

In ancient times, the Egyptians believed the sky to be a vast, primordial ocean named Nun. For whatever reason, the esoteric knowledge returned to Oha at that moment. In a way, it made sense. Floating there in low orbit, she was truly weightless, drifting placidly thousands of miles above the breathtaking, cloudy, blue marble. She looked out across the endless sea of blackness, ornamented by shining, crystal stars.

Despite the slight chill to the claustrophobic suit, or the stale scent to the contained air, she took a moment to breathe, to look out across the endlessness. There was no darkness like the void between suns; oblivion made comforting for its emptiness. The stars, scattered with all the care of coins cast by a mighty throw, glittered like diamonds. From the ground, they all seemed yellow-white. But without the air between them, they twinkled in every hue; blue, red, golden, and silver. The innumerable stars reminded her of the fireflies she watched in the woods as a child.

Though she knew the danger of the void, felt the bulky suit against her feathers, she lay back—or at least imitated the motion as best she could in the directionless void—and appreciated the serenity of space. Even if she were to panic or fight, there was nothing a struggling mortal could do against the perpetual motion she found herself in.

On his deathbed, feverish and delirious, her father said something to her. For whatever reason, it returned to her. *When we hatch and are children, the world seems infinite. It is as we age that our perceptions shrink, the world and people fading with every year. In our final moments, we die utterly alone.*

Her parents reassured her that he was wrong, that he didn't know what he was saying. But it stuck with her nonetheless. Floating out into the cold infinity of space, the words rung in her ear.

“How you feeling out there, Oha?” a voice asked over her intercom. The sound of another snapped her from her stupor, almost making her cheer with relief.

The voice belonged to Laika, an excitable little dog who ran communications and station diagnoses. The usual, chipper energy to her voice was gone. In its place was an obvious concern, poorly hidden as if to keep both Oha and herself calm.

“You know, drifting helplessly into oblivion, growing further from rescue with every passing moment. I’m pretty comfy,” Oha said back, her lightheartedness seeming to calm Laika as well. She twisted her neck to look back at the vessel she was gradually departing, but her immobile helmet offered no such visions.

“Well, stay calm, Yuri’s heading out there to fetch you. What happened to you, anyway?”

Oha chuckled slightly, unsure herself. From the corner of her visor, she could see a long, steel cable floating listlessly behind her. “I think the tether detached. Not sure. I was working on the panel wing; didn’t notice I was loose till I was already drifting away.”

“Well, you’re lucky we caught your mistake,” Yuri said over the comms, a hint of exasperation to his voice as if saving her life was some great burden.

“It was not my mistake. A mechanical defect,” Oha said, silently wishing that anyone besides that arrogant fool would have her.

“If you say so,” he said smugly. A slight jolt caught her unaware, followed by a slight tug as her harness was pulled back towards the station. “Alright, I caught the little owl before she could fly off.”

“My thanks,” she said begrudgingly, her drift carrying her back towards the station.

“Alright, you two, at least get back inside before you kill one another,” Laika chimed in.

“Ping when you’re at the hatch, I’ll let you in.”

Carried by the cord attached to the back of her suit, Oha was turned back towards the station. The SLS-570, though most called it The Chariot. A masterwork of steel, glass, and titanium, the brutalist structure of large blocks, tubes, and panels spun over the distant earth with a certain ungainly grace. Before it, floated Yuri in his bulky suit, properly tied to the station and pulling her back by her cable.

Keeping their momentum in check, they gave only slight tugs, trusting inertia as they drifted closer. Landing gently against the hatch, Yuri gave a quick thumbs up for reassurance. Oha raised her wing in response, unable to return the gesture with only a single finger. Slightly off-target and moving faster, she braced her legs as she bumped against the side of the ship. Before the bounce could send her off again, she hooked her covered talons around a bar, finally attached to a stable object.

Hissing loudly, the airlock flew open and allowed them reentry. Oha followed, holding her wings close as she slipped in through the small entrance. Careful not to catch their suits on the contraptions around the room, they shut and sealed the hatch behind them and waited. Several vents whirled as the cabin was pressurized. “All right, you guys back in,” Laika said over the comms. As she spoke, the cracked, green light over the entrance blinked on.

Yuri wasted no time opening the doorway and maneuvering back into the station. Oha followed as best she could, less adept with the swimming motions they used to move about the space without gravity. Though most birds possessed a single, dexterous, taloned digit emerging

just past their radiale, the limbs were not meant for grasping. While graceless in her motion, she moved with far more certainty than when she first boarded the station.

Fiddling with several latches on the helmet, she twisted it off and breathed. Though the ship air was no fresher than that of her suit's tank, it certainly felt better than in the claustrophobic bubble of her helmet. The rest of the outfit was more difficult, her covered claws bumping uselessly against the flaps and seals of her suit.

Minutes of fumbling yielded nothing but a sigh of frustration. From the corner of her eye, she saw Yuri already hanging his suit on the wall. The black rabbit was lean with wispy fur, now matted and pressed by the cooling garb. He shot her a bemused smile as he drifted from the room, his sharp features seemingly shaped for such arrogance.

“Do you think you could—?” she began to ask, silencing herself as he departed, his massive ears twitching at the sound. She would rather struggle against it herself than to give the man one more thing to mock and hold over her. Cautious not to damage the suit, she held back a flap on her wrist with her sharp beak and prodded the latch with her single digit. “Fuck, just one more finger,” she begged in a bitter whisper.

“Let me help you with that,” Laika chuckled from behind her, her soft Pomor accent immediately recognizable. Blinking and nodding in thanks, Oha twisted her head around and met her friend's gaze. The little dog chuckled at the act while helping to remove the unwieldy suit from the ends of her wing.

“Thank you.”

Laika was a small girl, an eternally jovial and excited expression on her face. A mutt most closely resembling a husky and a terrier, covered in short, soft fur. White furred with large brown

spots; she had a long muzzle and triangular ears, which folded near the tips, even without gravity. Her face was mostly dark-brown, broken by a white line traveling up from her nose, and two patches extenuating her large, expressive eyes. Pinned to her shirt was a small pin from the soviet space program. Though she was not much of a student of history, nor a supporter of the old regime, the pin was an heirloom, passed through several generations before it reached her paws.

“That’s easier, isn’t it?” Laika said, taking the white feathers of Oha’s wing between her paws.

“Yes, feels much better,” Oha chuckled, fluffing her feathers nervously. She began to work at the other wing’s seal, but Laika quickly stopped the talon and worked at the other.

“How the hell did you manage to get up here without being able to put on your own suit?”

“A lot of false confidence. Also, I’m damned good at everything else that I do,” she laughed as Laika freed her other wing. “Also, the tools are made to be used by one dexterous digit. Speaking of, the panels should be working now. I finished fixing it before I, um...”

“Before you fell off the station like a drunk and needed saving?”

“In my defense, I would have been fine if the leash didn’t break. This old ship is falling apart,” she said, taking off the last of the EMU.

“Well, be careful. At least survive long enough to see this hunk of scraps go down.”

