

New Earth

Sam Fultz had seen the commercials and the promotions hundreds of times but it was the posters that finally convinced him. The most striking one, the one that really did it, showed the dark and rusty plains of Mars juxtaposed with futuristic buildings rising in the background. The bold slogan along the bottom proclaimed "We Want You for New Earth" and he hadn't felt wanted in a long time.

The first time he saw that poster he'd been in a hurry. It was quarter till midnight and if he didn't make it back to Wayfair by curfew he'd be locked out for the night. Regardless, something about the vibrant colors and the soaring, sharply angular structures caught his eye and he couldn't look away. Plastered on the side of a burned-out convenience store, that poster spoke to him about other futures, other paths he could take. The next day Sam came back and stood in front of that poster for half an hour, his mind spinning with possibilities.

In the following days and weeks the idea or what that image represented was always on his mind. First thing in the morning, while he was gathering his things to head out for the day, or when he was making his rounds through the industrial sectors looking for salvage, the image of those buildings would flash in his mind and he'd feel a yearning for something different. On the very few days one of the fabricators had a shift open, he had to consciously keep his mind on the work or else he'd be lucky to only lose a finger.

What if I actually left? Sam thought to himself. *Just said fuck it and left.* He could have been kicked out of Wayfair two months ago when he turned eighteen but he was technically still in school till the summer. He hadn't signed in to the eClasses in weeks but they hadn't expelled him yet. Either way though, he'd soon be out on his own and then what? Sam didn't know of anyone who'd actually gone off to Mars but the idea of being part of something so grand was alluring. He fantasized about looking around a colonized Mars and being able to say I helped build this.

It's just a fantasy though, he thought to himself. *No way I'd actually go through with it.*

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After several weeks of mulling over the idea, Sam got up early one morning and checked the directory for the closest recruitment office. It wouldn't hurt to at least talk to them, find out the whole deal, he reasoned. There was an office less than two miles away and so after a meager breakfast Sam walked over.

Coming in off the street the first thing he noticed was how nice the center was. There weren't really any places in the city he'd consider nice, but this neighborhood was particularly rough. Instead of scuffed linoleum and burned out fixtures the lobby had high ceilings and the granite floor was freshly waxed. The furniture looked expensive and the place even smelled nice. You really didn't notice how bad most places were until it was contrasted with a place like this. Sam couldn't have felt more alien. Catching his eye, the receptionist beckoned him over.

"I'm uh here to see about joining I guess," Sam said. He cringed internally, hearing himself speak. He felt so out of place, so awkward.

"Sure, I'll just need you to fill out some paperwork." she said with a smile. "Bring the forms back up here when you're done and I'll get someone for you."

Some paperwork turned out to be an understatement. The bundle she handed him was thirty or forty pages at least. He took the packet and sat down at one of the desks, glad the exchange had been so brief.

The first couple pages were easy, name, date of birth, parent's names, etc. However, the majority of the forms pertained to his abilities and experience.

Farming Experience: EXPERT, MODERATE, SOME, NONE

He checked the NONE box.

Gardening Experience - NONE, Poultry Experience - NONE, Bovine Experience - NONE, Equestrian Experience - NONE.

He chuckled at this last one. Sam had only seen a horse once in his life and that was when he was six or seven and the home had organized a field trip to the zoo. It was a charity thing with the intent of broadening horizons and was back when there still were zoos. Eddy had been there too.

When the bus load of kids got to the zoo most of the exhibits were closed. No monkey house, no aquarium or seals doing tricks. There were a couple antelope though and one lonely kangaroo. In the rear of the zoo, past the empty elephant enclosure and the vacant lion display, there was a small petting zoo which consisted of a single goat and a single horse. Even to the children's untrained eye the horse was ancient but it didn't mind the kids. It didn't really seem to notice them at all.

After farming there was a whole set of questions on electronics. All NONE. After that there was a mechanical section. When Sam was younger he remembered there was a maintenance guy, or at least someone from the neighborhood who knew appliances and would fix small things around the home.

