



The intermediate generation

Prologue

The Earth of 2027 was going through hard times. Years of warfare in all parts of the world and environmental disasters, fueled by overpopulation, have caused decline and brought humanity to the brink of survival. To avoid the inevitable end of the human race, a group of engineers and scientists developed a radical plan - an intergalactic expedition to the potentially habitable exoplanet K2-18b, 2.5 million light years from Earth.

With no other choice and no support from world governments, the engineers from the United 24 organization began their adventurous project. In a few years, in secret from the whole world, the giant starship Argo was built, equipped with experimental ion engines, but even with such technologies, its crew of 150 colonists had no way to reach K2-18b, which was later called Eden. Even with the increased speed of the ship due to ion engines and the latest navigation systems that constantly calculated the shortest route, the time to travel between galaxies was estimated to take about 200-250 years, which meant that the distant descendants of the first colonists who set out would colonize that planet. However, the team for the ship was assembled anyway.

The crew of the Argo starship consisted of 150 colonists, carefully selected for their mental and physical abilities. Among them were engineers, scientists, doctors, agronomists, and survivalists. All of them passed rigorous tests because the future of humanity on the new planet depended on them.

When Argo launched in 2037, devastating wars and environmental disasters were still raging on Earth. But the crew hoped that by the time they arrived on Eden in a few centuries, humanity would be able to stabilize the situation.

However, the last message from Earth, received near Mars, was disappointing: the wars had ended, but planetary disasters continued. Therefore, the Argo mission remained relevant, as it was not known whether it would be possible to save the Earth before the Sun exploded. And the colonization of Eden would be the key to the survival of civilization.

Years of traveling in limitless space passed. "Argo had already left the orbit of Mars far behind, but there was still a long way to go. Decades of loneliness and obscurity in the cold sea of stars awaited the crew.

Mark opened his eyes sharply, waking up to loud banging on his pod door. He was a short, rather slender young man with short dark hair and piercing blue eyes. His face was somewhat square, and he had dark stubble on his chin, giving him a slight scruffiness. Outside the door, I could hear his girlfriend Eva screaming and trying to get through to him.

- "Come on, Mark, get up already. How long can you sleep?

- Just ten more minutes, I promise...

- That's what you said ten minutes ago, so get up, you bastard.

The capsule door opened, releasing all the oxygen from inside into the room.

- Are you satisfied?

- "Yeah!" Eva replied with a big smile.

- "So why did you scream so much, couldn't you have breakfast yourself?

- Yes, I could have. But it's more pleasant to do it with you.

- And it's so nice for me! - Mark mocked.

- "Besides, I wanted to ask you something on the way to the dining room.

- What did you want to talk about?

- I told you, on the way to the dining room...
- All right, I'll be right there.

After passing through the automatic doors of the capsule bay, Mark and Eva found themselves in a long corridor, the spine of the Argo spacecraft. Its steel hull tapered steeply toward the nose with curved plates, resembling the shape of an arrowhead. The walls were covered with plastic on the inside, creating a futuristic look. Walking along this corridor, one could get to any place on the ship. It divided the ship in half - on the left were the working compartments, on the right were the living and infrastructure compartments.

The corridor was illuminated by small flashlights built into every other plate, alternating with portholes that were now tightly closed - a decision made long ago by their great-great-grandfathers, the first crew members. After all, on Earth, people could see the stars only at night, so the windows were closed to avoid confusion and disruption.

Almost on the way to the dining room, Mark laughed when he heard Eva's latest claim. She was always a bit short-tempered. But that was exactly what he liked about her.

- "Why are you laughing?" she said, embarrassed by her lover's laughter. - "I'm serious - let's work together to repair the ship. You've been taking courses anyway.
- You already know that I prefer a quiet life and working with animals to tweaking or patching things up.

Besides, I'm not satisfied with worrying about you when you leave the ship.

- But think about it, this is such a good opportunity! We would work together and spend time together, and if we fixed something important, we might even get a couple of capsules...

- It's a tempting offer, of course, but I'll probably turn it down. I have already decided that I will take care of animals and plants in greenhouses. Besides, we'll be able to save up for a couple of capsules anyway.

- Okay, as you wish... "Just don't you dare get too excited when they send me on my next deployment, or I won't come back on purpose!" she said mockingly.

- "How can I not worry about you? You know how precious you are to me!

