

Will humanity survive?

The flood

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ISBN: 9789403925783

Editing / Proofreading: ChatGPT/DeepL

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Cover Design: Sriyan Thakku

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Translated from German into English by Sriyan Thakku.

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Prologue

The sun had just risen and cast its dazzling light upon the ISS. Solar panels glittered in the light, reflecting it into the space station, where a man was sleeping in a sleeping bag. The reflections hit him right in the face, causing him to stir slowly, pull one hand out of the sleeping bag, and hold it in front of his face. For a while, he tried to sleep in that position, but the light made that impossible. Annoyed, he yawned, stretched out thoroughly and pulled himself out of the sleeping bag. Now the man was floating in the air. He had black hair, looked muscular and had sharp features. Still half asleep, he floated there, trying to get his orientation. "Four Months up here, and I'm still not used to the weightlessness...", Alex muttered, looking around the room. On the opposite wall, still hidden in the shadows, hung another sleeping bag, with yet another person asleep inside. Slowly, Alex floated toward his colleague and gave him a shake. "Good morning, Leon! Time to get up!" But Leon didn't stir and carried on sleeping without a sound. Alex tried again, but he got the same results. After a moment of thinking, the astronaut, still somewhat helpless without gravity, floated over to

his “bed”, opened a zipper, and reached into a pocket. After a quick rummage, he found what he was looking for and pulled out a flat object. It was a small mirror. Light was still streaming through the medium-sized window. Alex made use of this, holding the mirror up to the rays and turning it until the object reflected the light precisely onto Leon’s face. The victim found it just as unpleasant as Alex and woke up, squinting with his eyes. “Is it already morning again?”, he muttered, holding both hands up to his face and cursing, “This bloody light!”. A smile crossed Alex’s face, but he took pity on him and quickly put the mirror away. Meanwhile, the second astronaut set crawling out of his sleeping bag and, after a few moments, floated grumpily alongside his colleague. “Can’t the night last a bit longer?” “It can’t and you know that. Come on now, we’ve got to go for breakfast. Mira will be ready ages ago, the way you’re dawdling about.” Indeed, Leon hadn’t got used to the unusual conditions on the ISS either and was just about to bump headfirst into a wall. Quickly, he caught himself and turned back to his original position. “Shall we?”, Leon asked his colleague still a bit annoyed and, without waiting for an answer, floated towards a large opening. Alex followed him and left the sleeping quarters. A day on the ISS is really quite exhausting, as they had to do everything

in zero gravity and therefore at a much slower pace than usual. The two of them made their way along two corridors to a circular room, in the middle of which stood a large, round table. Leon, who had a similar build like his companion, but blond hair, glided over to a cupboard and asked Alex: "What do you want to eat, Alex?" He replied: "Cornflakes, of course – you know that!" "Better to be safe than sorry.", Leon simply murmured and reached for two packets containing the food. The men opened the packets and let a porridge-like mixture spill out. Quickly they grabbed the food with their mouths and let it melt on their tongues. "It still doesn't look very appetising, but at least it tastes alright.", commented Leon, his companion made a sound of agreement. The two had been on the ISS since last March, now, in June, Alex and Leon were a bit more familiar with their new surroundings than they had been at the start, when they first set foot on the space station. Leon was just taking his last bite when another person entered the room. It was a fit woman with brown, rather short hair. In space, long hair was everything but helpful, it floated around everywhere, which is why Mira had her hair cut shorter before the journey to space. "Good morning, everyone!", Mira called out cheerfully, "What's on the agenda today?" "Morning Mira", Alex said, having finished eating and