Sam was always fascinated by machines and would follow the work closely, even trying to help by handing tools or holding a flashlight. Sam checked the SOME box on a couple items but then went back and changes those to NONE too. He'd been eight or nine the last time he'd seen the maintenance guy and really didn't know anything about engines or pumps or any of the other things the forms asked about.

As he got deeper and deeper into the packet he started questioning what he was doing here. There was no way they'd want him, they were looking for colonists, people who had skills and abilities that would be needed. After another entire section of NONES he decided this had all been a mistake and stood up to go.

"All done?" the receptionist asked, reaching for the paperwork.

Sam had intended to slip out, hoping she wouldn't notice but now she was looking right at him with her hand outstretched.

"Umm, yeah. Here you go," he said. Reluctantly he handed her the packet. He hadn't even filled out the last few pages but they were probably all NONE anyway. He had wanted to say sorry, this isn't for me but couldn't form the words.

"Thank you very much, have a seat and I'll have someone for you shortly." she said, taking the packet. Sam slowly sat back down, deciding if it made sense to just walk out.

"Mr. Fultz?" the receptionist called. It had only been a couple minutes and he still hadn't found the courage to leave. "If you'll follow me right this way."

The receptionist led him through a maze of cubicles, arriving at a small office where an older man sat waiting for him.

"Mr. Fultz, this is Tom Davis, he'll be reviewing your file."

"Pleased to meet you," Tom said, offering a handshake.

Sam sat down reluctantly, dreading the inevitable rejection.

"I've got the summary of your file here, let's pull it up." Tom brought up his file and then swiveled the monitor so they could both look at it.

"Hmm, not much going on." Tom said, scrolling through the analysis. Lots of red NONES filled the screen.

"Yeah I know, I'm not sure this is for me after all."

"Really? That's too bad, not having much experience actually isn't a problem at all."

"Really?"

"Sure sure, in fact we really need more people like you. Young, few social ties. Ready to make something of themselves. Don't get me wrong, we're in need of doctors and engineers, but the bulk of contributions are made by people just like you. Ready to learn, able to fit the roles that are needed. Versatile."

"Here's what I'll do," Tom continued. "We can offer you a standard service contract, 10 years as general labor, room and board, all of that covered as part of your salary. At the end of the term you'll have the option to renew or complete your contract and then set out to make your own fortune. How does that sound?"

"I don't know, ten years?" Sam had heard that was the normal contract length. Anything less and the cost of transport didn't make sense apparently. It was different now though, actually considering it. "What kind of work would I be doing?"

"Hard to say exactly, general labor could be anything from light construction to horticulture or even cartography and exploration. We just don't have enough people for all that needs to be done. There is some leeway and if you don't like a job after a couple months they can transfer you around. There really is so much more that needs to be done than we have people. How does that sound?"

"Actually, that sounds great," and it really did. A whole new world to explore and plenty that needed to be done. "I'm in."

"Just like that? Don't want to think it over. You need to read the contract thoroughly, its legally binding, you know."

Sam knew the recruiter was right and he should take some time to think it over but he also knew that if he thought too hard on it he might back out. He'd almost certainly be on the streets in a few months, especially if he didn't get back to the classes, and the prospect of that steeled his nerves.

"No, this sounds good, I'm in."

"Great, just wanted to make sure. Saying this is a big commitment is an understatement. Let's see what departure dates we've got."

Punching a few keys, Tom brought up the upcoming launch schedule.

"Looks like we've got a shuttle six weeks out and then another two weeks after that. How does either of those sound?"

"Can you do anything sooner?" Now that he had made up his mind to leave, waiting around six weeks seemed like an eternity. In six weeks he'd probably change his mind a dozen times.

"Sooner than six weeks? Normally even that's too quick. You're not running away from anything, any trouble we should know about?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Something turns up in your background check and you're out. You know that right? You're just wasting both our time if that's the case."

"No, nothing like that. It's just, if I think about it too long I'll probably change my mind. I think the sooner the better, really."

"Well, we'll need to finish the background check but I've actually got a few berths open for two days from now."

