

"What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another."

—Mahatma Gandhi

Determination vs. Destruction

"Everything seems so insignificant from up here. It looks so static and motionless, so peaceful as if nothing we did could ever disturb its path." Amala uttered to the boy sitting next to her that, just a few moments ago, had kindly agreed to let her have his seat by one of the few windows inside the aircraft. "So, what were you doing in Mars?"

"I actually live here" he answered "but my dad is finishing some stupid business for the new launching platform and he needed to visit the Earth."

"Oh! That's great... I guess." She did not bother herself much with such topics besides with what she overheard from her dad during dinner conversations, but she did notice he was not very enthusiastic about them either. "I was visiting what will be my new home, I'm moving here a month from now and couldn't be more excited! My name is Amala by the way, What's yours?"

"Malcom" he responded. And so began the conversation for the next few hours and a lifelong friendship with it.

Back on Earth things were still getting complicated, it had only been a year since the announcement of the successful arrival of the first colony to Mars and only six weeks after the decision of erasing the political divisions of countries had been executed. These two measures were the center of the agreement signed by the leaders of all the 189 nations in what was proclaimed as an attempt to solve the crisis resulting from the inability to effectively control the rapid population growth and its adjacent consumption. This lack of adequate policies to enforce sustainable practices had resulted in the exhaustion of Earth's natural

resources by 83% with the sole exception of the territories held by indigenous tribes from several corners on the planet which had rebelled against governments and had proclaimed their own leadership as a means to protect the few ecosystems left at their power. The scarcity had led to a lack of nourishment for over one third of the population which, in addition to poverty and inequality levels at an historic high, were creating new conflict. The solution leaders came up with was to halve the entire population and distribute it between the Earth and Mars, where scientist had begun doing experimentation to create conditions suitable for life there back in 2023, and erase borders to unify the remaining population under one sole and powerful leadership to make it easier to control. What was being kept from the people was that this distribution was not done evenly or randomly, people with a higher societal status and wealth were being chosen to be sent to Mars where a new and ‘improved’ order was being built while leaving Earth and its poorer inhabitants to fend off for themselves.

Upon landing Amala and her parents returned to their home in the Zone 1 boroughs, the bubble where affluent people lived and scarcity was not an issue. Her father was a former vice-president of what used to be called Brazil who had been tasked with ensuring the safety and stability of the remaining population while the last settlements at Mars were being fully accommodated. Him and his family were set to leave last upon successfully completing his job. Once again Amala found herself in what she often referred to as The Abyss of Boredom, she had never gone anywhere else on Earth, so she had no idea how lucky she was. Despite the lavishing exteriors and endless sources of entertainment, she felt restrained and confined to the same places she had known for her entire life. Her favorite part of the day was attending school, her only escape, where she found herself free in the sea of knowledge with endless possibilities at her disposal. She found comfort in the fact that no matter what was going on in the outside, once she entered the classroom she could be transported back in time to the splendor of the roman empire, she could engage in healthy dialogue with one of her friends from every corner of the world—and now the galaxy

too—or she could simply relax and listen to a lecture by a world renowned professor happening thousands of miles away.

The day after coming back was one she had dreaded for long. It was the day when she and her best friend Josephine had to deliver a speech to all of the staff in the school saying how sorry they were for having hacked the educational system in order to listen to a lecture, that was not yet available for their level, conducted by several Harvard University professors before the institution closed its doors on earth to move to its new location in Mars.

“Dear teachers, engineers and technicians who are the engine behind our beloved school...” Amala spoke, beginning her apology, but while these words came out of her mouth she could not keep herself from thinking that she was not sorry for what she had done and she would do it again, if necessary. That lecture was an incredible opportunity to learn and Josephine, an expert in computer science and amateur hacker, was more than willing to pick up the challenge and help her. Amala had found it ridiculous to miss out on that lecture just because she lacked 3 of the 100 credits necessary to be promoted to the last education level (which she could have easily gotten the week before if she had not been ridden with the stomach flu) and unlock the course that gave her access to—virtually—attend the lecture. You see, here the education system was not organized by age, but by progress. It was designed to let the student be independent regarding the pace with which they learned by incorporating game-like features, such as having a profile with goals and rewards, intended to motivate them into taking an active role with their education. The more they studied the more interesting classes they could unlock.