- Okay, okay, I understand. I'll be careful! Now, stop fooling around and let's go to breakfast, because everything is getting cold!" she said, embarrassed.

- "Yes, let's go!

As the automatic doors opened for the couple, Mark and Eva entered the bustling dining room, almost all the tables already occupied by other crew members.

- Please take a seat, and I'll go join the line. - Mark suggested.

Eva nodded and headed for one of the free tables near the large panoramic porthole, which was now covered with metal shutters.

Mark walked over to the touch screen vending machine to order food. Its glossy black surface was reminiscent of the old fast food machines on Earth. Mark chose scrambled eggs and green tea for himself, and for Eva he ordered a cappuccino and a croissant with jam, as she preferred sweets. Although they had slightly different tastes, Mark knew that the dishes he chose would go well together. After all, the most important thing was that breakfast would start their day in a good mood.

After receiving his order, Mark went to the table where Eva was already waiting for him.

- "Here, ma'am, your cappuccino and a croissant with jam. - Mark said as he approached the table where Eva was waiting for him.

- "Oh, how did you know I would want this particular croissant?

- It's just that I can read minds.

- Oh, and what am I thinking now?

- Hmm, give me a second... - He stretched out his hand and made a thoughtful face. - I see. I see what you want...

- What do I want?

- You want me to kiss you right now. - He said smiling.

- Wow! You really know how to read my mind!

- Of course, I told you that! I just know you so well.

- My magical telepath. Well, your powers are truly amazing. Now let's eat breakfast before it gets cold. We have a lot to do today!

- Yes, let's get started! And tonight I'll demonstrate my telepathic powers again.

- I'll be sure to! It will be interesting.

Mark couldn't take his eyes off Eva, who was sitting across from him. Her long red hair shone in the soft light of the diode lamps, emphasizing the pallor of her skin. She was elegantly drinking coffee from a cup, and her delicate hands were breaking a croissant. Her every gesture was full of grace and elegance. Mark was fascinated by her sweet smile and unique sparkle in her eyes. He felt incredible affection and a desire to protect this charming creature.

Suddenly, the measured silence of the dining room was interrupted by the calm voice of the ship's artificial intelligence:

- "Attention, crew. In two weeks the ship will leave the territory of the Milky Way and continue its journey in the Andromeda Galaxy. Be prepared for minor turbulence and stay in the capsule compartments in case of unforeseen circumstances.

The dining room was silent. Some exchanged worried glances. Mark noticed that Eva, who usually ate with gusto, had suddenly lost her appetite and was only twirling her spoon in her hands. Although they were born on this ship, Earth was their mythical ancestral home. And now the last thread of connection with it

was about to be severed. Finally, without taking another crumb in their mouths, Mark and Eva went to their workplaces.

The atmosphere in the greenhouses that day was tense. Colleagues whispered and exchanged worried glances. Some even left their jobs and gathered in small groups to discuss the announcement.

- This is ridiculous! We must fly on to Eden! Especially for you, who thinks that the decision of our ancestors to fly forward to save humanity means nothing!" one of the oldest agronomists exclaimed passionately.

- "What if the Earth has already recovered, and humanity is not in danger? "We can't know that!" the younger man countered.

- "It's too risky, you fool, who knows what's going on out there! And besides, wouldn't we be doing the same thing as our ancestors, only in the opposite direction?

- Maybe we should stop and land on the nearest planet to think things over," another farmer interjected. -

"Besides, I heard that we'll be flying by Proxima Centauri b soon anyway, which is also considered an exoplanet...

- Hey, there! We'll discuss it at lunch!" The chief agronomist called from a nearby greenhouse.

- "Chief, doesn't this bother you at all?" Mark asked.

- "Yes, it does, but it shouldn't affect the harvest, we still have to feed the whole crew anyway.

He was authoritative, so everyone listened to him and went back to work, but the arguments still didn't subside until the loudspeakers announced in the evening:

"Attention! All crew, please gather at 20:00 in the central corridor to discuss the ship's future course. I repeat. All crew to assemble at 20:00 in the central corridor to discuss the ship's future course."

The time for the meeting in the central corridor was approaching. Mark stood at a small porthole near the greenhouse compartments and gazed out into the vastness of space.