Two days from now? Suddenly the reality of what he was doing came crashing down. Leaving for Mars day after tomorrow. He felt nauseous but then he thought about going back to his old life, his long evenings alone, the uncertainty, just existing. Not doing anything to be proud of, just same old night after night.

"You know what, yeah. Day after tomorrow is fine."

"Great, let's get these forms going and then I'll get you to medical for the health screening."

Three hours later Sam walked out of the recruitment center.

"How'd it go?" asked the receptionist.

"Umm good, I guess. I'm leaving day after next."

"Wow, that's quick."

"Yeah, pretty exciting," he replied walking towards the exit. He almost said see you around but caught himself, glad he'd saved himself the awkwardness.

When he was half out the door, she called out to him. "It's a rebirth you know, you can be whoever you want up there. Leave it all behind, become a new you. Lots of people do that. Some even change their names."

Not sure how to respond Sam just smiled and nodded.

Walking back to Wayfair to pack, Sam mulled the receptionist's words over in his mind. If he could remake himself what would that mean? Who could he be except himself? He thought about his bad habits, the lack of direction, and the general apathy. All that would change whether he wanted it to or not once he got to Mars, or at least he hoped it would.

Sitting down to pack he realized he didn't have much worth bringing. Wouldn't need clothes, wouldn't need toiletries. He had his data pad of course with his personal files but that would take up almost no weight. Every colonist was allocated 200 cubic centimeters of space and 10 kilograms of weight for goods but Sam figured he'd just sell his space. He tried to think of anything worth bringing or something he should go out and buy tomorrow ahead of his trip.

According to the recruiter the trip itself would go by in the blink of an eye. Tom had explained that everyone is put in stasis at the launch facility. Sam wouldn't even see the inside of the ship, which apparently made it easier on everyone. With the cost of moving weight and space constraints Sam figured they probably stacked new colonists like sardines but hadn't asked and didn't want to think about it too much. The more he thought about it, the more he realized it really would be like dying and then waking up as a new person, just like the receptionist said.

The next day Sam got up early, determined to get the best out of his last day on Earth. Walking around town, and ignoring the frequent calls from his (now ex) boss, he had expected to feel a sense of nostalgia. Without somewhere to go he found himself really looking around for the first time in a long time, and decided he was glad he'd be going. The trash heaps, the smog, everything was so used up and worn out. The few people out on the streets were all wearing breathing masks.

His first stop was a small café he remembered he'd always wanted to try. When he and Eddy had been little kids the space had been a bakery. They'd spend hours drooling over the confections in the window,

not able to afford anything. The baker had gone out of business years ago but it felt nice all the same to finally go into that storefront and sit down as a customer. The bill was most of Sam's meager savings but that didn't really matter anymore.

After the café Sam wandered down to the waterfront, not sure where else to go. Years ago the greenspace was quite nice but the river had grown too polluted and the whole area was desolate with the exception of a few homeless camps.

As kids he and Eddy had come down here to play all the time, running up and down the walk, people watching, looking for anything interesting that had been left behind. Once he'd even found a twenty, and not one of those fake religious ones either that trick you into picking it up. It was an actual twenty and he'd felt like a king. They'd gorged on candy till they both threw up.

Things had changed though, no kids here anymore, not even orphans. The whole area wasn't safe. At the periphery there were still a couple old trees, withered and barely holding on. Sam sat down against one of those to rest for a bit and wondered if someday it would be the same on Mars, green hills and breathable air turned to ruin. For now everything was all domes and space suits on Mars. In his life time there'd be more breathable air on Mars than on Earth but after that who knew.

As he reclined against the tree, Sam's mind wandered to some of the other times he'd been down to the waterfront. It was the setting for some of his best memories. One of the last times he'd seen Eddy had been here as well, he recalled. They'd just been moved from the home to Wayfair because they were getting too old to be adopted.

"We're not kids anymore," Eddy had said. "This is a real opportunity."

They both knew they were still kids but it felt big to say they weren't.

"I don't know," Sam replied. "It's a lot to ask. How do you know this guy?"

"Look, we have to start watching out for ourselves now," Eddy replied, ignoring the question. "It's just you and me and this will set us up, get us going."