After finally getting over with that moment that had haunted her mind all week, Amala continued the rest of her day as usual. All but a few of her classmates had already departed for mars, but this was not an issue because she could easily communicate with them given that most classes were not restrained by

physical boundaries. The education system was designed to be universal, meaning that no matter the location, every school had access to it, it was so advanced that it was one of the few things that were being kept for the new colonies in Mars. This was possible thanks to the use of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Interactive Holograms to create spaces where students could interact directly with each other, regardless of their location. The purpose of this was to promote dialogue between students from varied contexts to help them become critical thinkers, open minded and tolerant to difference while strengthening the bonds between different populations, something that was specially critical nowadays to maintain order by uniting all of the people that now lied under the same leadership.

Amala's first class of the day was Development. Her team was working on the final stages of accomplishing the goal of designing a functional object that would help ration food and water to avoid wastage in underprivileged people's homes. Using a device that projected holographic versions of the people and of the prototype, and allowed them to interact in real time, Amala could seamlessly work with Noah, Grace and Laís who where at 5898, 4240 and 1706 miles, respectively, of distance from her. Because every person in her team was located in a different region of the world, each could provide a local perspective of the issue at hand, something that Amala cherished because it was her only approach to the lifestyle of other people beyond her borough.

Her day was coming to an end and, as everyone left school, she sneaked into the classrooms, this time the Applied Sciences one, as she always did and put the Augmented Reality goggles on. When she put these on in class she usually used them to obtain the properties of elements and decide whether they were a good fit for the projects she was designing, she just had to choose an item and then the information would come up, but now she was just going around her school choosing random objects and finding out how they had been created. She lost track of time and when she came out she found her father, who had been waiting for her for over half an hour.

"Where have you been? You do know I have a meeting in less than 20 minutes, don't you?" Her dad told her with a worried look in his face.

"I know, I'm sorry" she answered, "I just didn't realize it was so late"

"Well, You are going to come with me because there is no way I can leave you at home first and still get there in time." She agreed with a sigh and kept quiet for the rest of the journey.

When they got there she noticed how cold and unapproachable the man meeting with her father seemed, he was the director of the project destined to build the new launching station sponsored by the company that was responsible for the passenger aircrafts that connected Mars to Earth. Somewhere halfway through the meeting, Amala overheard something that she later would not be able to get out of her head: because of its privileged location on the Equator, the Amazon Rainforest, one of the territories that had been preserved until now because of the indigenous tribes that lived within it, was the building site for the project. Amala was very familiarized with the importance of this rainforest. Laís, one of the members of her team, lived on the border next to the Amazon and often talked about how beautiful the place was and how much it meant to her and the surrounding communities that depended on its wellbeing. Without giving it much thought and amidst the commotion that the announcement had caused her, Amala jumped of her chair and unknowingly started yelling at the director.

"But, why would you do that? You'll destroy everything these people have worked so hard to protect for decades, and the people! What will happen to the people when you extinguish their only source of life? The world is ruined enough as it is, why would you want to wreck one of the last places that make it less of a landfill and more of the miracle that it used to be?" Realizing what she had just done, she took a step back and excused herself before storming out of the room. She ran to the nearest bathroom and washed her face with cold water and waited for her father to finish outside of the building. Not a single word was uttered on the way home. When she arrived she locked herself in her room and began to cry. Without realizing, she fell asleep.

The next day she came in early to school, sneaked in one of her classrooms and called Laís to tell her everything she had heard the day before. They were both complaining about the atrociousness of the situation when Amala came up with an idea. According to what she had overheard at the meeting, the information on the location for the construction was not public because it was illegal to make use of the territory that did not belong to the government. If she managed to get the exact date and location of the start of the project, she could get there early, record the company's actions and, with the help of her friends, transmit these images live on every television on Earth and Mars by hacking the satellite that was used in everything—from televisions to autonomous cars and the education system. This would reveal the truth to the world and, at least, buy some time to figure out a permanent solution.

Her day went as usual, but instead of being engaged in her classes she spent all of her time thinking how to get the information she needed, she knew that she would not get it from her father because, even if he did know it, sharing that kind of data could mean the loss of his job and everything he had worked for. She remembered Malcom, the boy she had met just a few days ago during her trip to Mars, who had told her something about his father being involved with the construction of the new launching platform. She asked Josephine for help, and they both waited until the end of school to sneak into the teachers room and use one of their computers, which had access to the database upon which the education system worked, and look up Malcom's contact information.

