



# A Long Way Home (ISS Romance #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Alex thought she had outrun her old life, that was until her old life came knocking

Alexandra Peake has a problem. A few, actually.

First there is her ex-husband who turned up out of the blue and is currently pounding his fist against the tiny glass window of the airlock door. Then there is the fact she is trapped on the side of the door currently venting the remains of a breathable atmosphere into the vacuum of space. Plus, she really misses her cat, Tiggy.

Matthias Müller has one problem How to save his wife.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

I snuff out the lone survivor in the centre of the table, watching the white wax drip down the candle's stem to the base. The others have already burnt down to nothing. The summer evening's sun has come and gone. The salmon fillets have warmed, burnt and then cooled to stone cold.

All whilst waiting for him . To come home to me . To message me, he's going to be late. To fucking acknowledge my existence for once.

Staying late at work has become the new normal in the past few months, but I thought today, of all days, he would be home early. Or at least on time. I thought today he would remember.

I swipe my sleeve across my cheeks, the watery tracks as dried and crusted as the salmon fillets. My eyes are tired and sore, all my tears spent. I fidget with the gold

band on my left hand, the smooth metal slowly sliding past my knuckle.

Thrusting my chair back, I stand, dropping the ring in the centre of the table between the burnt salmon and withered green beans .

This decides me, after a year of weighing up the pros and cons, I'm done.

I scoop up Tiggy, hugging him to my chest, ignoring the moisture beading in my eyes.

“Point 1: The sex is great. Pro.” I say to Tiggie as I scratch beneath his chin. “When it actually happens. I probably have cobwebs down there.”

I climb the stairs to our bedroom. Pulling my overnight bag down from the top shelf in the wardrobe.

“Point 2: The only time we talk is to argue...about how we never talk. Definitely a con, right Tiggie?”

I shove a few changes of clothes into the bag, along with a few books, my laptop and some sentimental items. I reach across to the picture frame on my bedside table. I hesitate, holding it a moment longer. We looked so happy on our wedding day.

“Point 3: I feel beautiful in his arms,” I say as I swipe away a tear. “When it happens (refer to point one).”

I slam the photo frame face down on the bedside table. Tiggie leaps down from the bed to weave between my legs - blissfully unaware. Grabbing a pillow from our still-made bed, I scream my frustrations into the soft cushion.

“Time to go, Tiggie.” I throw the bag’s shoulder strap over my arm. Tiggie jumps up into my arms as we make our way downstairs .

“Point 4: He’s never fucking here. Con.” My overnight bag thuds against each step as I go. Tiggie purrs against my chest. Thud.

“Alex?”

Matthias stands in the doorway, his form illuminated by the porch lantern from behind. His hair is disheveled like he has been fiddling with it at work - a stress coping mechanism of his.

I take another step. Thud.

“I thought you’d be asleep already.” He rubs at his eyes – deep dark circles surround them.

Another step. Another thud .

I have to stop myself from going to him. Stop myself from caring.

“I was waiting for you,” I say.

Tiggie jumps from my arms, strutting towards Matthias to rub against his legs. Matthias looks to the dining table, at the snubbed-out candles, and the ones burnt down to stubs. At the fish.

“Did you cook?” He drops his work satchel, walking over to the ruined cold salmon fillets. “Mm, this salmon is good,” he says.

“It’s ruined.” I begin.

“ Nein , ist gut. I can-”

“No, Matthias. This is ruined. We are ruined. I won’t live like this anymore.”

“Because I missed dinner? I didn’t know you planned this. ”

“What day is today?” I ask.

“Thursday?” He forks a bite of cold green beans into his mouth. “Alex, I don’t understand... Are you crying?”

“You’ve barely seen me in months. Barely spoken to me. Barely touched me...”

“Ja, ich wei?.” His eyes soften. “Work has been a lot.”

“No more excuses. We are both unhappy.” I adjust the bag on my shoulder and make my way to the front door, pausing at the open entryway for one last look at the man I spent years loving. All those years wasted.

