

Year 3000

The gleam of an unusually large one catches my eye. Steadying myself on the makeshift ladder, I raise a gloved hand to grab onto the Purton. I tug at the round fruit as the branch shakes violently and eventually gives up. The Purton comes off with a satisfying snap. I turn it over slowly, though it barely fits in my hand. Its smooth, maroon skin stares back at me as I smile in amazement.

“Charlie!” I shout, searching through the canopy of trees for his familiar face.

From behind a lemon tree, Charlie pokes out his head. “Yeah?”

I climb down with the Purton in hand and show it off to him as he walks over.

“Wow, that one’s massive!” He exclaims, though less intrigued than I am. Charlie has been working here at Greenhouse-016 for longer than I have, so he’s probably a lot more accustomed to the novelty of rare fruit forms than I am. He raises his eyebrows and flashes a sly smile.

“Well?” He whispers, even though there’s no one else here. “Go on.” He adds, nodding at the Purton in my hand.

I chuckle and take a bite into the foamy flesh. I smell the sweet juice before I even taste it.

“Mmm, it’s good!” I try to say with my mouth full.

Charlie laughs. We’re not actually allowed to eat on the job, especially the fruits that are as hard to grow as Purtons, but Charlie is one of the more laid-back greenhouse supervisors and just so happens to be my best friend.

“You know,” I swallow. “They didn’t have anything like Purtons back on Earth. Or Shens. Or Teagles.” I shake my head and look down in an exaggerated manner.

I’ve been doing some extra reading between my shifts to learn more about terrestrial crops so that I can stop bombarding Charlie with questions about our work. Extensive research on Martian agriculture had been done prior to the first missions. It was found that many of the popular fruits eaten on Earth would not survive in our environment, even under simulated conditions in greenhouses like this one. One of those were the apples. Henry Purton was the first person to produce genetically modified apples that could grow on Mars. Although they slightly differ in colour and odour, Purtons are renowned for having the same texture as apples did.

“That’s true,” Charlie walks past me to sit on a lower step of the ladder. “But they had a lot of things that we don’t.” He lets out a sigh, barely audible over the whir of spaceplanes taking off nearby.

Over the past few centuries, Martians have forged a culture that emphasises the importance of maintaining loyalty to our planet in order to encourage scientific innovation. Yearning for Earth is believed to be counterproductive because it does nothing, if not reduces our capacity to survive here. Every minute spent moping about our old world could be better spent improving our new one. In school, we were only taught about terrestrial life in ways that could benefit Martian life. I’ve heard that terrestrial knowledge is even less valuable nowadays given some of our recent scientific breakthroughs. Nevertheless, many of our libraries still hold books that were written back on Earth, even some fiction novels. Charlie is the type of person who reads any and every book from Earth that he can get his hands on.

“They had oceans.” Charlie says, staring ahead at nothing in particular. I slow down with munching on the Purton so that I can hear him better. “They were these vast bodies of water, which were said to be both clear and blue. Well, they were neither by the time they left, but it was probably like that for most of human history. The books say that, on a summer day, you could stand on a beach – which was used to refer to, like, an area where the sea met the land – and you’d be able to feel your feet sink into the warm sand. Imagine that.”

I stand there trying to imagine it, but it’s hard. Walking outside barefoot is discouraged because it increases the likelihood that we would hurt ourselves, creating an open wound and allowing pathogens lurking in Martian soil to enter the body. Besides, the sand here is superfluous and the storms that dispel it into the atmosphere make breathing even more difficult.

The sound of waves crashing? A spray of salt water on my face? I’m not sure if those things would be as pleasant as Charlie imagines them to be.

I break from my reverie and go back to eating my Purton in haste.

I get home that night and smell dinner before I see it.

“Just in time!” My great-grandmother calls from the head of the dining table. Dad puts down the last dish on the table as I take a seat with everyone else, the five of us ready to eat.

Dad sits down and rubs his hands together excitedly. “Alright, dig in!”

We start to eat and share what we did today. Delilah tells us about how she is currently working on a school project that involves preparing a holographic presentation on the planets in our solar system. Great-gran offers to help her with Earth.

“Great-gran,” I turn to her. “Do you miss Earth?”

She chews and wobbles her head from side to side, indicating her ambivalence. “There are things that I miss. They’re just as technologically advanced over there, despite what people here think. There was also just this ...” She speaks more slowly, trying to find the right words. “natural quality about the terrestrial world despite the fact that almost all their land was urbanised. Just knowing that it once held a plethora of life forms that were untouched by the human hand makes it special.”

