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Сергей Шкрёбка



PATIENT ZERO

THE IMMORTALITY TRAP

Сергей Шкребка Patient Zero. The Immortality Trap

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Аннотация

Immortality has been found — the Eos vaccine.

It stops aging and heals any wounds.

But what if this is not salvation, but a new form of captivity?

On Mars, Dr. Mark Weber and his colonists face a nightmare that scientists did not foresee:

“They Stopped Being Human”.

Their consciousness sees a golden field behind an insurmountable wall.

This is “Paradise”.

And the one who took the vaccine but died in an accident.

They tell the same story:

“We broke the law”.

“They won’t let us in there”.

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Patient Zero. The Immortality Trap

Сергей Шкребка

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PATIENT ZERO

PROLOGUE

The diary of the man who died first.

From the notebook of Dr. Mark Weber. Found in the ruins of the first settlers' station. The last date is illegible. Paper made of pressed flax, ink based on iron oxide and organic tissue decay products.

In 2029, when Dr. Larsson from Stockholm synthesized the first prototype of “Eos,” we rejoiced. A virus that disables apoptosis, rewriting telomeres so they stopped shortening. The cure for mortality.

In 2031, the first expedition of settlers launched for Mars. We thought we were building a new ark for humanity. In reality, we built a prison for our own souls. The “Eos” vaccine promised us immortality of the mind, but it forgot to warn us: it's not that simple. Paradise was so close, and we slammed the door on it with our own hands.

CHAPTER 1. VACCINATION

//ber 204.*

I am writing this in the settlers' colony. My fingers still obey. The rest of my body does not; it slowly rots, like an abandoned fruit in a hermetic container. My lungs collapsed two years ago. My heart hasn't beaten for exactly three; today is a kind of anniversary. But I think, and I remember everything.

In the corridors, my eleven colleagues howl. They don't move, but their brains are active. I connected to their consciousnesses via a neural interface. What I saw there shattered my conception of reality. They constantly, continuously, like a looped hologram on the inside of their skulls, see Paradise and cannot enter it.

Colony "Ares-1", March 7, 2033.

Mars has no smell. The air is filtered through six stages of purification, and there is nothing in it for olfactory memory to latch onto. But today I woke up and realized I could distinguish the smells of microscopic bacteria. And they all smell different. I lay in my module, stared at the gray ceiling, and tried to classify the smells. That was the first event of the day.

Colony "Ares-1" consists of several hermetic domes connected by intestine-like passageways. We have been here for two years. Engineers, geologists, biologists, a communications officer, and me, a virologist — twelve people in all. Actually, a

virologist has no business on Mars, but I am here at Larsson's personal insistence. He was very hopeful we would get approval to test the "Eos" vaccine, which would require constant on-site monitoring.

It all began that very morning. Larsson contacted me via a secure channel. His face on the screen was gaunt. Ever since we got the first results with the mice, the scientist had rarely slept, and he was sleep-deprived now, visible by the burst capillaries in his eyes.

"Mark, I have news," he said. "The expert commission from Geneva has given preliminary approval for trials."

"On humans?"

"On the colonists."

Behind me, the water regeneration system hummed.

"You know I'm against it, Elias. We haven't tested the long-term effects, and humans are not mice."

"But the mice aren't dying from radiation, Mark. Your colonists are. Patrick Swanson has stage three radiation sickness, and Annika Ngwenya has stage two. You have the best indicators, but that's understandable — you're the doctor and have never gone out on the surface. In six months to a year, you'll be left on Mars alone."

I knew these figures even without him; I had collected and sent them to him myself. Everyone's white blood cell counts were dropping, except mine, but in my reports to Earth, I faked my parameters to match the others. In the grand space program, we

were expendable material and knew it from the very beginning. But knowing it is one thing, and feeling your body betray you, cell by cell, is quite another.

I never told Larsson that two years ago, on the first day after arriving on Mars, while the other eleven colonists were still unpacking equipment and setting up the life support systems, I locked myself in the medical module. The container marked “Eos” had arrived with us; Larsson had insisted the experimental samples travel with the expedition and be on site ahead of a decision, or in case of an emergency. He thought I would wait for the order. He could not have known that back on Earth, I had already decided to test the vaccine on myself.

I remember the cold of the alcohol wipe. I remember how my hand twitched with the realization of what I had done. I injected myself with a substance that had only been tested on mice. A drug that rewrote the genome, disabled aging, interfered with the fundamental mechanisms of life and death. And I did it deliberately, secretly, without permission and without a safety net.

Why? Because I was sure that sooner or later, approval from Geneva would come, but before offering it to others, I, as a doctor and a scientist, had to go through it myself. That was my codex, and it remains so now, as I write these lines with rotting fingers.

Two milliliters of a cloudy liquid, resembling diluted milk, into the vein of my left hand. Fifteen seconds, and it was done; I became patient zero.

All this time it was my secret, and for two years I observed my body. Scars disappeared on the fourth day. My eyesight restored in two weeks. My testosterone level jumped to that of a twenty-five-year-old. I recorded every symptom in a personal journal, an encrypted file hidden deep within the medical computer. And I waited. Waited for the negative side effects that never came.

Now, when Larsson was demanding we vaccinate the others, I knew “Eos” worked, and I was living proof. But I also understood that two years was too short a timeframe. What would happen in five? Ten?

“Mark!” Larsson’s voice snapped me out of my stupor of memories. “Mark, I’m telling you, we have approval. The sick need to be vaccinated.”