Oha hung the suit beside the others. Four suits remained in the container. Their team was first given six when sent up. One was damaged when their crewmate, Lev, an older acrobat, thought to do several flips and cracked his helmet. Fortunately, the fool did so in the station. The other suit at least functioned. Though they loaned it to the Chinese team on the other side of the

station. Technically against protocol, but it was harmless enough. Even with countless hours of planning behind them, it was always the most foolish of mistakes that would slip away.

“I’ll do my best,” Oha laughed. The owl turned her face upside-down and squinted playfully. The look was friendly, easily recognizable to other birds. Yet Laika flinched slightly, unaccustomed to the strange, blank expressions of a barn owl.

“You should probably change from that suit,” Laika laughed, recovering quickly from the surprise. She tapped her wet nose to Oha’s beak and turned her down the hall. “Or at least, change out of that MAG,” she joked, lightly prodding the puffy section around Oha’s hips.

“You a seven-hour spacewalk without one,” Oha retorted, jumping away, her beak flushing pink with embarrassment.

“Oh, I know, but this is such a good opportunity to embarrass you,” she chuckled, the tip of her tail wagging slightly. “Go get dressed. You’re too easy to mock like this.”

“Very well,” she agreed, beginning back towards the quarters.

Momentum carrying her more than anything, she used her clawed wings to drift through the station, using each holding-bar to turn and slow herself. Her wide wings felt cramped in the tight halls of the satellite. At first glance, several thought a bird like she would be at home flying on the lack of gravity. Of course, the movement was more akin to swimming than anything else. If anything, her old muscle-memory betrayed her. Though she spent her whole life working for such an opportunity, she missed the feeling of the wind in her feathers.

The space widened as she entered the team’s quarters. Five cubicles, one on each surface of the cube room. She kicked off from the entrance and landed against her own. Once inside, she

removed the tight under-suit. She warmed swiftly as she removed the liquid-cooled garment, her feathers matted against her. Though only she noticed, she was embarrassed at the state of her off-white feathers. In the past days, she had little time to preen, leaving her feathers dusty and misaligned. Though she never took the same pride in her plumage as some birds did, it felt somehow wrong when she was forced to cut their ends, to fit in her undersuit.

Of course, she knew all of it necessary long before boarding the station. For all her complaints, she knew she would miss the station when again on the ground. She had torn out more than a few beak-fulls of feathers during the endless training and studying she spent getting here. Some frayed plumage was nothing to worry over.

Her gradual drift caused her to slowly bump against the wall of her room, rousing her from her thoughts. It was so easy to become lost in meditation or wonder out here. In the darkness, only the constant hum of the machinery reached her, even sent seemed absent in the sterile air. Floating without direction, it seemed as if all her senses were missing in waking sleep.

She slipped on her normal clothes. Simple, baggy dressings which insulated them against the chill of the station. Little patches and markings from NASA decorated the clothes. Designed for avians, the pants possessed a wide slit through which she slid her tailfeathers, the shirt and coat sleeveless to allow her wings freedom.

Dressed, she departed her room. Sitting outside was her crewmate Orlando. Though he and she were both Americans sent up with the Russian team, they rarely spoke, never managing to get along. The alligator seemed to stand on the ceiling from her perspective. Brown-grey scales scraped against the ground as his tail swished behind him, his amber eyes darting across the book he read. Though she could not see the actual page, she could already guess its contents. Another

survival story, she wondered if it took place on an island, or a frozen wilderness, he read little else. It was a terrible habit of his, reading of such perilous events only seemed to worsen his already constant paranoia. He offered her a disinterested wave as greeting, and she continued out to the rest of the station.

Taking for the cupola, she ducked through the cluttered halls, every surface seemingly covered in pipes, wires, and notes. Three months left the space cluttered with notes from different projects and studies. She passed them by until she came to the glass dome of the cupola. The room let them see out into the darkness beyond the station. Just below were several monitors, their harsh light providing the only real light in the space. Floating in the center was Laika, turning from screen to screen as a clock's hands point to numbers.

"Anything else need fixing?" Oha asked, waiting at the entrance of the small room.

"Scans are clear," Laika said. She turned to greet Oha but found herself without pawhold to position herself. For a brief moment, she twisted about in place before the tips of her fingers caught a keyboard, and she regained control of her movement. Oha giggled at the struggle, causing Laika's whiskers to twitch with embarrassment. The expression only worsened as she looked back at the keyboard she had haphazardly grabbed. "*Pizdets!* Accidentally sent a message home."

"What did you send?"

"Well, Roscosmos just received: 'aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa'. I imagine they'll have questions," Laika sighed, starting to type up an explanation to her superiors. "You just got back from a spacewalk and are already looking for another task. Are you secretly a beaver beneath those feathers?"

"Just looking to prove my worth. I don't intend for this to be my last stay on this station."



“But what is the point of being here if you do not relax and enjoy it?” Laika leaned over and took Oha by the wing, pulling her closer to the window.

Beyond them, the sun rose over the Pacific Ocean, their pale blue dot becoming dark blue, crowned with the golden halo of the setting sun. As they looked out across it, Laika wrapped her arms around Oha, pinning her wings to her sides. Almost instinctively, Oha ran her beak through the fur atop her head, as if preening a companion. Laika giggled at the touch but leaned into her.

“I like that. You did the same after that first night,” Laika reminisced, burying her wet nose into Oha’s neck.

Though she enjoyed the touch, hooting slightly with laughter, Oha pushed herself out of her companion’s grasp. “Not now,” she murmured, Laika’s ears lowering in mock-sadness. “Not in front of all the monitors. It feels like both our governments are watching.”

“I suppose I still have some reports to finish,” she said, barely concealing her disappointment.

Oha shared the sentiment, but felt too nervous beside the open hall, in front of all the screens. Above anything else, she was uncomfortable to be so close with other people with so little warning. Though she enjoyed Laika’s presence, she was only ever able to hide the nervousness with a little more alcohol in her blood.

“By the way, NASA wishes you and Orlando a happy July Fourth,” Laika said, the chipper note returning to her voice as if it had never left.

“Oh right, suppose it’s that night there,” Oha murmured to herself. As Laika typed away at her keyboard, they looked out across the world. A hurricane was visible drifting eastward a few

hundred miles off the coast of Japan, likely too small to ever reach land. Everything seemed so small from such a distance.

“Speaking of, you know the pizza breads in storage?” Laika asked, unaware of her mistake. “They were close to spoiling, so we’re making them tonight.”

“I didn’t know anything could spoil up here,” she chuckled, remembering a small pile of crusts they found in storage, left by a previous team.

“Oh, they’re years old, but still technically edible for a few months.”

“Can’t be any worse than rehydrated stew, like the past couple nights.”

“How bad could it be? Liquor and pizza to celebrate America Day.”

“I can think of nothing better,” Oha chuckled, and the dog’s ears flattening as she patted her.

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Once they unfolded the steel table from the wall, the team gathered around and began the usual process of cooking. With a large syringe full of warm water, they rehydrated the sauces and unpackaged the prebaked crust disks. They squeezed the thick sauce from its package and spread it like frosting onto a cake. The paste acted as a glue with which they affixed shredded cheese and toppings. Choices were sparse, but the act of actually making food brought the team together.