Myriads of stars surrounded the Argo on all sides, like diamond dust scattered by a giant invisible hand. They shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow, forming fantastic patterns on the dark atlas of the Universe. Tonight, however, the star lace seemed disturbing. It flashed with bright lights and then faded away, as if reflecting the disputes and unrest that engulfed the Argo. Mark stared at this strange sight in silence, wondering what course to take.

Once upon a time, Mark's ancestors could only observe this majestic beauty of the Universe from afar, from a tiny blue speck called Earth. And now he himself was floating among the boundless ocean of stars, becoming a part of this magical cosmic mystery.

The thought of this inspired Mark, but at the same time gave rise to doubts. After all, he saw the universe in a completely different way from his ancestors, who had

lived most of their lives on their home planet. If they were an "intermediate generation," would they even dare to make such a journey? Should they continue on this path because their grandfathers wanted them to? And should they condemn their children and grandchildren to the same existence? Or perhaps Jerry was right, and it was worth trying to colonize some nearby exoplanet to establish their own new Earth? These thoughts tore at Mark's head from the inside out, and didn't give him a break even for a second. In the end, he could not decide which decision would be the right one...

Suddenly he heard Eva's light footsteps behind him. She tapped him on the shoulder:

- "Shall we go?"

Mark stood silently for a moment longer, as if continuing an internal dialog with the stars. Then he turned to his beloved with a casual smile:

- "Yes, let's go."

They walked in silence down the corridor to the central hall. To break the tense silence, Mark asked:

- Do you know who organized this?

- It seems to be Professor Nichols' initiative, he's one of ours, so I think there will be a vote now. - Eva answered. After that, silence hung between them again.

The entire crew of the Argo had already gathered in the long central corridor. People stood in a dense

crowd, whispering and discussing the situation. The air was tense and their faces were worried.

Suddenly, Professor Nicholas, one of the most respected members of the crew, took the stage. He was a small, thin man in his 60s. His rather long, graying hair was neatly combed back, and his wise gray eyes peered out from under his thick eyebrows. The professor's face was covered with wrinkles that testified to his rich life experience. His posture expressed confidence and authority. The professor raised his hand with long, thin fingers, demanding silence from the audience. After waiting for everyone to be quiet and look at him, he began his speech:

"Dear friends, colleagues, crew members!

I can see that the announcement of our departure from the Milky Way has caused many of you to feel anxious and doubtful. I confess that at first I did not quite understand the reason for this reaction. After all, we have all known for a long time that sooner or later our ship would leave the star cluster in which our civilization was born. This is a natural stage of our journey to Eden.

However, I now realize that this step does mark a certain moment of distance from our roots. And this has naturally made some of you want to rethink our path.

That is why I would like to present all possible options for our further movement. Over the course of the day, my colleagues and I have come to the conclusion that

out of the many options for our actions, the most popular ones are continue on the planned route, return to Earth, or try to colonize the nearest exoplanet to give our children a new home instead of the ship. Each of these options has the right to exist because it has its advantages and disadvantages, which we discussed with the people close to me. In general, I propose to go through each of the options.

The first option is to continue the flight to the planet Eden, as originally planned. This is the most logical solution, because this is exactly what the crew and the ship's design were counting on. Everything was prepared for such a scenario, so everything on the ship is designed to travel to Eden. However, we still do not have accurate information about what awaits us in Eden. Only old, perhaps even outdated, images from the James Webb Orbiting Telescope and a few less clear images that we took in an attempt to figure out whether life has appeared there during our journey.

The second option is to return to Earth and not leave the Milky Way. The situation there may have improved over the years, but it may not, and there may not be a habitable Earth at all. Our ignorance and lack of connection with the Earth is the greatest advantage in the matter of choice, but also the greatest disadvantage.

The third way is to stop at one of the nearest exoplanets and try to colonize it. This could be the beginning of a new era for humanity. After all, we can establish our own settlement on an alien planet and

start all over again, and using the fossils we find there, we may be able to increase our progress and reach Eden faster, but on the other hand, this option also hides many dangers. After all, very little is known about most of the exoplanets in our space sector. Their conditions may be uninhabitable or too hostile. The climate, atmosphere, flora and fauna are all a mystery to us.

As you can see, each of the options has its advantages and risks. Therefore, I will not impose my opinion on you, because the choice should be conscious and balanced. I only ask that at this crucial moment you be guided by your mind and conscience. And together we will accept the results of the vote as the will of the majority."

