

Alex Middleton
HUBI 1
Prof. Davies

Away To Olympus

“...away to Olympus, where, they say, the gods' eternal mansion stands unmoved, never rocked by gale winds, never drenched by rains, nor do the drifting snows assail it, no, the clear air stretches away without a cloud, and a great radiance plays across that world where the blithe gods live all their days in bliss...” Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book VI (Fagles trans.)

“What do you mean, ‘the company’s bankrupt?’”

Peter Liston glared at the screen. The news wasn’t entirely unexpected, but he didn’t have to like it. Rumbings had been making it down the channel for weeks that the financial view was less than rosy. But this—well, this was worse than he thought. Several million miles and 30 seconds away, a well-intentioned flight psychologist in the employ of Ares, Ltd was trying his best to break the news gently to the areonaut.

“Well, Pete, you know as well as anybody down here that your little trip wasn’t a cheap idea. The board knew it’d take billions to get you there, and they thought we could bankroll it, or at least make friends who could...they were wrong. Oh, sure, I could go into profit projections, market analysis, expected advertising rates and all, but it wouldn’t make a lick of difference. It’s too late. We’re flat broke, owe money in every direction, and I expect it won’t be more than a week or two before the vultures start tearing off pieces of the carcass.”

“Look, our descent from orbit is in less than a day. I’ve got plenty else to worry about besides dollar signs right now—so unless you’ve got something more interesting to say than that, clear the line!” The sixty seconds of the transmission lag ticked off. Liston

ran his hands through his thinning brown hair, and wondered what was really happening down there. Bankruptcy news could wait, it didn't affect anything right now. There were dozens of things to do to get ready in the last hours before touchdown. Mission Control wasn't stupid, they wouldn't have wasted his time now unless...unless what? Something gnawed at the back of his mind. What could be important enough? No, it was unthinkable. They wouldn't... couldn't...

The pilot's focus snapped back to the solemn, soothing tones of the psychologist: "So, Pete, basically, the problem is that they can't afford the return shot. That bird's nowhere near finished, and there's no way we can cover costs. So, Pete, the issue..."

Liston felt his chest tighten, his stomach drop. No. No. Not possible.

"...I know this is really hard on all of you. It's hard on us, too. We're doing everything we can to find some transportation back, but for now it doesn't look good..."

Christ. No. The room spun as the weight of the words sunk in. Liston was suddenly aware that he was shaking badly. "No. It's all under control..." he murmured.

"...viewers don't know yet, and we're going to keep it that way as long as we can. MC still wants to leave orbit on schedule..."

The areonaut screwed his eyes shut, and grabbed the nearest bulkhead, steadying himself. The metal was icy cold, unforgiving, and only magnified his feeling of emptiness. When Liston finally managed to pry his eyes open, he found himself gazing through the large viewport, the red face of Mars looking very foreboding. Olympus Mons was passing underneath, and somehow, it felt like all the old gods were there, watching and laughing at the mortals who dared think they might pay a visit.

“...supplies to last nine months on the ground. The NERVA should’ve been ready in four or five, then burned hard on a three month orbit. It’s possible they’ll find some way to put her up, but...Pete? Pete, answer me. Your vitals are looking pretty rough...calm down. We’ll work this out, Pete...”

Badly shaken, Liston snapped the switch to kill the transmission. After a moment of thought, he followed with the master relays for the onboard cameras. In thirty seconds (give or take a few, depending on who was manning the boards Earthside) the communication ready light would start blinking—Programming Control, wanting to know where in hell their content was. Blink all you want, he thought sourly. Ratings be damned, I need some time to think!

No, no, best to tell the others. Think later. They deserve to know, too. We’ll think about it together—not so lonely that way. As he made his way through the *Wayfarer* to deliver the news, Liston dolefully recalled the circumstances that happened to send him on this one way trip.