Oha was a woman of simple tastes and hesitant to experiment. Pepperoni seemed one of the few foods which retained its flavor after storage and in the strange environment. At first, she held only a disk with a squirt of sauce and a few circles of meat. Yet the rest pushed her to continue,

chanting as if taking shots at a party. When over, she held a pizza covered in a top-shell of pepperoni.

Laika treated her food with a certain delicacy. She applied the sauce in a spiral to a crust spinning without gravity. She added a few of each topping, all equally distributed. By the end, she stared wagging at her meal, almost too proud to eat it.

Lev had started preparing the meal before any other arrived. It was his idea, and he beamed with pride as he saw his plan bringing them joy. The meal itself seemed secondary to him, and he spent most of it spinning a barely-decorated pie on his clawed finger. The lion was the oldest member of the group. He was a large beast, muscular and intimidating without knowledge of what sort of person he actually was. He cut mane to half its original length, his clothes covered with numerous badges and patches from both his career and personal past. They were arranged seemingly haphazardly across his chest, though he took great care and pride in each. He had been beyond the earth quite a few times by now. He knew his value and skill, knew himself almost guaranteed a spot on any venture he was qualified for, and thus saw no more need for professionalism and enjoyed his every moment to the fullest.

Orlando was hesitant to partake, worrying over their nearness to the expiration date. Upon finally relenting, he was sparse with sauce or cheese, favoring only olives, all the while complaining about the salt content. Yet, at the start of the meal, he quoted a poem by Khalil Gibrian, speaking of friendship and the shared joy of little things. Though, the gravity of the words was diminished when the rest only recognized it from an episode of *Friends*.

Yuri treated the meal as a joke. At first, he only sat against the wall, watching and chuckling as if he were witnessing a humorous story from a distance. Only when everyone else had made

their meals did he reluctantly join the circle. With what remained of the sauce, he all but drowned his crust and added a few slices of meat.

The meal was cold, the crust was dry and rubbery, the cheese un-melted, and the sauce poorly mixed. However, it was nostalgic to eat foods different from their usual preserves. Beyond all else, it provided them an excuse to sit together with defenses lowered. They laughed, trading horror stories from training.

Oha almost lost her chance on multiple occasions, frequently unable to read the unspoken communications of her teammates. Unsurprisingly, Yuri was never at fault in his own stories, held back by the incompetence of those around him. It was Lev who spoke the most, telling old stories of how they trained and flew in his day. The more he drank, the more frequently he tripped over himself by revealing tidbits of which he was unsure if they were still classified.

Once finished, with stomachs full, they turned their attention fully to their drink. Crushing hers into her mouth, Laika chuckled. “Drinking from a juice pouch. I feel like I’m in elementary school again,” she laughed, sucking out the last drops.

“Ha, a child? Aren’t you drinking vodka?” Oha laughed, receiving bemused looks from the other three.

“This stuff is watered down. Back home, we’d call it baby formula,” Yuri chuckled.

“*Za vase zdorov’je*” Lev offered, seeming to wake from a trance as he raised his pouch.

“I must know, friend,” Yuri asked, looking to Lev. One of the rabbit’s long ears flopped over as he seemingly lost the motivation to keep it standing. “When ground chose to send you up, to set foot on the moon, what on heaven or earth could possess you to fuck that up?”

“It was precisely that mission. I had to celebrate. Celebrated so much that I slept through the launch of my rocket. Woke up in some stranger’s bed to find that my partner took my place. Suppose I was the lucky one there. The vessel was flawed, collapsed halfway to the moon. Afterwards, they buried the whole affair.”

“Why the hell did they ever let you back onto a mission?” Orlando asked, his sharp teeth showing as he laughed.

“Wasn’t my first flight. Also, I’m pretty sure the records were lost during the coup in Moscow. No one else seems to remember it.”

“Maybe you dreamed it,” Laika posited, less amused by the story than the rest. “I certainly wouldn’t lose an opportunity like that to such a stupid mistake.”

“Things work themselves out. That stranger whose bed I woke up in, she became my wife. Even today, she awaits my return. As for my ever-fortunate partner... he was a pompous fool who thought himself better than everyone around him. I imagine he felt deserving of the promotion which came with my ‘mistake’. He must have believed himself invincible... right up until he was vaporized,” he said, eyeing Yuri from across the room.

“But just for that chance,” Laika murmured, not really listening anymore.

“Call me whatever you like. The only thing you cannot say about me is that I am wrong,” Yuri said, his smug smile enough to turn the others’ stomachs.

“Just because you are not wrong, does mean you are right,” Oha muttered, taking another sip from her pouch. Though the spicy vodka was not something she much cared for, she enjoyed

the warmth which spread outwards from her stomach and the ease with which it allowed her to socialize.

“Just because you don’t like me, does make me wrong,” Yuri retorted, his smile showing his large incisors. “Which reminds me, Laika, has that joint pain faded?” he asked. His confidence was not so infuriating for his arrogance, but because he truly was always right. The closest thing their team had to a doctor; his research surrounded the effects which the station had on an anthro’s body.

Rather than answering verbally, Laika nodded in response. The motion threw her already shaky balance. Oha giggled as she jumped and floated frantically for a moment. Drunk people were quite entertaining without even gravity to tether them. Laughing, Laika pulled herself back to her seat.

“Perhaps we’ve had enough for the night,” Orlando said, his pouch of liquor half drained.

“Worried we’ll hurt ourselves,” Laika laughed amused by the concern. Though unbalanced, she was aware of her mental abilities and knew herself far from gone.

“Concerned that we will be unable to work properly. You always say this station is falling apart, and you fell off it sober,” Orlando said, running a claw over the rough scales on his arm. “I did not come here just to have a college party two-hundred miles above the earth.”

“What did you come here for, Orlando? Only two people from your country made it, and everything about this station seems to scare you,” Yuri prodded.

“By our very nature, it is the coward who is capable of the greatest courage.”

“Why must you always speak in quotes?”

“What the fuck else am I supposed to do with a minor in English lit?” he laughed, slapping his tail against the ground.

“Honestly, why did you join, Orlando? I know none of us were put here without extensive requests and training,” Oha asked, thinking back to the crushing work she put in to reach this place.

“I worked just as hard as any of you,” he said, Yuri sneering at the thought. “Maybe I am cautious, understanding of risks. But I too, am capable of the exceptional.”

“Chudnyy,” Yuri said, dismissing the conversation as he produced a pack of gum from his pocket and a single, worn cigarette. Though none were allowed to smoke for their six months on the station, he brought with him enough nicotine-gum to last him a year. Snuck between the packs were a pair of cigarettes. While he was not stupid enough to light one, he would occasionally hold one in his mouth while chewing his ash-stick flavored gum. “What do you suppose smoke would look like without gravity?”

“That would be something fun to paint,” Lev murmured wistfully. “What do you all wish to do when we get off this can?” he asked. To him, the mission seemed more like another job, than the life-defining event it was to the rest.

The four had to take a moment. Orlando was closest to him in age but still fell far behind both there and in experience with space.

“Firstly, I’d like to take a shit that actually falls into the bowl,” Yuri muttered.

“Have a decent meal,” Laika said. “Not to disparage tonight’s meal, but I miss things cooked in butter and oil.