After Professor Nicholas finished his speech, the room fell into a tense silence. Everyone was listening carefully and thinking about what they had heard.

- So, let us begin. - Nicholas said. - We will vote by a show of hands. Those in favor of continuing the flight to Eden, please raise your hand.

Slowly, several dozen hands rose. People looked around, counting the votes. Professor Nikolos wrote down the result in his notebook

- "Thank you, put your hands down. Now who is in favor of returning to Earth?

Only a dozen hands went up. The professor nodded and wrote down another result in his notebook.

- "And the last question - who is in favor of stopping at the exoplanet and attempting colonization?" Nicholas asked.

Suddenly, the ship tilted severely to the side. People screamed, grabbing the railings and each other. Mark managed to grab a handrail, but he didn't have time to grab Eva. She flew several meters away and fell near the entrance to the control room. Almost nothing could be heard over the screams of the people.

- Attention! Attention!" the voice of artificial intelligence roared from the speakers. - The solar wind blast had damaged the navigation system. The ship changed course to the star Proxima Centauri a.

Panic gripped the room. People rushed to the exit, trying to get to their capsules. Suddenly, something crashed into the side of the ship. A powerful impact threw everyone to the floor. The bulkheads shook and the hull creaked. Several people did not have time to catch on and flew to the opposite wall.

- "Asteroid hit," the ship's AI said. - Damage to the hull. Loss of tightness in sections 3 and 7.

Nicholas stood up, shaking the glass shards from his jumpsuit.

- "Put on your spacesuits immediately! All mechanics, check the affected sections! Engineers, patch the holes! Farmers, please proceed to the capsule compartments. Let's move, guys, hurry up!

People were fussing, trying to recover from the shock and collect their thoughts. And the ship was tilting steadily toward the threateningly hot star that already occupied half the window.

Mark was hurrying to his capsule compartment with all the other agronomists when he suddenly met a team of mechanics led by his former instructor, Volodymyr. Volodymyr's short-cropped red mustache and sideburns peeked out from under the transparent helmet of his spacesuit. His face still showed traces of the tan he had acquired while working in the open areas of the ship. Mark recognized his former instructor by the almost childlike drawings of flowers and stars on his suit. Volodymyr usually worked with Eva, so Mark decided to ask if she was with them now.

- Excuse me, Mr. Volodymyr, but where is Eva? I can't seem to find her," Mark asked anxiously.

Volodymyr hesitated for a moment, as if he did not dare to say anything.

- According to preliminary information, she was in one of the damaged compartments," he finally said.

It was as if Mark had been electrocuted. He was terrified at the thought of losing Eva.

- "What?! Are you sure? Did you see her there?" he asked, questions pouring out of his mouth.

- "It's not confirmed yet... But I didn't see her among the other mechanics," Volodymyr explained.

Suddenly, an announcement came from the speakers: "All farmers, go to the capsule compartments immediately! Don't make a mess in the corridors!" Mark automatically moved in that direction, leaning against the wall, but Volodymyr stopped him:

- "Where are you going?

- Me? I'm a farmer...

- Are you kidding me? What kind of a fucking farmer are you? Since you proved yourself in the exercises, you have no right to say that. Get your shit together and come with us!

- But I...

- I don't want to hear anything, you have a minute! We need all the manpower we can get to save the ship. You'll find my spare suit in the mechanics' bay and head for the entrance to the airlock.

Hearing Volodymyr's order, Mark immediately rushed to the mechanics' bay. Despite his fear and uncertainty, he knew he had to act now to save Eva. He quickly grabbed his tools and returned to the group, where senior mechanic Borys Yevhenovych was already assigning tasks:

- "Attention, everyone! The situation is critical, but we have a clear plan of action! We will have to work almost synchronized. The first group makes its way to the bow and restarts the navigation and engines. The second group immediately begins external repairs to the ship. The third group works inside, clearing the

debris. Each group will be led by an engineer via radio. Execute orders immediately! Success depends on cohesion! The people in the damaged compartments have about an hour to live, so there is no time to waste!

- Yes!" the mechanics responded.

- "My deputies are selecting teams and immediately begin their tasks! Turn on the walkie-talkies to communicate with the engineers! Let's move, guys, because time is running out!

After the briefing, Volodymyr's group rushed to the airlock to enter space and begin repairing the ship.