By the mid-21st century, mankind had crossed the depths of space to Mars several times—starting in the 2020s with the initial American-Russian there-and-back shots. Crews flew out in one ship, landed, lived on the surface until orbits lined up conveniently, and then flew home on a return ship parked in orbit. The Red Planet, while far from tamed, was being conquered. Smelling a profit, the corporations came sniffing around, looking for a way to exploit the huge public interest in the planet. Well-established laws kept them from going and setting up heavy industry, and even if they could have, there was no cheap way to get the products back to waiting consumers.

And so *Wayfarer* was born. Some wunderkind venture capitalist in America cooked up a moneymaking scheme: entertainment. Reality television had been around for fifty years or more, and there was little left on Earth to tap for new material. So, from the producers of “Fast Animals, Slow Children” came “Destination: Mars”—the first and only show to watch people journey to another planet. The business plan was simple: put together a flight to Mars for as cheaply as possible, let the world watch, and make them pay for the privilege.

The planned flight followed the old American reference mission: one vehicle would carry the crew to Mars. They would land, make the fuel they required from the atmosphere, and fly home on another ship waiting in Martian orbit. A separate lander would ferry them to the surface. They were to descend near Olympus Mons, highest point in the solar system. The majestic shield lay dormant, watchful, rising thirty kilometers above the Tharsis Plateau. The itinerary called for a wide, sweeping exploration in the rovers that sat waiting at their base, along with a vast array of other cargo sent ahead of time—refineries, shelters, chemicals, food—everything they needed for a nine month sightseeing trip. The rovers would take them across the wide plains, up into the perimeter of the volcano, and down into the canyons and valleys of the planet. Every image would be beamed back to a greedy public, anxious to see what they could of the new world, and, of course, turned over to the scientific community for study (as a “public service,” of course. There was wonderful publicity in it.)

Finding one ship was surprisingly easy—the Russians had a surplus crew module from the initial exploration missions, and were even willing to put it in Earth orbit, for a price. The second was problematic. A return vehicle could be built with the maturing new

NERVA technology and reused—and could be bankrolled once the venture turned a profit. Moreover, the nuclear rocket allowed for higher velocities and quicker transport times, allowing for some downtime before starting construction. Convinced of the viability of the project, the Ares executives opted to delay the craft—christened *Spacefarer*—and launch after the crew departed. In hindsight, the arrogance was shocking.

At the time, though, corporations were stumbling over each other to throw money at the project, and the networks battled for broadcast rights. Advertisers all wanted product placement, logos, voiceovers. There were fanclubs. Speaking tours. Money poured in from every corner of the globe.

Picking a crew turned out to be one of the most lucrative events in the history of television. The whole process was filmed in the style of the reality-TV competitions that were so popular at the turn of the century. Anybody that wanted could audition—and did, in droves. Yammerheads, professionals, and everyone in between made their pitches to go off-planet. A selection process of interviews, ability tests, and viewer input decided which photogenic smart cookies made the cut. In the end, the three selections were Ariel Kelly, a young psychiatrist from southern California, Ryan Newhouse, collegiate hockey star, geology student, and All-American boy, and (captain) Peter Liston, ex-pilot, aerospace expert, and man of mystery.

Newhouse, despite what his detractors had screamed all through the selection process, had fared very well so far. Overcoming doubts about his abilities from many loudmouthed male viewers, the boy had proven remarkably level-headed, dealing with a variety of crises in stride. The solar flare near the midway point of their orbit hadn't even

fazed him—he had just rushed around the ship, stowing gear faster than anyone else, and made it into the shelter just minutes before the radiation hit. Newhouse had spent a great deal of his free time studying and consulting with geologists back on Earth; he had acquired a true sense of scientific purpose for the mission, and if that made for good viewing planetside, wonderful.

Ms. Kelly, while more than competent, added something to the show that her male compatriots couldn't match: marketability. The svelte blonde twentysomething had made a small name for herself on talk radio and by acting as “shrink to the stars” before the trip, and gained a reputation for sensationalism. It was widely rumored that the network brass orchestrated her appointment to the crew to act as a sort of on-board censor—someone to keep the “show” running according to plan. Planted or not, the psychiatrist was a master communicator and peacemaker, and had done a great deal to keep the trio friendly and productive. Her interests somehow never seemed to focus on Mars so much as the human factors. Tabloids ran wild with accusations, claiming she was there to control the crew's behavior; cooler heads declared she was simply being a good counselor. Meanwhile, the public certainly had a great interest in her—she received as much camera time as the other two travelers combined, and more than tripled their revenues in merchandise sales.

