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Warnings We Do Not Heed

23 December 2024

4, 079 Words

## **Make Room for Space**

Jane Granger quietly calculated the time left till the end of the world. Twenty-five minutes before the missing cosmonauts, Doug Drawings and Amanda Burles, were officially classified as past due -- their deadline come and gone with Mission Control Director George Stample beside himself with anger. Another fifty minutes for the onsite cosmonauts, those who'd checked in on time, to finish suiting up and be seated in their individual New Glenn Personnel Carrier Protective Pod Transportation Systems. Thirty-five minutes securing all twelve astronauts within their pods. Forty to transport and then properly connect each pod into the Aldrin Carrier Rocket. Another two hours verifying each pod, system, stage, rocket and guidance system were in the green. Fifteen more for Mission Control redundancies ensuring every green was, in fact, green. And finally, Stample's burly, "She's a go!" sparking one full minute of countdown. Engines fire for fifteen seconds, maybe twenty, as the nuclear powered Gemini boosters defy gravity and lift all off the ground. Another thirty ticks for those powerful engines to propel the New Glen Capsule into high atmo. And then *BOOM! BANG and KABOOM!* Explosion lighting up the sky with an atomic fireball so bright, the night sky becomes day horizon to horizon. Then darkness as NASA's Neptune space program plummets, crashing back down in pieces to the planet's surface below. The whole world watching. All hope gone! No more mission.

*No more mission! Jane smiled, No more Stample. No more Neptune. Hell, maybe even no more NASA. People will have to deal with the planet we're on – they won't have any other alternative. No more self-proclaimed saviors with deep pockets insisting he should ride along on the very rocket he paid for. And then this overpopulated world will have to accept the sisterhood's population control measures rather than put their faith in one man's science fiction fantasy to save them. In just another two hundred and eighty-six minutes and forty-five seconds, if I converted the math correctly in my head. Not much time considering the years spent trying to end this god-complex charade we call the NASA Human Migration and Relocation Program -- and that one SOB's efforts to gobble up all of Earth's natural resources just to fulfill his boyhood dream of becoming Captain Kirk. Which was, let's admit it, just a substitute for his arrogant and unquenchable ego.*

"Any word from Mr. Drawings or Ms. Burles?" Stample growled, opening up his comm for everyone to hear and interrupting Jane's thoughts. She glanced over at the General standing at the director's station. And not for the first time, in his military uniform, rocking on his heels, looking out over the control floor, head up, jaw firm, hands clasped behind his back, did she realize Stample looked the epitome of Captain Bligh overseeing his operation -- completely unaware of the mutiny to come.

"Still no contact, sir," Jane replied. "They are confirmed in absentia." *And should remain so if the agents I hired are as capable as my contact assured me they would be.* Jane took a beat to clear several status reports scrolling in from various departments so they wouldn't clutter Stample's visual displays. She knew Stample didn't appreciate the images or the chatter -- he was a big picture kind of boss who expected results from his people and didn't tolerate whining engineers or insecure technicians anxiously worrying over their assignment progress. Jane, as Stample's second in command, was the filter who handled all those vital details so he could maintain his stoic vigil over the inaugural

launch to Neptune and planets beyond. She watched over everything, which, some whispered, though not loudly, she was both better at and more effective in.

"Have we triangulated Mr. Drawings or Ms. Burles' beacon chips? Initiated emergency contact protocols?" Stample asked.

"Joel from Communications...."

"Joel?"

"Engineer Egan with Communications confirms active alerts force broadcasted every thirty seconds since 0500 hours this morning to their body chips, but have yet to make any contact. Additional diagnostic tracking has also been in the negative. Egan believes either Drawing and Burles' beacons have been disabled, or their port chips physically removed along with their intercellular low jack implants. He also states an inability to triangulate their biometric signals on planet due to output dead zoning absorbing or muting his alerts. Analysis suggests such shielding is due to a higher level of technical proficiency than your local IT clerk. And therefore a coordinated effort by as yet unknown operatives."

"Your assessment then, Granger?"

