

Lost in
Space

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Taylor

in the twenty-first-century version of an improvised isolation tank. Or he had been.

"Mitchell. I am sorry to interrupt you, but..."

There was a slight hiss as the ship's computer injected more oxygen into the chamber, forcing Mitchell into a fully conscious state.

After a few seconds, he struggled to find his voice. "Yo, Mac, that was cruel."

As usual, his throat was a little tender from working twice as hard to take in half as much oxygen. He noticed the light level increasing the visibility of the opaque blue walls surrounding him.

"Again, I am sorry."

Even in his foggy state, Mitchell was sure he could hear a subtle Newfoundland accent coming from the ship's verbal access interface. No doubt a joke from the people who had programmed Mac, short for Machine.

"Are you, Mac? Do you know what 'sorry' actually means or feels like?" Mitchell yawned as the oxygen flushed his system.

"I have done the research. I believe I have an approximation."

Mitchell quickly checked the stat board embedded in the wall four feet in front of him to make sure everything was working as it should in the chamber and, correspondingly, in his body. As monotonously as usual, everything was fine.

"Let's leave that philosophical discussion for another time. I assume you have a reason for harshing my buzz?"

"I don't understand. This is not your siesta period, as you call it, yet you appear to be sleeping. Are you unwell?"

Not this again, thought Mitchell. The problem with these computerized human personality approximations was their limited understanding of the true human condition, though they frequently claimed to understand it. That was the frustrating part. He'd always meant to send a scathing report to the people who programmed these things, but they probably wouldn't do a damned thing about it. Mitchell would simply have to suffer in silence, and silence was the norm in outer space.

"I was not sleeping. I was giving my brain a rest."

There was a pause as the machine processed this. "And this involves manipulating the oxygen, light and gravity levels in the hyperbaric chamber? Judging by your bio readings, you were barely conscious."

Typically, Mac, or any of the new types of synthesized intellects, wouldn't understand the concept of getting high, or wanting to take a

LOST IN SPACE

...nothing...

...everything is nothing...

...and nothing is everything...

...only breathing...

...and my thoughts...

Like a dinosaur-destroying meteor crashing into a primitive planet, a loud buzzer suddenly dragged the free-floating man out of his perceptual world and into the hard reality of technology surrounding him.

Mitchell had been hovering effortlessly, drifting both in the gravity vacuum of space and, more interestingly, in and out of consciousness. Small tethers from the right shoulder and left pant cuff of his jumpsuit anchored him to opposing bulkheads. This was to make sure he didn't bump into the walls of the ship and ruin his fun. His mind had no such restrictions and had meandered back and forth between alpha, beta, delta and all remaining brain-wave frequencies. The small room was dark and the temperature was neutral. A sort of purgatory. Additionally, the oxygen in this hyperbaric chamber had been reduced to the minimum, allowing for a more recreational time alone. In other words, he was mellowing out

break from reality. They only had reality; that was the total purpose of their existence. Their primary function—to deal with the reality of crossing vast expanses of nothing, for intolerable periods of time and dealing with a thousand different ways the universe could kill a human. Mac didn't understand that out here, reconnoitering the asteroid belt for valuable minerals, things could get a little lonely and boring, so an individual planning to remain sane had to do what he could to keep himself amused. What with the strict restrictions on recreational pharmaceuticals, which could easily be scanned and identified by Launchport headquarters, this was the best Mitchell could do. Unfortunately, it wasn't exactly a high—more of a heightened or altered state. If he was lucky, maybe he'd hallucinate—a self-generated trip. It wasn't much; in fact, it was kind of desperate, but out here anything was better than nothing. He also had Mac looking over his shoulder should some mishap occur. He knew Mac was more than likely to put this in the report to the company that owned and operated this ship, but he figured he could probably talk his way out of it. He was good at that. This two-year tour was his third long-term mission and he was slated for a fourth, six months after getting back. Still, that didn't explain why Mac had woken him up.

"Just leave it alone, Mac, and answer my question. Why did you interrupt my downtime?"

"There was a message for you."

"Was it important?"

"Depends on how you define important. That is a purely subjective judgment."

If it was possible to throttle a machine, that is exactly what Mitchell would be doing right now. Instead, he took a deep breath of the richer O₂ levels and reformulated the question. "Is it time-sensitive? Relevant to the safety of the ship or myself? Does it substantively change the nature or direction of our mission?"

Again, a momentary delay. "No."

"Then I guess it wasn't important, was it?"

