

# Martian Law

## Part One

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# **Martian Law**

**International Space Center  
Kenya, 2063**

**Helena Anderson**

Helena woke up with a jerk and quickly sat up in bed. She tried to suppress the violent breathing by putting her hand over her mouth, but it didn't work as it instead produced strange hissing and sucking sounds. She removed her hand from her mouth and let the heavy breathing continue freely, hoping that it would finally calm down.

Her heart was beating so hard that she almost thought the pounding would wake up her husband Sven. However, he didn't seem to notice anything as he was completely still and breathed quietly in the darkness beside her. She gently laid her hand on his arm and tried to focus on his peaceful breath. Maybe it could help her calm down a bit?

It worked. Slowly, slowly, her violent breathing calmed down, and she could finally gather her thoughts. What had she dreamed this time? She tried to remember but her mind was totally blank. She had no memory of the dream. But it must have been a terrible dream, as it left a lingering feeling in her body that she would die any second.

On other occasions, the panic attacks had been a consequence of lively dreams about her childhood, about her mother, and about her children, Anna and Erik. But not this time. Perhaps she had dreamed something so horrible that her brain immediately sorted it out of her consciousness to protect her?

Helena gently folded away the blanket and slowly got out of bed. She didn't want to wake up her husband because she knew he would have trouble falling asleep again if he was awakened.

She hadn't told anyone about the panic attacks, not even her husband. And she was convinced that if the evaluation staff found out she had panic attacks, they would immediately make sure that her and her family had to leave the colonizer program. They were in no way irreplaceable. There were hundreds of families who were waiting as reserves, ready to take their place if it turned out that they didn't measure up to the high standards that were required.

She couldn't really understand how she had managed to pass all the evaluation tests. During the test period she had been constantly waiting for them to reveal her weaknesses. But in some strange way they had decided that she and her family were perfect for the mission.

Sure, both she and Sven were highly educated people. She was a biologist and botanist, and he was an engineer. But having a high education wasn't enough for such an extreme mission. You also had to be a stable personality type. A person who managed to work smoothly with other people in a small and dangerous habitat.

But that was not enough. Above all, you needed to be a person who could handle the psychological pressure of leaving your home planet forever. Sven didn't seem to have any problems with that. He was almost ridiculously excited about colonizing a new planet. On countless occasions he had told her he had no problem in leaving Earth as long as he had his family with him.

She walked around in the small apartment that had been their home ever since they were accepted into the colonial program. Even though the worst anxiety had now subsided, she didn't want to go back to bed. Maybe the terrible horror would return as soon as she fell asleep again?

She went into the living room, sat down on the couch and turned on the light at the lowest level of brightness. In the dim light, she noticed something familiar lying on the table in front of her. A small snow globe with fir-trees and cute reindeers in a winter landscape. The glass was a bit scratched, but it still looked nice. Her grandmother had given it to her when she was a little girl, and for several years it had been her dearest thing.

She shook it and watched with fascination how the small snowflakes danced around inside it. She remembered giving it to Erik as a Christmas gift when he was five, in the belief that he would also appreciate the beautiful, dreamy landscape as much as she had done when she was his age. But he had just shaken it once and looked at it with a bored face, before setting it aside. Obviously, she should have known better. Today's kids would never settle for such a simple toy. What were some snowflakes in a glass cup compared to being able to walk around in amazing virtual worlds using VR-glasses?

She shook it once again when it suddenly hit her: I will never experience snow again! The anxiety came back and hit her with black sorrow and fear. What have I done? She thought. How can I voluntarily exchange my life here on Earth for a life in narrow corridors and small rooms where I can never be alone? How can I choose to travel to a world where the impressions are so few and where the complexity is so sparse? No snow, no sea, no forests, no cities, no cool winds, no animals, and nowhere to go if I just get tired of everything. And how can I do this to my children? Is this the future I want to give them? Not to mention the risks! How can I expose them to something that is so unknown and dangerous? What a terrible mother I am!

She pressed her head to her knees while sobbing intensely. Suddenly she heard Sven's sleepy voice from the bedroom.

"Helena, what are you doing?"

Helena instinctively held her breath. He can't see me like this! She took a deep breath and tried to sound as normal as possible.

"I'm out here in the living room, I just had a little trouble sleeping."

"Okay, are you coming back to bed soon?" he asked a bit hesitantly.

"Yes, yes, soon, I'll just have a glass of water first."

She waited for an answer and after a few seconds she heard him mumble, "Okay."

She got up from the couch, went into the kitchen and filled up a glass of water. She took a few small sips although she wasn't the least thirsty, poured out the rest in the sink and then went back to the bedroom.

She realized that there was nothing she could do. It was too late. There was no possibility of withdrawing from the mission just a few days before departure, and she didn't want to disappoint Sven either. He was so proud and thought it was a great honor that they had been selected. He was of course right in that, but for my part I would gladly abstain this honor, she thought as she lay down in bed.

Sven immediately crawled up next to her, put his arm around her and whispered in her ear, "Is everything okay honey?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm just a bit anxious about everything now that departure is just a few days away."

