

INCONCEIVABLE

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The year is 2030, and the first manned mission is set to launch for Mars.

It's been 453 days since an unidentified astronaut was spotted on Mars.

453 days of unanswered questions, wild rumors, and an intense space race to Mars.

453 days of headlines speculating aliens, time travelers, abandoned astronauts surviving,
and worst of all, a trick of the light.

453 days since we saw the astronaut last.

453 days of footprints on Mars coming from and leading nowhere.

It's about time we find out who it really is.

I couldn't wait to leave Earth. The last three hours on this planet were spent with anxious last minute preparations and packing. They were spent running around, saying goodbye to friends and family, checking and rechecking every last detail.

It was hard to find seconds to lay in the grass. To stare at the sky. To breathe real oxygen.

Because once I left, I wasn't coming back for a *long* time, but where I was going was worth it.

I was going to Mars.

Russia was ahead of us. They had superior space technology, and honestly, we were just rushed in finishing our ship. The Space Race II, USA against Russia, was kicking off.

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Russia's three man crew had taken off in their spaceship, a ship more advanced than any other in our time. It had weapons and missiles attached, as if to warn us not to even dare try and follow. They thought they had us beat.

It was inconceivable to them that we would be foolish to try and fight back.

They didn't realize that we had teams of brilliant astrophysicists and rocket scientists and aerospace engineers on our side. They didn't know about the billions of dollars our president put into space exploration, for us to "show the rest of the world who's boss". They didn't even consider the possibility of us launching our rocket just a day after theirs. They didn't think that we would be stupid enough to try.

But we were coming. We were going to catch them and make them eat their words, again.

In a barely developed spaceship with an inexperienced crew.

"OH DEAR GOD WE'RE IN SPACE GUYS!" our pilot, Jay, screamed as we broke through the Earth's atmosphere. The third passenger, other than Jay and I, on the Titanic III was another a girl named Hazel. When NASA heard the news that the Russian ship had launched, the head of the department panicked and sent three junior astronauts who were barely halfway through their training in an unfinished spaceship instead of the pre-selected Mars Mission astronauts who were off on another mission. Pretty much a recipe for disaster.

Soon enough we had left the one place we had never left before, Earth, and were floating through space.

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We quickly unstrapped ourselves and shared a round of high fives before crowding around the window to stare at the blue, green, and brown planet behind us.

Static cracked over the intercom of the ship. “Commanders, please report to your stations.” We stopped and stared up, wondering if they could see us. “*Now.*”

“Right,” I mumbled as the three of us scattered to where we should’ve been. Jay went to the navigation controls room to make sure we were going fast enough and even in the right direction (going in the wrong direction was entirely a possibility with Jay steering us). Hazel went to work on the controls and double check that the machines on the spaceship were working correctly. Finally, I went to check on the ship’s engine since I had studied to become an aerospace engineer.

After I finished my check up, I turned to leave but was caught by another gruff NASA voice coming over the loudspeaker.

“Please send us the report you just took, Commander Taylor,” they said, sounding annoyed and a little bored. They probably felt like they were babysitting.

“Oh, right, yeah, forgot about that,” I replied as I hit send. After, I pivoted and journeyed into the heart of the Titanic.

“Who’s that?” someone asked behind me as I hung up pictures over my cot. I whipped around to see Jay leaning arrogantly on my door frame. I sighed and turned back around, smoothing the corner out of a picture of me and my best friend since high school.

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“My friend,” I replied, uninterested. After the first few hours of space excitement wore off, I remembered how annoying Jay could be. We had been in grad school at Yale together and he always seemed to appear at just the wrong times.

“But I thought you didn’t have any friends?” he said, walking further into the room. I fantasized about the gravity machine keeping his feet anchored giving out and watching him float away.

“Ha,” I mumbled, unamused.

“Come on, Taylor, don’t give me that attitude,” Jay muttered, disappointed that I wasn’t biting at his games. “You know you like me, just admit it.”

I snorted and wondered if anyone loved Jay as much as Jay loved himself. “I would sooner walk out of the ship with no equipment.”

“Playing hard to get,” he noted, “Cute.”

“Wait,” I stopped, realizing something. “Aren’t you supposed to be flying the ship?”

He stopped, thinking. “I thought it was like, I don’t know, automatic?”

“Jay, oh my god...”

“I’m gonna go check that,” Jay mumbled before turning and running out of the room.

Great, I thought, I’m stuck on a spaceship for a crap ton of years with this idiot.

I glanced over the little collage I made from the few pictures I grabbed before leaving. My eyes stuck on the picture of that lone astronaut on Mars. When the picture went viral a little over a year ago, I was obsessed with it. I wanted, *needed* to know who, or what, it was. It was something I knew my dad, who has been dead for twelve years now, would have loved to see. He

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was an astrophysicist hell bent on discovering all of Mars' secrets. I wished my dad could see me now, on my way to Mars.