“Mein Herz. ”

“Goodbye, Matthias.”

“Alex. Wait.” He drops his fork, it clatters to the tabletop. “Please, don’t do this. I don’t understand-.”

I bend to pick up Tiggie, bundling him into my arms like a baby.

“Happy Anniversary to you, too,” I say.

Realisation illuminates his sharp features, swiftly replaced with devastation.

I turn, rushing out the door and down the steps to my car. I slam the key in the ignition and take off before I lose my nerve.

“Point 5:” I say to Tiggie in the passenger seat as I stroke her fluffy tail. “He forgot our tenth wedding anniversary. Definitely a fucking con. ”

Tiggie purrs in the seat beside me, oblivious to my pain. It hurts. It burns. My heart feels as though it has been ripped clean out of my chest, plucked from my body and stamped into the ground.

My eyes flick to the rearview mirror.

Point 6: He's not even trying to stop me from leaving.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:20 pm*

### CHAPTER ONE

I miss the smell of burning logs on the fire. I need a glass of Riesling in one hand, and a good book in the other as I curl up beneath the blankets and lose myself in a fantasy world.

I mourn the comfort—the luxury.

More than the home comforts, I miss the feel of firm ground beneath my feet, dewy grass tickling between my toes and birdsong filling the air. I miss lazy morning snuggles with my fluff-ball cat, and most of all, I miss sleeping in my own bed.

I don't miss waking up alone.

The station's air recyclers hum loudly as sunlight pours through the Window to the World – Cupola module's panoramic viewing platform. I watch as the Sun blankets the Earth far below, chasing away the night.

“Where are you, Fiore ?” Luca's honeyed whisper tickles against my ear, pulling me from my thoughts. “Come back to me.”

I draw my attention back to him, a lock of soft blonde hair is plastered to his cheek whilst the rest of it floats straight up. He nuzzles the back of my neck, inhaling deeply as he pulls me into him, rubbing himself against me.

Now, this. I will miss this.

“You smell so good.” He heaves a satisfied sigh into my hair, hot breath tickling me, and causing a giggle to escape.

Luca brings out my playful side, one of the reasons I reluctantly indulged in his offer of no-strings-attached fun these past few months – the other reason being to chase the cobwebs away.

“I can think of better ways you could have woken me up.”

His eyes widen, a mischievous glint alighting his strong features. “I’m sure we can arrange something.”

I giggle as strong hands clasp beneath me, pulling my hips up level with his head. Our sleeping bags are forgotten, discarded as he presses his face against my plain cotton regulation knickers – not the sort to inspire sexy thoughts – and inhales deeply.

“You’re such a deviant.” I gasp as his mouth sucks on me through the thin fabric .

“Shh, let me enjoy my breakfast,” he says, attempting to silence me with his fingers against my lips. Sucking on them, I pull them deeper into my mouth. His eyes blaze.  
“ Mio Fiore , you are an angelo .”

My communications device chirps.

Luca groans.

“Peake, you with us?” Clayton barks, his voice tinny through the speaker.

“Until tonight, Fiore ,” Luca whispers against my lips before he steals a quick kiss.

I groan aloud before reaching for my comms.



“Not for long,” I call back.

There's a deep rumble of laughter down the comms, “Not long now, and y'all can take a nice ol' vacation,” the southern drawl of Clayton's voice echoes around us.

Someone snorts in the background, likely Chelenko, who meets anyone's enthusiasm for home with derision. I think the stubborn Russian would live up here permanently if they let him. He's practically furniture at this point.

He's been on the station every time I've been here. Likely every time in between as well. Should ring up the Guinness World Record people for the longest stint in space, or the biggest asshole. He is the dictionary definition of anal-retentive, complete with stick up butt .

That said, he is one mean engineer. What he can't fix is probably not worth fixing, and even then, he could break it down for parts.

“I have a visual on the shuttle. Soyuz, check in,” Aiko's delicate voice rings out through the station, polite and formal as ever.

“Soyuz here. We are on final approach,” a soft French accent responds, static swallowing the last syllable.