“I don’t know,” Oha murmured. She could acknowledge the many annoyances of the station but would accept them all a thousand-fold before returning. It took a deeper look back before she could find something she truly missed. “I grew up near the Bitterroot Mountains. They... probably not worth visiting. But I loved them, still do. Once my feathers come back, I’d like to go back to that wilderness.”

To the other three, this mission was their first journey beyond the tenuous grasp of the earth. This was the highest peak of their ambitions, at least the only one attainable within their current conceivable reach. They could not think of what came next, after their six-month venture. Because for so long, this venture was their *next*.

“Help me understand. After months in the absolute void of space, your first thought of return is to flee from civilization?” Laika asked, her ears perked with curiosity.

“I like the quiet, like to be alone.”

“Alone? There’re never even a dozen people in space at any given time. How does one get more alone?”

“Please, the lot of us are packed into a few thousand square feet. There’s even another team on this on this station.”

“No, that’s psychotic,” Lev chuckled. “I tell you, the only thing that keeps me from ever going back down there is my wife. You need to find yourself a husband, owl.”

“Ya, that’d do you right,” Laika laughed, sharing a knowing look with Oha, who turned her gaze down against the prodding. “Big, strong hubby waiting for you when you step off the ship, hugging you close in the night. So romantic,” she laughed, floating from her chair as she



stopped paying attention to her momentum. The others gave her confused looks, unsure why the image amused her so.

“Can we talk of something other than my social life?” Oha begged, her beak flushed with embarrassment. Clever as he was, Yuri seemed to read the moment. The rabbit snickered into his hand; his large gum-stained teeth showing as he glanced between the two. Fortunately, from the flush in his nose and the bob in his head, he was too far gone to tell anything, even if he desired to do so.

“You have something better,” Orlando prodded, clearly pushing where he noticed nervousness, even if he did not understand it. “If you’d like, Ground gave me a little book of team-building exercises.”

“We’re already holding the finest team-builder on earth, or otherwise,” Lev joked, raising his vodka.

“If that is the case, any more teamwork might kill the team,” Orlando said, smiling at Laika and Yuri’s almost unconscious levels of drunkenness.

“Weaklings,” Lev muttered, taking Yuri’s arm. He attempted to hoist the rabbit over his shoulder as one would, carrying an inebriated companion on the surface. The position did little. For all the training they went through, NASA never taught them how to drag around wasted friends. “Perhaps it is time we turned in.”

“I’ll carry the pup,” Oha said, gently taking Laika’s shoulder into her large talons.

“No, no. I’ve been worse than this and still driven,” Laika chuckled, grabbing the wall to stop them. “What if we stayed up a little later?” she whispered. Once the other three had drifted from the room, she rose and gave a quick, playful lick to Oha’s beak.

“That... that I would like more than anything,” Oha said, unconsciously ruffling her feathers. Hushing their voices, they made their way in the opposite direction. When they grabbed the bars for mobility, they did so silently, as if attempting not to wake any on the station. The motion came easily for Oha, as she was used to flying silently.

Laika took lead, guiding her to the cupola with surprising precision given her state. As they entered, she quickly turned off the various monitors throughout the room. Soon, darkness hid the cluttered space. The only light streamed dimly through the glass. They spun slowly above the earth. On the darkening horizon, they could see lights twinkling from distant cities, curious glowing masses like clusters of stars. Below them, the blue marble of the sea seemed alive, moving subtly with clouds and tides.

It was strange. On the ground, the sky above seemed vast, endless. Yet hundreds of miles from the earth, it was their little blue dot, which seemed massive compared to the sea of diamonds above. Perhaps it was distance and not detail which created grandeur. The stars too shone more beautiful from their little island. Though no bigger, they were brighter. Rather than a tapestry above, the little lights stretched all around them, their depth only visible from this perspective.

“What do you think the odds are?” Laika asked, putting one arm around Oha in a half-embrace. “You’ve got a head for numbers. Of all the rotations, what do you think the odds are, that the two of us, strangers, would be sent up here together?”

“If I said *astronomical*, would you take it as a pun?” Oha said, resting her head on Laika’s shoulder. She liked the feeling of the laughter against her, soft tremors which the contact made them share.

“A joke? You must be drunker than you’re letting on,” she prodded, running her claws through the feathers on the nape Oha’s neck, making her shiver slightly. In sunlight, the station could heat up past boiling. Though the cooling systems kept them alive, they were too imprecise to keep things comfortable. Gentle warmth from the meeting of fur and feathers created an ease between them, made them more hesitant to separate. “What about when we get down? What do you think the odds are that we’ll stay together, then?”

“Now you’re thinking about what comes after this? Could’ve brought this up at the table.”

“You know I can’t,” she said, pulling away slightly and looking towards her. “If things like this, like us, were to get out, my whole future would be threatened.”

“And you think I want to be outed by fucking Yuri? We keep things quiet.”

“Agreed.” One of the computers buzzed with an incoming message. With an exasperated sigh, Laika leaned over and silenced the monitor. Even once the machines were off, she kept a tentative distance between them.

Flattening the feathers on her face, Oha listened to Laika’s heartbeat. The murmur was just audible over the whirl of the machines. Quickened by the view and the warmth beside her, but eased by the serenity of it all. Though she was never good at reciprocating emotion, she could sense it quite well. Laika, however, was annoyed by her inability to read Oha’s. Around her own kind, body language was simple, and scents betrayed one’s mood. Yet the closed-off owl beside

her had a rigid face and entirely black eyes, her body producing few indicative pheromones. It annoyed her, made it difficult to read someone who intentionally showed little.

Over the horizon of the earth, the moon seemed to rise like another world. Almost silver, the moon looked surprisingly similar to how it did from the ground. Though technically closer, there still stood so many insurmountable miles between them and the pale half-circle, that it still stood unchanged. What made them stare, was seeing it over the azure waves of the distant earth.

“It looks so green from up here,” Laika murmured.

“Hmm?” mumbled, returning her attention.

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling at the half-thought. “Somehow, I always thought the colors were just something from pictures.” As she explained, she noticed a bemused smile from Oha. “Not literally. But I grew in Moscow, never really left. Somehow I thought that sort of grey was the norm.”

“It was the opposite for me,” Oha chuckled. “I had seen them in movies, knew they existed. But when I first saw the big buildings of a city, they seemed unreal. Funniest part... this awe-inspiring city was fucking Boise.”

“I don’t even know where that is,” Laika laughed.

“You don’t need to.”

“Why did you leave?” she asked, receiving a look of confusion. “Rumor is that not even a hundred people live in your town. You like being alone so much that you flew to space. Willingly went through solitary training again to *collect your thoughts*. Such a place seems a fine home for you.”

“Didn’t think I’d ever have to justify leaving that place,” she chuckled, looking down at her talons. “Wisdom Montana... If there was ever an unfitting name. No one leaves that town, and I like the quiet; but if stayed, the best future I could hope for was marrying Lowell, the beagle who owned the gas station.”

“A beagle? Was he cuter than me?” she prodded.

“Not even close. Would’ve been a sham anyway,” she joked, reaching out and taking Laika’s paw, rubbing her digit against the soft pads. “Still, I’d like to bring you there someday.”