While he was up, he might as well get something to eat. The food substitutes weren't especially tasty, but at least eating helped pass the time between asteroid scans. True space exploration consisted largely of boredom.

"Your grandfather Peter Shabagwis has died." Mitchell stopped breathing for a second. "Although this news does not fall under any of the

categories you mentioned, I believe—based on my knowledge of human nature—it can still be classified as 'important.' Am I in error? I ask only in case a similar situation should arise in the future. I believe you have another grandfather back on Earth, and one remaining grandmother."

Papa Peter was dead. This was such a surprise. Although Papa Peter had been well into his eighties, Mitchell thought Papa Peter would outlive him and everybody in the family. He was that kind of man. Old but not infirm. Aged but not weak. Slow but still sharp. And just damn tough. Now he was no more, while Mitchell floated out here, farther away than the old man could ever imagine. Part of him wished Mac had not woken him with this announcement.

"No, Mac, you did the right thing."

Disembarking from the chamber, Mitchell immediately felt the resumption of faux gravity, so called because it was a system of magnetic attraction instead of legitimate gravity. A metallic resin added to the material in his clothing interacted with a small magnetic force coming from the deck plates to give a rudimentary sense of gravitational pull. His organs and hair still knew there was in fact no downward drag, but at least the added effort of movement kept his muscle degeneration at about 40 percent of the expected level, meaning longer, less debilitating trips in space.

"Do you need me to do anything?"

Lost in thought, Mitchell shook his head before remembering Mac did not have interior optical sensors. "No thanks, Mac. I'll take it from here."

Papa Peter. His Native grandfather. The only real Aboriginal influence in his life. The remaining two forebears were non-Native, and his mother—Papa Peter's daughter—had died when Mitchell was nine years old. He had only met the man in person a half-dozen times but had felt a certain kinship. His grandfather had always tested him, in positive ways, like making him explain as a child why the universe above was more important than the world below. Once the boy had figured that out and found a way to explain it logically and passionately, his career had been chosen. A good chunk of Papa Peter's philosophy of life could be summed up in a simple sentence: "Step up and represent, or just go home. No room in the middle."

In postings and video chats, the old man had shown a greater interest in Mitchell's life than most of his closer relatives. And when he was first offered these astronomical forays, Peter Shabagwis had been excited for him, maybe even a little envious.

"When I was young, they had just landed on the moon. Such adventures. Bring me back a rock. A pretty one. Maybe it will help me get a girlfriend."

That was in his last video message, a couple days before Mitchell left the confines of Earth. He had not yet found a rock worthy of his grandfather, but he would now, and then he would return to his grandfather's community and lay it on the man's grave. He had a whole asteroid belt to pick from. Yes, it was against protocol for extraterrestrial objects to be handled so casually. Quarantine would definitely be upset. But right now, Mitchell didn't really care. Where he was now, what he was doing, looking for the known in a universe of the unknown and then returning it to what his grandfather's people called Turtle Island for the betterment of everyone—this was the only tribute he could manage for the man.

Back in his quarters, Mitchell searched for the file containing the recorded messages sent to him from Papa Peter; Otter Lake First Nation, Planet Earth. He sat and watched four-and-a-half hours of video messages from his grandfather, sitting in front of the same unremarkable kitchen background, wearing the same baseball cap. Playing back to back the ten years of messages he'd collected during his multiple survey trips, he noticed something that had escaped him in past viewings. He could see his grandfather getting older, greyer, aging with each recording. The man still bubbled with vitality, especially when he laughed, but it was easy to see the passing years etching their signature on his face.

One of his grandfather's last communications got Mitchell thinking. The old man had posed some interesting questions, sitting at his kitchen table, ruminating on his grandson's career. Just idle thoughts about the nature of space travel and Aboriginal identity, two things not usually found together. "Kitchen talk," he called it. If he had looked outside the ship, Mitchell would have seen Ceres, one of the largest asteroids in the solar system, a scant million kilometres or so off the port side. Already well surveyed and picked over, it held no mystery or potential for his mission, but this was a moot point, for the astronaut's mind was back on Earth, sitting in a ramshackle kitchen, enjoying some tea.

"You know, I was thinking about you the other night. I couldn't sleep, so I went outside and looked way up into the heavens. I knew in a few weeks you would be up there somewhere going about your job, just like I am down here in my little cabin, washing the dishes. Boy, when I was a kid I used to think the store, with all its candy, was so far away. I had to walk so far to lose all my teeth. I guess we learn things all the time, huh?"

For a moment the old man's eyes grew distant, but then the lopsided smile Mitchell knew so well returned.

