



2375 Return to Earth

“Hey guys, come and look at this. I think it may be important.” Pavel Chomsky waved excitedly to his colleagues. They were all members of the inter-galactic archaeology team from Settlement Alpha on Mars. They were excavating in the city of Cambridge and were in a chamber under what had been the Cavendish laboratory. They were trying to fathom why Earth had become a dead planet in the twenty-second century. Their ancestors had left voluminous records on the chain of events leading to the total loss of viable habitats for all animals and plants but there were still some intriguing unanswered questions.

First, all species of insect had gradually died out and without this vital link the food chain had collapsed. Pavel’s colleague, the biologist Marco Biondi had briefed them all on the three week flight from Mars on the fundamental role of insects. “Every buzzing, crawling and hovering insect is a cog in the ecological machine.”

Pavel knew about their vital role as pollinators. Without insects crops can’t reproduce and humans and animals lose key food sources. He was also aware that they are food providers for birds, bats and fish and that they decompose animal and plant waste. He was unaware of their other two important functions as pest controllers and soil engineers.

“Yes,” Marco elaborated, “By feeding on crop-threatening pests, predatory insects perform the role of non-chemical pesticides....And termites and ants can transform soil in hot dry climates. Their tunnelling aerates hard ground helping it retain water.”

From their history lessons they knew that the huge loss in insect populations had caused all countries to stockpile food. With the inexorable decline in food production and the rapid depletion of these stocks World War Three had broken out between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. Countries fought over remaining food and water supplies. Billions died from starvation and from nuclear fall-out. From 2225, once the hyper space propulsion technology had been proven, huge transports had been ferrying people from the richest countries on Earth to the rapidly growing biosphere colonies on Mars. These colonies started as independent national entities. Once the last link with Mother Earth had been severed in 2265 the colonists realised that their only hope of survival was to pool resources and brain-power and create an integrated trans-national society.

From then onwards the Mars Federation had grown and prospered. For the past few decades it had been sending teams back to Earth on exploratory missions. Pavel’s group was tasked with investigating the early 2020’s when a pandemic had caused major fractures in

the established world order. Repeated failures to produce effective vaccines for the constantly mutating virus had led to increasingly hysterical reactions as countries closed their borders and developed a siege mentality.

Then the insects started to disappear. Why?

Pavel had in his hand a dusty research paper dated December 2023 with the title **'MUTANT STRAIN OF COVID 19 CAUSES INSECT DEPOPULATION.** Scrawled across the front page was the supervisor's comment, *'Brilliant work. God help us!'*

500 Words