“Konnichiwa, Soyuz.” Aiko greets them, her speech still heavily accented despite the past few years spent over at NASA. “Autonomous docking procedures taking over.”

“Alright, I'm heading up. Peake out.” I click my comms mic off, wriggling my flight suit the rest of the way up. Luca coasts his eyes over my sleep-mussed form one final time.

“Tonight, Fiore .” He adjusts himself through the fabric of his joggers. His darkened

stare hints at the obscene scenes he has playing out in his mind, before he pushes through the open hatch.

### CHAPTER TWO

I etch it into memory. Taking one last, lingering moment to gaze over the Earth. This may be the last chance I get to see our home in all its giant, polished-marble glory.

“Soyuz aligned,” Aiko calls out through the comms.

In my periphery, I spot grey metal blotting out my view of the solar arrays that stretch out like golden wings from the station’s core.

“Ease it in slowly,” Clayton says.

Through the viewing glass I see the Soyuz docking, the domed tip jutting straight out into space. I feel the vibration as it connects with the station’s docking module.

Clayton’s run me ragged in recent weeks, so I never did check the crew manifest updates. Between my resistant materials experiments and performing some much-needed upgrades, work has kept me busy. Besides, I’m more interested in the cargo.

“ Good work, Y’all ,” Clayton says. “ Matherson, patch Soyuz into our comms .”

“ Done .”

I can feel my crew care package calling to me.

Gerda likes to send me homemade Lebkuchen – these buttery spiced biscuits that I used to devour each and every Christmas – even though I haven’t been her daughter-

in-law for over three years now.

I should protest. But not when she effortlessly slipped into the role of mother after I lost my own.

Gerda kept me together when all I wanted to do was fall apart – a kindness I can never repay.

It's nice to feel loved. To be doted on - even if only for one delicious biscuity moment.

“Soyuz, this is ISS. Respond.” Clayton's voice echoes through the station's halls.

“ISS, this is Soyuz. Confirm clamps are in place?” A woman's voice responds, heavy with an accent.

“Yuri?”

“On my way.”

The comms relay should be in the correct position for a long-distance call home in just a few hours.

I'll call Gerda with thanks and let her regale me with tales of her new life in the retirement village, and the spicy gentleman neighbour vying for her attention.

They bonded over their mutual green thumbs and a love of homegrown veggies.

She provides freshly made potato pancakes, and he supplies the homemade apple cider.

Enthused with happy thoughts of somewhat freshly baked goods, I tear my eyes away from the magnificent view and pull myself up out of the Cupola. I'm halfway to Command Control when I reach the mating anchor.

Yuri is a step ahead of me, his bare feet poking out the bottom of his grey joggers and paired with a once-white t-shirt that's likely never seen an iron a day in its life.

He's criminally underdressed, especially when compared to my royal blue flight suit – although the blue isn't looking as crisp and regal as it once did.

"Yuri? We have visitors." Clayton calls out.

"Working on it, Boss."

Sliding a palm down the front of my flight suit, I aim to straighten out any wrinkles but give up after one particularly ingrained crease immediately returns.

"Soyuz connected. Clamps secured," Yuri's deep voice sounds off as his clever hands work.

"Clamps secured ," Clayton repeats. "Ready for hatch opening."

"Soyuz ready. " They confirm.

"Welcome to the International Space Station."

"Glad to be here. " She replies.

It might seem like he's a glorified doorman to Earth's most exclusive hotel, but in reality, Yuri is probably the best of us up here.

He was part of the team that designed the new Artemis space suits and is currently working on new airlock systems that create a tighter seal, keeping both us and breathable air inside the station, and the cold, endless expanse firmly outside .

I drift through the corridor, pulling myself over the strapped-down crates along the floor, and come to a stop before tucking my feet under the handholds to stabilise myself.

Yuri pulls away the metallic dome and stares at the probe. “When will they upgrade this?” he mutters to himself.

“Yuri?” I tap my foot against the metal handhold.

He glances over at me, his face cracking into a wide grin. “Ready?” he asks from the soon-to-be doorway.