"No contact under present circumstances suggests impedance with possible conspiracy and/or collusion. Meaning neither Drawings nor Burles should be expected to return by deadline and, for all intents and purposes, considered compromised or incapacitated."

"I'm in agreement. Notify and prep the alternates immediately for inclusion within the main mission."

"Without delay, sir." *I started planning this years ago, you old bastard, Jane thought, of course they'll be included.*

Jane touched her Sharp's blue-wave receiver and turned up the volume to listen to some chatter between two launch pad engineers talking to a couple of dressing room technicians. But the chatter was only a bit of good natured ribbing between the two departments over who was the more proficient. And who would buy the first round at the off base crew bar when they were done.

"Montiel! Perez!" Jane barked.

All chatter stopped immediately. "Ma'am?"

"Oliveras and Mottle are green for go. Get them suited up and in place. Drawings and Burles have been scrubbed." Jane didn't mind the crew having a little on duty fun. She knew it helped build camaraderie. Which was fine as long as Stample didn't overhear – he was a real by the book, stick shoved far up his ass kind of boss. Which didn't always get the best out of people. But Granger knew this crew were good at their jobs, respected the chain, and kept their focus. So she cut them slack whenever she could. "I also will need a time assessment estimating how long to make the necessary changes without delay. And Perez...."

"Ma'am?"

"If you're even one second late, you're not only going to buy the first round of margaritas tonight, but you'll be serving them in your jockey shorts with your ass hanging out! You hear me?!" The crew's laughter was barely contained.

"Yes ma'am! No delays, ma'am! We anticipated the possibility when Drawings and Burles weren't in the pre-flight que. So I had Tony pre-prep Oliveras and Mottle's pod. We'll move Oliveras and Mottle in now and be ready on time and on your order."

"Good man!" Jane replied. "Excuse me, Director Stample."

"Go."

“Technician Perez confirms alternates Maria Oliveras and Richard Mottle are up and active, briefed and engaged, suited, miked, and will be moved into position on your orders. Pod insertion will be on time and on schedule.”

“Good. Any anomaly with new pod integration?”

“No, sir. My displays show both alternates are fully A & O times four. All equipment likewise five by five and fully functioning.”

“Good,” Stample replied shifting his gaze briefly to Granger’s control panel desk, noting with pride how much busier and cluttered they were than his own. *She always was a quick study*, he thought appreciating how efficient Granger was. *She knows her stuff. I believe she would’ve made an excellent replacement – which I suppose I should’ve told her years ago. It might’ve made a difference. But it’s too late now and not a good practice to spoil subordinates. They tend to grow entitled when you do.*

Stample knew he ran a tight ship mainly because he always chose the right staff -- handpicked and personally trained to be efficient upper level managers. But sometimes -- though rarely -- sometimes he did make the occasional misstep. “Granger. Notify Crispin with Security to lock down the base. The entire base! No further ingress or egress for any personnel even if they have security clearance. Especially Drewings and Burles. And have an additional security detail moved to the control center here. Have Beltzer organize it. He knows what to do. Can’t be too careful.”

“Yes, sir.” *He knows to do what?* Jane thought.

“Wait, check that last. Let Crispin know if either Drewings or Burles do show up, remand them into custody. As far as I’m concerned, whether compromised or not, they’re criminally negligent for risking our mission timeline and are no longer members of this program. They should be considered without amnesty and subject to termination. As such, we’ll proceed with the launch, on time and on schedule with the currently established crew.”

"Copy that, sir." Jane knew better than to smile. Stample liked his program managers to maintain serious dispositions without jocularly at all times, which he considered the height of professionalism. But if she had permitted herself to smile it would've been over her plan approaching a successful fruition. *Drewings and Burles*, she estimated in her head, *would both be dead by now -- both encased in cement and dropped down to the bottom of the condemned Comstock Lode Mine No. 3 outside Caldera, Nevada no beacons could be located.* Jane didn't expect confirmation about this from her agents simply because the continued absence of Drewings and Burles provided some degree of proof things were going well for her. Which set the stage for Mottle and Oliveras to join the ride. *Perfect*, she thought. *Just like I planned. Steady as she goes.*

"Granger, I see pod fourteen's display is still dark while pod twelve is still up and listed active against type. Is Lemming trying to cut corners again? Or making adjustments on the vertical and horizontal differentials? Pod fourteen replaces twelve, is that not correct? Tell Engineer Lemming to tighten up immediately or he'll be wishing he'd never been born," Stample growled. "This is not the time for inattentive laziness!"