“From what you’ve told me, your home sounds like a lawless wildland. Still, it sounds wonderful.”

“You’re not far off, not on either account. I’ll probably have to teach you how to camp, but we’re already used to sleeping in tiny boxes and eating shitty food, the main difference will be the gravity.”

“Only a small difference, is it?” Laika quipped. “God, walking’s gonna feel weird after this. Everything is.”

“How could it not? We’ve traveled about as far... well, everything, as we can.” Oha marveled, looking at the earth before them.

“No, I intend to go about two-hundred-thirty-nine-thousand-seven-hundred miles further,” she said, pausing as she remembered the number all but engraved in her mind.

“What’s... *that* far away?”

“The moon,” Laika stated simply, as if the answer were obvious. She let go for a moment, looking towards the window to watch as the pale sphere rose over the sapphire one. “That’s why I joined all this madness. To one day get up there, to be the first woman to do so.”

“To land on the moon?”

“I know it sounds stupid. Hell, they’re not even planning future missions to the moon. But reason and logic alone were never enough to shake me.”

“They certainly wouldn’t. Still, that’s amazing,” she said, thinking to her old home, how everyone seemed to have settled where they fell.

“What about you? I know all kids say they want to be astronauts, but what made you keep to it?”

“I don’t say. After yours, mine seems... weird,” she said, turning away slightly.

“Come now. You can’t listen to my naïve dreaming, then close up like an oyster.”

“Fine,” Oha relented, pushing herself away and coming to rest against the dome of windows. “When I left Wisdom, I wanted to get as far away from that town as I could. It wasn’t just that, always loved space, machines, all of this. But somewhere in me, I knew this was as far as I could get.” She spoke quickly, eyes flitting about as if the words floated through the space like marbles.

“So, taking that Kepler was just an elaborate way for a kid to run away from home?” Laika asked, cocking her head slightly to the side.

“When you put it that way—”

“No. Even a barn owl couldn’t hide that. You don’t hate your home, and you’re grounded to fly to space just to get away,” Laika said, her voice measured and ears raised. “Have I ever judged you? Why do you need to lie to me?” Unintentionally, her drift carried her further away, her voice more concerned than hurt, but not entirely without the latter.

“Laika... I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I don’t know why I said that. Nor am I even sure why I actually came up here. It’s disappointing, but I don’t know why I do the things that I do.” She reached out her wing and stopped Laika’s drift, but did not pull her any closer.

“There wasn’t anything besides — impulse?”

“It was mostly a meet point of everything I loved,” Oha explained, a slight disappointment crossing her companion at the answer. “But, because you seem so intent on this.”

As Oha prodded, she put her other wing around the small of Laika’s back. Victorious, the tip of Laika’s tail wagged for the coming answers.

“After my... Doesn’t matter... I ran away as a kid. It was stupid, and I wanted to come within hours of closing the door. But I had wandered off the trail and was lost. Mountains looked so much stranger when I was lost. Even the darkness of night wasn’t comforting,” she said, ruffling her feathers as the chill of the night air seemed to return. “All the strange noises were so loud, I broke my wing and couldn’t fly home, and I was scared. Stumbled onto the shore of this small mountain lake,” she explained, able to see the place perfectly in her mind. No matter how faded other memories grew, that lake remained as clear as her own face; the smell pine on the air, the wind ruffling her feathers and biting through her down, and the crickets and gusts echoing against the surrounding cliffs. “The stars were so bright that night, the lake reflecting them like a mirror. All around me, fireflies blinked like a galaxy themselves. Maybe I was just light-headed from

hunger and fear. But sitting there alone with my thoughts, surrounded by the dark and the stars,” she retold, almost forgetting the world around her. “I don’t know. It felt different when I found my way back home. With everything else that had happened, I don’t think they even noticed I was missing till I got back.”

“That was when you started all of this?”

“Honestly, I would believe if that thing was all a dream. I can’t say if that moment inspired me, but I remember it, it came back to me when I first space walked.”

“Maybe we don’t need a single defining moment on which to build our entire lives,” Laika assured. As she did, she pulled herself forward. Back against the cold glass of the window, Oha returned the embrace, warmth passing between them with every heartbeat. Between the hollow echo of their voices in the station, or the vast emptiness beyond the glass, lonesomeness came easily, even when beside another.

“It’s like I said,” Oha began. “On this station, it seems like everything I love comes together,” she said, giving a quick, kiss-like preen to the dog’s head.

“I...” Laika stammered, her nose blushing, and her tail wagging slightly. “I know you don’t want to think about it. But when we do go back, I want to stay with you; or at least, keep seeing you.”

“Why does everyone keep going to that? We worked so hard to get up here, now everyone seems to just think about going back.”

Burying her snout in Oha’s plumage, Laika chuckled. “Because we worked this hard for a lot more than this. We’re only up for six months. It’s amazing, and it’s hard, but it’s also a vacation,



at least somewhat. Our careers and lives are still waiting for us on the ground.” As she finished, they stood for a moment in silence, waiting for the other to speak up. Oha broke first, beak barely opening as she whispered.

“Ya, but we return with more than we left with,” she assured, embracing her closer.

Laika returned the gesture and pulled herself up slightly. She touched her nose against Oha’s beak in a kiss. The wet snout was cold, yet sent a jolt of fire throughout Oha’s body. Her beak flushed, and she fluffed her feathers, but closed her eyes and pushed into the touch. Even in their intimate moments, she hadn’t felt like this. The nearness and heat that was theirs, or the sound like rumbling lava, of which both could hear within the other.

Oha tilted her head forward, rubbing her brow against Laika’s temple. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” Laika returned, closing her eyes as she traced the soft feathers of Oha’s facial disk with her muzzle; she giggled as the down feathers tickled her snout. “God, it took leaving the planet for us to meet. How did you describe it, *astronomical*?”

Before Oha could respond, another voice spoke up. “I thought I heard some... thing,” Lev mumbled drunkenly, haphazardly fumbling his way down the hall. He seemed halfway through combing his mane, his claw caught in a tangle of fur.

Laika and Oha pushed away from one another, their faces growing cold and pale as pits formed in their guts. “Lev! What are you doing out here?” Laika asked, her voice sharpened with poorly concealed alarm.

“I’ve misplaced the bedroom,” he muttered, his head bobbing as he spoke, and his pants still unzipped from the bathroom.

“What did you hear?” Oha asked, forcing out the nervous words.

“Nothing but the clucking of hens,” Lev laughed, beginning back down the way he came.

Once he turned away, Oha and Laika looked worriedly to one another. “Lev, wait, let help you back,” Laika offered, taking his arm and guiding him down the hall. “Of what we said, did you hear any of it? Anything specific?” she asked innocently as they departed from the cupola.

Frozen, Oha did not move from the window, even when alone. If she followed, he might suspect something, might draw conclusions. Yet, sitting in silence as the fool drunkenly rambled to her companion, she shivered and felt needles prodding her with unease. By chance, he stumbled upon a real threat to them. She could only hope Laika could keep him to hold his tongue. Lev was not the sort to hurt them for its own sake, but such a threat sent her spiraling with worry. Unsure if she ought to give space, or to follow, the choice paralyzed her. *Damn it! Damn it all!* She shouted within her mind, banging the back of her head against the cold, reinforced glass behind her.