"Mmm, so am I, but try not to think about it. Instead, imagine that you and I and the children will be part of a fantastic adventure together. I am so happy that you didn't oppose me when I suggested that we should register as volunteers."

He kissed her on the neck while whispering, "I love you Helena!"

"And I love you," she replied, gently stroking his arm.

She waited for him to say something more, but he remained silent. After a few seconds, she heard how his breath became heavier and soon he snored behind her. Helena sighed heavily, closed her eyes and hoped for a dreamless sleep.

**Emma Harrison**  
**International Space Center**  
**Kenya, 2063**

Emma hurried into the car and threw her bag on the passenger seat beside her. As soon as the door closed, the air conditioner started, and she sighed with pleasure as the cool air streamed over her. Even though it was still early morning, it was already unbearably hot, and she really hoped she wouldn't have to be outdoors more than necessary during the day's activities.

After a few minutes she felt cool enough to move her body and entered the address on the screen, and then activated autonomous transport. For once she felt quite relaxed and when the car silently drove away a smile spread over her lips. After years of hard work and preparations, the dream of her life would finally come true. She was going to Mars with the first wave of civil colonizers.

Today's schedule was packed with several meetings and now she was on her way to a final meeting with the Space Agency. She had received the message yesterday and she remembered how she had felt a small sting of worry in her stomach when she saw it in the mailbox. She couldn't understand why they had to meet her right now, just a few days before departure? The board had already countless times, gone through everything that had to do with her tasks, so it could hardly be about that.

Well, there's no point pondering about it. Soon, I will find out what they want, she thought, and glanced at the car's information screen.

She noticed that she would arrive in about fifteen minutes and immediately picked up her tablet from her bag. She instantly began to study the design drawings of the colony. Although she didn't really want to admit it to herself, she was a perfectionist. There was always something that could be improved or something important she could have missed.

She enlarged an area to the level of high detail, studied it intensively and made some quick touches on the screen, but it didn't turn out well, and she quickly changed it back again. She tried some other options, but these felt just as wrong and soon a sense of dissatisfaction crept over her, and her previously relaxed face became stiff and tense.

Emma was herself again.

"I don't have time for this," Emma muttered and tried to find a comfortable position on the hard chair. She had been waiting for over half an hour now, and the receptionist behind the counter had no information to give regarding when they could let her in.

"They" were at least half the board and a lot of other senior project managers. One by one they had passed her before entering the meeting room. No one had stopped to talk to her even though she knew many of them well. That was worrying to say the least, as she knew that some of them felt she for various reasons shouldn't be allowed to go to Mars.

The main proponent of this opinion was of course Henry Jones. As the head of the Psychological Institution, his opinions were of course considered of highest importance by the board. He had on several occasions tried to persuade the board that she had unreliable personality-traits and that they should remove her from the colonization program with immediate effect. "Problems with authorities, aggressive tendencies, and an inability to collaborate under pressure," was the final judgment from the moron. Fortunately, the board didn't listen to any of his arguments, but after that, she had always felt that her participation was hanging on a very fragile thread.

She was of course aware of the fact that she might not always be the easiest person to deal with, but Henry's statements were a pure insult. What did he mean by aggressive tendencies? Fighting for an opinion was not the same as being an aggressive person, was it? But apparently Henry thought so.

She sighed heavily. Henry's aversion to her had of course more in-depth reasons. But she had no desire to address these with the board, since she knew that she would be at a disadvantage when his words stood against hers.

She glanced at her watch and found that she had been waiting for over forty minutes. Now that's enough! I can't sit here like a little schoolgirl outside the principal's office! It's better to take the bull by its horns and get it over with. She looked over at the information desk. The receptionist curiously glanced at her from behind her screen but looked down as soon as she noticed that Emma was looking at her. Emma took a deep breath, then got up quickly and walked up to the counter.

"Hello!" She shouted and waved her hand in front of the woman.

"You can tell them that I won't wait any longer."

Then she turned around and went with firm steps towards the meeting room.

The woman got in a hurry and started to fiddle with some buttons and Emma heard behind her how she whispered in a microphone:

"She's on her way, she's coming in now!"

She was just about to knock on the door when it opened in front of her.

"There you are Emma! How nice that you could come on such a short notice."

The chairman of the board, Michael Greenstone, looked nervous and smiled so broadly that Emma wondered if he would get jaw-cramps any second.

She gave him a little smile and said, "Of course, no problem Michael. But what's the point of this? I'm very busy as you know."

"Yes, yes, we understand, but we wanted to discuss one last thing with you. Come in!" he said and put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently into the room.

When she saw the men and the women around the elongated table, she immediately lost her courage. It was only grim faces that met her, and on one of the chairs, Henry sat with his hand resting on a thick stack of papers. That fat pile is probably my act, she thought sourly. It wouldn't

surprise me if he symbolically printed it out to show everyone how much shit he had collected about me over the years. She tried to catch his eyes, but he slid away smoothly and began to stare intently at his laptop.

"Sit down, sit down," Michael said with an ingratiating tone and pointed to the only vacant chair at one of the short sides of the table.

Emma sank into the chair and looked at Michael, hoping he would explain the reason she was here.