"Right away sir," Jane replied switching her intercom channel over to three in order to privately berate Lemming without his subordinates hearing. *Lemming, you twit, are you trying to poke the bear?!*

"People!" Stample barked on the all broadcast channel, "Attention to detail is critical! Success is guaranteed only by the skilled work of our hands! So tighten up and let's show everyone in the world why we're the best damn program ever assembled!"

"Yes, sir," chorused the control room engineers sitting up higher, facing their monitors, eyes lit up by each display.

*Two hundred and seventy-seven minutes and counting.*

Sitting in pod fourteen, Astronaut Timothy Mottle felt like a nobody. A poser. A loser. Unimportant to General Stample, the world, or anyone connected to the Earth to Neptune NASA program. As far as he was concerned, he was just another theologian-IT linguist with dreams of visiting another planet – and the chance to bring Jesus into the universe. That was his calling. Sure he had advanced degrees, but so did thousands of others on Earth. And sure he'd been selected as an alternate in the Neptune program, but that was only by default -- his social media campaign had all but given him the edge. In reality, or at least personally, he felt unworthy of any and everything he'd had. And constantly worried he'd be exposed as the poser he was.

*Mottle*, Granger thought, was a loser, but he was wrong about not being important. He and his New Continental Bible, currently packed within the equipment hold on pod fourteen, concealed the triggering relay device Astronaut Maria Oliveras would retrieve before the launch. And once retrieved, use to trigger the explosion that would blow up the Aldrin rocket.

"Why a bible?" Oliveras once asked.

"Because no one ever searches bibles."

"Ohh, I see." Maria Oliveras, at least in Granger's opinion, was definitely not a loser. A rare sister of Athena, like Jane herself, masquerading as a subservient women in a society of male dominated deceit and dogmatic machismo. Maria had become critical in the last few years – not only as a cosmonaut in the aeronautic program, but helping Jane adapt to several unforeseen circumstances in her efforts to take down the Earth to Neptune NASA program.

*It will all be in your hands soon, Maria*, Jane thought, *may your sacrifice reward your heroism. For all our sisterhood and their right to call their body their own.*

No one but Jane, and a few in the sisterhood, knew Oliveras' true motivations. To martyr herself, which would elevate her family's status in certain political circles and ensure the next generation of Oliveras women would achieve power on the world stage. Sure to do so, but only if Maria correctly set off the explosives embedded in the New Glen from inside her and Mottle's pod and kill all eleven of her fellow astronauts. Jane assured her no one would know it was her. It would be Mottle they suspected, and eventually blamed, as long as Oliveras made a few precautionary moves ahead of time.

"Have sex with that pig?! But why!? There's no need. I can set off the trigger without sleeping with Mottle!" Maria fumed.

"I disagree. One, we need him blind so he doesn't suspect anything. And nothing blinds a man more, even a religious one, than a beautiful woman who wants to have sex with him. And two, you have to appear above reproach. That you are a victim to his charms, not the other way around. No one will believe you're the victim if you aren't sleeping with him. Can't you see that? He's the perfect scapegoat – a religious zealot who will be dead. With a manifesto left behind implicating him not only in the explosion, but the abuse of power he's held over you and others like you."

"What's wrong with making Stample take the rap like we originally planned? Why change the plan so late in the game?"

It was true. Jane originally planned for Stample to be the scapegoat – creating a picture of a disaffected military man who would rather blow up the entire program than be forced into retirement. But he wasn't perfect. When Mottle arrived, the political-religious-societal paradigm he represented couldn't be passed up. He was perfect. A retired Navy jet pilot and current board director for the New Religion Government Council -- who was extremely rich and popular. And who exhibited delusions of grandeur strong enough to insert himself into the current NASA cosmonaut program

by use of his political and financial weight after the selection process had been closed. All to satisfy his ego -- which would come to light after the explosion investigation revealed his "hidden" manifesto. Mottle was Jane's opportunity to ensure this happened and further their cause -- that men screwed up the world and women deserved the right to make it whole again.

