

"You probably don't realize," Dr. Albert finally said, his voice unchanged, his eyes still staring sightlessly at the screen, "just how devastating that moment was. To get a message telling us ~~that somehow~~ the entire world had destroyed itself. Everyone and everything you cared about just irradiated and burned away."

Dr. Albert's voice cracked, and a tear ran down his cheek. "To then listen to your ~~friends on Earth...~~ people you had trained with, laughed with, spent more time with than your own family~~...~~, and know they're going to die. Wishing all the while that you could trade places with them."

Commented [BP1]: I added this because it was ambiguous enough that readers could think Dr. Albert was talking about his friends on the Demeter crews, not his friends from NASA on Earth.

Neo shifted, oddly aware of his hair gently brushing the low ceiling. He'd never seen Dr. Albert break like this.

They didn't know any specifics, but Neo knew the bedtime story. Something had happened on Earth twenty years ago. The two crews, ~~one~~ already on Mars and the other seven months into their eight-month trip, ~~one~~ guessed, based on sporadic and garbled transmissions, that nuclear war had broken out. On September 15th, 2063, they'd received their last message wishing them good luck, ~~saying~~ Godspeed, and expressing a hope that humanity would do better on Mars than it had on Earth.

Commented [BP2]: This added word is just to make the structure of this list grammatically parallel.

Then Earth had gone quiet.

September 15th. Blackout Day.

A day that, ~~this year,~~ also coincided with a close approach to Earth.

After Earth went quiet, the astronauts had frantically contacted the Peary Crater base on the Moon, hoping they could still get through to someone. Earth, however, ~~had been~~ was silent to them as well. The lunar base relied on resupply missions and only had provisions for three months. If civilization had destroyed itself, then they were in serious trouble.

They stretched out their supplies and hung on to hope for nine months, but then they, too, were gone.

Neo remembered begging his parents to tell him the story. And they had. Night after night. He'd wanted to know about their families on Earth, imagining with excitement what it was like to have brothers and sisters to play with. He hadn't realized then what he must have put ~~his parents~~ them through. Now, those memories filled him with guilt for making them relive their losses with every retelling.

"You're right," Neo said softly, and Dr. Albert finally looked up at him. "I don't understand how devastating it was. Not to you, my parents, or the others. But you couldn't have done anything."

The lines on Dr. Albert's face deepened as he scowled, his teeth clenched. "I could have been with them. My family. My wife and children. I should have been with them. I'm a botanist. I should've been helping solve the food supply problems on Earth. I know that was what started it."

~~Neo rubbed his chilly arms.~~ True, ~~if~~ there had been a food shortage on Earth, brought on by rising temperatures and extreme weather. However, there

Commented [BP3]: Here, I've added this action from Neo to keep us grounded in the current moment a little more and give readers a better sense of how he feels about this argument.

was no evidence that the shortage had been~~was~~ the spark. They Demeter
crews knew next to nothing of what had happened, ~~but~~ Neo decided not to
bring it up. It would only lead to an argument.

"I'm sure Earth's botanists would've appreciated the help, but what you
were doing was good too," Neo said. "You were going to colonize another
world."

"We weren't here to colonize Mars," Dr. Albert snapped, glaring at Neo.
"We're scientists, not pioneers. We came to run experiments. To gather data. We
came to see if Mars could be colonized. By others. In the future. Not by us."

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He paused, looking down at the floor, his shoulders slumping as the anger
gave way to an invisible, crushing weight.

"I shouldn't have been on the mission."

"From what I heard," Neo said slowly, "you were the best botanist in the
program."

"Consider your sources, kid. Your dad, the mission commander, thinks
every member of his crew is the best in the program. Always has. It's part of
being the mission commander." He shook his head. "No, I wasn't the best. Stan
was. He could almost turn rocks into bread. The only one better than him was
Jesus himself. Stan should have been on this mission. Then He would have
survived then. He wouldn't be sitting in his own filth and despair, ignoring the
greenhouses and threatening everyone's lives."

Commented [BP4]: This line was lacking a little bit of intensity to justify tears in the next few lines, so I've added a bit that hopefully shows more of Dr. Albert's bitterness and shame.

Tears were flowing steadily down the older man's cheeks now, and Neo understood the weight that pressed them out. He had felt that weight his whole life.

"I'm sorry," Neo said, blinking to keep his own tears away.

"What are you sorry for? You weren't there. You weren't even alive when the crew was put together."

"No, but I've... complicated things."