Michael pulled his hand through the few hairs he had left on his head and started to speak a bit hesitantly:

"Okay Emma, let's see now... I know you're a busy person, so I'm going straight to the point. As you know, some members of the board believe that you are not suitable for this assignment..."

He glanced at Henry, but he just looked back at him with a neutral face.

"And above all, chief psychologist Henry Jones believes that you are totally unsuitable for the assignment and that your mere presence can risk the balance in the colony."

Emma didn't answer and tried to look as indifferent as possible. It was just as good to let them chatter for a while before she would say her point of view in the matter.

Michael continued, "But at the same time, there are several members of the board who defend you and believe that it's of the utmost importance that we send someone with your invaluable knowledge of the colony. They think that it is important that there is someone in place who knows where every little screw and bolt should be..."

Emma couldn't help smiling. They didn't use any screws or bolts at all in the colony. No weak mounts were allowed, but of course, a bureaucrat like Michael didn't understand that.

"Anyway, we have to take Henry's fears seriously. He argues that we cannot risk having a confrontational personality type like yours creating conflicts... We need a colony that works frictionless and where everyone can cooperate with each other without problems arising..."

"But wait a minute, Michael!" Emma suddenly shouted. "Why do you have to start nagging about this non-existent problem once again? You have made a final decision that I can go to Mars... The departure is only a few days away... You all know that Henry's accusations are completely unfounded! There is simply no risk at all that I will create any kind of "imbalance" in the colony."

"Yes, it's true that we have tried to see the benefits of your participation and ignore the..." he cleared his throat. "The obvious disadvantages."

He started browsing some papers on the table and continued so quietly that she hardly could hear what he was saying.

"But now we have a new incident to take into account."

Incident? What could it be this time? She tried to remember but couldn't come up with anything special that had happened, not recently anyway.

Michael looked up from his papers.

"It's like this Emma. It has come to our knowledge that you on several occasions have expressed yourself condescendingly and critically about the colony's leader Nikolai Kovalev."

Nikolai? Emma tried to remember what she could have said about him. Sure, she obviously disliked a person who constantly complained about her work, but it was thoughts she tried to keep to herself, at least for the most part.

"Okay Michael, tell me what I said about him!" she said and stared at Michael, hoping he would get even more nervous.

However, he quickly turned to Henry and said in an appealing tone. "Henry, can you tell Emma what has come to our knowledge?"

Emma's heart stopped. Damn, she thought. Not Henry! That bastard will not give up until he has managed to make sure I never get to Mars!

Henry rose slowly and said calmly. "Thank you, Michael!" Then he cleared his throat and continued in loud and clear voice:

"As you all know a colonization of Mars is not a like a school excursion where you can send home troublemakers which destroys for the other participants. Therefore, we have worked very hard to find the people who are best suited for this mission. The colonizers will live in extreme and dangerous conditions, not for a short period, but for the rest of their lives. Because of that, everything must work as smoothly as possible. We cannot afford any unnecessary friction and weary conflicts among the colonizers. Focus must always be on getting the colony to work. It is, of course, inevitable that disagreements still arise among the colonizers, but we must strive to make them as few as possible."

He cleared his throat again and looked around the table, and then continued:

"That's why we have carefully selected people who show good cooperation skills and good abilities to flexibly solve any conflicts that arise..."

He paused and glanced at Emma, and she could swear that he smirked at her.

"As one of our chief designers, Emma has all the qualifications needed to contribute to the development of the colony, at least if we look at her knowledge and merits. But, if we look at the requirements that we set based on personal and psychological characteristics, she should, in my opinion, never been given the opportunity to even join the colonizer's program from the beginning. Emma is showing major difficulties when it comes to collaborating with others. As soon as someone goes against her ideas, hell breaks loose and her way of resolving conflicts can be summarized in short by telling everyone to go to hell. The reason for still letting Emma through the eye of the needle has largely been due to the fact that, she after all, would be surrounded by socially flexible people and that they would alleviate her more aggressive appearance."

He made a short break, took a sip of water and continued.

"Anyway. My point is that we have accepted Emma's inappropriate personal qualities, as her qualifications were considered invaluable. And even I can accept that argument. But now there's new information on the table. We have from several independent sources got the information that Emma have said very inappropriate things about the colony's leader, Nikolai Kovalev."

He now turned directly to Emma.

"We can understand that you think Nikolai is unnecessarily critical of many aspects of the colony's structure. But he has been on Mars for over four years now and is doing everything he can to make the colony work. As the leader of this project, he does an invaluable job of preparing for the arrival of the civil colonizers, that is, for you. It's his job to be critical, because without his critical eye we ultimately risk human life."

Henry quieted, looked straight into her eyes and then said with a chilly voice, "Is there anything you want to add Emma?"

What does he want now? Maybe it's a trap? It wouldn't surprise me if he hopes that I will start yelling and acting out just to strengthen his argument, Emma thought bitterly.

She forced herself to sound as friendly and as resolute as she could and said:

"Yes Henry, it's true that I perhaps have expressed my dissatisfaction over the fact that Nikolai constantly complains about everything I do. After all, there is no end to his criticism. Very tiring, to say the least. But you don't have to take it so seriously. I may have whined a little over some things he said in the heat of the moment, but of course I respect Nikolai's opinions just as much as you do."