feeling full. He pulled out a tray from one of the shelves attached to the walls and tapped on it briefly, before finally replying: "We have to continue with yesterday's exterior work. And connect this new software to the on-board computer and test it." Mira sighed and floated down to sit next to Leon, who then asked: "So, how was your breakfast in solitude today?" The woman turned to her neighbour in confusion, then she understood. Usually, she was the first of the three to be up and about. By the time the men finally turned up for breakfast, she already had finished breakfast and even started working. But today was different. "Oh, you know, I treated myself a bit more sleep this morning. After yesterday, I just couldn't get out of bed.", she replied. Mira and Leon had spent eight hours on a spacewalk the previous day to repair a small hydrogen leak. It wasn't anything serious, the hydrogen was only needed in the laboratory and was therefore not essential for their survival, still such issues had to be sorted out. On the one hand, because they needed the gas for experiments, and on the other, to avoid weakening the structure of the space station. The tank was normally pressurised, and if the pressure was lost, structural weaknesses could develop in other components near the tank. To prevent this, they temporarily had to divert the gas into another

container until the original tank was repaired. Alex, who had tossed Mira a packet of food, got to work with his other colleague and went through a report on his iPad. They let the woman finish her breakfast in peace and, a short while later, they got ready for the work outside. Today it was Leon and Alex's turn, whilst Mira stayed in the space station and provided support via cameras and radio calls. The two men struggled a bit to squeeze into the bulky white spacesuits, and just before they had Mira open the airlock to let them out, Leon said to her over radio: "You're lucky to stay inside after yesterday." "Don't worry, your mission won't even take two hours.", Mira laughed, opening the door to space. Both crew members flew out into the nothingness. Below them lay the earth, silent, vast, round and sapphire blue. They were hovering directly above the Pacific Ocean. For a few moments, they stared spellbound at their home planet. Then they turned away and flew to the correct spot on the outpost and set to work.

Less than two hours later, and with the mission successfully completed, Alex and Leon were once again in the process of slipping out of their uncomfortable spacesuits. "That spacewalk really didn't take that long", remarked Alex. Leon, who was

struggling, agreed. "Actually, Mira did all the work." That was indeed true, because today they only had to test the leaked tank that had been welded shut the day before. During the test, the tank was briefly pressurised again to check whether the welds were holding. The two men were only there to step in, if anything went wrong. Mira, who was sitting in the control room, had to check that everything was in order and carried out the test. The men now sat there panting, recovering from their strenuous work of slipping out of the suits. "I'm ready for the bed already again...", said Leon as Mira appeared. She held two packets of food to them. "Forget it, we're heading straight to the test run of the new software! After that you can do whatever, you like.", the woman winked. Both grateful and annoyed, grabbed the food and gulped down their snack. "Ugh, what on earth is this?", Alex asked suddenly, pulling a disgusted face. "Carrot purée, you better get used to it, unfortunately we've run out of that delicious potato-protein purée." "Not that too", groaned Leon, "Hopefully it can't get any worse!". Mira, just for fun, predicted: "Don't say that, or something even worse will happen in the end!".

By early evening, the astronauts were still sitting in the control room in front of large screens. The new software was anything but easy to install. There were constant problems with the download, and when the system was finally installed that afternoon, a false alarm kept going off. Now they had been stuck on a bug for just over an hour, one that simply refused to be resolved. “<<ERROR><CHANGE_IN_MOONS_ORBIT_DETECTED>>” was displayed in red letters on the central screen. The software consisted of a new form of artificial intelligence, which was supposed to make the work in orbit a lot easier. But now it was causing them problems. “Everything is calibrated correctly!”, said Leon desperately, he was now at the end of his tether and was swearing furiously at the screen. Alex sighed: “The programme is designed to detect the slightest abnormal changes in good time. The ISS equipment is probably a bit too old and is causing the problems.” Mira, suddenly struck by an idea, asked: “And what if it is really the moon?” Her colleagues stared at her in disbelief. “Don’t be silly! The moon doesn’t change its orbit just like that!”, Leon retorted snappishly and started a new calibration. Alex however, agreed with Mira after giving it some thought: “Perhaps this change is happening so gradually that the old systems didn’t

