

Year 4000:

When in space, keep calm and do as the astronauts do- which is, to take a good break after repairing their leaking space shuttle.

They reeled themselves in by their fifty-foot-long safety tethers, whooshing through space, the stench of sweat and toil clogging up the air in their space helmets. Their dry, tongues stuck to the back of their throats, vacuuming in every last vestige of moisture in their mouth that they still possessed.

They stumbled through the sliding automatic doors, peeling off their space suits, delighting in the cool relief of the electric fan. A few decades ago, space shuttles whose interiors had gravity were invented and, for the first time, they were grateful for being able to slouch in their chairs.

'Hang on, what's that?' One of them peered through the window, in front of the controls.

'What's what, Tom?'

'Have a look here. Is it just my eyes or the Earth's turning...'

'Blue.'

Tom, George and Mark stared out through the quartz windows of the shuttle into the vast openness. A tiny planet, about the size of a basketball, shuddered and heaved. Blue swirled over its surface, devouring all green in its path. It came from everywhere- the North and South poles as well, as if the sea had suddenly awakened and threw a raging tantrum. Splintered glaciers and icebergs found their way to the Equator, where they melted into endless oblivion. Winds blew the clouds in all directions. The planet was losing land, and fast. The force pummelled the land into bits. Entire continents vanished in a matter of seconds and now, the Earth was just another inhabitable orb, waterily suspended in dark matter.

Mark gaped at the scene before him. *I have a wife and two kids. They're in there.* It was obvious that they had not survived. The sentence still reverberated in his mind. *I have a wife and two kids. I have a wife and two kids.* Until a few seconds later, the cruel truth hit him. *I had a wife and two kids.* It was a cold, merciless world. Couldn't he have rejected their request to go on a trip to repair satellites and floating equipment? *The last mission*, Mark had told them. *After that, I'm done.* No more space travel, no more long periods away from home. The extended training periods meant less time spent with family, and family was most important, it always had been. What was the point of it all now?

Tom and George were equally struck by this loss. This was their planet, their Earth, and nobody, not even the sea, would take it from them. Or so they thought. And it was all the three of them could do to stop and stare.

A hollow was being carved in their chest with a knife as they watched; it would never be filled again.

Seconds ticked into minutes which ticked into hours. Heads lolling, their chins dropped into their chests. George, Tom and Mark fell into an uneasy torpor, dreaming that it was they themselves being engulfed by the dark unknown. But when their eyelids flew open with racing hearts, they were inside the shuttle, the last three of their kind in the galaxy ever to exist.

Slowly, heavily, rising to their feet, they faced each other in a triangle.

‘So. What do you think we should do? Mark? George?’

They did not answer for a few seconds. It was not hesitation; they were trying to find the right words to say.

Finally, Mark answered, ‘Let’s just... die here. I don’t care. I don’t want to care anymore.’

It had not even been twenty-four hours but he already bore the look of a man who had given up all hope, and rightly so. His eyes no longer sung of excitement and rigor, they were replaced with a dead emptiness.

‘What if you’re wrong? What if we should live? What if we are alive for a special reason? Mark. You’re not yourself,’ George responded, grabbing Mark’s shoulders. ‘I say we look for another planet to live on. There must be some planet good enough for us to stay on. And once we’ve found it we can stay there, together.’

George wanted very much to live. An extremely religious man, he believed that he was meant to be alive for some reason unknown to him but known to God, and he accepted this statement without any doubt. After all, it was in His big plan of things, and who would dare question it? He filled his mind with dreams of discovering new lands in uncharted galaxies, if they managed to find one in the first place. He cried out for guidance, for peace to be restored to Mark, so that he could see, too. Yes, he did have a family back on Earth, but his real family would always be with him, allowing him to find a way through troubled times. Unlike real family, which sometimes, was no use at all.

Tom shook his head. He wouldn’t decide, but to be honest, it wasn’t as if he could decide. All those options ended in death, inevitably, whether quicker or slower. However, that didn’t mean he didn’t want to live. Tom was as set on living as George was, yet grappling with the same monster that had taken over Mark was no easy feat. They had no home to go back to, no family or friends awaiting their return.

A rift deepened between George and Mark. They were at opposite ends of the spectrum: George too hopeful, too optimistic that there would be another planet suited for humans; Mark, rid of all hope, waiting for death. They would ignore each other for what seemed like an eternity, and then start bickering, unable to see each other’s point of view.

‘If you two don’t stop this right now, we’ll never get anywhere! We’ll die of starvation without having done a thing! Don’t we want to try, or at least die trying? There’s nothing to be gained out of this, can’t you see?’ Tom would repeat this again and again, wishing that they would, for once, be sensible and argue in a civilized manner at least.

Of the three astronauts, Tom was the pragmatic thinker. Never married and distant with his relatives, he preferred to do his own things quietly, absorbing the rhythm of life. Although he was affected in

some ways, the destruction of Earth didn't really bother him, apart from the hassle of having to find a new place to stay. He did, however, care about his friends, and their despair made him all the more intent on thinking up a suitable solution to cure all of them of their troubles.

The mood was infectious, and every now and then Tom felt himself sinking into a state of helplessness and despair.

Meanwhile, Tom came up with an idea of his own. He announced it to George and Mark, and was met with an unexpected reaction:

'I guess so. If you want to. That is to say... alright.'

'Yeah, it seems pretty good. I don't mind trying it out. Who knows, maybe there *are* survivors.'

The Plan, as they called it, had to begin as soon as possible.

'Ready the controls.' Mark flipped a few switches, setting the shuttle on autopilot mode.

'Booster activated.' A whirring sound rent the air.

The air around Tom, Mark and George vibrated, growing heavy. Hurling through space, still in the shuttle, they sat, cross-legged, strangely calm. It was as if they had accepted their fate...but no. Out of the small peep-hole window, there could be seen a blue planet getting bigger and bigger, rushing up to meet them.

*SPLASH!* The waves billowed around them, and they bobbed around, white foam dripping off the capsule, rippling the ocean. They were back on Earth, their home.

The door unlatched. Mark, George and Tom peered outside. Was that-? Could it be-?

For in the distance, they could just about make out the sight of a floating platform, made of what seemed to be rubber tyres. They saw smoke, which meant *fire*, and heard human chatter in the distance, which meant that *they were not the only ones*, after all!