Seconds dragged on like hours, her heartbeat feeling slow in anticipation. Mercifully, she eventually heard the padding of Laika returning down the hall. Unwilling to wait, Oha fled the room and met her. “What happened? What did he say?” Oha asked, the two practically colliding in the walkway.

“He didn’t hear anything, probably won’t remember anything,” Laika reassured, putting a calming paw on Oha’s wing. “Anyway, he’s asleep now.”

“Wonderful,” Oha sighed, so relieved, it felt like when her feathers first came in.

“I know, we got lucky,” she said, panting a little as the nervousness crashed. “God, so hard to keep secrets when packed in here sardines. All worth it, right?”

“Without a doubt,” she said, running a talon along Laika’s claws. “But at long last, we’re alone on this ship.”

“So it would seem.”

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Piercing the peace of sleep came a boom like thunder and a screeching tear of metal. “The fuck was that?” Orlando shouted, emerging with a start from his sleeping space, the reptile’s movements slow in the chill of waking. One by one, the rest of the crew opened their doors and looked around with confusion, most blinking in pain as the sudden light burned a headache into them.

Waking with a start, Oha lurched forward, bumping heads with Laika. Yelping as she too awoke, Laika covered the bruise and hushed her voice. They struggled for a moment to find the latch of the door. In the tight space and without a light, they intertwined themselves in their attempt to find their way. As Oha’s claw found the latch, Laika giggled at the situation. The inside of the little box already smelled of feather oil and fur; their first time spending so long together in the space.

Laika peered out of the sleeping chamber as Oha hid in the darker corner. She breathed sharply as she remembered it Oha’s cabinet they were in. Fortunately, the sudden noise had the crew too distracted to notice.

“What the hell is happening out here?” Laika asked, receiving only confused shrugs from the rest. “*Blyad!* I’ll run diagnostics,” she said, her mind sharpening and returning to the present. She kicked off from the chamber and hurried towards the cupola. The others climbed slower into the room. Oha peeked from her own sleeping space, making sure none noticed as she emerged.

The crew made their way to the section of the station, worried into tenuous silence by a strange whirring, sounding over the usual din of the machinery. Filtering into the hall outside the cupola, they pushed for a spot in the cramped tunnel. They stayed out of the dome itself, giving Laika space as she typed furiously at a keyboard.

Transfixed by the screen, her eyes darted about worriedly, her claws tapping the keys like rain on a rooftop. Worryingly, numerous warnings flashed on the screen, bright red but for a brief moment before vanishing as she worked with surprising speed. “*Tchyoy za ga`lima?*” she swore, bearing her fangs and slamming a fist with fear and frustration. “The P3-ITS, it’s damaged, cut to ribbons and losing air.”

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit!” Orlando hissed, looking around as the very air they breathed drained away.

“How does that even happen?” Yuri demanded, kicking off to look over the screens himself.

“High-speed debris. They didn’t catch it till a few hours ago. The chances that it would hit use were astronomical,” she explained, stunned and quieted by the news.

“Fuck! If the base is—” Orlando cursed, curling over and gripping the sides of his face, his claws sinking into his scales. As he began to hyperventilate, Lev cut him off, standing tall and doing well to hide his fear.

“Everyone, shut up! Laika, what exactly is the state of our ship? Is the damage isolated to P3?” Lev asked, the others quieting as the lion took control of the situation.

“Nothing detected anywhere else, but the damage is extensive,” Laika reported, hammering frantically at the keys. “The seal isn’t responding; it’s shot. I give us forty minutes, but the air will be unbreathable before then.”

“What about P8?” Oha asked, the ship’s layout flashing through her mind. P3 and P8 divided the station down the middle, separating the two teams on the station.

“Closed. No damage on that side of the vessel,” Laika read, her voice trailing off as she finished. Flickering, the station lights shut off, briefly plunging the crew into darkness. Fueled by backup power, the cold glow from the monitors stayed lit. Laika hardly seemed to notice, too deep in thought as she looked over the diagrams. “If that half is functional, their air will hold.”

“We retreat to the other team’s side. It at least gives us a chance,” Oha interjected.

“How bad is P3?” Yuri asked, knowing the damaged section to be the only path across the station.

Laika only shook her head, the excitement draining from her. “Shredded, fuel cells are critical. We could never make it through, even in suits.” The news shook the crew, leaving them to glance worriedly between one another.

Before they could devolve into panic, Lev seized their attention. “Then we walk from outside,” he suggested, looking down the hall towards their suits. Already, the fleeing atmosphere took on a deathly chill. “Even if we can’t, the suits will give us more time to plan.”

“We need to be quick,” Oha said, remembering the long fifty minutes it took her to don her suit. “While the air holds,” she suggested, already turning down the hall. Weeks of training took hold, leaving them surprisingly calm as they rushed down the way. Though she forced down her panic, it felt like an iron weight in her gizzard and a gnawing beast in her mind.

Stumbling into one another in their haste, the team made their way down the hall to the suits. Only when they reached the rack did their mistake become evident. “There are four suits,” Lev murmured, seeing the dusty spot where his suit once stood.

A constant, quiet whistling sounded from the breach, growing slightly louder with each passing moment as the opening widened. In the dark, it seemed like the grim specter of death was ambling down the hall, whistling macabrely as it neared. They cast nervous glances to one another, none willing to voice what they all knew to be true. Yet each second of unwillingness was another precious second wasted.

“What do we do? Draw straws?” Yuri asked, his voice dead as he failed to process his own words.

“We haven’t any straws, and have even less time,” Laika informed, looking down at her own shaking hands. None spoke up, looking to one another as they waited for someone to offer the impossible.

Without a word, Yuri walked over to the supply closet and opened the door. “Seems we haven’t any choice. I broke the suit, I’ll stay. Just... live well in my stead. And tell my family that I loved them,” he said, emerging with a pouch of vodka in his paw. He spoke stoically, sure of himself, but still gripped with fear.

“No... You have the most experience here. They need you. I’ll stay,” Orlando offered, his voice shaking as he steeled himself.

“Orlando, what are you—?” Lev began.

“I have nothing to return to. Just make sure everyone gets there; promise me you all will,” Orlando said, seemingly taking all the quiet valor from the lion beside him.

“You’re a good man. I don’t know how I could ever thank you,” Yuri offered, giving a grateful nod and putting a paw on Orlando’s shoulder.

Unable to summon words, Laika stepped forward and embraced Orlando, the latter still in shock and remaining still through the gesture. “There’s nothing I could say. We won’t forget you,” Oha offered, saluting him before she turned to the suits.

“You’ll need this more than us,” Lev said, handing over the pouch of vodka. Orlando took hold of the drink, but Lev did not release it. In confusion, they met one another’s gaze. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, his voice more serious than when he thought himself to die.

“Am I the only one who hears the air slipping away,” Orlando muttered, tugging at the pouch, but gaining no ground. With so little time himself, he relented. “Fine... As I said; by our very nature, it is the coward who is capable of the greatest courage,” he said, taking the vodka for himself and squirting some into his mouth. “Just once in my life, I will be the one who is incredible.”