"You don't have to like it," Jane concluded, "but Mottle will be the scapegoat. And if you want me to ensure your family receives all the benefits of you becoming a martyred American Hero, then you'll not only sleep with Mottle, but make sure he believes you love it. Can't get enough of it...or him."

"Bite me!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

In the control room, with two minutes till her next evolution, Jane permitted herself a quick daydream. She imagined herself being interviewed, post-tragedy, by her favorite news anchorman, the dreamy Galen Aristolee -- who would most certainly fall in love with her of course.

"Ms. Granger," Aristolee would sonorate, "How did you know the launch of the New Glenn Mission to Neptune was compromised? That makes you quite the astute manager and a hero for trying to stop it. Even more so than Director Stample, I believe."

"Well, Galen," Jane would reply, "can I call you Galen? Well, Galen, I detected an anomaly in behavioral patterns between crewmen Mottle and Oliveras leading to the suspicion of conspiracy and collusion just prior to their launch. Unfortunately, I wasn't fast enough to notify Director Stample or halt the tragic liftoff in time. Nor did I anticipate the great stress the explosion, which was directly attributed to Stample's selection of Mottle and Oliveras, causing him to go into cardiac arrest. His heart sadly

couldn't handle the stress. So I wouldn't say I was successful at anything. It's all a tragedy as far as I'm concerned and one small step backward for mankind."

"Not a giant leap, then? Does this mean," Aristolee conjectured, "with Director Stample currently incapacitated, you will be assuming the director's position and continuing the program?"

"Out of respect, and in light of Director Stample's great leadership, I would never consider stepping into his shoes. No one can replace him. But knowing how important the program was to him, I certainly wouldn't dishonor him by NOT continuing his legacy. With whomever NASA determines to be best to fill his inestimable role." Here Granger would give Galen her most patriotic smile. And his heart would melt.

"You're quite the lovely patrician, my dear," Aristolee would coo.

"Thank you, Galen."

The message, "Evolution two on your go," flashed across Granger's screen bringing her back to reality. Granger hit the confirm button on her screen at the same moment she noticed Stamper watching her. *Shit, Granger thought, careless to let myself get distracted. Stamper may be an old fool, but he's not stupid. How long was he watching me?"*

While Granger re-focused on her work, Brian Vollman pulled his Peterbilt International rig off the base expressway into the parking lot at Minnie's Big Rig diner. He'd completed his last pre-dawn delivery to Granger's base hours earlier -- the fifth and final of Granger's "special" deliveries -- with each coming off without a hitch. Which meant he was a rich man once Granger forwarded the last payment she'd contracted him privately for. His Cayman Island bank account was going to love it. And he was going to love living in the Cayman Islands. Which is where he'd be heading right after breakfast.

Vollman knew those five deliveries arranged with Granger weren't kosher. Nor her cover story. He'd been a munitions and explosives courier for NASA, and worked with enough classified materials over the last fifteen years, to know that a deputy director didn't go outside the chain of command – especially for a silly ploy Granger provided. That was trying to hide a special birthday present for her boss from her boss till the time was right. And no one paid out of pocket for such deliveries unless, let's face it, something bad was going to happen. But Granger's bribe was too rich. And his retirement all Brian considered important. So what if something bad were to happen, he would be retired before it did. He didn't conspire, as far as he was concerned, or violate any laws. He just made a sound financial decision.