However, upon entering the lock, Volodymyr announced that there was a shortage of safety ropes, which sent a wave of indignation through the ranks of the mechanics.

- "This is crazy! We can't work without safety ropes!" someone shouted.

- "Yes, it's too dangerous! Is there any other way out?" another supported.

- "Quiet!" Volodymyr sharply cut them off. - I understand the risks. But there is no other choice! Every second counts!

The crowd quieted down a bit, but the discontent was palpable in the air.

- Only newcomers who have just completed training will receive insurance. All the experienced ones will work without it. I expect professionalism from you!

Hearing this, Mark was worried. After all, he had just completed a mechanics course. Working in outer space without insurance was extremely dangerous for a beginner.

- "Hey, Mark!" Volodymyr called out. - "Take the safety rope and just do everything the way I taught you. And don't hesitate for a second, you remember why you're here, right?

- Yes, sir.

Mark breathed a sigh of relief. At least he would get the insurance money. He hooked the tether to his suit belt and headed for the airlock. The main thing now was to save the ship and Eva as soon as possible!

The airlock's gerometers opened, and group after group of mechanics began to go out into space. At first, there were so many of them that it seemed as if a flock of moths had surrounded a small piece of fabric on a black background. Each group knew its task, so everyone moved quite smoothly. The first group, which was the smallest in number, only five people, moved confidently toward the bow of the ship. Everyone in that group was an experienced mechanic, so they were all moving without a safety net, but even so, they were very fast in their progress. The second group, which included Mark, had already reached the point where the asteroid had made contact with the ship and began

patching up a large scratch in the hull. Some of the mechanics kept muttering that it was foolish to do anything without a safety net, but they were doing a good job. Suddenly, a huge meteorite flew past them, almost hitting several of the workers. Some of them lost their balance from fright and flew off into outer space, but it was quickly noticed and they were not allowed to fly far. People with insurance quickly caught them and put them back in place.

- "What the hell is going on here?" the mechanic roared furiously. - "Why didn't anyone warn me about the danger? They didn't give me a fucking insurance card, and they don't even warn me! Do you want us all to die here, you miserable assholes?"

- What do we have to do with it? It was the engineering bastards on the inside who should have warned us!

- Yeah, it's their fault, the engineers and navigators! They should have been watching the surroundings! - his partner supported him.

- "Have you all completely lost your minds?" came an irritated voice from the radio.

- "This is not the time to find fault! Stick to the task at hand!" one of the engineers said clearly.

- "They're over there, sitting in safety, giving us commands! And you come out to us, tell us everything and show us! - someone snapped at the engineers.

- "And it's still yapping! "They should have kept quiet in their chairs!" his partner supported him. - "Either help us or get lost!

Even in the spacesuits, the tension was growing. Everyone was nervous not only because of the approach to Proxima Centauri, but also because of the deteriorating atmosphere in the team. It was clear that any word could lead to a fight. But one of the mechanics tried to calm his colleagues down:

- "Stop it! Fighting will only make things worse! We need to unite!

But no one listened to him.

- "You, especially, keep quiet!" someone suddenly attacked his partner. - "You're the one who campaigned to come back! It's because of your chatter that we're in this situation!

- Bullshit! I wasn't the first one to voice this idea! And anyway, this is the most logical course, given the circumstances! - he argued.

At that moment, Volodymyr spoke up. He roared in his low voice into the radio:

- "Stop arguing! We have more important things to do now! Let's get back to work!

The argument quickly turned into a messy quarrel and mutual accusations. Everyone forgot about the danger and their tasks. The only thing they cared about now was finding the culprit instead of saving the ship.

Professor Nicholas' voice appeared on the radio:

- "Group One, how are you doing with the backup engine?

- Engine startup is complete. The navigation system is being rebooted, it will be done in the next few minutes, Professor. - Team One leader reported.

- Excellent! Second group, report.

However, instead of an answer, only arguments and insults were heard.

- Group two, speak up! What about the task?

Only silence in response.

- Group 3, report on the situation!

- Professor, we have a problem. It is impossible to dismantle the rubble - the structures are damaged, there is a risk of depressurization of all compartments. We need to repair the external lining in compartments 3 and 7.

- Understood. Thank you for the report.