And Liston. Liston was an *ex*-pilot for a reason. Liston was an *ex-test* pilot for the same reason. At age thirty-five, his nerves weren't what they once were, and his once-toned body was showing signs of the stress the career had left him with. The man was still a legend in aerospace circles. The Chuck Yeager of the 21st century, they called him. First man to successfully fly a scramjet. Holder of two airspeed records. His breakdown

was equally legendary—after all, how many men have them at Mach 10 and live to tell the tale? At age 28, a broken man, Liston disappeared out of the world of flight altogether. Several years later, he resurfaced just as abruptly—consulting with aerospace firms, offering advice from a pilot’s point of view. Liston’s fame grew again for his uncanny ability to grasp complex problems with the vehicles and their applications—and even find simple solutions. The reputation as a legend and a troubleshooter (which became household knowledge during the primetime run of “Who Wants to Go to Mars?”) was key in his selection.

His whereabouts for those two years were never determined by his adoring public—but one thing is certain: no mental institution had any record of a visit, which proved crucial in getting cleared for a Mars flight. The corporation’s psychiatrists were all too aware of Liston’s past, and were shocked by how level-headed he seemed, from initial examinations, to preliminary training, all the way through his final selection for the crew. Liston was amazingly normal, ridiculously well-adjusted, they pronounced. Despite a hazy past, he was cleared for the flight. His presence gave the mission some credibility—he was, after all, a respected pilot, and more than capable of monitoring a few mostly-automatic systems on the way to Mars.

Subtle, he was not.

“Let me make sure I’m not imagining things,” Ryan said slowly. “Did you just say ‘We’re not going home?’”

Liston nodded slowly. “Ares’ financial problems finally boiled over. They have zero cash, zero prospects for any more, and are giving us exactly zero hope. They can’t

finish *Spacefarer*, and we can't burn onto a trajectory for Earth on what fuel we have left. Beyond that, we'd starve to death long before we ever made it anywhere near home."

"Well, then, we have to land!" said Ariel. "There's food on the surface, and supplies. We've got more than enough to last us until they can send another ship. That was the plan all along. There's still a chance they'll pull through back Earthside."

"I'm not so convinced," sighed Liston. "The picture they painted was bleak, bleak, bleak. I've been in aerospace a long time, and while Ares isn't just in that business, that's where almost all of their outlays go. From what I know of the situation, I'm not holding out any hope."

"Still," said Ryan, "we might as well land. We've got nine months at least—more, if we stretch our supplies and watch our volatiles—on Mars. We sure as hell can't stay up here much longer. The life support systems are about dead on here, as we all know."

"Nine months until what?" snapped the captain. "Nine months until the inevitable? Or longer, if we want to drag out the misery! We are not leaving here. We will stay here, and sooner or later, we will die here. It's *over*." He ran his hands through his hair, then covered his face, mumbling.

The two younger crew members stood stunned. They'd never seen anything like this out of their normally subdued leader. This defeatism was completely new, and a complete change from the cold pragmatism they had seen so far. Looking at each other, and then back to the shaken commander, neither knew what to say. Kelly's face clouded with discomfort and doubt, watching and (no doubt) analyzing him. The three stood in silence.

Finally, Liston dropped his hands to his sides, and straightening, regained his composure. “Keep running down the pre-flight on the lander. I want her ready to go in eight hours. Mission Control wants us to drop on schedule, so the viewers won’t know about our problems until it’s absolutely necessary. I’ll get back on the horn and see what else I can find out.” He offered a weak smile.

“Sure...sure thing, chief.” Ariel smiled back and lightly placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll pull through this.”

“We should be ready to go in six, seven hours tops,” said the ever-focused young geologist. “Not a hitch so far.”