This hatch is the only thing standing between me and my long-awaited snacks.

Nodding, I clench my toes tighter inside my socks, as if that will do anything to keep my feet tucked firmly under the bar and closer to the floor, although floor, wall, and ceiling are all relative in the absence of gravity.

Yuri has his feet tucked under the hand bar on the wall behind me as he stretches horizontally across the main corridor that connects most of the station to its various modules.

There’s a small breeze across my cheek, a faint suction of air from the module, but as I turn about, everything is as it should be.

The straps along the walls hold strong. The storage crates are still secured beneath the bungee straps.

My long brown hair continues to float straight up, fanning out around me .

“Piece of fudge.” Yuri throws me a thumbs up over his shoulder, and I take in a slow inhale.

“Cake.” I correct.

“Ah, but fudge is nicer,” he laughs, his hands checking over the mating node.

This has always been the most nerve-wracking part for me. It’s a lot easier to stomach when you’re the one inside the docking shuttle, still fresh from Earth and excited to get onboard. At least that's what I tell myself.

“Peake?” Yuri calls me.

“Ready,” I confirm, nodding as he twists the probe and pulls it out of the way of the now airtight connection between the station and the Soyuz.

“Today I am blessed, for the agencies send me beautiful ladies.”

Yuri reaches through to grab a hand, helping pull out a woman, brunette, French, according to the flag patch on the shoulder of her white spacesuit. He raises an eyebrow, shooting me a grin before he starts the whole Yuri spiel.

“Yuri Volkov,” he bows. “I am here to, how you say, service you.”

She pulls off her helmet with a chuckle, flicking her hair to the side, though it’s defying both her and gravity right now.

“Pesquet. Botanist,” she offers her still-gloved hand to Yuri’s outstretched one. He takes it, kissing the back .

“That makes sense. You’re making parts of me grow,” he winks.

I roll my eyes. HR would eat Yuri alive if we were back home in England. But I can’t fault the guy for trying. The life of an astronaut can be a lonely affair; my own little indiscretion in recent months is an anomaly.

My lips part in surprise when Pesquet laughs as he taps his homemade sign taped above the corridor leading to Central Command and welcomes her to ‘ Yuri’s Kingdom ’.

Perhaps Yuri’s luck is on the rise. Good for him, he could do—

“Well, fuck.”

“Right here?” Yuri asks.

“Excuse-moi?” Pesquet spins to face me.

“Buy drink first,” he winks at Pesquet. “Am I right?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean...” I murmur.

Yuri’s luck might be on the up and up, but mine is definitely hitting rock bottom. Making his own way out of the Soyuz, still in his white spacesuit complete with a black, red and gold flag, is a ghost from my past.

His moss-green eyes cast about, searching until they meet mine. His lips turn up into a wide smile as he pulls the rest of himself through the hatch, his boot catching on the rim before he yanks it through behind him .

There was one person I was glad to leave back on Earth – no, ecstatic to leave behind



– and he’s only bloody followed me up here.

His gaze dances over me. His lips are moving fast, but no sound is breaching his suit.

“I can’t hear you,” I tap my ear, attempting to steel my expression to one of indifference, and ignoring the butterflies rising in my stomach. They should be long dead, and yet the zombie butterflies keep stirring, causing flutters.

Realisation dawns on him as he reaches for the suit console, thumbing the buttons.

“Moin ,” his face breaks out into a wide grin. “Lang nicht gesehen, mein Herz. ”

“What the fuck are you doing here Müller?” I snap.

His mouth drops, his thick brown brows pulling into a frown. As if he would expect me to react any other way to his ambush.

“Spit it out,” Folding my arms across my chest to form a protective shield, I flare my eyes at him pointedly, trying to harness the deep gut-wrenching anger I should be feeling – but it doesn’t come.

“You never answered my calls?” he offers. Nervously, his eyes dart over to Yuri and then Pesquet – both of whom are helping another white suit navigate out through the hatch – and then his eyes are back on me .