pick it up?” That seemed plausible, even to Leon. The calibration had just finished, and Alex shooed away his colleague, who was sitting closest to a keyboard. Muttering to himself, he tapped away at it and brought up a few lines of code on the screens, then pressed the Enter-key and folded his arms, hovering mid-air. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then the systems began spitting out data wildly. At the end of the output stood a result. No one else would have understood those lines, but these three astronauts knew exactly what they meant. Without further ado, Mira began creating spreadsheets on her tablet and entering the data into them. Alex and Leon each opened the calculator app on their devices and started typing in numbers frantically. A few minutes of intense concentration passed as the three dictated random numbers and letters. Finally, they arrived at a result. Everything matched. The three looked at one another, their faces deeply shocked. The system was right! The moon had lost speed and was really changing its orbit!

This realisation was enough to keen the three astronauts working until well past midnight. They had completely forgotten about dinner, instead, they tried to work out just how drastic the change was.

Shortly after two o'clock, the crew finally caught their breath. They had calculated the rate of change. It was still small, but it looked like it would increase. That would not bode well, and the three scientists knew that too. At this rate of change, the moon would gradually slow down more and more and follow ever-closer orbits around the Earth. Naturally, this would affect the tides. Floods could rise and gradually take over land and destroy everything. The astronauts were now very tired, after a brief "goodnight", they went to bed. The following day, the crew contacted Earth to report their discovery. To be on the safe side, the ESA (European Space Agency) ran calculations with the same data several hundred times using supercomputers to be absolutely certain and eventually confirmed the findings. However, they still gave the all-clear: at the moment, the problem was luckily too minor to be considered a significant threat. At this speed, it would take 20,000 to 30,000 years before humanity would face any real problems. Nevertheless, they were instructed to keep an eye at the rate of change and to record and report any alterations in it.

Days and weeks went by, and the astronauts carried on with their work as usual. Time and again, they had

the AI calculate the rate of change, and it actually turned out that this rate was increasing. When Alex, Mira and Leon exchanged some information with Earth about the moon again, six months after their discovery, they realised that the catastrophe, was drawing closer at an alarming rate. “We don’t know how this could have happened. An object the size of our moon is almost impossible to slow down or speed up. You could say that only another planet is capable of doing this. But if that were the case, we would’ve discovered that and seen it a long, long time ago!”. The director of the ESA explained, “It must be something else...” “Are there any other theories?”, Mira asked, “How about Aliens?” “There’s a lot of speculation, with new theories popping up all the time, but none of them seem to fit our situation. Not even the ones about extraterrestrials. But even if that were the case, again, we would have noticed something. For now, all we can do is wait and see.”

Another six months passed, but the rate of change showed no sign of slowing down. Our three astronauts were now back on Earth and, as the lead team, were tackling the ever-growing problem. Less than three months later, they were offered the chance to travel to the ISS once again. Leon and Mira

agreed immediately, but Alex wasn't quite sure. The three had become best friends by now, but the third member of the trio had a wife and two children whom he didn't want to leave for another year. After much deliberation and discussions with his family, he finally agreed as well. So, three months later, the three boarded their expensive ride-share and arrived safely at the International Space Station. Their investigations were making progress, but all of this was happening in secret. The public was still unaware of the situation regarding the moon. The ESA had decided this to avoid causing panic. However, the news had been passed on to the other space agencies, which were now also looking into the matter closely. This time, the three astronauts were joined by an American team. They got on splendidly with one another. One day, however, they again received some alarming news: the calculation of the point in time from which the moon would pose a real danger had been made without taking climate change into account. A costly software error had caused the sea water level from 1880 to be included in the calculations instead of that from 2016. New studies show that due to melting ice, the threat to humanity could be imminent within the next 1,000 years, rather than twenty or thirty thousand! It had been discovered that the rate of change was rising

exponentially, and in light of this, it was now assumed that the catastrophe would affect the very next generations. Even now, everything was still being kept secret, as there was now an even greater fear that the world would be thrown into panic. Gradually, the astronauts began to feel that the next piece of bad news would be that humanity's greatest problem would occur within their own lifetimes. And sadly, they were right.