

Immolation

Connor Moore was the most famous man in the world, for he was its savior.

His final day on the planet he saved was a Tuesday of no particular importance to anyone but him. It was exactly 35 years and 142 days since he deflected the asteroid known as “C-137” away from Earth and toward its eventual target.

Connor woke up on that Tuesday at noon, which had become a common occurrence. He had spent the previous night drinking his favorite stout and eating instant potatoes, even though he could eat at the most expensive restaurant in the world for free. Sometimes he even received tips for his service to the planet. No matter what he ever wanted, he had gotten it for free for the past 35 years and 142 days. That included his secluded house on Cuttyhunk Island in Cape Cod, away from the mainland where he couldn’t step outside without being swarmed by the grateful masses. He also chose the spot because it was the nearest point of land to where the asteroid was supposed to hit and end life on the planet. He never wanted to forget.

Connor had saved the planet on a Sunday. His plan was the only realistic one that completely eliminated the potential of any loss of life on Earth.

C-137 was three times the size of the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs and entered a collision course with Earth without much warning. By the time it was discovered, NASA determined it would arrive in six months. Scientists had been preparing for such a possibility for decades, spending all the allowed budget money for the program on a laser that could be sent into space to vaporize any asteroid up to the size of the moon.

“Project Death Star” was the plan’s name, and required a launch into space to be successful. With four months to spare until C-137’s arrival, the laser was set for launch. Connor

watched the shuttle explode on the launchpad within two seconds of being declared ready for liftoff.

Connor remained in his house for the next week while the world went into a panic. The only thing keeping any sense of order was NASA's open call for new plans to redirect or destroy C-137.

Connor was never anything special before his plan went viral. He was one of the ten smartest people in the entire world but spent his days working at a gas station after his brief stint as a mechanical engineer ended abruptly when he threw a chair at his co-worker, Dale, who kept hitting "reply all" in every email.

The gas station job didn't bother Connor, as it gave him time to think through his inventions with minimal stress at work except for the occasional bag of change handed over the counter in lieu of cash or card.

Connor stopped showing up for work once the shuttle blew up. He saw all the looting taking place on television and didn't want to die defending overpriced gum and beer. He had enough saved up in case life went on, although he had no idea how useless his savings would become in a matter of weeks.

The internet became filled with countless plans to destroy the asteroid that included blowing it up with nuclear weapons. It seemed to be the only option, even with the risk of the weapon going off before it left Earth and causing a mass extinction before C-137 got its turn.

There was also the problem of the lack of nuclear weapons, which were discontinued when Connor was just a child. With just four months before the world was supposed to end, there just wasn't enough time to make something strong enough to destroy the asteroid far enough

away from Earth. Connor knew that but he could see the plans were trending that way with no other alternative, except for his plan.

People around the world could never figure out why Connor hated the spotlight and the praise. He had only done one interview since saving the planet and was otherwise left alone, thanks to the security detail he received from the government. Everything he ever wanted was brought to his island home and he spent his days doing countless equations hoping to clear his mind. But they always came to the same conclusion, which led to alcohol binges that sometimes lasted more than a month.

Connor's only interview was a short one that he requested after C-137's new target was revealed. He planned to do an hour but walked off after five minutes. All he could say was that he was sorry.

There was only one group in the world who hated Connor, and its total membership was just around two million. He knew they were right. The Right For All Life coalition cared about all known life in the universe, not just that on Earth, and the target of their anger was Connor Moore.

The RFAL was led by a former NASA employee who leaked the information that C-137 was headed for a planet harboring life. It was set to strike exactly 35 years and 142 days after the day people began celebrating as Connor Moore Day. At first, NASA combatted the leak by saying it was just speculated that this new planet was harboring life, and even if it was it was nowhere near advanced as life on Earth.

Connor spent years trying to find any hope that the planet would be spared, but his equations always came out the same. The planet, dubbed “Immolation” by the RFAL, was going to go through its orbit and run right into C-137. He kept running his equations hoping for some semblance of hope that there was a chance he was wrong, but it was no use.