“I did,” I grit out. “Did you not think three years of radio silence was my answer?”

Even through the suit you can notice his shoulders droop, his arms dropping to his sides in defeat, and I could swear his eyes start to glisten. But that can’t be right. Must be the harsh artificial overhead lighting playing tricks. He is the most stubborn son of a bitch I know.

“Defeatism doesn’t suit you.”

“You wanted grand gestures.” His hand glides through the space between us, gesturing over himself before dropping by his side again. “Here I am.”

“Grand gestures?” I fight to keep the rising hysteria out of my voice. “Maybe three years ago. It’s too late. I don’t want th—”

“Let’s keep comms clear. We can save the personal chit-chat for later,” Clayton barks out – a fantastic reminder that everyone on board can hear a one-sided play-by-play of Müller airing our dirty laundry.

Heat rises in my cheeks, embarrassment mingling with the anger that finally rises inside me, but he looks unphased and as effortlessly handsome as he always did.

My stomach flips at the sight of him, and I find myself torn between throttling him and embracing him.

That sends the zombie butterflies into another frenzy low in my stomach .

“I didn’t mean this. I don’t... Argh.” I bite my tongue, not wanting to unleash a torrent of harsh words upon him.

Müller knocks off his comms – too little, too late – before reaching up to open the visor on his suit.

“Alex, you must have expected this. You can’t just send divorce papers out of the blue.”

I glare at him. Is he bloody insane ?

“Who pops up on the first shuttle to argue it out with their ex about bloody divorce papers?” Fucking Matthias Müller. That’s who. I scoff. “And it was hardly out of the blue.”

“Alex, we need to discuss...”

I hold a hand up between us.

“This isn’t happening.”

“Mein Herz...”

“I wanted space! Why do you think I’m out here? You’re a physicist, figure it out! ”

“Theoretical physicist,” he corrects.

“Exactly! Weave your little theories in your head back down on Earth and leave me alone.”

I want to hit him. I want to shove him back into the shuttle and pretend he isn’t here.

Instead, I clench my fist and push past him, our shoulders colliding as I grab the first of the supplies to be unloaded from the Soyuz and start steering it toward the Leonardo module to dump with the rest of the station’s supplies.

My fingers grip at the thick seat belt-like straps, tightening until I’m white-knuckled.

As I pass by the entrance to the mess area, both Anderson and Aiko shoot me a look of concern. I never was one for successfully hiding my emotions. My face is an open book. I ignore them and the increasing throb in my shoulder.

I cannot believe the gall of him, the audacity, upending my peaceful existence. I left the house, the country, and the damn planet. Is it too much to ask for space?

Literal space.

“Whoa, Kiddo.” I’m steadied by two large hands.

I’m so inside my own head that I bump clean into Clayton before I even notice his presence.

“Kid?” He takes the crate from me, pushing it down to Matherson waiting below.

She lines up the supplies along the walls, velcroing down supply bags and strapping down anything larger.

“I’m good,” I reply numbly, my eyes slowly refocusing on him.

His flight suit is even more worse for wear than mine, with the broken zipper only half pulled up and his vest peering through. Guess we’ve both been up here too long.

“I could really do with some fresh air.” If only I could open a window.

An unhinged laugh escapes me as I picture myself opening the nearest window, and the whole crew is dragged out into the vacuum of space.

Clayton gives a brief, awkward laugh.

Chancing a glance over my shoulder, I see Yuri console Müller with a pat on the shoulder whilst they watch me. Müller’s mouth drops open to speak. Nipping whatever that was about to be straight in the bud, I cut him off with a curt shake of my head and turn back to Clayton.

Behind me, I hear a “Pfft. Women. Am I right?” and I can already picture the accompanying wink with Yuri’s words. I don’t even attempt to hide my eye roll.

“This isn’t going to cause problems,” Clayton cocks his head, one brow raising at my silence, quickly transitioning into Commanding Officer mode. “Is it?”

A sigh leaves me, and I shake my head, “No, Sir.”

