivera switched back on the radio.

"Mars.....Mars, do you have a name? Mine is David Rivera."

"We know who you are. Is Major Deeth with you? Or is he still in cryo?"

"I'm right here. Look, we have a very difficult situation on board. You know how devastating space travel can be. Some of us are in very bad shape."

"Major Deeth, can we stop playing games here? You and I both know there are no women and children on board that ship. After what happened a few months ago, we kind of expected Earth to do something like this. I must warn you, we will not let you destroy us. There's far more going on here than you realize."

"Look, we were lucky to make it this far. We were almost destroyed in orbit. I'm not sure how much longer life support will last. It's thirty degrees on board. We're cold, hungry....we just need to land."

"That's quite a performance Major. I think Earth people used to say: I'd like to thank the academy....whatever that means. No, I was hoping we could just have a real, honest, heart to heart about what's going to happen here." said the Martian.

"Okay, let's talk."

"Major, we've known about this mission for quite some time. We have a lot of friends on Earth. Some are in very high positions of power in your United Earth Government. Did you really think you could pull this off and we wouldn't know about it?"

"What difference does it make? In a few days, you'll all be dead and we'll return to Earth as heroes," said Deeth.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that Major. I must implore you to think about what you are going to do. You won't return home as heroes, you will return as the most hated people on the planet. Think of your children and grandchildren. Even if you are protected, you won't have much of a life. Last we heard, over two million people wanted to leave Earth and come to Mars. They hate your tyrannical government with a passion. Most are just too afraid to speak out, but that won't be the case for much longer."

"How did you destroy those ships?"

"Why does it matter?"

"I'm just curious."

"Well, we used Martian technology to destroy them."

"I see. Am I just supposed to use my imagination or are you going to be a little more specific?"

"You don't understand Major, you just cannot understand what this planet is. What if I were to tell you that we are not the first humans to live on the red planet. There have been humans here before us. Many tens of thousands of years ago. You see Major, Earth, and Mars have fought a war before. It was so long ago that most of the records have long since been forgotten, but it did happen."

"Sounds like you have been reading too many comic books."

"No, no we've discovered all kinds of fascinating things about this planet. It wasn't always the frozen, toxic wasteland it is today. At one point, it had a climate very similar to Earth. It had cities and rivers and oceans. Then, Earth destroyed it. We fought back, we nearly obliterated Earth, but not before this civilization was destroyed. The survivors built massive cities underground that still exist today. I am speaking to you from a room inside a building that was built over thirty thousand years ago."

"Okay, Mars. I know that thin air does strange things to your brains, but this is absurd. There is no way Mars could have possibly supported an environment like that. Maybe billions of years ago, but not as recent as that."

"Major, think about it? Does any of this make sense? Why would your government want to destroy us? We're no threat to them whatsoever. There's only a few thousand of us and a few hundred million of you. What harm can we possibly do?"

"You broadcast lies and rumors every night. People on Earth can tune into your frequencies. You are a bad influence on an otherwise harmonious society."

"Please. There's no harmonious society on Earth. It's a hell hole. Your prison and internment camps are full of people who are guilty of nothing more than being human beings. They want freedom. *They deserve freedom.*

People like you would sell your own mothers for a few pieces of silver. You're the kind of people who built the Nazi war machine or the Roman Empire. Always doing and never thinking. If people knew the truth about our planet and its history, I think you might lose control and that terrifies you more than anything."

"People on Earth can do whatever they like. They can live in a house of their own choice, buy whatever they want, marry whoever they want. They can even own weapons. What kind of oppressive government would let them do that?"

"They can own the things you let them own. They can pick from whatever you have already decided they should own. It's not a race if you own all the horses."

"Look, my grandfather told me what life was like on the 21st century Earth. It was an overpopulated shit hole. Everyone was poor, no one had anything and the rich and powerful

called the shots. Now, everyone is equal. There's no racism or classism. There's no crime or war. We have finally evolved."

"So, again Major, I beg the question: why destroy us."

"To be fair, you guys drew first blood. We can't let you destroy three UN ships and think there won't be consequences. That's just not logical thinking."

"If you were a logical thinker, you would dump those nukes in space, then turn around and head home. This is not going to end like you think it is. This planet holds many secrets. Some are just too incredible to truly comprehend."

"I'll take a hot shower and be able to swim in my own pool over your secrets any day."

"What are they paying you, Major? How much does it take to kill three thousand people?"

"I hardly think that's any of your business."

"I just think we should all know, just for the history books, what it takes for someone to commit mass murder. I suppose you'd have to have a conscience first though."