"I want you to think about something. Everything I was taught about being Anishinabe was tied to the land. Everything we were, everything we did came from our relationship to this chunk of earth our people stand on. I know you weren't raised much with our traditions, but I like to think somewhere deep inside you is a fair-sized chunk of Anishinabe, just like those expensive minerals you look for in all those rocks way up there. Maybe that's why you're so handsome."

Now it was Mitchell's turn to smile.

"But being Native in space... Now that's a head-scratcher. Think about it. We sprang from Turtle Island. The earth and water are so tied to who we are. There's an old saying, 'The voice of the land is in our language.' But what happens when you aren't able to run your fingers through the sand along the river? Or walk barefoot in the grass? Or feel the summer breeze blowing through your hair? Nothing natural, only manufactured things around you. Manufactured water, manufactured food, manufactured air. Even manufactured gravity. I understand you even got a manufactured friend up there to talk to. I know that everything we are we carry inside us, but I can't help wondering if it's possible to be a good, proper Native astronaut. Sometimes I get weird thoughts, huh?"

Mitchell froze the image of Papa Peter on his monitor and let his grandfather's smile hover continuously a few feet from his face. Maybe the old man was right. The few things Mitchell had picked up from the elder did seem to contradict everything the astrosurveyor did. First and foremost, no matter how hard he tried, he just could not see Papa Peter, who had dressed perpetually in jeans and denim or plaid shirts, up here in the coveralls Mitchell had been issued. He might have been allowed to keep his baseball cap, though. Nor could the young man imagine his grandfather eating the food, which was bland no matter how much the Mineral Cops tried to liven up the meals. Papa Peter would probably have said there was "never enough salt in this stuff you call food!"

But it was the broader implications his grandfather had brought up that raised uncomfortable and complicated issues. Papa Peter burned sage every morning to greet the new day and honour the Four Directions. So many things in Mitchell's current environment made that simple practice impossible. He might be allowed to bring sage on board, but he certainly couldn't light it in this oxygen-enriched atmosphere that had rather severe

and unforgiving fire-suppression technology. Half a second after he ignited the sage, the entire ship would be breathing a distasteful and obnoxious fire retardant that had been sprayed into the ventilation system. It would take days to get rid of the smell.

And there was no dawn or rising sun. The sun never moved, except to recede into the distance. The ship's chronometer told him when "dawn" was, but that was an arbitrary choice by headquarters. Of course, Mitchell could rationalize things however he wanted. He remembered an old saying stating that home is where you hang your hat. Well, dawn could be whenever you got up. The problem was that when you started rationalizing too many things, the significance of the original action was diminished.

Also, how was it possible to honour the Four Directions when there were none out here? No north, south, east or west. Just the endless, horizonless expanse of space. There was a planetary plane, even a galactic plane, but that was rationalizing things again. Some Aboriginal nations in North America believed there were actually Seven Directions: the original four, plus up, down and wherever you were standing. Up and down complicated things even further, but Mitchell was still fairly confident he knew where he was on that seventh direction. One out of seven... not a particularly good batting average.

Other bits and pieces of conversations with Papa Peter came flooding back. The man gave thanks to Mother Earth and Father Sky on a regular basis... This was another difficult reckoning. Mother Earth was very far away. In fact, Mitchell was closer to the backside of Mother Mars—if a planet named after the god of war could be given such a maternal designation. As for Father Sky, it all depended on how you defined sky. Blue, filled with oxygen, nitrogen and various trace elements, with clouds and high-flying birds? Or simply everything above Mother Earth? It was all getting so complicated.

Sitting in a storage locker back on Earth—he could even remember exactly where he had gingerly leaned it against a side wall—was the hand drum Papa Peter had sent him. Made of moose hide and cedar with a stylized painting of an otter on one side, it was one of Mitchell's most treasured possessions. He had listed it on the content form for objects he planned to bring along on the mission, knowing full well it was unlikely to be allowed. And he was right. First of all, it was made of non-sterilized animal and plant matter. Second, it was bulkier than personal belongings

were permitted to be and would therefore take up precious space. Third, it was just weird. Launchport had a thing against weird.

His supervisors and the technicians who serviced the vehicle he toured the solar system in pointed out in very specific terms to the frustrated astrosurveyor that because of the extremely delicate calibration of many instruments on the ship, any unauthorized and unanticipated vibrations within the hull could be catastrophic. Bottom line: no drum and especially no playing the drum.