He places one hairy, burly hand on my shoulder, leaning in closer as he lowers his voice, “You okay, Kiddo?”

“I’ll be... Müller is...” I huff out a breath, clenching my fists by my side as a new resolve spreads through me. “It won’t cause any issues.”

I won’t allow it to .

“I’m out of here on the next shuttle down. Twenty-four hours and it’s Cheerio. I’ll be back on Earth.” ...and he’ll be stuck up here for at least a couple months, if not longer. One can hope.

“Good, we don’t need conflict between the crew,” he gives my shoulder a squeeze. “We’ll ready the descent module and get you back on solid ground in no time. Leave Matty to me. I see about keeping him busy.”

I sigh a breath of relief. “Thanks. I’ll stay out the way.”

He purses his lips, nodding slowly, “Take five, then Chelenko needs some help.”

I nod again, slowly coming to a realisation that the next twenty-four hours are going to be the painfully slowest of my life. But first, I need to focus on the now.

Chelenko needs help.

Right, he needs help like I need a hole in the head, and he enjoys company about as much as I would enjoy said hole in the head. But he usually keeps out of the way of the others – the way he likes it – so that is where I'm being sent.

Out of the way.

### CHAPTER THREE

I need a stiff drink if I'm going to have the vim to tackle the next twenty-four hours, but new crewmates linger in the main module, separating me from my liquid courage.

Out of his spacesuit, I recognise the other German. "Reiter," I reluctantly acknowledge his existence.

He frowns, slight eye twitch flaring up as he glances in my direction.

He hates me.

Artur Reiter is an old friend of Müllers from his undergrad days. Thick as thieves. He could give Chelenko a run for his money on the highly strung front. In the past, I tolerated him for Müller's sake, and Reiter barely tolerated me in return.

Reiter had expectations. What a woman should be. What a wife should be. Not that he would know what a woman is meant to be – the only woman in his life was his mother.

The hard line between his brows deepened, the same mask he wore when he refused to speak English with me.

Always annoyed I couldn't assimilate into German life fast enough. He was too busy looking down his nose at me to get to know me. Judgy prick .

I clear my throat, eyes flicking between Reiter and the corridor behind him.

Narrowed eyes pierce me as he moves aside. I make sure to give him a wide berth as I pass.

I know Reiter, but I don't recognise any of the others.

“Mes petites chéries, ” Pesquet checks over her plants as Yuri hangs off her every word.

She has a self-assured air about her, from the way she holds herself down to the cropped pixie cut she's sporting.

“Allons y .” She tows a crate of carefully secured potted saplings behind her.

“Let me.” Yuri flexes his muscles, wagging his eyebrows at her.

“Is zero-G, non ?” She rolls her eyes, motioning for Yuri to lead her on. “Take me to the Kibo module.”

There goes my privacy - I'd all but moved into the Japanese-built lab.

It has peace, quiet and a spare toilet, which beats queuing for the ‘master bathroom’ over by the crew cabins in Harmony.

I guess Luca and I will have to find new sleeping arrangements.

Cupola might work; the view was certainly nice to wake up to this morning—

Bloody hell. How am I going to explain Müller to Luca?

We are only having fun, but I should still give him a heads up that my ex-husband has stopped by for a visit.



I hear a gasp as the final crewmate emerges from the Soyuz. The new girl has a dewy look to her saucer-wide eyes. Her mouth drops open, blonde pigtails swishing as her eyes arc around the module, pausing to take in each minuscule nut and bolt.

Medic is a safe bet. Her left shoulder sports a red and white first aid cross patch, Canadian flag on the right, plus there's an oversized medic's duffel bag floating a little behind her.

"First time up here?" I ask. "The Station has that effect."

She nods at my words.

Sterile metal makes up most of the rounded walls. Each module is lined with storage lockers and strapped down supplies like a hoarder's paradise. There are computer screens and cables trunking everywhere and not forgetting the continuous droning hum coming from the older Russian modules.

Hell, even the weightlessness.

"Takes a bit of getting used to." I smile, "Wait till you see the view."