"I'm just a soldier. I follow orders just like everyone else, even if I don't like the orders. If the pilots aboard the Enola Gay had not dropped that atomic bomb on Japan, history could have been altogether different." said Deeth.

"Yeah, we have a few million Japanese people around. I heard you volunteered for this mission. You're a special kind of psychopath, aren't you? Are you going to think about us at night? Are you going to wonder how quickly we died?"

"No, I can pretty much assure you, I will not."

"I think if a person can kill another human being, then they can kill a thousand. The first one's always the toughest, isn't it?" said Mars.

"Look, we both know how this is going to end. Perhaps you should be saying your final goodbyes instead of splitting hairs with me. The bombs will be launched."

"Here I thought nuclear weapons had been banned for centuries. Where did you find them?"

"I really don't know," said Deeth

"Of course you do. I've heard the Americans stashed a few dozen away just for a rainy day. The last nukes were manufactured in 2037, right before the third world war. That would make them almost six hundred years old. Sure they'll work?"

"I guess there's only one way to find out." said Deeth as he smiled at Rivera."

"You aren't a human being Major Deeth. Neither are those other two up there with you. We may be the same species, but we are not the same. Do you know it has been over fifty years since our

colonies had a homicide? Fifty years. Our last assault was over five years ago. Here on Mars, our species has a chance to start over. We are the future, you are an anachronism. You can't put fresh paint over old rot. It's still rotten underneath." said Mars.

"We'll be in orbit in five hours. Five hours and five minutes to be exact."

"We have cities built miles underground,, your stupid bombs won't stop anything."

"Really? What are you guys going to eat? How are you going to produce oxygen?" You guys might survive the blast, but you won't last more than a few weeks, a month at most. I hear it gets mighty cold on Mars this time of year." said Deeth.

"I told you, the city takes care of all that. It was built by our ancestors, eons ago. It's over thirty thousand years old and it still works. Pretty impressive engineering."

"So then, what? We destroyed your planet and Earth won. Where did all the Martians go?"

"They went to Earth. We were picked up by another race. They are always watching us. They intervened and saved us. That's why humanity has such a broken history, why nothing really makes sense. That's why we have different races. They transported the survivors to Earth."

"Mars, are you just making this up as you go along? You and I both know there is nothing on the planet except sand and ice," said Deeth.

"If only you knew. If only you could see what is really down here. You might think twice about launching those weapons. How bout it Major Rivera? Are you willing to be an accomplice to the worst act of mass murder in history? I know you're listening. Feel free to chime in." said Mars.

Rivera said nothing and just looked away from Deeth.

"That's what I thought. You know this is wrong. You know it and you're asking yourself how you got involved in all this. Right now, I think even you know how horribly wrong this is. The question is: what are you going to do to stop it?"

"I follow orders, just like everyone else," said Rivera.

"Didn't the Nazis say the same thing at Nuremberg? Didn't help them any."

"They were murderers. They did horrible things," said Rivera.

"How are you any different?"

"Look, no one wants to do this. I don't want to. Major Deeth and Captain Burnholz don't want to. Even the people who ordered us to do this don't want to. There is simply no other way."

"There's always another way. Peace will always win out over war. Love will always trump hate. You have a choice. You don't have to do this. You can go down as heroes, not mass murderers. If those men aboard the Enola Gay that day back in August of 1945, really knew what they were about to do, would they still do it? I wonder how any of them were able to sleep at night. I

wonder what they would say to God when he asks them why they destroyed so many women and children, what do you think they would say?"

"Mars. I'm sorry for what we are about to do. I wish there was some other way. Your fate is sealed. Even if you destroy the ship, the nukes will still launch. You won't be able to stop us. It's nothing personal, really." said Deeth.

"You're going to destroy our planet and you tell me it's nothing personal? Major, I'm not sure you're running with a full tank at this point. Only a madman would do what you are about to do. A soulless, delusional, madman." said the Martian as he choked up on his tears.

Rivera switched off the radio. Deeth could see he was not well. He would have to keep an eye on him. Burnholz was all but useless at this point. Deep space travel was clearly not his thing. The silence. The omnipresent silence was everywhere. There was no sound on the ship. It was like being in a giant sensory deprivation tank 24 hours a day. Some could handle it, some could not. There was really no way to know for sure until you were forty million miles from home.

"I'm going to go check on the engines," said Rivera.

Deeth knew there was no need for him to check on anything. All the information went right to the control deck where they were sitting. He knew Rivera had a weapon, they all did. They are all special bullets designed to shatter upon impact. The last thing they needed was a bullet hole to pierce the hull. That could be fatal.

