

# The Inevitable Next Step

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Two hundred ten days, eight hours, fifty-seven minutes, and thirty-eight seconds. A hell of a long time to be in space. Not that anyone was counting.

Vibrations faded as the repulsion engines shut down. The sense lingered, a reminder of the brief, but intense descent to the surface. Those five or so minutes had been the most dangerous of the entire voyage, but also the most fun. Nothing had gone wrong and Fable Devine was almost disappointed. Almost.

“Meissner, systems report.” Fable saw no alarms on her visor’s HUD, but her flight engineer, Walther Meissner, monitored every minute detail on the lander.

Silence. Fable sighed.

“Meissner, talk to me man.”

“I am still in the process of checking all diagnostic readouts.”

“I know, and I’m sure there are plenty of them. Just give me the quick story. Can we all get the hell off this ship?”

“Preliminary results show all systems fully functioning, but I cannot be certain until—”

“Good enough, we’re going. Everyone, unclip and make for the main hatch.”

Relieved sighs echoed through the headset. Fable wasn’t surprised; prolonged spaceflight was brutal. No one liked it. Well, maybe Meissner, but he was a special case.

Fable pressed oversize buttons with her gloved fingers. Her harness straps released with a satisfying snap, lifting pressure from her chest and shoulders. She was free. Smiling, Fable sat forward and stood up.

The interior of the lander swam. Fable bounced off the bulkhead and spun to the ground.

Her suit cushioned the blow, but it still hurt. She lay still on the floor, but the ship didn't stop swimming. Fable closed her eyes and put a hand to her helmet. For a moment she lay there, overwhelmed by dizziness.

Damned gravity.

Fable opened her eyes again. It wouldn't do for the commander to stay down. Careful this time, she rolled over and pressed back to her feet, clutching the wall for support. Embarrassed, she ran through excuses in her mind as she turned to face her crew.

They were all lying on the floor. Akio and Don were tangled up on the far side. Lifan was on her back, rolling back and forth like a fallen turtle. A wet gurgle sounding suspiciously like vomit came from Meissner's channel.

Fable bit her lip, but couldn't hold back. She broke into a hearty laugh. Oh this was going to be fun.

"Welcome to Mars folks. First step's a doozy."

"Shut it Devine," said Akio.

Fable chuckled until a wave of nausea hit her stomach. She held the bile in; she was not going to throw up. Still, the malaise lingered as she worked her way to the center of the circular cabin. This was going to take some adjustment.

According to physics, gravity on Mars was weak, less than 40% of Earth's pull, but after the zero-gee trip it felt plenty strong to Fable. Now she felt exactly how heavy her legs were; each step was a challenge. Yet the exercise regimen on the flight paid off. Fable staggered around her chair to the central hatch.

She pulled the hatch open to reveal the ladder to the chamber below. Tentative, she found her footing on the rungs. Gripping the handrail, she lowered herself down. Her crew was still struggling to stand, but she was too eager to wait for them.

She set foot on the cargo chamber floor. Crates filled with supplies for their mission crowded the walls, but right now Fable only cared about the exterior hatch. She shuffled across the chamber, footsteps growing more certain. The hatch was huge rectangle designed to fit both personnel and equipment. Next to it was the control console, blinking green.

“Tito, open the exterior hatch.”

“Opening Dr. Devine,” said a smooth British voice. She had Akio to thank for that. Last week she’d shared that she found the accent sexy. Now everyone knew. Of course, British Tito was pleasant; if Akio wasn’t careful he’d have some competition as her lover.

Vents hissed as the interior started equilibrating to the surface pressure of Mars. This was a frustratingly slow process, but necessary to safely open the hatch. Fable took the opportunity to change frequencies to Dr. Jason Davidson, prime commander at the Mars base colony.

“Jason, it’s Fable. Against all odds we’ve made it here safe and sound. Heading your way now. You got a doorbell to ring?”

“Alas Fable,” the physicist’s voice rang out strong, “The thing’s broken. It’s been some time since we’ve had visitors.”

No fooling. Thirty six years was a hell of a long time to last in isolation. Of course that hadn’t been the original plan, but no one had expected the chaos of the Climate Wars. Earth had been too busy dealing with its own problems to spare any attention for the red planet.

Davidson had done surprisingly well to keep the colony going all this time. The original mission had always intended to develop a self-sufficient habitat, but no one had expected it to actually work.

“All right, well I’ve got another five to add to your ranks. That’ll be enough to call a city.”

“A proper metropolis I should think. Come on over as soon as you can. And make sure to bring the whole crew—I want to congratulate them in person.”

“You got it, see you soon.”

Fable tuned back to her crew’s frequency.

“...told you I wouldn’t throw up.” That was Don Stringer, their medical specialist.

“You also told me you loved me,” said Lifan Yu. “If I’d known you had such a thing for Akio...”

“Oh come on, it’s not my fault he fell on top of me.”

“I fell on you?” asked Akio. “That’s not how I remember it.”