“God keep you, Orlando,” Lev offered, putting his forehead against Orlando’s own.

They got to work donning the suits, bothering only with what was entirely necessary. They worked with better unison than ever before, keeping speed even after equipping their sluggish

gloves. Though Oha expected to fumble with her suit, the painful stress pushed her to perform at her peak. Her talons worked quickly, and her senses narrowed to the task at hand. Soon, her upper half was entirely encased in the hard shell of her suit. Yet as she lifted her suit-pants, the piece fell from her wings, and her vision blurred.

“What?” Oha murmured, blinking slowly to clear the distortion, but only felt the haze migrating into her head.

“Canary in a mine. A bird will feel the air first... it’s thinning,” Yuri said grimly.

“We don’t need to be out there long. Make sure it’s sealed, and let’s be out,” Lev commanded, handing Oha a spare oxygen tank.

“Thank you,” Oha said, taking a deep breath as she pressed the mask over her beak. Passing around the tank, they finished donning their suits with a loud click as they secured the helmets. Smelling like a mixture of burnt toast and iron, compressed air flooded through the bulky garb. Laika ran a gloved hand over Oha’s visor once they were both finished. Both their features remained concealed within the suits, but Oha knew the touch one of reassurance; that they would both see each other again.

“I’ll keep with you on the comms for as long as I can. Godspeed,” Orlando said, taking every third breath through the tank.

“Be seeing you, friend,” Lev offered, taking the lead towards the airlock. Just outside the vastness, another low, rumble of a blast echoed through the station, its very foundation shaking perilously. “We move quickly and carefully. Stay together and stay on the station. We’re just aiming to reenter through P15. Understood?” Lev said, speaking through the comms as the helmet obscured his face.



“Copy,” the others responded. They packed into the airlock and braced for exit.

The gust from the opening airlock made them jump, but they quickly composed themselves and stared outside. It felt strange to leave the station, the entire vessel drifting calmly through the stars. After the sheer intensity earlier, the slow, methodical motion felt wrong.

Even so, they moved carefully. Crawling along the surface of the station, they moved one step at a time, always keeping at least one hand latched onto the solid surface. Without time to find their tethers, they climbed freely, knowing a single mistake could send them uncontrollably off into the abyss. Before long, they could see the broken section ahead of them. From that distance, the damage seemed trivial. A hole hardly big enough to fit through, torn jaggedly into the side of the ship, like a blade-mark on an empty can. Within, the flickering light of a fire burned, dull and choked for air. The escaping pressure seemed a plume of white steam hissing through the opening.

“Everyone still alive out there?” Orlando said, his voice coming suddenly over the intercom.

“At the moment,” Oha said, relieved to hear something aside from her breath.

“Ground knows what happened. Both Roscomo and NASA will want full reports. Sorry, I’m not spending my last minutes dealing with bureaucracy. Be careful out there; even the sensors are down in P3.”

“Understood.”

“God, it’s getting cold in here,” Orlando said, his speech beginning to slur slightly, either from acceptance, the drink, or the failing pressure. “The fading air, it sounds like wind. I had the

windows open when I drove to the shuttle. Always liked the breeze on my scales. I didn't think that would be the last time I felt it."

"How are you doing in there?" Laika asked, the team pausing on their way as they searched for a safe way forward.

"Better than I will be in a few minutes. I'm starting to feel it now; that isn't a good sign."

The single digit on each wing made clinging to the side of the station difficult. Her heavy boots left her incapable of even closing her foot talons. It felt unnatural to maneuver along the ground using her wings as her feet floated free. Yet, they climbed onward across the station, none verbally acknowledging the sorry state of the P3 unit. It would take time to reach, but none had yet thought of a way to cross the precarious area.

The flames took the oxygen tanks within P3. With a flash of red and orange, the canisters set off, shaking the entire ship. Eerily silent in the vacuum section broke entirely, breaking the station in two. Hundreds of tons of steel bent and shattered, the crew clinging close to its side as they fell away from their target. Shrapnel flew from the break; the giant satellite was ripped apart. One of the panel wings snapped free, pulverizing itself on the also moving station. Oha screamed out as the shards flew past, blue blades with the speed of bullets.

Like a bat taking a mighty swing, the long station twisted and flung the crew haphazardly from their grips. Thrown from one another, they flew screaming in separate directions, spinning through the void. Oha instinctively flapped her wings, unable to control her momentum.

Panicked voices clamored over the radios. Their voices stayed clear, their selves only white shapes flailing in different directions.

“Everyone! Everyone be quiet!” Lev shouted, his voice just as pained and frightened as their own. Even so, the command he wielded silenced them as they flew.

“Where are you? Where is everyone?” Oha called out worriedly, turning her head uselessly in her rigid helmet.

“Just calm down,” Lev instructed, his voice pained almost to the point of tears. “Everyone, sound off.”

“Still here,” Laika answered.

“As am I,” Yuri said worriedly.

“I’m here,” Oha said, forcing her voice to be even as she controlled her breath. A knife of terror pierced her heart as her eyes caught a silver hair before her. On her helmet was a crack, so slight she could hardly see it. Instinctively, she covered the fissure with her wing, though she soon realized it pointless. If the crack broke the seal, she would already feel it.

They waited a moment, accustomed to a fifth joining them. “Orlando? Orlando, are you with us?” Only the white noise of the radio met them, each waiting on bated breath for anything.

“What the hell happened?” Yuri asked cautiously, breaking the silence.

“I don’t know,” Lev muttered exasperatedly.

“I can see the station,” Laika whispered, her voice dull and distant with awe and defeat. “It’s in pieces; ripped in half and a thousand shards. Leaving us behind,” she said, watching the torn pieces sail into the distance.

“What... What do we do?” Yuri asked. None answered, the silence setting them on edge as each moment carried them further from one another. “What do we do? There has to be something?” he shouted, desperation creeping into his voice. “Lev? Lev, come on?”

“I don’t know what to do,” Lev stated, pain and exhaustion slurring his words. “I suspect there’s nothing to be done,” he said, summoning another length of silence. “I, at least, am done.”

Her rotation eventually turned Oha towards the planet. Against the endless blue of the earth, she could see Lev floating only ten feet away. Their paths carried one another ever further apart, but they could see one another well. “Oh my god, Lev, are you alright?” Oha asked, seeing his injuries for the first time. A large piece of one of the solar patterns stood driven into his side. It pierced his suit and torso, jutting from him like a third limb.

“I think my blood froze, sealed the hole in my suit. Lucky, aren’t I, means I can die slow.”

“Lev, are—” Laika stammered.

“I’m not ok. God, this hurts.”

Weakly, he pawed at the wound. “I’m here, Lev. I’m here,” Oha reassured, reaching out a wing. Desperately, Lev extended his hand, straining for the slightest contact. They both reached with all their strength, Oha’s joints aching as they stretched. However, they remained just a few feet apart, unable to pull themselves any closer.

“Was worth a try,” Lev chuckled, his hand going limp as he sighed in defeat. His momentum turned him back towards the earth. “What a view,” he murmured, watching lights from the cities illuminate like webs of stars in the distance. “*Tyana, ya lyublyu tebya, prosti, chto ne*

*vernus*,” he said, speaking more to himself as his world shrank around him. “I’ve lived such a good life,” he called out as the last of his lifeblood flowed away.