The RFAL stressed that Earth could have suffered the same fate as Immolation, if not for Connor the Destroyer, as they liked to call him. The rest of the public ignored the RFAL and deemed them nihilist extremists. But Connor knew they were right.

Connor found out about Immolation about five minutes after C-137 was redirected away from Earth.

“Connor, I have to tell you something because this information may come out in the future but I want you to hear it from me,” said Evan Diehl, the lead scientist on Connor’s mission.

“Is something wrong?” asked Connor in shock. He knew his plan would work as long as no one interfered with his exact instructions.

Evan leaned in closer to Connor. “That asteroid is headed straight for a planet harboring life. And I’m not just talking microscopic life, I mean living, breathing creatures.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Connor. “The odds of that asteroid hitting that exact planet aren’t even fathomable.”

“It was going to hit us. What were those odds?”

Connor was told that NASA had a tough time agreeing to his plan, which is why it was delayed for two months. The satellites used to redirect C-137 could only be launched at a specific

time to meet up with the asteroid at the right time. Calculations had been done for months, but each one showed that Immolation would be awaiting certain destruction. It was the only other planet NASA knew of that harbored life.

Evan Diehl was not the one who leaked the information, but he resigned from NASA shortly after the world was saved and Connor became a hero. Several others at NASA did the same, and Connor assumed they also knew of the destruction awaiting an innocent planet.

Further research into life on Immolation was officially discontinued once the information about its demise leaked, but the RFAL gathered enough to give Connor insomnia. The bulk of the information claimed that the planet had vast oceans filled with countless life forms, which was proven by a secret NASA probe sent out decades ago. It had sent back pictures from the planet, but no one on Earth seemed to care. Connor saw people arguing online about politics and sports, completely ignoring concrete evidence of alien life. He began to wonder whether he was the crazy one for caring about other life in the universe.

What put Connor over the edge was the information given to him on his final Connor Moore Day on Earth. He had a private email account as his only connection to the outside world, with only a select few knowing how to reach him. The message from Evan Diehl was the last one he ever read before destroying his computer.

It read:

Connor,

I would say I hope you're doing well but I know you're not. Neither am I. I sit up every night thinking about what we did, even though it was me who signed off on the final decision. How were you supposed to know? Anyway, I wanted to share some information I received with you

because I don't want it to reach you from another source. It turns out life on Immolation, (oh how I hate that name), is not just confined to its oceans. The probe we sent years ago is still sending pictures back and there are early signs of intelligent life. We have not got a good look at what these beings look like, but there are small structures on the land that indicate life on the planet is advancing as it did on Earth. I hate that I have to share this information, but if the RFAL leaked it before I could tell you I would never forgive myself. There are still 142 days before the asteroid makes impact. Perhaps our calculations are wrong. But we know they aren't. Take care of yourself, please.

Best,

Evan

Connor spent 100 days rarely leaving his room after receiving Evan's email. He occasionally ran through equations but knew it would take a cosmic miracle for something to change. He received his food by delivery from those assigned to him by the government, but he never got to know their names. He was so preoccupied with the life forms he never met, he lost all notice of life on Earth.

Connor was just 25 years old when his plan was adopted by NASA. It was his face at that age that adorned everything from shirts to plates to corn mazes all over the world. He had been seen a few times in public since then, but he had not been seen smiling since he first emerged as the hero of the world. Artists tried to depict what 60-year-old Connor looked like, but all the depictions were far too generous. The bags under his brown eyes looked to be stressing under the weight, creating crescents under his eyes that were impossible to not notice. His hair went from

jet black to gray and wispy, often uncombed and unwashed for weeks at a time. He even had a slight paunch after years of staying inside and only getting up to walk to grab his food and some beer, unable to recognize who he had become.