“Well, then, check it twice.” With that, Liston turned away from his crew and stormed out of the room.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all,” said the psychologist darkly, staring at the hatch the captain had rushed out of.

“What, being stranded? Are we supposed to be *happy* about it? Nobody’s happy about it! We just keep on with the mission, and...”

“No, not being stranded! That’s not the problem, right now. I’m talking about old Pirate Pete. That outburst scares me—it was like we were listening to a completely different person. I don’t think the guy’s feeling like himself.”

“You don’t think...I mean, every doc they could get their hands on cleared him for flight. He was as sane as you or me when we left...and I haven’t noticed anything too different about him. Of course, you’re the expert, but...”

“I’m scared, Ryan.” The doctor turned and looked out the viewport, as if hoping to find the key to her captain’s psyche there. She watched the dusky, dark terrain of Mars

pass beneath them as they orbited—a lifeless, lonely red. The four great volcanoes were in view in all their grandeur—their alien grandeur.

“When Pete had his breakdown years back, it was stress-induced. I’ve seen the file—not much in it. He kept it pretty quiet, somehow. But from what I can tell—from what little his company docs could tell—he was having control issues. He needs to feel like he’s got a grip on any situation, can change the course of it, and I guarantee that part of his personality hasn’t changed. Look at the way he’s run this mission so far—painfully tight. His way or the highway. That’s where most of our arguments have come from—him being so goddamn rigid all the time.”

Ariel suddenly turned from the window, her usually calm face strained with emotion. “I don’t know what he’s feeling—but this has to be pushing him close to his breaking point. I don’t know if he’d lash out on us, or on Mission Control, or...God, I just don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe this is just his private way of dealing with the news, and he’ll just let it simmer...”

“Oh, and you think this is easy for *me*?” Ryan interrupted. “I’ve tried to be level-headed about *everything* we’ve run into up here. Trying to stay calm when there’s a real chance we’re not going back, well...I couldn’t blame the guy if he’s feeling frantic. I...” He trailed off, staring at the backs of his hands, which suddenly seemed delicate and pale in the reflected red light. He looked up at Ariel, his eyes filled with conflict.

“What if they *don’t* send another ship? I don’t want to die, Ryan. We all knew this wasn’t safe, but—I never thought that, that *money* would be a problem. It’s so...out of our hands. So distant, so trivial, that some suits can decide it’s a cash problem and play god with our lives...”

“Well,” he said pensively, “we knew there were risks...even if we didn’t know all of ‘em. We’re not done in yet by any means, though. We’ll land, we’ll take our pictures. We’ll drive, we’ll climb where no human has ever gone before. We’ll see Mars. I’ll see Mars until I die, if that’s what it comes to.” Ryan swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. He seemed to draw into himself. “C’mon, let’s get back to it. I...don’t want to dwell on it right now. Pass me that multimeter?”

Ariel handed it to him, and the pair uneasily returned to the pre-flight checklist, trying to ignore the haze that had fallen on their minds, and think instead of the red sands that lay below.

Liston’s heart was pumping hard as he left the lander chamber. The ship swirled around him, the barren walls coming close. The diffuse white light burned his watering eyes. When he had covered his face, an image came to him that shook him to the core—an image he couldn’t shake and couldn’t see. When he had closed his eyes, the commander had seen the high mountain they were to climb—but the vision not been bare rock. It had been something more, something almost mystical, something beautiful...wine and revelry, song and...no. It was too far. It was out of reach. It was gone. Liston shook his head and tried to clear his thoughts, but old urges were creeping forward from the back of his mind. Instead, he saw the cockpit of an experimental plane from nearly ten years ago, and felt a familiar icy chill.

Liston had never told anyone what happened in the upper atmosphere, in the cockpit of the scramjet—they’d have thought he was crazy. But somehow, he just knew, just *knew*—that death was at hand. This was a completely new sensation to him—he’d

been flying experimental craft for years. Death had always been at arm's length or closer, but suddenly, it was *there*, its frigid glare fixed on him as he blazed through the atmosphere, forcibly reminding him of his mortality. He still had control of his own destiny, though, and as long as he had that, he would exercise it. Liston brought the plane down, walked away into the world of the living, and didn't look back. He would deal with death, he decided, but he would do it on *his* terms. It was arrogant and downright irrational to think one could haggle with the ferryman over his fee—but somehow, this thought never occurred to him. Even during the years out of the public eye he spent putting himself back together, rebuilding his old image, the idea never entered Liston's mind.