She looked around the table to see if anyone seemed to accept her explanation. But it was mostly neutral faces that looked at her, so she continued.

"You all know that I can be a bit temperamental, but you don't have to worry, I'll behave. I understand as well as you that internal conflicts are one of the greatest threats to the colony's existence, and I would like to point out that there's probably no one that cares about the colony as much as I do."

She smiled in the hope that they would soften a little.

But nobody said anything, and Henry stared at her with ice-cold eyes and then said,

"There's no doubt that you have the colony's best interest in mind. But when you, on countless occasions, say patronizing comments about Nikolai, at least I start to doubt whether we really have made the right decision to send you to Mars. Let me quote some of the things you have said about Nikolai only in the past year."

He picked up his tablet and read out loud, "That little rat doesn't know anything about air locks." "He should just shut up with his nagging about the solar panels' angle and position, no one has asked for that imbecile's opinions in the matter." And this is my favorite. "That bastard will answer to me as soon as I get there."

Emma recognized the sentences and there were probably several witnesses who could confirm what she had said. I'm done, she thought desperately. There is no way out of this. Henry has crushed my dream!

Henry continued with an almost triumphant tone:

"I think especially the last quotation is telling for the problem I'm trying to highlight. Emma's personality profile, her behavior and, above all, her statements indicate that she will inevitably confront Nikolai Kovalev as soon as she gets the opportunity. Therefore, I think we must consider recalling Emma from the mission. We cannot risk a serious conflict arising between Emma and Nikolai, as it in the end, may risk human life."

Henry looked around the table with a victorious smile. No one said anything, and Emma felt tears in her eyes and turned her face down in an attempt to hide it. The seconds went by, but then, suddenly she heard a familiar voice, Peter Erikson, head of ICL Electronics, and one of those who had always supported her through her career.

"Thank you, Henry! Your opinions are very valuable, as you address many of the important factors that we need to consider regarding the colony. A colony on Mars is an incredibly sensitive project, and we must of course try to shed light on every aspect that can jeopardize it. But I must emphasize that I think you are exaggerating the dangers of sending Emma. Emma and I have worked together for almost fifteen years, and I can certify that Emma has a temperament that some people maybe can experience as brusque or perhaps even aggressive. I have myself have received my own share of telling-off's over the years, but we still respect each other, and our cooperation is still intact and good. You make it sound like Emma has some kind of personality disorder and that she can't see her own faults and flaws. But I can assure you that Emma has always apologized when she has crossed the line, and she can always change her mind if it turns

out that someone else has presented a better solution to a problem. I also want to add that once you get to know Emma, she is a warm and compassionate person. She works hard, almost too hard, and she never gives up until a problem is solved. Those characteristics should be more than enough to let her come along for the journey. Emma is an important contributor to this project and having someone with her knowledge at the colony is in my opinion an absolute must. Emma is with her knowledge and her expertise, is an asset for all of us. We must not forget that a serious malfunction with, for example, ventilation, food supply and radiation protection, not only will create a few minor problems, but will risk the whole existence of the colony!"

Henry opened his mouth to answer, but Peter held up his hand to stop him and then continued.

"Wait a minute Henry! We already know what you think. As a representative of ICL Electronics, one of the largest suppliers and developers in this project, I would like to argue that I have the mandate to stop this stupidity here and now! We have invested huge sums of money in this project and we expect to get something back from this investment as well."

He turned to Michael.

"It would be very unfortunate if you chose to listen to Henry's arguments. ICL Electronics, as well as many of the other major investors, cannot demand anything other than sending our best personnel to the colony. We have an obligation to the shareholders, an obligation to all the people who have been working day and night for us to succeed, and above all we have an obligation to the colonizers, that we all do our best to succeed in the colonization of Mars. Emma is one of the key figures in this project. And if you take our money and our efforts seriously, I really hope you will find reason and follow our opinion in this matter."

Emma couldn't help smiling. She knew she was rescued. They would probably continue to discuss back and forth for a while, and Henry would certainly not give up without a fight. But his efforts would be meaningless as he now faced a superior opponent. In the end, it is always money that decides the verdict. It has always been like that. She had been saved by the safe embrace of the market economy. An investment must provide returns and she was a highly valued bet in the game to maximize this return.

Emma let her tablet discreetly slide down on her lap. I can just as well get some work done while they continue the discussion, she thought pleasantly and opened the drawings for the cultivation center at the colony.

### **Anna Anderson**

During the first eleven years of her life, Anna had always been able to fall asleep as soon as she put her head on the pillow. But now it was completely impossible. She had been lying in her bed for hours now, twisting back and forth while thinking about what would happen tomorrow. The next day, she, her brother Erik, her mom Helena and her dad Sven, would go up to the space station with the space elevator and then head off to Mars with a spaceship.

The idea of using an elevator to go into space was really staggering, but it was not the elevator that made her stay awake. It was the fact that she would leave Earth, probably forever. Out of thousands of candidates, her family had become one of the chosen ones to have the honor of colonizing the red planet.

Although no one had told her directly, she knew it could be a dangerous journey. But that wasn't what worried her. It was the fact that she would never meet her friends again. Each time she realized she would never see her best friend Lisa again, tears began to run down her cheeks.