These words were like a cold water drenching on the hot heads of the mechanics. At first, everyone was numb with shock and guilt. People looked down in shame, not daring to look at each other.

A minute of oppressive silence followed. Everyone realized that someone could die because of their quarrels and inaction. This thought pierced everyone with an unbearable pain of guilt.

Finally, Volodymyr could not stand it and spoke sternly but quietly:

- "That's enough. Now is not the time for quarrels. There is work to be done.

His tone made it clear that he was not condemning, but rather urging them to focus on the main thing.

The mechanics began to slowly disperse to their places and get to work. Now they worked in silence, in harmony, as if they were a single organism trying to correct their own mistake and save their comrades.

Mark felt with every fiber of his being that the fate of many people, including his beloved Eva, depended on the speed of their actions. He was filled with unbearable fear for her life. But he tried to turn this fear into energy to work even faster.

Carefully holding the torch, Mark slowly moved it along the tear in the lining. He watched as the metal melted under the flame, turning into liquid silver. With careful movements, Mark filled in the gap as if he were painting with a brush. The melt laid neatly on the edges of the gap, connecting them forever.

Nearby, in the darkness, he could see the silhouettes of his comrades. They were silently concentrating on their work, restoring the integrity of their common home in the same way. Only from time to time the silence was broken by the hissing of the torches and the gurgling of molten metal.

When Mark finished sealing one gap, he moved on to the next. He felt proud that his skillful hands were restoring the ship's viability bit by bit. It was painstaking, but also rewarding work.

Around them stretched an endless black wasteland dotted with twinkling stars. They silently watched the mechanics at work, as if illuminating their path with their dim glow. But the stars seemed uneasy, as if they were anticipating trouble. Their brilliance reminded them of the threat that still lurked inside the damaged ship. The mechanics were in a hurry, as the fates of many people still hung in the balance.

When the last crack was welded, Mark closed his eyes for a moment and imagined Eva's face. "Hold on, darling," he said to her in his mind. - "We're going to make it. I'll save you, I promise."

Then he looked at the clock on his suit. There was very little time left until the oxygen in the locked compartments was completely exhausted.

- It's done! Quickly back on board!" Volodymyr commanded.

Returning to the airlock, the mechanics eagerly breathed in fresh air. Now they could only wait and hope that they had managed to save their friends and colleagues.

After the external damage to the ship was repaired, it was the turn of the third group to clear the debris inside the Argo. This was the most dangerous task, as the damaged structures could collapse at any moment.

Mark nervously waited with the others, ready to rush to the rescue at any moment. His thoughts were only about Eva. He imagined how scared and alone she must be, waiting for rescue under the rubble. His heart was literally aching with concern.

"What's going on with them?" one of the mechanics could not stand it. - "They should have gotten out by now!

- "We need to wait, to clear the rubble - it's not a quick process," another replied.

- "But enough time has passed! Something must be wrong!

- Let's not panic before time. Let's give them a little more time to work.

- What if they stopped there altogether? We're getting nervous here, and they're just playing around!

- There you go again! Trust people, they are doing their best!

- Slowly, they are! I'd be done by now.

- Then go. No one's stopping you.

- I've already done my job, let them do theirs.

- So shut the fuck up. Don't bother us.

- What are you talking about? Do you need to learn to communicate?!

The argument grew again. Mark tried to ignore it, lost in his own thoughts.

Suddenly, the sounds around him began to fade away, as if someone had started to muffle them. Mark closed himself up in his thoughts, shutting out the rest of the world. He recalled all the happy moments with Eva: their first date, walking along the ship's corridors, kissing in the greenhouses... Her incredibly beautiful hair, bright smile, witty jokes Mark realized that he could not imagine his life without her. He wanted to propose to Eva as soon as she was rescued. To propose to her, because he loved her so much! These thoughts warmed Mark in the midst of the horrors of the accident and gave him the strength to wait.

Suddenly, someone shook him by the shoulder, bringing him back to reality. It was Volodymyr:

- "Mark, are you ready? They're almost there! It's time to go!

Mark's heart was beating faster. Finally, the moment had come - he would run to save his beloved! All his thoughts and feelings were focused on one thing - saving Eva. He rushed after the group of rescuers who were already making their way through the rubble to the compartment where Eva was. Adrenaline was pulsing wildly in his veins, ready to perform a feat for his beloved. Mark was ready to pull her out from under the rubble even at the cost of his own life.