Fable smiled. Despite the grueling trip, morale was as high as ever. This crew had been selected wisely. It took a special person to come all the way to Mars and she was looking at four of them. Even Meissner made his way down the ladder, the last of the crew to exit the command chamber. As he set foot on the floor, the exterior hatch rolled aside and the boarding ramp lowered.

“The hatch is now available for surface exit,” said Tito.

“You heard him, we finally get to set foot on solid ground. Follow me.”

Fable lead the way down the ramp, which someone had wisely constructed with a handrail. Her eye took in the scene ahead. Mars was called the red planet for good reason, rich red rock stretched as far as the eye could see. Overhead the sky was dark, much darker than on Earth. It was stark, sterile, empty save for plains and rising mountains. Fable had never seen anything so beautiful.

At the bottom of the ramp Fable paused, savoring the moment. She’d never forget this, her first moment on a new planet. And to think she was only the twenty fourth human ever to set foot here. She was part of history. Pride swelling, she planted her white boot in the red soil.

A few hundred meters ahead sat the outbuildings of the Mars colony. They were nestled at the foot of a mountain. Behind them, the long-term living quarters were embedded beneath the rock.

With a bubble of happy energy in her chest, Fable set off for the nearest structure. She had to take it slow without walls or railing for support, but she refused to fall. This was a moment of glory.

Ahead the outbuildings grew larger. They were functional, not pretty, little more than a series of white boxes tied together. Strewn around the complex were solar panels, a couple surface rovers, and a few empty cargo boxes.

A little untidy, Fable thought, but hey, who was she to criticize. Support had been cut off for decades. She had no idea what they'd been through to make it this long.

Now at the front door, Fable pulled the release lever. Nothing happened. Perhaps sand had gotten into the latch. She tried again, this time tugging a little. Still nothing. Fable frowned. This couldn't be right. She switched over to Davidson's channel.

"Jason, something's wrong. The door isn't opening."

"Oh, yes that. I forgot to mention the outbuildings are under maintenance. Everyone is locked out. Come directly to the main complex. It's right around the back."

Locked out for maintenance? Fable had read every colony report and none mentioned anything about recent work. She stepped back and tuned to her crew's channel.

"Lifen, are these buildings ever locked during maintenance?" Lifen Yu was their habitation engineer and knew the most about Mars infrastructure.

"No way, these buildings always have open access, for emergencies if nothing else. Besides, locking out doesn't help with any maintenance."

An uneasy feeling settled into Fable's stomach and this time it wasn't nausea. They'd all trained hard and sacrificed years for this mission. She'd thought them ready for anything, but now she wasn't so sure.

She switched back to Davidson.

"Okay, just give us a few minutes to catch our breath then we'll be right over. Been awhile since we've had to walk."

"Oh, even I can remember that transition. Take your time, no need for anyone to get hurt."

"Right, thanks."

Fable switched to just her crew.

"Akio, can you get us in?"

"As long as the door is still powered, yeah, shouldn't be a problem."

“Do it, and hurry.”

Akio cocked his head, but obeyed. He opened a flap next to the door and plugged a special cable into the receptacle. This gave network access directly to his suit.

“Send in a bypass package.”

He spoke to Tito, the AI networked back on the lander. Fable watched his lips move, lips she knew quite well. She admired the concentration on his handsome face as he directed Tito through the process. Akio knew software systems better than anyone she’d ever met. She had no doubt he’d be able to override the lock.

Still she wondered why this was even necessary.

“Got it,” said Akio as the door popped open.

Fable stepped through first. Inside was dark, unlit. No signs of any maintenance personnel.

“Akio, get the lights on.”

“Sure boss.”

A moment later, the lights burst to life to reveal chaos.

Fable’s breath caught. The inner airlock door hung askew, dented. The complex wasn’t pressurized. Beyond spare parts were strewn about, as if a child had thrown a tantrum with his toys.

“Fable.” Jason Davidson’s voice intruded over her headset. “I told you, those are under maintenance. I apologize for the mess, but please leave it alone.”

“Jason, what’s going on? There’s nothing about this in any of your reports.”

“Just come to the main complex and I’ll explain everything.”

The lights turned off.

“Akio?”

“It’s not me, someone cut off power to the complex.”

“Shit, everyone stay outside. Something’s wrong. I’m going in.”

Fable clicked on her headlamp. The light was weak compared the overheads, but it was enough. She picked her way forward, stumbling through the junk. Soon the corridor widened to the central room.

Fable swung her light back and forth. Junk covered most of the floor, but her lamp landed upon something else, a large shape slumped in a chair. Fable darted over, heart pounding. She already knew what she would find, but she had to see it up close. Her clumsy hands spun the chair around.

“Don, get in here now,” Fable called, though it was much too late for the medic.

Before her was seated corpse, well-preserved in the sparse Marian atmosphere. A young man, wearing work clothes, eyes peacefully shut.

But there was nothing peaceful about the dried blood stain on his shirt.