And when she thought of her beloved grandmother and grandfather, she began to cry uncontrollably.

She pulled the blanket over her head to not awaken her brother who was sleeping in his bed on the opposite side of the small room. He didn't seem to be the least concerned about the fact that they soon would leave Earth forever. But on the other hand, he was four years younger than her and probably didn't understand what was awaiting them. In his childish mind, they were just participants in some sort of exciting adventure. He always talked about how big the spaceship was and how fast it was, and whether it had laser canons and whether they would meet aliens and so on. He seemed completely trapped in his fantasy world, inspired by countless space movies. But what could you expect from a seven-year-old boy? He was as he was, and even though he was the most annoying person she could think of, she liked him. And deep down, she was glad she had her brother. Without him, she would be completely alone in this.

Anna wiped away the tears, got out of bed and went to the only window in the room. She looked out through the dark windowpane but the only thing she could see was the diffuse reflection of herself. She thought she looked a bit like a ghost with her long blonde hair, her dark eyes and the white nightgown. Slowly she pressed her hand against the window, as if to make sure that there wasn't real ghost in front of her. She stood motionless for a few seconds, but then the enchantment faded away, and she quickly moved her hand down to the handle and opened the window at a glance. A cool breeze slipped into the room, and she focused on the sounds from the world outside the window. She heard crickets playing, leaves rustling in the wind, and the sound of small animals running around in the bushes. It felt comforting to stand there in the darkness, just listening to the sounds of the night.

She didn't know for how long she had been standing in front of the window, but suddenly she yawned, and a drowsy feeling came over her. Okay, maybe I should try to get some sleep now, she thought, and yawned again.

Anna sighed and crawled down under the blanket again. Maybe something good might come out of all this somehow? she thought and closed her eyes and felt a little tingle of expectation tickling in her stomach.

### **Sven Anderson**

Sven woke up as soon as he heard the first beep from the alarm clock. He quickly extended his arm and shut it off. The clock showed 06:00. It was really unnecessarily early, but he wanted plenty of time on this last day on Earth.

Next to him, Helena began to move under her blanket on and he immediately whispered in her ear, "Go back to sleep, I'll wake you up when breakfast's ready."

She muttered something inaudible, turned to her side and pulled the blanket over her head. Sven got up and quickly, put on the clothes that were hanging on the chair next to the bed and then went out into the kitchen. The coffee machine had already started according to the timer and he picked up a mug from one of the cupboards and waited for it to finish. After a few minutes the coffee was ready, and he filled up the mug.

At last, they were at the finish line. Years of waiting was over. For over two years, they had lived like "prisoners" here at the education center. First, they had been tested and evaluated in what felt like an eternity, and then, once they had been accepted into the colonizer program, they had been subjected to equally tedious preparations for the mission.

He took a sip of his coffee and smiled. He would soon be part of the greatest and most magnificent project in the history of mankind. Although mankind had made tremendous technological innovations over the past fifty years, such as the huge space wheel revolving around the Earth, the lunar base and the amazing space elevator, it was not near the technical achievements and economic sacrifices required to establish a full-scale colonization of Mars. Even though it was a bit silly, he could not help but feel proud that his family had become one of the chosen ones.

Sven went out into the living room and waved his hand in front of the window and the black glass slowly disappeared and revealed the world behind it. The sun had just gone up and the low light created long shadows from the few trees in front of the house. He let his gaze follow the road that led out of the housing modules area and then meandered out to the Savannah. The winding road led to the space elevator and later that day they would all be on their way up to space with it.

However, this was no regular Sunday trip for a couple of hours. Instead, it would take them five days to get up to the space station where the spaceship waited. But there would probably not be any problem passing time. The elevator was bigger than it looked at first sight and once they were inside, they could move quite freely around. There were sleeping areas for everyone, a large dining room, a number of smaller rooms, where you could look at the amazing view, and a communal living room. It was the perfect opportunity to hang out the other families and get to know them better.

They had of course already spent countless hours together, but it is not quite the same thing to hang out at the training center under constant supervision of the evaluation staff. Now they had the possibility to socialize freely and really get to know the people they would share the new world with.

Five spaceships, with about one hundred and fifty people in each, would leave Earth every two weeks. Luckily, we got to go with the first spaceship, Sven thought. It would have been unbearable to have to wait several months before we could...

His thoughts were interrupted by a weak voice behind him.

"Daddy!"

Anna came out from the bedroom and looked at him with sleepy eyes.

"Is it time to leave now?"

He knew that she very well knew that they wouldn't leave until later that day, but he played along in her fake memory loss.

"But pumpkin, it's more than half a day until we leave. They pick us up at around two and the departure isn't until four o'clock."

He went to the couch and sat down and clapped his hand in the pillow beside him.

"Come Anna, sit here with me!"

Anna smiled happily as she jumped up on the couch next to him. She loved the early mornings, just before the rest of the world woke up, as much as he did. Anna was a curious young girl and she often asked questions about everything between heaven and earth. And even if he tried to answer her to the best of his ability, it wasn't always easy to answer her questions. Her young mind still worked in an unfiltered way, that he, as an adult, no longer was used to. At the same time, he saw it as a challenge, and as a way of not getting stuck in narrow thought patterns.

