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Stowaway

A Story of Humanity's Journey to Mars

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Illustrated by Lily Judge



Three Months Before Launch

The hum of fluorescent lights mingled with the television in the corner and the blizzard outside, making it difficult for Jasper to hear what the reporter was saying. Some nonsense about the great effort everyone had put into the Mars Program, how it was an accomplishment regardless of who was selected. The reporter took out a small yellow envelope, opened it, and began reading off names: Sarah Khan, Douglass Emerson, Noriko Ogawa. The blizzard howled over the television and Jasper focused on the subtitles: Hans Zimmerhied, Jordan Wexler. Then, crawling across the flickering screen: Jasper Reynolds.

Launch

There is not a stowaway in the physical sense. There is no locker where the stowaway hides for the nine months it takes to arrive on Mars, no sneaking through the dark of the simulated onboard night, no whispered plotting with a benefactor among the crew. Instead, it hid itself from the glare of the selection committee during the years of preparation in the Antarctic, and now lies in the crevices of the social system that floats to Mars aboard *The Margo*, stowed away in dinner table conversations, radiation readings, and simulated emergencies. It emerges fleetingly in the poetry Jasper leaves at his bedside, and in the sketchpad Hans spends spare moments with. It whispers its name to Noriko, who pays it homage in swirling colors. It sings to the crew of the parts of themselves they were not selected for, the parts left unmentioned, the parts impossible to quantify. And it flies with all of them to Mars.

Month One

Hans' first moments aboard *The Margo* were awe-inspiring; nothing in all the years of training in the Antarctic had prepared him for what it would be like to step aboard a ship like this. The living space consisted of a huge drum, partially divided into rooms. It would reach a spin high enough to create pseudogravity for the crew, meaning the horizon curved up. Just being aboard seemed to give him new perspectives on everything: how the corners of rooms made weird angles with the walls, how small irregularities in the floor changed the gravity as one got closer to the center of the drum. His plans for the first settlement on Mars were mostly complete before launch, but so much more suddenly seemed possible. Hans had never been an unconventional architect. He had been chosen at least partially because of this, but everything seemed different aboard *The Margo*, on this journey that would culminate in living on Mars. And so, in the spare moments between tasks, Hans breathed new life into his plans for the first settlement on Mars.

The stowaway released the breath it had been holding

for years, through the Antarctic trials of selection, and began to unfurl.

Month Six

There were a total of sixty birds aboard *The Margo*, mostly robins and sparrows, as well as entire rooms filled with jumbled green oxygenators, including snake plants, weeping fig, and spider plants. Yet, it still felt barren and narrow to Noriko. The spacecraft was big enough to hold its crew, along with livestock, gardens, and a small amount of wildlife intended not only to create an artificial ecosystem onboard, but to give everyone the sense of being somewhere like Earth. But to Noriko, something was missing. Some sense of sky, or place. Fieldwork was essential to her career on Earth, as botany was not really an office job, and sitting still did not agree with Noriko. Now, she distracted herself from the claustrophobic feeling with a constant stream of lab work, splicing together different strains of weeping fig to maximize both its metabolism and survivability for the frigid temperatures of Mars. But she would add little twists of her own. She coaxed one strain into growing leaves with strange tie-dye patterns that shifted depending on the light, growing the plants until there was a room by her lab that would swirl in psychedelic color. She tampered with another until it produced new figs almost weekly. Neither of these were the reason Noriko had been chosen to go to Mars, but she reveled in their strangeness and the autonomy she found in the projects.

The stowaway took shape, and its manifold manifestations blossomed with Noriko's figs across the drum of *The Margo*.

Month Nine

The tension among the crew was palpable as they prepared to send the first of the landing shuttles down from orbit. The nine-month confinement aboard *The Margo* had yielded its share of disputes and depressions, and Jasper was eager for a change of scene. But he wished there was a better way of getting to the surface. The lander rattled and heaved during descent, like some great dying beast; it struggled to decelerate as the computer determined it was nearing the surface, then slowed to an almost imperceptible movement. With a final jolt, they landed. Jasper unbuckled himself and stood up, jumping slightly. He ran through the landing protocol as though he were sleepwalking and finally opened the lander door, taking one clumsy step, then another, then another until his boots hit the surface of Mars and he was staring out toward the too-close horizon, the alien bright orange of Noachis Terra, home now.

The stowaway emerges too, and absorbs the orange, cratered surface of Mars, colors and verse swirling around inside it, whispering, dancing, ready to unleash its creativity.