Sam was still reluctant but had gone along with Eddy. He hardly knew anyone else and Wayfair wasn't like the home. Hardly anyone kept tabs on them and they were free to come and go as the pleased. Eddy had been approached by some of the older kids and had roped Sam into his latest scheme. They had been thirteen.

Thinking on Eddy, Sam knew there was actually something he had to do before he left Earth for the last time.

"Are you sure this is it?"

"Of course I am," Eddy replied. If there was one defining characteristic of Eddy, the real essence of his character, it was his brash confidence. If you had asked Eddy about nuclear reactors or seventeenth century politics he would give you an answer. It wouldn't be right, but Eddy would believe it was right, and he could make you believe it too.

The Dacha Epsilon refinery was three city blocks long and half that wide. They'd left Wayfair that evening and had been waiting around for a few hours. The boys knew they wouldn't make it back before curfew but they wouldn't be missed.

The sprawling industrial complex was a maze of gantries, tanks, metal enclosures, and thick cables snaking this way and that. The plant was lit up bright as daylight twenty-four hours a day but Eddy's contact had told them about a weak spot in the fence. That was what made them so valuable, they were small and could sneak through, in and out, and no one would notice.

The break in the fence was just big enough if someone pulled up the fence while the other crawled through. Once they were both inside Eddy pulled out a crudely drawn layout of the plant. What they were looking for was actually just inside the fence, a point Eddy had belabored while trying to convince Sam to come along.

"It'll be in and out, not ten minutes," he'd said more than once.

After intently checking the layout, Eddy pointed to a panel on the back side of some machinery.

"Look, CXR-2131. Just like they said," and sure enough, the old rusting cabinet had the tag CXR-2131 stenciled on the front.

The panel wasn't locked and Eddy set about removing the latches. There were quite a few other panels nearby, but almost every panel Sam could see was locked, but this one wasn't. Sam felt something wasn't right about this.

Before he could say anything, Eddy had popped off the panel. Inside was a strange configuration of electrical components connected with thick bundles of wire. The panel was humming and bright lights on some of the components were flashing rapidly.

"So that's it then?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, you have the wrench?"

Sam reluctantly handed Eddie the pipe wrench they'd brought.

The job had been simple. Go to this panel, open it up, and smash it to pieces.

Taking the wrench, Eddy got a good grip and brought it over his head, swinging downward. Instead of the twang of metal, there was a thud and then sparks. Sam had flinched from the strike and cautiously opened his eyes. Eddy was frozen in place, shuddering and then he started letting out a high pitched scream as his hair began to smoke. The panel crackled and shot flames out, the wrench had turned red hot in Eddy's hands but he couldn't let go.

Sam was frozen with indecision, and there was a loud explosion and then darkness as the power died. Sam turned and ran.

Sam wormed under the fence and kept running. He cut himself badly but didn't notice till later. As he ran he heard sirens in the distance.

The next day Sam saw the news was reporting there had been an accident and the plant would be shut down for weeks pending an investigation. Something to do with vandals.

Sam didn't even know who they were doing the job for, had no idea what to do or what to even say. Eddy had handled all of that. For weeks Sam had been afraid the authorities would show up one day but they never did. A couple of the other kids had asked him about Eddy but after a while it was like Eddy had never existed at all.

Strolling down the sidewalk Sam came up to the point in the fence he and Eddy had scraped under years ago. The fence had been replaced, probably more than once, and was again showing wear. It was also set in concrete though, no squeaking under that.

Sam peered through the fencing and could just make out panel CXR-2131. Everything in that plant looked old and worn down. Probably didn't even work anymore, no one was really around, but that panel in particular looked worse, burned a little bit.

There was still time to back out, still time to disappear, make something of his life, binding contract or not, but then he thought about Eddy, all brash and ready to take chances. It had killed him but at least he had lived.

Sam spent all night outside, didn't bother going back to Wayfair. They'd figure he just ran away, happened all the time. As Sam headed off to the spaceport the only person he'd really miss was Eddy and he'd take Eddy with him as best he could.