Anna was thinking hard about something now, as she almost imperceptibly moved her lips in her attempts to formulate what she wanted to say.

"What's on your mind honey? " he said and stroke her arm gently.

"Well, I wonder," she began a bit cautiously, "will Erik and I share the same room on the spaceship?"

"But Anna, you already know that our family only get a small room at our disposal. Sure, it will be a bit crowded, but we can handle that, don't you think?"

Anna didn't seem convinced and Sven tried again.

"Do you remember when we were camping in the mountains last year? As I recall, we had no problem whatsoever living together in a tent that was much smaller than the room we will have on the spaceship."

"But Dad, it was only for three days!"

"Yes, but it's not that we will spend all our time together in our room. There are, after all, a living room, a dining room and an exercise room as well, so we will not walk all over each other. And it's not forever either. Don't you think that you can endure our presence for just seven months?"

"Yes maybe," Anna mumbled and continued with a low voice. "But how will it be when we come to Mars?"

"On Mars we will get our own apartment and you and Erik will get your own separate rooms. They will be small of course, but you will have your own place where you can hide from your brother if you want to."

Anna looked a bit happier when she thought about this and Sven smiled. We are going to another planet and all she's thinking about is how to avoid her brother as much as possible. It is almost ridiculous when you think about it. But on the other hand, it's how the human mind work. Whatever happens, it's always the small problems in everyday life that occupies our minds.

He put his hand on her shoulder and said in a tantalizing tone, "Well, have you packed everything you need for the journey? Have you made sure you haven't forgotten anything?"

"But Dad, it feels like I have been packing for weeks now, how can I have forgotten anything?"

"You never know, you might have forgotten your dear tablet, for example?" he said and smiled.

Anna shook her head.

"How could I forget my tablet? I need it to be able to vlog about everything that happens to me during the trip. All my followers would be very disappointed if I had forgotten it," she said proudly.

At first, he and Helena had been a bit hesitant when Anna started nagging about wanting to vlog on the trip. But most of the other children in her age had been granted permission by their parents to do so, so they had agreed to it in the end.

"Okay, pumpkin, I just wanted to remind you. It's not that we can go back later and fetch something that we forgot."

She frowned at him and he smiled back. He then glanced at the clock and said:

"Anna, we have a lot to do today. I'll fix some breakfast and, in the meantime, maybe you could see if you can get your brother out of bed? I'll call for you when breakfast is ready."

Anna sighed and reluctantly rose from the couch while she muttered, "Okay dad."

He followed her with his eyes as she walked towards the bedroom and then he picked up the little snow globe standing on the table in front of him. He shook it and watched for a few seconds how the tiny snowflakes singled around in the miniature landscape. Then he quickly put it down and walked with light steps towards the kitchen.

## The Beanstalk

"Can you please calm down in there!" Sven shouted.

In the children's room, there was some sort of fight going on. Even though Erik was only seven years old, he already knew how to tease his sister to the break of madness and surely, he had once again pushed it too far.

No reaction from the room, the loud voices continued. Sven hurried towards the room and stuck his head through the doorway. Anna sat across Erik's chest and held his wrists in a firm grip.

"Take it back!" she hissed.

Erik sneered at her and said, "No, never!"

Anna released one of Erik's wrists and started beating his shoulder, "Yes, you do!"

With a few quick steps, Sven arrived at the combatants and lifted Anna up and put her down on the nearest bed.

"Anna, what have I said about beating your little brother, you just don't do it!"

"But he..."

"No Anna, you both know what I have said about this!"

Tears began to run down Anna's cheeks.

"But Erik actually said..."

"Yes, I know that Erik like to mock you Anna."

He turned to Erik who still had a smirk on his lips.

"And you know you shouldn't tease your sister! Do you want us to leave your tablets here on Earth when we leave?"

It was, of course, an empty threat, but a seven-year-old couldn't possibly know that.

Erik immediately looked worried and said with a low voice, "No, Daddy, I want to bring it with me."

"Okay, listen to me, both of you! No more trouble now, otherwise we will leave both your tablets here on Earth."

It was perhaps a bit dramatic, but it had an effect. Both Erik and Anna spoke almost simultaneously and looked appealingly at him.

"We will behave daddy, we promise!"

"Okay, please try to stay calm now, it's not long until the bus arrives, and mom and I have to make a final check."

He felt a bit horrible. It was hardly right to threaten your children, but he didn't have the time to work it out with them right now, and threats always worked, at least so far.

He went out into the living room. Four smaller suitcases were open on the floor and Helena rested on her knees in front of them and folded some clothes. It was their hand luggage that they would carry with them during the trip. The rest of the luggage had been retrieved earlier in the day and they would not have access to it until they arrived on Mars. But there wasn't much they needed on the trip. Some personal belongings such as tablets, toiletries and a few outfits for each person. He went over to Helena and sat down beside her.

"Do you need any help?"

Helena answered with a slightly absent voice, "No, darling, there's not much left to do, I am just going through our bags one last time."

Sven stroked her back.

"Are you okay?"