Unbeknownst to Connor and everyone else on Earth, life was quite advanced on Immolation. It began around the same time as life did on Earth, but Immolation was spared major extinction level events. The vast seas on the planet were similar in composition to those on Earth, except large traces of methane were found in the water. Not a single mobile life form emerged from the seas until around the time dinosaurs were wiped out on Earth. It took a brave step from a tiny turquoise creature with one slit on its face for an eye to emerge and realize it could breathe in the atmosphere. There were food sources all around the shore, and winds carried seeds across the planet to create food for the brave souls willing to emerge from the methane seas.

On the day of Connor's death, life on Immolation was thriving. Languages were developed and civility was in order. The best minds on the planet were set to launch a massive vessel into space that could bring back proof of other life in the universe.

To someone from Earth, the leading species on Immolation resembled manatees with arms, legs and larger eyes. They communicated telekinetically, creating a quiet, peaceful landscape on the planet with a bright blue sky and lush forests covering most of the dry land. There had never been a war on Immolation as there were no conflicts or power struggles. The constant goal was to reach into the vastness of space to find other life. No one ever considered the idea of doing anything else.

Immolation's fatal flaw was its best minds focusing on the wonder of the universe instead of its dangers. The most advanced species on the planet had spent ten thousand years working on the most efficient way to send a long-term vessel into space. Countless generations lived and died with the hope that the next one would be the one to reach space, without realizing all the dangers to be found off the planet.

Unlike Earth, Immolation was not near any collection of asteroids. A comet never passed by and there were no moons. The sky had just one star, which was the planet's sun. All the others weren't visible, as there was no night on the planet. It took generations for those on Immolation to fathom life outside the planet. They had no concept of the vastness of space, but were driven by a subconscious desire to seek out any evidence of other life or to find out why there were alive in the first place.

Connor spent the final hours of his life inside. The floor was covered with paper displaying the exact same equation with the exact same solution every time. He still had a television in his house and turned it on to see the coverage of a RFAL protest in Washington D.C. They had signs with grainy pictures of life on Immolation held high as men and women walked by without a glance on their way to work. One protestor was interviewed by the news crew.

"I want to say something to Connor Moore," said a woman born ten years after Connor saved his world. "You don't deserve to live when all those beings on Immolation are about to die."

"So you're saying you'd rather have Earth destroyed?" asked the reporter.

“No,” said the woman. “There is just no reason why Connor and NASA had to redirect the asteroid right into the only other planet with life. They are hiding knowledge from us and trying to spin this destruction as some cosmic coincidence.”

“Do you even know the name of the asteroid?” asked the reporter in a sarcastic tone.

“That doesn’t matter,” said the woman. “It won’t even exist anymore in a few hours.”

Connor turned off the television and poured himself a beer. Some of it got on his shirt but he didn’t seem to mind. The stain joined the others on the shirt he had been wearing for over a week. His food delivery was waiting in a box right inside his front door but he didn’t bother to grab it. He sat down to do one final equation, but not on the asteroid’s current track. He went back to the one that made him famous.

Connor’s world-saving redirection plan involved rerouting two major satellites to collide with C-137. They were propelled out into space at an exact rate to meet up with the asteroid and redirect it just enough to avoid a collision with Earth. The day the plan was set in action was just two days before C-137 would have come close enough to where redirecting it may put the Earth’s moon in jeopardy.

The equation Connor was going over in his beer-stained shirt was the one that saved the planet. But he wanted to see if he could have indeed waited longer to propel the satellites and if NASA’s theory about the moon could have been wrong. He started to work when he heard the doorbell ring. He hadn’t heard that sound in years, as the deliveries were always done without any commotion. He got up and went to the door and was greeted by one of the security guards whose name Connor did not know.

“A letter, sir,” said the man before handing Connor a piece of paper and walking away.

Connor took the paper in his hands and began reading. It was from Evan.