A lot of things did enter his mind during the lost years. Philosophy, fine art, literature, and most anything that was removed from flying occupied his time for over two years. Liston became intrigued by archaeology and went abroad to see the ruins of Western civilization—and in Greece, saw something more. While standing on the slopes of Parnassus, Liston was gazing at one of the most sacred temples of the culture, and then suddenly...wasn't. Instead, he saw what could only be a festival in full swing, and men and women so stunning they couldn't be human. In his mind's eye, he saw the undying gods of a civilization long dead—surviving even after their religion, their people, had passed. The feeling was almost like the one in the cockpit—he was close to something *else*, but now, something numinous and beautiful. In a flash, the vision passed, and Liston was back at Delphi, and felt...whole. For reasons he couldn't fully explain, the ex-pilot felt a growing need to get back to his ex-profession. Within weeks, he'd resurfaced as a consultant.

A vision of a different kind was tugging at Liston's mind now. He ambled down the passageway, toward the bridge of the little ship, his thoughts tormenting him at every step.

When the pilot reached the control room—sure enough—the transmission waiting light was blinking an angry red. Clicking a switch, he opened the channel, and the subdued murmur of the ship was replaced with an angry nasal voice from the console's speakers: "GODDAMNIT, PETE! Turn those cameras back on! We're running on recycled tape down here and if there was ever a day when we needed live feed, it's today! I know you're shaken up and all, but think about it. It's not for our benefit, it's for the fans, for all the people who are waiting to see Mars—to see *you* on Mars! You're an inspiration to people down here, all of you, whether you realize it or not. Please, please, bring the cameras back online. We'll screen out anything too personal before the world gets it. Please. Hang in there, buddy."

Sighing, he closed the contacts, and across the ship, the cameras whirred back to life. The transmission from Control clicked off seconds later.

Liston turned away, frustrated and scared. They had no idea, no idea at all down there... He found himself face-to-face with the red planet again, Olympus passing underneath. The old gods were there, looking up at him, mockingly raising their ambrosia in toast. The pilot imagined he could see the temples perched atop the shield of the great volcano, hewn from Martian stone, standing stoically atop the world. Anger rose swiftly in the areonaut—anger at his predicament, anger at the helplessness. He would not sit idly on the surface for months and wait to die—by asphyxiation, by starvation, by

exposure. He would not listen to the taunts. He would take control in the only way he could see.

There was only one option, and not much time to exercise it. They were scheduled to descend to the surface in a matter of hours. The others were busy prepping the lander—so this would be his only chance. Slowly, deliberately, Liston worked his way over to the navigational computer. Studying the flight path, he made a few calculations and tapped in the commands for a burn with the main engines. A few seconds was all it would take to make the change in course, a slight deceleration. They'd even have fuel to spare, but not quite enough to reverse the change, he noted. Typing furiously now, he hard-coded the program and buried its call deep in one of the daily maintenance programs. It would execute automatically in—Liston checked his watch—three hours. After that, maybe another hour. There wouldn't be any after that.

The cameras were rolling until the very end, feeding their images back to an enthralled audience on Earth. The beauty of the Martian terrain whipped past at thousands of miles an hour, growing rapidly closer as the *Wayfarer* lost altitude. The tapes the viewers never saw showed the reactions of the crew as they plummeted: the sheer horror in the eyes of the two young voyagers...and the grim satisfaction on the weathered face of the captain. Mission Control never fully grasped his final whispered words to the camera: "Where no mortal has ever climbed."

The gods atop the greatest of all mountains never felt even a rumble from the *Wayfarer* as she burrowed deep into the base of the massive shield. As the smoke and flame wafted upward, Olympus stood proudly, as ever, beyond the reach of earthly men.