“I won’t force anyone,” I said finally. “But if they agree voluntarily, I will administer the injections. As for myself...”

“What?”

“Elias, I will also take ‘Eos.’ I won’t send people into a risk I’m not willing to share.” I didn’t confess what had already been done. After all, no negative side effects had been detected during this time, except perhaps for recurring dreams. Honestly, even if approval hadn’t come from Earth, I would have administered the vaccine to the sick anyway, without any permission.

After the session ended, I prepared to leave the medical bay for the common module. Outside the door, on a folding chair, one leg crossed over the other, sat Patrick. Twice a week I treated

his radiation ulcers, and twice a week he sat in this very spot with the patience of a boulder that knows erosion will win anyway. In one hand, he held an aluminum mug of surrogate coffee, murky-brown in color and smelling of burnt barley mixed with chemicals. Real coffee had run out on Mars long ago; Patrick brewed this swill every morning and drank it as if it were a real espresso from a Roman café. On his lap lay his already rolled-up sleeve, under which a bandage was moist with ichor. The skin on his cheekbones hung in shreds, like sun-scorched parchment, and his eyes had lost their color, vaguely resembling Arctic ice.

He winced, either from the taste or the pain, took another sip, and looked at me over his mug.

“So, Doc, they don’t happen to want to turn us into lab rats, do they?”

Our eyes met. This huge Swede, who looked like a lumberjack but thought like a nuclear physicist — because that’s what he was — had guessed.

I invited him into the cabin, took out a fresh pack of bandages, grabbed a stool, and sat opposite him.

“Something like that,” I said finally.

“I agree.”

“You didn’t even ask for details.”

“Why bother?” He shrugged, and the bandage on his forearm slipped, revealing the weeping edge of an ulcer. “I’ll be dead in six months anyway. You’re the doc, you know that better than me.” He glanced at his arm. “Give me your serum. If your stuff

works, maybe I'll see my daughter grow up. If not, I die. I've got nothing to lose."

I was already reaching for the syringe when he stopped me with a look.

"Just, Mark, do it like you did for yourself," he said calmly, as if death was a cabin-mate he greeted every morning in the corridor. That was Patrick, through and through.

"What do you mean?"

"I have a photographic memory. I remember perfectly well how you looked when I met you two and a half years ago, back in training."

I was slightly taken aback, not expecting this turn in the conversation.

"I've been looking at your face for two years." He ran his thumb over his own brow, mirroring my anatomy, and a dry crust of dermatitis crumbled into his mug. "You had a scar above your eyebrow."

"Patrick..."

"It disappeared a week after we landed. I remember."

He continued, counting on his fingers:

"Marek is balding, Annika lost her sense of smell, I'm rotting alive. And you..." he swept his gaze over me, "are blossoming."

Nervously, I tore off a strip of medical tape with a crack.

"I'm a doctor and a scientist. I couldn't risk you without checking it myself, and I had no one else to test it on but myself."

"I'm not judging." Patrick placed his mug on the floor and

extended his healthy, ulcer-free arm to me. “I can see the stuff works. Thanks in advance, Mark. I respect you for going first. Now, go ahead, inject.”

I swabbed his dry, peeling skin with an alcohol wipe and found a vein beneath it. The needle slid in easily; I injected two cc’s of the cloudy liquid. Patrick didn’t even flinch.

“Do you have dreams?” he asked suddenly, staring at the wall as I taped the injection site.

“Could he possibly know about the dreams too? No. Nonsense.”

“Dreams? Of course.” My voice trembled more than I would have liked.

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “From day one here, I dream of my daughter almost every night. Such vivid dreams, like I’m back in childhood. If your stuff doesn’t cloud them, I’ll be the happiest man on Mars.”

I reached for the bandage to dress the wound after all, but Patrick carefully, although the strength in his paw could have easily broken my wrist, moved my hand aside.

“Forget it, Doc. Don’t worry.”

“Patrick, the ulcer needs to be covered, otherwise...”

“I’m sure this damn thing will heal by tomorrow morning.”

I looked at the weeping edge of the ulcer, at the gray, dying tissue around the edges, and wanted to object — but the confidence resonating in his voice made me keep silent.

He stood up, clapped me on the shoulder with his huge palm,

making the instrument tray clang and nearly fly to the floor, and left.

The next morning, the ulcer had indeed closed.

In three days, his skin would begin to turn pink. In five, all ulcers would completely disappear. And in a month... but let's take things in order.

Within ten days, I had signed consent forms from all expedition members in my hands.

I vaccinated everyone. Annika Ngwenya, the communications officer, wept with hope as the needle entered her vein. Marek Kowalski, the geologist, grimly joked about "blood and milk." Liam Chen, the biologist, recorded everything on camera for future generations. They didn't even suspect that standing before them was patient zero, holding a syringe.

As a formality, I made the last signature on the list for myself.

That night, I opened the encrypted file and added:

"March 14, 2033. Eleven people vaccinated."

"Not for the protocol, for posterity: Observation period for patient zero — 731 days. Side effects: Physical condition ideal. Biological age stabilized at ~30 years. Reason unknown. Continuing observation."

At that moment, only Patrick Swanson suspects I was the first. No one else.

I closed the file and lay down in my bunk. The life support system hummed its endless lullaby. Somewhere beyond the wall, Patrick was already asleep; he was to be the first to walk the path

I had walked two years ago.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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