"~~Oh really? What, B~~because we had to scrounge up stuff to build you your own EV suit? Kid, you are probably the greatest achievement of this entire disaster. You are proof that humans can survive on Mars and create something. Even your name means 'new.'"

"Then why weren't ~~there~~ other children born? Why was I the only one?"

~~Neo asked,~~ The question hunchanging in the cool air, as a tear finally escaped down ~~Neo's~~his cheek. He knew the answer. "Mars's atmosphere alloweds too much radiation to pass through objects, even the concrete walls of the habitat.

That combined with malnutrition, and... "Dr. Jayden was surprised that I made it. Perhaps if I wasn't here, we wouldn't be so short on food."

"Dr. Jayden Thomas," Dr. Albert said, correcting Neo's informal use of the doctor's name, "is probably right. Still, you represent something. And the quantity of food is only part of the problem. The bigger problem is quality. Remember what I said? We're scientists, not colonists. The plants we brought werewas a random sampling. A—a test to see which would survive and

Commented [BP5]: "Oh, really?" sounds more sarcastic than confused.

Commented [BP6]: This exposition felt a little too heavy-handed because Dr. Albert knows this information just as well as Neo. But also, if my bit about the concrete walls was inaccurate or doesn't work with what you intended, feel free to change that!

produce. We didn't plan on having to eat and live off ~~of~~ them. Our doom was laid out long before you were around."

"That's not the only reason I've complicated things. You asked before why I care about Blackout Day. I don't care about it. Everyone else hopes that Earth is still intact. But Mars, Habitat-A, that's all I've ever known. Dr. Jayden... ~~Dr. Thomas,~~ Neo ~~said,~~ correct~~ed~~ing himself, "worryes that if we ever get back to Earth, I may not survive."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Look at me," Neo said, almost laughing. "I'm almost eight feet tall. I have no muscle to speak of and my bones aren't as dense as yours. Plus, I have a dozen other conditions ~~in~~with different organs, all because I've spent my entire life in one-third Earth's gravity. ~~I'm a Martian.~~"

Neo had never hated that word so much. He'd pushed these thoughts away, ~~D~~distracting himself. Forcing himself to smile and go on. Pretending to hope. But the worries had haunted him. Neo stepped over the dirty laundry, glancing at the scattered pictures ~~as he walked through the room,~~ before sitting next to Dr. Albert on the bed. Dr. Albert watched but didn't object. Neo could now see what was on his laptop's screen. A woman, smiling and standing next to a much younger Dr. Albert.

"That isn't even what worries me the most," Neo said, wiping away another tear. "Both of my parents have families on Earth. They have other children. What if my dad's family or my mom's family survived? What if they

Commented [BP7]: Consider adding some small action/body language from Neo either before or after this sentence to add more of his emotions to this moment.

Commented [BP8]: I love this moment! It's so sad how alienated Neo feels even though he's technically home.

want what they had before? My family exists here. Dr. Jayden, Sakura, Felicia, ~~and~~ everyone here is my family. What happens to it if Earth answers our transmission? What happens to me if Earth survived?"

Silence fell between them again, and Dr. Albert looked at him with a soft expression that Neo was sure he'd never seen before.

"Blackout Day is painful," Neo said. "But one botanist wouldn't have been able to solve the world's hunger problems. You being there wouldn't have saved your family. And I—I can't do anything to change gravity or my family situation. The others hold on to Blackout Day because it gives them hope. I want it to mean that to me, too. ~~I~~ Hope that I'll actually get to see Earth. Hope that my family won't die here on Mars or fall apart on Earth."

"You talk about hope like it is a simple decision."

"It's not though. Is it?"

Dr. Albert paused, studying Neo. "No."

~~Neo shifted his long, angular legs, trying to find a position that didn't trample Dr. Albert's belongings or turn his seat into a squat.~~ The future promised to be terrifyingly difficult. The habitat was failing, and they had no way of repairing it. If they ~~Demeter crews~~ couldn't get help from Earth, they would meet the same fate as the lunar base. ~~And~~ ~~if~~ they ~~miraculously did get~~ help from Earth, Neo knew ~~that~~ his life would change. He would face pain, disability, and death at the hands of Earth's merciless gravity. Worst of all, he would likely

Commented [BP9]: You don't have to keep this if you don't want to, but I think we needed a moment here to allow Neo's emotions to come through in body language again. Plus, I love the image of this crazy tall teenager sitting next to a normal-sized adult on a bed as they connect and empathize for the first time.

face it alone and separated from his family. A family that would likely break up on reentry.