Two weeks after Brian accepted Granger's bribe, and found the risk of detection higher than he anticipated, Brian realized he'd get squat if the plan failed. Well, he'd get a prison cell...or death. But that wasn't the retirement he preferred. He needed a backup plan. And what better way to double his money then by selling out Granger to the very people she was trying to sabotage. If he did it right, retirement was guaranteed playing both side off the middle. Payment and immunity up front BEFORE revealing the full details on Granger's source, contact, and plan. Honestly, it hadn't been hard convincing that bulldog security manager who ran the base, Crispy something or other, that he had a conspiracy afoot to report -- the man was paranoid beyond paranoid even before Brian said hello. But he did have to work a bit to ensure Special Agent in Charge Beltzer accepted the deal. To get his immunity, to get paid, Brian also had to agree to wear a wire while making each and every delivery to Granger. And have her repeat the deal she was contracting him for on the wire -- something about "*corpus delicti*" and all that jazz.

"No problem," Brian agreed.

Vollman did all that he was asked by both sides. And made sure every payment was placed in a safe, Cayman island account. All but this last and largest payment that is. Now all he had to do was wait for the final transfer, which should be completed by the time he finished Minnie's blue plate "heart attack" special, and head south. Retirement officially begun. Course, he didn't take into account those eggs, bacon, ham, grits, toast, and biscuits and gravy would also be laced with a special powder sure to induce fatal a heart attack -- a departing gift from General Stample who green lit Belzer to close off any and all loose ends.

"All systems ready?!" Stample growled across all open comm lines to Granger.

*Two hundred and eighty-five minutes down. Jane thought. A minute and a half to go. I'm so nervous, I could burst.*

"Granger," Stample called over again, surprisingly gentle.

"Yes sir?"

"Step up to my display please."

*"Yes sir." This is unusual, Jane thought stepping over, Stample never calls me over when he's about to give the go order.*

Keeping his comms open, General Stample addressed Granger in front of everyone, letting the entire control room listen in. "I should've done this a long time ago. You've been an excellent Assistant Director and its high time I publicly acknowledged that fact. Please take command of this launch and complete the mission parameters."

"Sir," Jane asked surprised. And surprisingly a bit choked up.

"You heard me Granger. Take command. Give the go order and handle the rest of today's launch as acting director from my station. You've earned it."

All the crew would've applauded if they weren't busy with their final duties getting the New Glenn ready to launch and on its way to Neptune.

"Thank you, sir. This is...unexpected."

"Well? What are you waiting for."

"Yes, sir. Attention everyone." Jane felt surprisingly awkward. "Prepare for go."

For the next minute and a half, Jane busied herself with the duties of a director. But in the back of her mind, she felt a little off knowing the explosion would now be seen as her failure too, and not just Stamper's.

Reports flew back and forth across the control room. "Go," Jane spoke again and watched as her commands were relayed through dozens of channels ensuring the New Glenn engines fired and began their launch. Then everyone turned to the monitors as their mission propelled upward, higher and higher, faster and faster, reaching high atmo, and then and then....into low orbit. Everyone cheered. The first leg was a success. When the second booster fired sending the New Glen and it's passengers into high orbit for s final lap around Earth, more cheers concealed Jane's look of surprise. And once that sling shot lap was completed, the New Glen rocketed out into the solar system signifying success and the end of today's work. Jane could hardly contain her confusion.

*What the...?*

It might've been a small mercy General Stamper didn't have Jane Granger arrested on site in front of everyone. Or orchestrate an immediate public trial, sentencing and punishment. Which would've sent Granger down a deep, dark hole never to heard from again. It was a small mercy then, but only because Stample didn't want anyone speaking openly about how wrong he'd been in selecting her. Or how close she'd come

to successfully sabotaging the entire Earth to Neptune NASA program. Heads would've definitely rolled. His first and foremost.

No, Stample waited till Granger was out that night celebrating with the crew. Still keeping up the charade and accepting additional accolades about how great a director she would be for the next launch. Jane didn't know why Maria hadn't set off the explosives, but she'd be able to send her a wave in the morning to find out why. In code of course. For the time being, she decided to let loose and get drunk, which unbeknownst to her, made it that much easier for Security Director Belzer to orchestrate a solo drunk driving accident on her way home in the early morning hours.

General Stample was disappointed. He'd put a lot of effort into bringing Granger up through the chain and training her to be director. Despite how many objections there'd been against him choosing a woman over so many more career eligible men.

*Maybe they were right from the beginning, Stample thought. Ahh well, I won't make that mistake again.*

The End.