Her eyes alight with excitement. "Why do you think I'm up here?" she laughs.

Boy is it a magnificent view .

Just the right amount of awe to both take your breath away and leave you feeling as insignificant as the floating dust motes yet to be filtered out by the air recyclers.

"Alex." I offer her my hand.

She grasps it, "Callie."

I point behind me. “Cupola module. Make it your first stop.”

Her eyes crinkle as a huge, toothy grin spreads across her face. “Yes, Ma’am.”

I ignore the others – the green around the gills newbie, the flirty brunette, my ex-husband and his sour-faced friend – and carry right on past them into the communal kitchen area.

“GCR is high,” Matherson huffs out a breath.

“How high?” Anderson has some noodles poised to slurp as he listens to her talk about fluctuations in the cosmic background radiation.

“Too high,” she says as she aggressively taps at her datapad, her brow in a permanent frown. “Let’s hope it’s just another fried circuit in the sensors.”

“What’s the worst it could be? Solar flare? Aliens?” he smirks.

The microwave beeps.

She sighs, “Alright, smartass. ”

“It’ll keep until after meal break.” Anderson gulps down a mouthful of udon, slurping loudly. The microwave beeps again. “Don’t keep Chef Mike waiting.”

“Sir, yes, Sir.” She mock salutes, gliding towards the microwave. A slight sulphurous smell escapes as she opens the door.

Beside her, Aiko is making tea in one of the odd new cups NASA has us trialing, designed to mimic gravity using surface tension.

It looks something between a gravy boat and an over the nose oxygen mask.

They certainly reduce our single-use plastic consumption – if they work reliably – but so far, they remain alien to my hands.

A delicate floral scent surrounds us as Aiko turns; she startles, almost bumping into me. “My apologies.” She gives a modest bow.

She’s so sweet and mild, it’s endearing. I give her a small smile. “No worries.”

She looks overly relieved as she attempts to tuck her silky obsidian hair back behind one ear, but the nervous habit doesn’t translate well to zero gravity. The inky strands float back up immediately.

“ Arigatou ,” she offers a timid thank you, bowing her head before she glides back through the room .

Anderson looks up from his conversation to smile at her, and a touch of blush tints her cheeks – a peachy pink, a colour as delicate as her.

I hit the leftmost button on the dispenser, the symbol completely worn from use.

I grab one of these new-fangled cups, insert the nozzle of the machine and listen for the woosh of the high-pressure fluid as liquid pours forth.

As far as NASA and the ESA are concerned, this button is lemon tea.

In reality, it’s pure space moonshine and a well-guarded secret.

I throw back the cup, bumping the extended edges against my cheeks. My throat burns. I cough as I swipe at my mouth with the back of my sleeve.

It's noxious to the palate, but at least it's better than the last batch, and the one before that.

It took Yuri just one slow week, a few months into this rotation, to get inspired for his first attempt. It tasted beyond foul, and it burnt like rocket fuel going down.

A few more attempts, and he had it mostly perfected. It only took a few months for him to think of swapping it out for the lemon tea in the drinks dispenser – a flavour no one uses, except for that time the whole station got wiped out with flu.

Perhaps with a botanist on board, his latest batch might have a more pleasant flavour than whatever this abomination is meant to be. It's the worst taste to ever come from something potato based .

I throw back the cup, coughing as I swipe at my mouth with the back of my sleeve. My throat burns. I palm the cup back under the dispenser as I thumb over the button again. Knocking back the next cup, I savour the burn as it glides down my throat.

That has Anderson frowning at me, "Everything alright, Peakey?"

I warm at the nickname, nodding as I wipe my sleeve across my mouth again. He doesn't seem convinced, passing his data pad over to Matherson and slipping out of his seat to float towards me.

On Earth, he towers over me, but the lack of gravity has a way of equalising us all. Hell, I think I've grown two inches since I've been up here.

But here in the cramped quarters of the dining area, he still seems head and shoulders above me. Being this close up makes me wonder how he squeezes into one of the crew cabins at night, especially considering they are barely larger than the sleeping bags they house.