He found Rivera in the cargo room that housed the nukes. He never saw Deeth come in. Rivera was trying to enter some kind of code into the nuke's computer. Deeth drew his weapon.

"What are you doing, Major Rivera?"

"I'm stopping this. This is insanity. What the hell are we doing here? Why are we going to kill all these people? The hell have they ever done to us?"

"Drop your gun on the floor.....slowly."

"What are you going to do, shoot me? They're right, you are crazy. This whole goddamn thing is crazy. I won't be a part of this....I WON'T."

"You already are."

"We can still stop this. There's still time," said Rivera as he opened the tablet screen on one of the nukes.

"This is your final warning. Get away from there, or I'll kill you," said Deeth. He wasn't kidding. Rivera knew that. He stepped off the small metal stage where the nukes sat. He walked right up to Deeth and looked him in the eye.

"I'd rather be dead than be a part of this." he tried to draw his weapon, but Deeth was faster, just by a second. He fired three rounds into Rivera's chest. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the metal floor. He was gasping for air, fighting for his last breath.

"You're a mo.....a mons.....a monster!" he said, spitting up blood.

Deeth fired two more rounds, the last one killed him instantly.

He checked the status screen of the nukes and was relieved to see that Rivera had not been able to do anything. They were still armed and online, ready to go.

Good thing I didn't wait to take a pee. He thought to himself.

He left the cargo area and walked down the hallway to Burnholz's room. The best engineers on Earth had not been able to replicate gravity aboard these ships. The best they could do was to make the astronauts wear these special boots that acted like a magnet to the floor. It wasn't perfect. Walking was still difficult. But gravity was necessary. The human body goes haywire if it does not have gravity to keep everything in check. He still had two rounds left in his gun. He opened Burnholz's door and immediately saw the blood. He saw his body on the floor of his quarters. He had shot himself in the head. Deeth checked his pulse. He was cold to the touch.

No big loss. Once I get back to Earth, I'll be the hero. I get the bonus for completing this mission. These two losers are dead. Just have to launch the payload and get the hell outta here. I can do that. I've trained for it dozens of times. Drop the bombs and away I go. Earth is forty-two days away. The computer will navigate. I'll just sit back and sip coffee and watch pornos for forty days. Don't want to celebrate too early.

Deeth knew he had to be careful. Whatever had destroyed the three ships months earlier had come out of nowhere. He had to be ready for the unexpected. The mission had to be completed. *The mission will be completed.*

Deeth switched on the radio. He was a soldier after all, regardless of what those thought of him. He wasn't going to gloat over killing them. He almost felt sorry for them. He was just another link in the chain. He wondered what cover story they were going to tell back on Earth. How were they going to explain this one away? How big was the lie going to be?

"Mars, this is UN-121. I'll be in orbit in less than three hours. There won't be any more transmitting, but I will keep the line open. I'm not a monster. I'm not a murderer. I'm a soldier and sometimes big missions need big commitments. I'm sorry it had to be this way. I only hope wherever you go after today, that you can find it in your hearts to forgive me....at least try to see this from our point of view. No one is coming out of this thing smiling....especially me."

"Major Deeth. My name is Brian Williamson. My great-great-great-grandfather was one of the first colonists on the red planet. I guess you could say that I am in charge if there is such a thing here. I'm not going to try and appeal to your sense of humanity, because I don't believe you have one. I am going to warn you that should you deploy those nuclear weapons and should they detonate, this planet has a built-in defense mechanism. It very nearly wiped out Earth thousands upon thousands of years ago. I'm not completely certain as to how it works, we are still in the

process of translating the Martian language, but I assure you, it is still operational. Whatever it is, it is extremely powerful. A tiny fraction of it destroyed those invading ships a few months ago. You can only imagine what it can do at full power. You might want to think of the consequences of your actions, not just for us, but how it will affect Earth as well."

"Your concern is noted, Mr. Williamson. It's not going to change anything. You're already dead. Please, make the most of your remaining time. The end will be here shortly for you. God Bless." he said and turned off the radio.

He made himself some coffee and waited for the final two hours of his trip. He just wanted this damn thing to end. He hated the thought of going into that cryogenic sleep chamber, but he wasn't about to just hang out here for forty-two days. He was going out of his mind already. He would just close his eyes and when he wakes up, he'd be back on Earth, a very rich man.