Connor,

I take it you smashed your computer or something like that as you haven't responded lately. That's fine, I prefer the old way of communicating. I'm also pretty sure our communication was bugged, so I wanted to share some information with you that no one else could spy on. I knew about the advanced life on Immolation far before the RFAL did. In fact, I was on the team that discovered the life there. They are currently building a space shuttle twenty times the size of the largest one ever built here on Earth. I don't know what their intentions are but they are close enough to Earth to where it's possible they may know there is life on our planet. That's why I was tasked with ensuring C-137 could wipe out life on Immolation. My team discovered life on Immolation about two months before C-137 came on course with Earth. Once that happened we had to ditch all exploration of the planet. Then the laser blew up and all of NASA was tasked with the single goal of keeping Earth alive. Then you came along with your plan. Such a perfect storm! I hate to have lied to you for all these years, but that plan was ready to go as soon as you brought it to us. The only reason we waited was because I was ordered to make sure that asteroid could be sent right toward Immolation. After such a harrowing event, we didn't need to throw in a potential war with aliens. Didn't you find it odd that we waited to execute your plan for several months when failure meant all life on Earth would be destroyed? The moon was never in danger. I made that up and gave you false equations to work with.

There was more in the letter but Connor crumpled it up instead of reading the rest. He felt his heart racing. After nearly 36 years, he realized he was not in fact Connor the Destroyer. He was merely a puppet in the destroyer's hands. He ran to his room to put on some clean clothes.

Once he did that and put some water in his hair, he ran outside to the same security guard who brought him the letter.

“I need you to take me to the nearest news station.”

The most advanced species on Immolation had no name. They just were. All two billion of these creatures were tuned to screens on the day their space vessel was set to launch. Someone from Earth would assume no one was concerned about the event, as the planet was nearly silent. But that didn't mean there wasn't noise in the heads of the creatures.

Countless thoughts went from brain to brain about the fears of launching into the sky. Some thought it led to nowhere, while others were worried about destroying the sky and cracking it into pieces.

Five lucky individuals were chosen to ride in the vessel. They were the five smartest individuals on the planet and were tasked with guiding the ship through whatever was out there, looking for any other signs of anything.

Even with all the fear and anticipation, the overwhelming feeling was excitement. This moment was in honor of all those who lived and died making it a possibility. If these creatures could cry, many would have.

In Earth time, there were five minutes to go before the vessel launched into space.

Elsewhere in the galaxy at the exact same time, Connor was in a car with the security guard who had brought him the letter. It was his first time on the island roads in years, and he remembered why he loved the area so much. He saw families on the beaches laughing and splashing in the ocean water, something Connor was never able to do in the past 35 years. He

drifted off in his thoughts when he was jolted forward by a car colliding with the one he was in. The security guard put the car in park while Connor opened his door and stepped out. He got out and saw Evan Diehl, gray-haired and clad in RFAL insignias.

“I’m assuming you read my letter,” said Evan with a smirk on his face.

“What the hell is going on?” asked Connor. “Have you been with the RFAL this whole time?”

“What? Oh, all this? No I’m just wearing this in case there are any witnesses.”

Evan pulled out a gun and pointed it straight at Connor. Connor looked for his bodyguard and saw him sitting in the front seat of the car as if nothing had happened. He knew it was over.

“I’m sorry I have to do this, but I can’t have you go off sharing government secrets. You should have just stayed inside.”

“You don’t need to kill me. I can just go back and be quiet.”

“That is true, but killing you serves a greater purpose. The headlines will be great. You were murdered by the RFAL. You’re a martyr. They’re a terrorist organization. Problem solved.”

Evan pointed the gun at Connor’s stomach and fired. Connor didn’t feel any pain as he fell to the ground. He just saw his shirt turn red and began to feel as if he was in a dream.

“You served your planet well,” Connor heard Evan say as he took his final breaths.

Connor Moore, the man who billions worshipped, died violently at the hands of the RFAL, or at least that’s what the news reports said after his body was found floating in the sea.

Across the galaxy on the planet dubbed “Immolation” by a terrorist organization, so the reports would say, an entire planet was awaiting the most important moment in billions of years. Every member of the dominant species, which would never have a name, stared at screens as the

vessel to discover meaning was set to launch. The vessel cleared to launch when every screen on the planet went dark. Not a sound was made but voices rang out in the heads of confused individuals who were wondering how this could happen. Then the ground began to shake and for the first time in billions of years, the sky went dark.

No one made a sound.