She used the same device from her Development class to speak to him, it was the only one that, at the moment, allowed communication between the two planets. He answered her call by setting the device in front of him, this scanned his every angle in his body to create a perfectly accurate holographic replica of himself whose data was sent back to Earth where Amala could talk to him as if they both were in the same room.

“Amala! How have you been? Boy, was I surprised to receive your call, How could you even contact me?”

“Don’t ask, but I am happy to hear from you too. I need to ask you for a favor.” She replied.

“Okay, just tell me what you need” He could sense the anxiety in her voice.

“You said your dad works in the construction of the new launching platform.”

“Yeah, he’s the director, why?”

“I need you to get me some information regarding the project, do you think you can do that for me?”.

“What do you need that for? Are you planning to do some crazy sabotaging?” He said with a sarcastic tone.

“If I were, would you still help me?” She responded, unsure of what his reaction would be, but this was her only option and she was committed to at least find out if it could work.

“Oh! so you ARE serious, I can’t believe this, I wish I had an ounce of your courage within me. Of course I’ll help! I haven’t really been on talking terms with my dad since I found out the implications of the project, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. I owe you. All I need for now is the exact location and date of the start of the construction.” At this point she was nearly jumping off her feet. She could not believe what she has hearing and all she could see was Josephine doing her victory dance.

“Okay, I think I can manage to get those, it shouldn’t take me more than a few days. Once I have them I’ll email them to you.”

“That would be perfect! you have no idea how grateful I am.” She hanged up and joined Josephine in her dance.

Now she just had to wait for Malcom to send the information to put the rest of her plan in motion. But she had to act fast, the clock was ticking for her family to leave for Mars, there was only less than a month left for her to accomplish her task and the days passed as she awaited Malcom’s response, meanwhile, she

prepared the remaining details. Josephine was training herself to do the hack in the most time-effective manner possible, Laís had already offered Amala a place to stay, she had told her parents about an upcoming school trip as a cover for her real intentions and she would use the AR goggles from Laís' school as a video recorder, but she was still fretting about something else. She would need to travel on her own to get to the Amazon Rainforest which, having never gone outside her borough on Earth, seemed pretty daunting to her. Thankfully, it would only take her 3 hours to get there because of the intercontinental underground transportation systems that had been established in 2039.

A few days later, Amala finally received Malcom's information and became immediately surprised, the project was set to start within 4 days. Between the nerves and anxiousness, she also found herself relieved, she knew she was ready to put her plan in motion and wanted bring an end to the project as soon as she possibly could. The date came sooner than expected. Amala followed her normal routine and, as her school day came to an end, she said goodbye to her friend Josephine and wished her luck with her part of the plan and then left for the transportation station.

As Amala arrived and was greeted by Laís, she could not help but notice how different everything looked, even Mars had seemed more familiar than what she was seeing now. She could not believe how ignorant she had been and how much she had missed out on, she wondered how many places on Earth she had left to discover and how little time she had to do it. She regained focus on her plan and started the work.

After a very hectic 24 hours, they had done it. Every existing television was showing the same images of the executives in charge of the project threatening harmless people who were protesting against the advancement of the machines that were there to perform the deforestation of the rainforest. Malcom, Josephine, Amala's parents and everybody else were witnessing the reach of a crazy idea that would now help keep safe one of the last pristine spaces on earth for a little longer. The next morning every

newspaper had those images in its front page, politicians were deeming these actions inhumane and people from all over were refusing to go anywhere near one of the responsible company's aircrafts if it meant the destruction of a population and its ecosystem. This represented victory, the company had no other option but to change the location of the building site to avoid even bigger problems.

Amala returned home where her parents welcomed her with a big hug and a bit of a scold for doing everything behind their backs. She had a feeling that what would come out of her mouth next was not going to be well received by them either. Her short and fast-lived experience had helped her realize how much Earth meant to her and how she could not move to Mars when she knew her true path lied exactly where she was. She had realized how she could use all of the potential she had to make an impact through the small actions that in the aggregate can help change the world.