He programmed the final coordinates into the computer. The end was getting very close now. The rockets and thrusters kicked in at t-minus thirty. The ship began to decelerate. At t-minus ten they had slowed to twenty thousand miles per hour. At t-minus five, they were locked into orbit. The light flashed and he opened the cargo bay doors. He typed in the countdown sequence for the nukes and released them. It was done. He watched them fly out of the back of the ship and then watched their thruster engage and sent them hurtling down to the surface. He closed the cargo bay doors and programmed in the coordinates for Earth. He buckled his safety harness and was instantly pinned back by the incredible g-force that engulfed the ship. He was watching them on the camera as they detonated over their respective targets.

It was nice knowing you, Mr. Williamson.

Deeth got drunk that night. He smuggles some cigarettes aboard the ship instead of champagne. Tobacco had been banned for almost thirty years, but being a field grade officer in the Earth Government afforded you certain privileges. He took a drag from the cigarette and sat back in his bunk. He wasn't even thinking about the dead Martians now. They were dead. He wasn't. He felt like celebrating. Passed out that night watching a movie in his quarters. Getting drunk in space is not a good idea. The alcohol's potency seemed to be magnified. When he woke up five hours later, he had a hangover. Taking small steps in the metal-lined boots was a struggle. He stumbled over to the sleepers. He looked at them and then, a very uneasy feeling came over him.

What if I don't wake up? What if that's been their plan all along. They know I've killed Rivera, I had to tell them that. Maybe they figure it would be easy if all three of us just disappeared. Then, they could make up any story they wanted. He'd heard horror stories about these things going haywire and killing the sleeper before they wake up. If he shuts that door, he had a sinking feeling he would not wake up. No, fuck that. No sleeper for him.

He thought he had been asleep for five hours and was amazed to discover he had been asleep for nearly three days. He figured he ought to check in with them. Since this was a secret mission, he had to be careful. His radio only got frequencies that were used by a secret moon base. Regular communication channels were not to be used. This ship wasn't even supposed to exist. If the Martians knew about it, then there had to be plenty of Earth-bound humans that knew also. He turned on the radio.

"Echo one this is Foxtail, over?"

They were using a special radio that used subatomic particles for communication and was thirty percent faster than the speed of light."

"Foxtail, echo one, status?"

'Objective cleared. Balloons deployed all of them popped in the atmosphere." said Deeth.

"Outstanding Foxtail, well done. I'll be sure to pass it along. Foxtail, be advised, we have a very unusual situation here. We were hoping you could help clear it up."

"I'll try, what's up?"

"Shortly after the balloons were popped, we began tracking a very large object that seemed to be following you. it's massive, hundreds of miles in diameter."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Well, we must be mistaken, but we've run it through our labs and computers several times and they all tell us the same thing, but they must be wrong."

"What are they telling you?"

"They are telling us that one of Mar's moons, Deimos has somehow broken orbit and is now on a direct path towards Earth. It looks like it is going to impact Earth if it holds its present course."

"That's impossible. There must be some mistake. How does a massive rock almost eight miles wide just start steering itself towards Earth?" said Deeth in shock.

"We were hoping you could clear this up. We won't know for certain until a few days, but if the computers are correct, we have one hell of a giant problem on our hands."

Deeth turn off the radio. He turned on the camera for the ship's starboard side and indeed, he could see something in space coming after him. He nearly collapsed in his chair.

"No.....no, this is impossible. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!" he shouted.

He ran all over the ship, stumbling and falling down. He opened a small bottle of whiskey and began chugging it.

It wasn't a bluff.....it was a warning! Earth had its nukes, but Mars had its asteroids. Somehow the former inhabitants of Mars had a doomsday machine. Eight miles across and very hard to destroy. It had a date with Earth, forty-three days from now. The two would finally get to meet.

Deeth stumbled back to his quarters. He sat in his bed and lit up a cigarette.

So much for my villa. So much for the easy life. I did what they wanted. I completed the mission, but I don't get my reward. That's not right.....that's just not right.

He'd have the next forty-two days to think about it. Some days he would just pace around the ship, going from one side to another. He was going to use up all of his cigarettes soon, then what would he do. They kept calling him, asking him to try and stop the asteroid, like that were possible. They wanted him to kamikaze the ship into the asteroid and blow up the engines, which were just two small nuclear bombs anyway, but he refused. He wanted his desert. Major Deeth had been a good little soldier and good little boys get rewarded. He wasn't going to fall for their lies again.

"Fool me once, shame on you....fool me twice.....well, you know the rest."

Some days he would just sit in his bunk and cry. Some days he would just stare out into space. They were going to blame him for all of this. They were going to say this was his fault. Maybe he would just join Rivera and Burnholz. The end was getting closer. The moon base had been abandoned. No one was even listening to him anymore. No one cared. No one cared about the good little soldier who did exactly what he was told.....and destroyed Earth in the process.