However, there was no need to risk it, she was already being carried out on a stretcher. Her head was wrapped in a bandage, and she had a few bruises on her arms, but she was otherwise fine. As soon as Eva saw Mark in the spacesuit, she said:

- I knew you would save me.

Then her face spread into a tired smile and she passed out.

Eva slowly regained consciousness. Opening her eyes, she saw an unfamiliar room around her. Realizing it was an infirmary, she looked around. Mark was sitting next to her bed and holding her hand. When he saw that Eva was awake, he jumped up happily. His eyes sparkled with happiness, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

- God, Mark, don't cry. You were just working so bravely in outer space! And now you're crying like a little child," Eva said in a weak voice, smiling gently and jokingly.

- "These are tears of joy! I was so worried about you! Я... I have to tell you something," Mark said excitedly. - "Eva, I love you with all my heart! I want you to be my wife!

Eva smiled softly and squeezed his hand.

- "Of course, my love! I love you very much too!

Hearing this, Mark hugged Eva with all his strength.

The happy moment was suddenly interrupted by the voice of Professor Nicholas, which came from the ship's speakers:

"Attention, everyone! Unfortunately, due to the sudden accident and its consequences, we were unable to bring the vote on the ship's future course to a conclusion. Many people have been injured and need

rest and treatment. Therefore, I propose to postpone the second vote until tomorrow, at 10 am. By then, the ship will be stopped. During this time, everyone will be able to recuperate and re-evaluate their position on this fateful issue. After all, the future of all mankind depends on our choice. Please consider this decision in good faith. See you tomorrow!"

Hearing this, Mark and Eva looked at each other. Eva could see that Mark's eyes were tired. He was literally barely holding himself up because of the stress of the work overboard.

- "Mark, you need to go get some rest. I'll be fine," Eva said, lying on the bed in sickbay.

- No, I'm not going anywhere! "I'm not leaving you here alone!" Mark protested, squeezing her hand tightly.

- "But you've been on your feet all day, you need to get a good night's sleep in your capsule. I'll be here under medical supervision, don't worry!"

- I'll feel safer staying with you anyway. I'll just sleep on a chair here.

Eva smiled gently and stroked his head. She realized that when Mark was determined to do something, it was better not to argue.

So the boy made himself comfortable on a chair by her bed and soon dozed off. However, the sleep was superficial, because Mark woke up at every rustle, keeping a close eye on his beloved's condition.

The next morning, Eva woke up to rays of light shining through the window of the infirmary. She felt much better than yesterday. The pain had receded and her weakness had decreased.

However, she could not walk to the voting hall on her own. So, carefully leaning on Mark's strong shoulder, Eva slowly walked to the exit of the infirmary.

Their walk to the main hall was unhurried. Eva took cautious steps, gradually gaining strength. Sometimes they stopped so she could catch her breath. But Mark was waiting with a patient smile.

Eventually, an hour later, they reached their destination.

The main hall of the ship was already crowded. All of Argo's crew members had gathered here for the decisive vote. The din of voices echoed off the metal walls, creating an echoing hum.

Mark and Eva took a free seat on the side. The girl still felt weak and leaned on her boyfriend's shoulder. However, her eyes were full of determination - she had to take part in this fateful event.

Suddenly, the room fell silent. Professor Nicholas stepped up to the podium. His stern gaze looked around the room.

- "Friends, today we have to decide the fate of all mankind," Professor Nicholas said solemnly. - "We are faced with a choice: to return to Earth, to stop at Proxima Centauri, or to continue our flight to Eden. I

ask everyone to carefully weigh all the arguments and vote according to their conscience. If you are in favor of returning to Earth, please raise your hand.

Some of the audience raised their hands. The professor counted them, and his assistants recorded the result.

- Next, who is in favor of staying on Proxima Centauri?

Again, some of the audience raised their hands.

- And finally, who is in favor of continuing our journey to Eden?

After the votes were counted, Professor Nicholas announced:

- The majority voted in favor of going to Eden.

Suddenly there were indignant shouts:

- This is ridiculous! We have to go back! It's too risky!

The professor tries to calm the audience down, giving arguments in favor of this decision:

- Friends, I understand your concern. But think of the prospects that Eden offers! This is a chance for a new beginning, free from the mistakes of the past.

