

Of Stars and Space

and other stories

Michael Bergman

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ISBN-13: 9798654285577

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Alexander gripped the arms of his shaking chair. The simulators did their best, but nothing could prepare him for the actual feeling of the launch into space. He held his breath more than he should and kept his eyes fixed on the picture taped to his console.

As the atmosphere thinned the vibrations grew more manageable and he loosened his grip. Turning his head as far as he could, he caught a glimpse of the Earth shrinking.

“Wow,” the word slipped out.

“Rookie,” Captain Schumer replied. “But it is always breathtaking.”

“How many times have you been in space?”

“This is my tenth trip.”

“Wow.”

“Don’t worry. After this, I’m sure you’ll have plenty more opportunities to return.”

Matvei interrupted the conversation. “The time is now seventeen-oh-three. We will be in position to activate the generator two hours from this mark.”

“Roger.”

The two hours passed in what seemed a few minutes. Alexander and Ja-kyung examined the generator a final time, their bodies floating about the cabin. She smiled at him. He smiled back. She was beautiful, he thought, but old enough to be his mother.

“Looks good. Everything checks,” he said.

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“Agreed.”

They made their way back to the command module. Over a century and a half, thousands of space flights occurred with minimal casualties, yet Alexander’s nerves twitched before the launch. Travel through a wormhole had been done with various objects, drones, probes, and chimpanzees, but never humans. Yet as *t minus zero* approached, calmness settled over Alexander.

He opened a storage compartment near his shoulder and pulled out a small wooden block.

“What’s that?” Matvei asked.

“Something my father insisted had to travel with us: the first object my grandfather successfully sent through a wormhole.”

“May it bring us luck.” Matvei touched a few buttons on the screen above his head. “Ready, Captain.”

“Mission Control, we are go.”

“Roger *Echo 2*, engage generator and start countdown at *t minus thirty*.”

“Confirmed, Mission Control, thirty second countdown at mark.” Captain Schumer gave a nod to Matvei. “See you in a few minutes. Mark. Thirty...”

* * *

“*Echo 2* this is Mission Control, do you read?”

Silence.

“*Echo 2* this is Mission Control, do you read?”

Silence.

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The young woman with a headset looked over her shoulder.
“It’s been one hour, Ma’am. We have received no pings from the Neptune probe and they have not reemerged in orbit.”

“Keep trying.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

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