The last few years had felt flat, empty, and lifeless. ~~As~~ much like the images of Mars once had. Much like the images of Earth still did. He'd let his fear and anxiety make his choices for him, robbing him of the wonder he used to find in the world. The choice was not about caring or not caring. It wasn't even about what was going to happen. It was simply, "Do I have hope?"

Neo brushed his fingers along the sleeve of his father's sweater. It took him back to the steady, soothing motions he used to sweep the dust off the solar panels outside the habitat. His job, his place among the Demeter crew.

Suddenly, ~~And~~ Neo smiled. He did feel a spark of hope. It was frail, but it was there. A ~~a~~ hope that things wouldn't be as bad as he imagined if he ever got to Earth. Somewhere on that planet, there would be a job for him, a place to belong. A place to clear his own path out of the dust and fill it with the warm rays of the sun.

Just acknowledging that sliver of hope's ~~presence~~ drove away some of the desperate futility that usually clung to edges of Neo's ~~his~~ mind. The weight he'd been carrying felt lighter, like he and Dr. Albert were sharing it, at least for the moment.

He wiped away another tear and cleared his throat as he stood and walked back to the door.

Commented [BP10]: Could you add a line here telling an example of one of these choices Neo let his fear and anxiety control? For instance, maybe he and his parents used to play a card game every night before bed, but he'd stopped playing so often because it always made him worry about when he might lose those moments. It would probably help to have a hint of this (whatever example you choose) earlier too. For instance, if we go with the card game idea, maybe he sees the cards out on the table where everyone is gathered (although no one would be playing), and he could feel guilty for a moment that he didn't play the game last night even though he'd known his parents really wanted a chill game with him on the night before Blackout Day.

Adding this little bit of evidence will really help readers believe this shift in Neo. Up to this point, we've seen how much Neo really cares about his family, but we haven't seen how his worry of losing them has affected his and others' happiness. Obviously we can't show everything that Neo has struggled with for the past few years in a short story, but we can show one manifestation of it with an example like I suggested above.

Commented [BP11]: Previously, this moment felt really brushed over and unearned because we couldn't see what Neo actually had hope in or for. I was trying to think of what sort of movement Neo could use to give us something more tangible to work with, and then I had this idea of bringing back his beginning moments with brushing off the solar panels. You're totally welcome to change up what I've done here, of course. This is one of the key character moments to the story when Neo overcomes his biggest inner obstacle, so you should make sure the changes I've made fit within the vision of your story.

"We've already sent the message. If a reply comes, it could come within the next few minutes. We'd like you to join us, if you can."

Neo actually hoped, for the first time in his life, that Dr. Albert would. An understanding, a sense of shared pain, passed between them in the darkness. Then Neo ducked out of the room.

He didn't stop at the greenhouses, choosing instead to return to the command room. He still felt anxious. His worries racing around his brain. Returning and being with the others, facing the day with them, was a simple choice, but it felt good to make it.

Samantha still sat at the computer console when Neo reentered the command center. She **tapped the edge of the console as she anxiously** watched the clock and power reserves, her plate of food forgotten and cold. Brian stood next to her, finishing his plate of sweet potatoes, lima beans, **steamed squash**, and raisins. The others sat around the long table, talking in subdued tones over already empty plates.

Returning to Earth had always been an unknown that loomed in the back of Neo's mind. As difficult as it would be, Neo had to hope that Earth would respond. Regardless of what it meant for him, he didn't want his family to lose hope. He didn't want to see them die.

"How long has it been?" Brian asked.

Samantha glanced at the clock again. "Thirty-five minutes."

"Send the message again."

Commented [BP12]: Just trying to "show" rather than "tell" here.

Commented [BP13]: Is the squash the only vegetable that's steamed? Why not the sweet potatoes and lima beans?

“Pavonis Mons, Habitat-A to NASA, ~~—~~do you read?”

Neo grabbed a plate and filled it with ~~sweet potatoes and other~~ vegetables. He could have sat anywhere, joined any of the conversations. But for this Blackout Day, **Neo wanted to be near his mother and father.**

While others tried to smile and share memories of Earth, ~~of~~ family, and friends, his mother was always quiet on Blackout Day. Neo, however, knew she was thinking about her three other children, Lucas, Evelyn, and Charlotte. Talking about them was never easy for her. She loved their white-blond~~e~~ hair and reminisced about how the girls would sit for hours and play dolls and how Lucas was notorious for bringing garden snakes and small frogs into the house.

Commented [BP14]: I think this moment will be even more powerful with those potentially added bits earlier of him avoiding them because of his anxiety.