“*Spokoynoy nochi, drug*,” Laika whispered into the radio. Oha twisted in sudden jerks, trying to turn away, desperate not to watch as the man died. Shuddering and unable to move, she turned her head away and closed her eyes, listening as the heavy breaths faded away.

It felt like hours passed, drifting through nothingness with only white noise as company. Behind the shadow of the earth, she shivered in the cold and dark. “Where is everyone?” Laika asked, her quick voice somber but present.

“I don’t know,” Oha said, looking out across the emptiness.

“In orbit,” Yuri joked, his snark and confidence gone. “What, what can we do? There must be something we can do.”

“I don’t think so,” Oha said. She searched for either of the other two but found herself alone.

“It can’t be,” Yuri said, almost accusatory as he lashed out. “But we don’t deserve this. Dammit all, what did we do wrong? There must be some reason,” he shouted, clearly crying as he spoke. “What even happened?”

“Everything we did was right,” Laika comforted, somehow suppressing her fear as she drifted further away. “We did everything right. I don’t know why, but the station went down, and nothing we could have done would have stopped it. There’s no reason for any this, but that doesn’t change anything.”

“I’m going back home. Even now, I can’t get my brain off of numbers and science; but that’s my trajectory. I’m going to fall back to earth, burn to nothing on my way,” he whispered, more to himself than to anyone else. “Why did it have to happen to us? Any other team could have come up here. Any other cycle could have seen this accident. Why us?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think there’s some sort of plan. Even now, I know there has to be a reason,” Oha said. She wanted to curl up and bury her face in her wings, but the suit prevented even that simple of a comfort. Eyes closed, she thought of the lakeside in the night, of her soft bed on the ground, but the space around her always dragged her back.

“A plan? Then what, this is all some fucking game? Why us? Why does this plan end with us dead, forgotten dust alone in space?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does this plan matter if we don’t know it? Why us?” he cried out, his voice cracking with tears.

“I don’t know why the station broke! I don’t know why we were on it! I don’t know why we’re going to die here! Or if there even is a fucking plan!” Oha shouted back, her voice whistling through her half-closed beak as she lashed out. “But we’re not going to find out. Not in these last few hours.”

“I’m not ready to die yet. I don’t want to go.”

“None of us are, but we’ll see you wherever we end up next,” Laika said. Despite everything, she sounded hopeful, warm through the sterility of the comms.

“I’m going to fall like a star. Do you think anyone will see me?” Yuri asked, openly weeping as he spoke. “I can feel it now, the slight resistance of the atmosphere. I’m back home.”

The radio cut short, a sickening silence holding in the air. “Yuri? Yuri, where are you?” Laika called.

“He cut his radio,” Oha explained flatly. “He wanted to be alone when he died.”

Oha saw a light cresting over the wide sphere of the earth. The sun, a golden-orange gleam shining past the veil of darkness. She could no longer see the station as crumbled in its endless dance around the earth. By now, Yuri was likely aflame, and Lev’s drift had carried him out of her sight. For an instant, with only the sun, earth, and sky before her, she again thought it beautiful.

In so many stories, death, angels, or something appeared in one’s last moments. She would have given anything to see that, to have just companion beside her.

“Oha, why did you say that? Why do you think he wanted to be alone?” Laika asked softly.

“My father once told me something. I don’t want it to be true,” Oha said, raising a hand to the side of her helmet as if to touch the voice.

“Where are you going, Oha?”

“I don’t know.”

“Like Yuri said. Where’s your trajectory carrying you?”

“Nowhere,” she whispered, stifling her tears. “I’m getting further from the earth and floating off into god damned nothing.”

“Hey, hey. Stay with me, Oha. I can tell, I’m going to the moon. Didn’t ever think this is how I would reach it, but I’m going to hit the moon.”

“You made it.”

“I’m going to land on the moon,” Laika laughed, bittersweet as she floated further away.

“God, Laika, I want you to be here. I don’t want to die alone,” she cried, flailing in the cold and empty infinity around her.

“I’m with you, Oha. I’m here.”

“No! No, you’re not. We’re just voices, two sounds alone in the dark.”

“Then we’ll be alone together. Do you remember when we first met?” Laika asked, her voice shaking as she tried desperately to comfort the both of them.

“They introduced our teams. We just saluted one another as they explained the mission. Shit... that was the only time we ever saw one another on earth.”

“No, that’s when we first saw one another. We first met on our second week up here. You were up late, hiding on your own again, I was thirsty. We talked and I fell in love with you.”

“I love you, Laika. I don’t want to go. I wanted to stay when we got back to earth. Wanted to show you all the beautiful places in our world. Wanted to work as hard as I could to make you as happy as you make me.”

“You did... Beautiful places? Look around you, Oha. All the stars are dancing for us.”

“I really do believe that there is a plan. That we’ll meet again when this is over.”



Laika sighed, her voice leaving in almost a whisper. “When I was a pup, I almost died. I saw something. Not even sure if it was a dream, a vision, or what have you. But I saw myself on a ship sailing in from a foggy sea, the sun rising over a vibrant field, and infinity beyond it.”

Though neither had yet reached it, she turned slowly to see the moon. Milky and alight, it shone before an infinity diamonds, all twinkling and breathing as if alive themselves. Trying with all she could, she reached out, straining as if to tear free her arm. Nothing graced her fingertip, no warmth met her. She could think back to the moment they embraced on the ship, holding one another in the dark as if they were the only souls left in the world. But they mere memories, and she could feel none of it anymore. No matter how she looked at the moon or remembered their time together, she could not feel any presence near her.

“Oha? Oha, I need you to keep talking to me. Oha, please, I can’t be here on my own,” Laika begged over the comms.

“I’m still here,” Oha said, her vision blurring as the current of nothingness carried her. “I don’t feel well. I the air is escaping through the crack,” she said, unsure if she even activated her comms. “Goodbye, Laika.”

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With a start, the haze in Oha’s mind faded. She jerked forward and bumped her head against the glass of her helmet. The little crack remained static, so small that any escaping air or pressure was unnoticeable.

“Laika? Laika, are you there,” she asked, looking around as if she might see her.

Nothing sounded over the radio, leaving her alone in the void.

“Laika, please, please be there. I can’t be alone. I don’t want you to go,” she begged, tears falling freely, fogging over her visor.

Again, only silence greeted her ears. Yet, she felt a flicker of warmth, like a candle in a distant, dark room.

“Is that you, Laika? Stay with me, just for a little.”

As the mist faded, she found where she was. It seemed impossible, but earth and sun were but distant specks. In a far reach of space, she saw a nebula, blooming with nascent stars. One, held a massive sun at its center, gasses blooming red like blazing. All around was the soft, silk tapestry of black, dotted with diamonds of every hue. Emerald and sapphire fires blazed and churned lightyears across.

She closed her eyes and found them all vanished, the universe shrinking around her. Without her suit, floating weightlessly, she found herself with stars above and below, a thousand fireflies dancing around them. A warm presence sat by her side, embracing her. She reached out and took hold of the warmth, feeling the being she knew with her.

“You were wrong. I know you’re here, Laika.”