However, the indignation in the hall grew. There were shouts:

- We are doomed! You are leading us to destruction!

- If you think so, then get married and leave here for your own land! But how far can you fly by yourself?

- Or maybe it's you who's going to fly to Eden in a marriage, you whore!

- Turn the ship around before it's too late!

The situation demanded immediate action. Professor Nicholas stepped forward and spoke in a calm but firm voice:

- "Friends, calm down! Let's discuss this with a cool head. I understand your concerns. But isn't that why we set out on this journey - to find a new home for humanity? Didn't we dream of finding a planet where we could start over? Eden is a chance we cannot miss. Trust me! Together we will overcome all difficulties and build a new future for our children there.

Professor Nicholas' words gradually calmed the crowd. People stopped talking feverishly and getting indignant. Instead, they listened with thoughtful faces to the professor, who was speaking to their hearts and minds in a convincing way.

- Friends, let's remember why we embarked on this journey. For the hope of a better future for our descendants. And this hope is still burning in our hearts, lighting the way forward amidst the starry abyss. Trust it! Together we will overcome all difficulties and find a new home.

This seemed to calm the crowd down a bit. So Professor Nicholas added:

- "By the way, since we have already decided to move into the future, and the Earth no longer restricts us

with its rules, I announce that from now on the portholes will not be oriented to Earth time. Now you will be able to see the stars whenever you want!

The last doubts dissipated, giving way to the determination to go to the chosen goal. People shook hands and hugged each other. Finally, the difficult decision was made, and now everyone looked to the future with hope.

After a heated debate, calm finally prevailed. People shook hands, hugged each other, and smiled. The decision seemed to have united the crew and inspired new hope. The engines finally started working at full speed, and the Argo started moving again in the direction of Eden.

Mark and Eva went to the window of the hall. Behind a thick layer of transparent material, a dizzying view of the vast outer space opened up. This abyss, which had been frightening until recently, now seemed majestic and beautiful to Mark. It was there, among the flickering lights, that their path to the future lay.

Mark gently hugged Eva, holding her close. She leaned her head on his shoulder. Together, they watched the slow movement of the distant stars as if they were smiling at them.

- "We're going to make it, aren't we?" Eva asked quietly.

- "Of course, my love. Together, for sure," Mark whispered, kissing her temple.

They felt they had done something right, all of them, even those who disagreed with the majority decision. The journey still continued. There were still many years of uncertainty ahead in the cold vastness of space. However, now hope had been kindled in the hearts of the people, as pure as a candle flame in the darkness of night. They believed that there would be no more breakdowns and quarrels, only peace and harmony would illuminate their journey. Their mission was to leave the best to their descendants, not the eternal quarrels and omissions of the past. This is the destiny of the Intermediate Generation.

Epilogue

Almost two hundred years have passed since the fateful vote aboard the Argo. The legendary starship, having traveled countless parsecs, eventually reached the outskirts of the distant planet Eden.

Those who once made up its crew have long since become space dust, immortalized in human history as the Intermediate Generation. However, their descendants have inherited the cherished dream of their ancestors - to find a new home among the stars.

Over the years, mutinies and protests among the crew have repeatedly arisen, especially among the new generations that were already born in new galaxies. Some of them believed that they would never see the final goal, but would only pass the baton to their descendants in this endless journey. However, each time wisdom and prudence prevailed, uniting the crew around a common goal. And the Argo moved steadily through the stellar void toward Eden.

When the rays of the red dwarf K2-18, called the Red Sun, first illuminated Eden on the bridge's screens, Mark and Eva's great-grandson, the ship's chief engineer, ordered Argo to stop in orbit and land a reconnaissance team.

What the researchers saw exceeded their wildest imaginations. Lush vegetation, crystal clear water bodies, and fertile soils. So even though scientists had long believed that the heat of the red dwarf would

barely be enough to heat the planet, Eden turned out to be more than habitable.

Soon, the first settlers began to descend to the surface. With incredible enthusiasm, they began to equip their homes and plant gardens and orchards. Though the road here was thorny, and the faith of their ancestors was shaken more than once, the dream eventually came true.

When the first sun of Eden set behind the horizon, shedding its last rays on the new settlement, people looked forward to the future with hope. They knew that their great-grandfathers would be proud of them. After all, it was the destiny of the Intermediate Generation to pave the way for a better life for their descendants.