Delilah interjects to give her input on how Earth used to home to gigantic creatures that roared. Not that there were any humans alive at the time to know what they sounded like. Mum tells her not to talk with her mouth full.

“Most of the animals were genetically modified by the time I left. We had to create a number of them to survive the climate, just like we do here on Mars.” Great-gran nods solemnly. “There was just too much instability for us to really feel safe there. Ultimately, I think my family made the right decision coming here. I’ve lived a good majority of my life here and, well, I certainly wouldn’t still be around if I were still on Earth!” She lets out a guffaw, while I give a half-hearted chuckle and voice a sympathetic note about how our terrestrial ancestors lived such brief and fleeting lives.

Dad chimes in with enthusiasm. “That’s why our lives here are so much better!” He is what people would consider a proud Martian.

Great-gran does her head wobble. “Perhaps if you were to measure the quality of life based on lifespan. There were a surprising number of people who didn’t find life on Mars appealing. Some objected to leaving Earth and were accused of compromising the survival of the human race.”

I nod and look down at my plate. We now know that humans really can terraform Mars and become successful inhabitants.

We eat in silence for a bit before Delilah breaks out into her lecture on dinosaurs again.

I make my way to the Greenhouse as the sun rises into the gloomy sky. Spaceplanes take off in the distance, providing me with a therapeutic soundtrack.

I hear my name being called. I look around before I spot a figure running towards me. It’s Charlie. I ask him why he’s not in uniform.

“A group of us are going to visit Earth.” He motions his head toward the spaceplanes.

I'm surprised at the abrupt notice, though I realise that trips back to Earth are rather rare and unadvertised because they're so unpopular.

"Well," I say. "I guess I won't be eating any Purtons on the job 'till you get back!" I expect him to give his usual chuckle, but he doesn't. He looks almost sad for some reason.

"I don't think I'm coming back."

I'm immediately taken aback. I don't really know how to respond, other than to ask him what he means.

"Well, I-" He falters and sighs before he continues. "Earth is home."

"Charlie, that's a bit of a primitive thing to say, given tha-"

"No," He cuts me off. "I mean to say that I really am from Earth."

He attempts to give me a condensed version of his story. It turns out that Charlie was born on Earth. At the age of two, his biological parents had put him on one of the last spaceplanes from Earth to have arrived on Mars. They wanted to give him a chance at a better life but refused to leave Earth themselves. The man who raised him was the one who had flown that very plane. Him and his wife were especially sympathetic towards Earth, being homesick terrestrials themselves. The three of them are now returning to Earth for closure.

Against strong advice, Charlie was made aware of his origin at quite a young age.

"Why are you only telling me this now?"

"I didn't want you to think less of me." He looks down. "You know what people think of terrestrials."

I nod in understanding. Still, I voice my concerns about this being a rash decision. He shakes his head.

"I've been thinking about this for a while now, and I guess I've always known I couldn't be here forever. There was never really a place for me on Mars." He absently raises a hand and taps his fingers at the core of his chest. He attempts to describe his ineffable connection to Earth, as great-gran did.

"This is my opportunity. I need to know who created my flesh and blood, and the kind of planet that I was brought into. I'm going to find my parents." There is a possibility that they have already passed away, but I choose not to mention it. "If they didn't come here with me, there must have been something worth staying for."

The depictions of Earth that I've seen haven't been great. The doubt must be evident on my face.

"It'll be okay." Charlie's voice softens. "I'll try to contact you once I'm there. Also," He reaches into the back pocket of his pants and pulls out a key. "It opens up a cabinet in my

room. I've left everything in there for you." He hands it over to me and I take a look at it. I've never had to use a key; it seems rather archaic. "It's got my books. Journals full of notes that I've made on all the Earth-related materials I could find – artefacts from Earth, old books, stories passed down from former terrestrials. Maybe once you've gone through everything, you'll understand why I am the way that I am."

I look at his face one last time. He seems older than he really is for some reason.

We embrace.

He makes his way back to the landing area. From where I'm standing, he looks as small as the sun does.

Maybe we are just like stars. Nothing more than stardust arranged in a unique form. Nothing more than an entity occupying a tiny fraction of the universe's infinite space and time. Yet, here we are, entangled in something so much bigger than ourselves. Something that makes people do things as absurd as flying through the galaxy to live on a dying planet.