She looked up and he saw that her eyes were red and glossy.

"Yes, I am okay, I just feel a bit sad. I think about all our friends that I will never see again and all the places..."

"It's the same for me honey," Sven interrupted. "But I try not to think about it. I just try to look ahead. We will experience so much new and exciting things together, you, me and the children. Focus on that instead if you can. I am sure it will make you feel better."

"Okay, you're right Sven, I'll try."

She kissed him on his cheek and tried to smile.

"Can you please check all the rooms one last time, just to be sure we haven't missed anything."

He knew they hadn't forgotten anything, as they had checked every room at least ten times. But it was just as good to do something to pass the time before they had to leave, and Helena seemed to want to be left alone.

"Of course, honey, I will make one last check." he said and smiled at her.

Helena waited until Sven had left the room. Then she carefully placed the little snow globe in her suitcase and closed it.

\*

The bus drove quietly and smoothly across the road that meandered through the grassy landscape. Outside, the African afternoon heat was pressing, and the trees and bushes seemed to almost vibrate in the heat. Inside the bus, however, it was cool and nice thanks to the air conditioning. The bus was packed, but despite that it was completely silent. Everyone seemed to be in their own thoughts, perhaps taken by the seriousness of the situation.

Sven had a seat by the window and looked dreamily towards the horizon. Everything looked as usual if it wasn't for the "beanstalk," as the space elevator was called by the locals.

He never really got used to the sight of a huge thick wire that just stretched up to the sky and then disappeared behind the thin clouds. If you were close to it and looked up, you got vertigo. It was as if the brain reacted in the only way it could come up with to something so unnatural.

As an engineer, Sven had studied the elevator project with great interest. In order to build the elevator, they had to overcome enormous technical problems. For a long time, the material of the wire had been the largest problem to solve. The material had to be strong enough to be able to carry both its own and the elevators weight right up to the geostationary path.

For a long time, the researchers worked on trying to produce coal-based nanotubes and they proved to be both strong and light. But unfortunately, not strong enough. The best nanotubes could perhaps handle 6,000 kilometers, which was nowhere close to the length they needed. Therefore, the project stood still for many years before they managed to produce nanotubes with a diamond structure. This time, the material proved to be strong enough to cope with the enormous stresses, but there was just one problem. It was too expensive to manufacture. At least initially. However, the researchers worked hard on finding cheaper and more efficient ways to produce the material, and finally they managed to bring down the manufacturing costs to more reasonable levels.

Luckily, they finally resolved it, Sven thought. Otherwise they would never had come as far with the Mars project as they had now. Probably only a few landings on the planet.

Now they could send spaceships away at a fraction of the cost compared to if they started from the ground. The spacecraft itself was anchored to the space station at the end of the cable, and, on departure, they could then utilize the centripetal force and save lot of fuel.

Sven noted that they were approaching the base station as the huge building was now showing behind the hills. Sven and Helena had been there several times, but not the children. They were both sitting in front of him with their faces pressed against the window and Erik turned to Sven and said, "Dad, I didn't think it would be *that* long, you can't even see the end."

Anna sighed heavily and shook her head.

"You moron, you don't understand anything. Of course, you cannot see where it ends, it's so far up in space you cannot see it."

Erik pressed his elbow into Anna's stomach and said, "You are a moron too!"

"Dad, did you see? He hit me!"

Anna demonstratively rubbed her belly and looked unhappy.

"Okay kids, calm down. Remember what I said earlier today. We can still leave some things back here on Earth if needed."

Both silenced and mumbled "sorry" while Helena leaned toward him and whispered in his ear:

"Don't threaten our children, they may get psychological scars for the rest of their lives."

"What should I do then?" he whispered back. "They don't listen otherwise."

"You could do what you said during all the interviews with your psychologist. That you always try to explain to your children what's right and wrong in a calm and methodical way."

She smiled at him.

"Ha-ha, very funny! What do you think I should have said? The truth? That they drive me crazy and that I sometimes would like to beat them when they don't listen?"

"If you had said that, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be on this bus now."

She held his hand and continued, "By the way, isn't that Emma Harrison over there? You know, the one who thinks she knows everything about almost everything?"

Sven recalled that Helena and Emma had an argument during a meeting a few months ago. Helena had pointed out something about the location of the various crops in the colony's enormous greenhouse and Emma had then instantly cut her off with a comment that she shouldn't talk about things that she hardly could know very much about.

"Yes, it's Emma. But didn't you know she was going with our ship?"

"Yes, of course I knew that! But I had also heard some rumors that she had made herself impossible with almost everyone on the board and that they didn't want to send such a troublemaker to Mars."

"I don't think they had any choice," Sven said. "From the very beginning, she has been one of the key figures in the construction of the colony, and her knowledge can be the difference between life and..."

He was interrupted by a voice in the speakers that said that they would arrive in two minutes and that they should remain in their seats until the staff let them out.

Helena released his hand and said, "You don't have to always be so practical and analytical. Can't you just be on my side without having to see everything through some sort of logical filter?"

"Eh, what do you mean? I'm always on your side darling. I just tried to guess why they actually kept her in the program. But enough about that... I listened to the weather report before we left.