No sweet grass. Not even a lousy dream catcher. Space was meant for atheists or people with little spiritual inclination, it seemed. But then Mitchell remembered there had been Christian astronauts, Muslim ones, and probably a smattering of other faiths. Delaney, an Irish Catholic woman in his training program, had said all she needed was a cross around her neck and her faith in God, and she was ready to face the universe. Papa Peter would probably say it sounds harder to be a good Native person in space.

"Are you okay? You seem unusually quiet today."

Mac's programmed rising tone at the end of a question usually irritated Mitchell. Today, it barely registered.

Of course he was quiet. Who was he going to talk to? He hadn't reached the point of talking to himself yet. After a month on the mission, to relieve the tedium he had found himself humming songs he remembered from his childhood, but Mac kept asking questions about the function of humming and the meaning of the songs. Mac had been programmed to be interactive as a means of keeping the minds of crew members lively and engaged. Mitchell wished he could find that program in Mac's hard drive and erase it. He knew where he was. He knew what he had signed on for. He didn't need a computer trying to be human. Nobody needed that. Besides, small talk had always annoyed him.

"Is this related to the death of your grandfather?"

Closing his eyes, Mitchell struggled to answer without registering anger. Mac was highly unlikely to be hurt or insulted, but reacting irritably to a machine asking a question was one of the first symptoms of a long-term astrosurveyor losing it.

"Yes, it is, Mac. Could you leave me alone for a while? It's a human thing."

"I understand."

Does it really? Mitchell wondered. Or was that some programmed response?

"But I have taken the liberty of researching your grandfather. I hope that is all right."

The anger was returning. Why would Mac have done that? Mitchell felt almost... violated.

"I thought you might like this. Nine years ago, your grandfather appeared at a National Aboriginal Day celebration in Ottawa. He was part of something called a drum group. I have found thirty-two minutes of archival video of his performance. Would you be interested?"

Mitchell opened his eyes, completely surprised. On the screen was an image of his grandfather sitting around a drum with half a dozen other men. What seemed to be hundreds of people, a mixture of Native and non-Native, were gently swaying and singing along with the traditional song. The familiar skyline of the nation's capital stood proudly in the background.

He had never really understood the nature of traditional Anishinabe music, its words and meanings, but that was indeed his grandfather swinging the drumstick, being as Native as Native could be. Mitchell even recognized a few of the other men seated beside Papa Peter from his occasional visit to Otter Lake. The only problem was the silence. Drum music wasn't silent. As his grandfather once said, it needs to be heard, celebrated, felt and sung to. Instead, all Mitchell heard was the sterile hiss of the ship's constantly recycled air.

"Mitchell... You are still silent. Did I do something wrong?"

"No. No, just unexpected. Thank you."

Kindness and concern from a computer? This was not the kind of service he expected from Mac out here cruising the asteroid belt.

"Perhaps you would like to listen?"

Nodding before he spoke, Mitchell focused the view screen on his grandfather. "I sure would, Mac, but you know the acoustic restrictions."

"I believe you were issued headphones upon assignment to this ship." Again, surprise. Mac was right. Somewhere in one of his service lockers were headphones. Standard equipment but rarely used. Since each ship usually held only one crew member, there was little need for the privacy that headphones provided. Mitchell listened to a lot of music, but the feeds had been specially modified to not agitate the ship's sensors. For a true audiophile, it was sacrilege, no different than serving a tofurkey at

Thanksgiving. Feeling eagerness for the first time in a long time, Mitchell manoeuvred himself around in his compartment, opening one locker after another. His mission now was to find the headphones.

"I believe you'll find them in the compartment right above the door-lock display."

Once again, Mac was right. Mitchell's appreciation for the computer was growing.

"Mac, you are a lifesaver." Mitchell plugged them into the proper input. "A bit of an exaggeration, but I will accept the compliment. Enjoy."

"Thanks, Mac." Mitchell felt real gratitude to the automated voice and programmed personality.

"All in a day's work. I will take care of business while you mourn."

Putting the headphones on, Mitchell could hear Papa Peter's voice rising above the others' and feel the pounding of the drum. He could feel everything his grandfather was washing over him. It was good. Song after song made him realize that even though he was only one quarter Anishinabe, he could be fairly confident he was the only Anishinabe out here in the asteroid belt, possibly the only one outside of Earth and the three space stations. This was the only drum music for millions and millions of kilometres. This was a responsibility.

As his grandfather used to say, he'd better step up and represent, because he was a hell of a long way from home. Mitchell started humming, his fingers beating a rhythm on the plastic console.

As promised, Mac watched over Mitchell as he visited with his grandfather.