Suddenly, the ship began to shudder and shake. The bed slid across the floor with the racket, causing me to fall off. I yelped and fell into the hallway, bumping against disrupted furniture and the walls. "Jay? Hazel?" I pushed up and fought my way deeper into the ship to get to the source of the issue.

Hazel slid into my path, nearly colliding with me. "What's going on?" she asked, her eyes whipping around. I simply shook my head and we took off towards the cockpit together.

"Jay? What's happening?" I yelled as we burst through the doors.

He didn't get a chance to answer before I saw the huge backside of the Russian ship blooming before us. It was *huge*, easily double the size of the Titanic III. The sleek metal was contrasting silver to the darkness of space. In my awe of the impressive spacecraft, I forgot to take note of the giant laser/gun/thing pointed directly at our ship. It was firing and sending our spaceship into convulsions.

"What do we do? What do we do?" I asked, desperately looking for our own defense mechanism, some kind of button to push, but there was nothing to be found.

Hazel just shook her head, gripping the back of Jay's chair to keep from falling over.

Jay stared at me hopelessly for a minute before something clicked in his mind. He let out a tiny gasp before throwing himself against the controls, pushing three buttons and ripping a lever entirely back. The ship immediately dipped down, going miles under the Russian spacecraft. The gigantic laser struggled to follow us to finish us off, but by the time it had fully circled, Jay had sent us flying forward, past the Russians.

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We all cheered as we lived to breathe another day.

“I don’t know how this thing was able to not only catch up to the Russians, but also dust them, but wow, I’m grateful,” he said, laughing in joy. I stared at him for a minute, eternally happy for his good solution as I realized that maybe he wasn’t as much of an idiot as I thought he was. I guess you had to be at least kind of smart to get on this mission, even if we were undertrained and the last resort.

The next year of traveling was boring and kept us restless. We didn’t see the Russians more than twice, and both times it was from a distance and they left us alone. The three of us gradually grew more and more accustomed to life in space and became close to experts in space technology.

NASA stopped hovering over our shoulders and busied itself back on Earth, probably training a new group of recruits to take our place when we tragically died.

NASA was shocked to see our progress and how fast we had managed to travel. Hazel and I owed it all to Jay, who's piloting skills had made all the difference in our success.

Any day now we would see the red planet looming into sight and see our new home. As we got closer, I began to wonder what we would find. An alien colony? A dead body? Nothing?

I couldn’t even fathom what I would do if we came all the way from Earth and found absolutely nothing.

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Hazel and I crowded over Jay's shoulder, excitement coursing through the three of us. We could see Mars now, could see its atmosphere and two moons. We were getting ready to enter, preparing ourselves for whatever was to come and what we would or wouldn't find.

What we didn't expect, though, was to see the Russian ship patiently waiting outside the planet for us. They were taunting us, as if they had fallen asleep waiting for us to catch up. They wanted us to watch as they claimed the victory, it seemed.

Jay shoved the Titanic into turbo mode. We sped through space as the Russians kicked their own spacecraft into drive. We tore through space and time, ignoring the rules of anti-gravity.

The Russian ship hurtled directly towards us instead of into Mars and Jay began to yell, moving the joystick and levers around manically. "WHAT ARE THEY DOING? WE'RE GONNA HIT THEM!!"

And we sure did hit them. The two ships collided, sending the Titanic III spinning into Mars. We broke through the atmosphere and immediately felt the pull of real gravity, instead of artificial, for the first time in a year. We fell through rust and ash clouds, tumbling over and over again.

This is what falling from heaven must feel like, I thought to myself as I puked directly onto Jay's lap. We all managed to stay secure in our positions, through, thanks to the new technology.

We smashed into the ground, pain resonating in my head, skull, bones, everywhere.

"They named the ship The Titanic III," I retorted, weakly chuckling. "What did they expect for our landing?"

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When we managed to get our spacesuits on and get out of our now damaged rocket, we found a barren land with nothing for thousands of miles all around.

“I think we won,” Jay said, breathlessly. None of us knew the fate of our Russian counterparts. We should’ve been celebrating our descent into the new, uncharted planet, but all I wanted to do in that moment was revel in the untainted holiness of the untouched ground.

Untouched except by a single pair of footprints. The footprints news channels and conspiracy theorists had obsessed over for 453 days. I followed them, realizing they were pointed behind me. I spun around, confused, to see a rogue astronaut standing behind me with a red smudged suit, dented helmet, and familiar eyes.

This wasn’t real.

“Taylor,” he said, grinning ear to ear. “I knew you’d be the first to make it here. I was wondering when you guys would figure it out.”

This was inconceivable.

“Dad?”