The night will be completely cloudless, which means that we will have a fantastic view of the continent from the elevator."

Sven leaned against her and whispered, "Maybe we could sneak away to one of the private rooms after the children have fallen asleep? Just you and me alone watching the view?"

"Forget it Sven, anyone could find us there. I wouldn't want to risk humiliating myself just because you are horny."

"What? What do you mean? What is embarrassing about a married couple who admires the view together?"

"I know what you are thinking about! And stop smiling like that, you look like an idiot!"

She took his hand again and kissed him on the cheek.

"You have to wait until we have the opportunity to be more private."

"More private? We have no privacy until we arrive on Mars. That's seven months into the future!"

Sven made a sad face.

"Yes, yes, we'll see... but enough about that now. It seems like they're going to let us out now. Help me get the kids ready and check through all the seats to make sure we don't forget anything."

He sighed heavily and began to pick up their stuff.

"Certainly darling, I'll do that!"

Maybe he was logical and practical, but Helena was probably the worst control freak he knew.

## Anna

Why couldn't they just let them into the elevator, so they could leave? Anna felt like they had been in this dreary place for ages now. At first, they had been dragged around long boring corridors and then they had to sit in a large room and listen to an uninteresting speech from an old man from the United Nations. She and Erik had hardly been able to stay calm during the talk and Mom had told them to behave at least a hundred times.

But finally, they stood in the queue on their way into the space elevator and she felt butterflies inside her stomach. Erik held her hand in a hard grip. He actually looked a bit worried and she felt strengthened by taking on the role of the supporting big sister.

She glanced at her parents. Dad seemed happy and looked expectantly around the room. Mom looked more reserved, but there was really nothing strange about it. She was almost always worried about something.

They moved slowly forward and suddenly they were at the entrance. A woman formally asked what their names were, and then they had to write their names in a thick leather-bound book before they could move on.

After passing through an air lock, they entered a large room with scattered tables and chairs. There were already lots of people in there and Anna recognized most of them. She nodded to some of the children who were in her own age. However, no one came up and talked to her, instead they all kept close to their parents. I guess they are just as nervous as I am, she thought just as her dad suddenly tapped on her shoulder.

"Anna, you are a fast girl. Can't you try to take that table by the window before anyone else do. And take Erik with you too."

He pointed to a vacant table at the far side of the room.

"Okay Dad. Come on Erik, let's race! The one who finishes last is a pile of shit!"

Erik immediately started to run as fast as he could, and she followed him. It was not easy to get to the table because they had to zigzag through the crowd. Erik seemed to take the competition as a matter of life and death, and he didn't seem to care that he ran into people on the way. As usual, he wanted to beat his big sister. But she didn't care whether she won or lost and she decided to let him win this time. She held back her steps a bit, and when she arrived at the table, he was already there with his hands triumphantly in the air.

"I won, and you are a pile of shit!"

"Okay, you won, but a pile of shit can you be yourself!" she said, sticking out her tongue.

However, they hadn't been fast enough. A woman about mother's age sat at one of the chairs by the table. She had a stern look with her short-cut brown hair and equally brown dark eyes. The woman didn't seem to take any notice of them. She seemed to be in her own world, just staring at a tablet lying on the table in front of her. Anna was just about to grab Erik's hand to return to mom and dad when Erik said, "Anna, look, someone has taken our place!"

Anna wanted to sink through the floor and disappear. As usual, Erik understood nothing, and thought that just because dad said that they would take the table, it somehow was decided that it *was* their table.

The woman observed them with an annoyed look. She said nothing, and it was obvious she didn't want to be disturbed. Anna decided it was best to leave when the woman suddenly said, "Ah, you kids were planning to sit here?"

Anna really had no desire to talk to this sour woman and mumbled, "Yes, we thought that the seats weren't occupied."

"It's a big table, so there's enough space for all of us," the woman said and smiled at her.

Anna answered quickly, "No thanks! It is okay, we'll find another table."

She then turned around just to walk straight into her father's stomach.

"Watch out, Anna!" he said happily. But then he discovered the woman sitting at the table.

"Oh, the table was already occupied. Let's look for another table Anna," he said and started to look around the room.

The woman quickly said, "You can sit here. I don't mind."

She seemed to think for a short while and then continued, "Is your name Sven? I think I recognize you. Engineer if I remember correctly, or am I wrong?"

"Yes, that's right," he said with badly hidden pride and nodded at her. "Hello!"

"And here we have my children Anna and Erik," he continued and pushed Anna forward, as if to show her properly. Anna thought Dad just sounded ridiculous with an excessively nice tone in his voice.

"Hi, Anna and Erik," the woman said. "My name is Emma."

She reached out her hand and Anna unwillingly shook it. Erik refused to take her hand and just stared down at the floor.

"Yes, we'll sit here then, if it's okay with you? And by the way, this is my wife Helena."

Anna noticed that her mom looked very uncomfortable while she reached out her hand and mumbled a stiff "Hello." Then she immediately sat down in one of the chairs while lifting up Erik in her lap. Anna sat down in one of the other vacant chairs and tried to look as unaffected by the situation as she possibly could.

"What do you think Anna?" Emma suddenly said with an exaggerated, loud voice.

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