“Müller?” He offers me a sympathetic look.

Groaning in response, I thumb the eroded button of the dispenser again, listening to the whoosh of liquid.

He nods in understanding, glancing back over at the girls eating behind us, before he leans in conspiratorially. “I heard he quit.”

I look up at him, “Who?”

He drops his voice lower, “Who do you think? ”

“No way,” I spit out some of my drink, spraying Anderson's arm, and he grimaces.

“Said there was nothing left for him on Earth,” he shrugs.

“He’s a workaholic. Work is his whole life,” I say.

“Next thing I know, he’s in talks with Peters, Mission Control and—”

“Wait, the ESA didn’t send him up?”

He shakes his head, brushing the beading droplets of moonshine on his sleeve into a paper towel.

“No, it was NASA. Did Clayton not tell you?”

“No...” He most certainly did not .

And a few choice words are coming to mind. Mainly words involving expletives that would make even a seasoned veteran like Clayton blush, once I get hold of him.

Clayton, more so than anyone, knows full well how things ended between us. Müller and I—

Anderson glances behind me, something grabbing his attention before he lowers his voice, “I best get back to it.”

A throat clears behind me, bringing my focus back from the mental spiral.

Anderson straightens, giving a curt up nod as a greeting. He gives my arm a quick, reassuring squeeze before heading back to his lunch, slotting himself in between the two women and reuniting with his noodles .

A long moment stretches on whilst the person loitering behind me remains silent.

I knock back the rest of my liquid courage. Dump the empty receptacle. Straighten my back. Square off my shoulders. Take a deep, nerve-calming breath, and turn to face the lingerer hovering behind me.

My eyes drag up from the floor. Over long, muscular legs and an equally impressive t-shirt-clad torso.

He brushes his blonde, floppy hair back.

A mischievous twinkle in his eye. When you read about Adonis Mafia types in romance novels, full-blooded Italians with a sex appeal that oozes right off the page, you picture Luca with his warm, walnut-brown eyes staring back at you.

Not who I was expecting .

Müller’s been here all of five minutes, and he’s already ruining everything. Worming his way back into my thoughts.

“Luca—” I start.

He surges forward, pulling me into a crushing embrace. I bite back a yelp of surprise. My eyes dart over to the others eating. Anderson is giving me a carefully concealed, unreadable expression, and Aiko is politely looking away. But Matherson...

Yeah, she’s staring. Scowling even.

I turn back to my Italian Adonis, just in time for his lips to crush against mine. His tongue glides along the seam of my lips, seeking entrance .

I thought I was used to this - the extravagant displays. Not completely comfortable with it, but after a few months, we’ve skirted the rules more and more. Our little indiscretion becoming... not so discreet. Wandering hands. Stolen kisses.

Luca is an outrageous flirt and very... physical. But this kiss is something different. It’s not slow and sensual, nor playful and teasing – it’s desperate, and possessive, and confusing.

It feels... wrong, and I hate that I think that. I tell myself it’s because he’s acting differently. He isn’t . It’s not me who feels different. It is.

Another part of my brain, a small part that I’m trying to kick back to the deep crevices of my mind, tells me it’s because Müller is here. And I hate it. I hate him .

I haven’t spared him a thought in months. Not since before Luca and I became friends. Not since I’ve been up in space. But I may as well update the ‘Days since I last thought about Matthias Müller’ sign because it’s just been reset back to ZERO.

I pull myself away from Luca, from his seeking lips and questing tongue, and give his unjustly firm forearms a squeeze.

“Hey,” I lean in, giving him a quick peck, conscious of everyone watching me. “I have to go.”

He frowns, searching my eyes, “Are you... good? ”

“Everything’s good,” I say. It sounds convincing, even to me. But it’s a lie.

“You seem a little off.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Another lie . “We’re okay.” Lie. Lie. Lie.

Confusion mars his handsome features for a moment before he smiles, “Did you hear the new guy over comms? Imagine meeting your ex in space,” he chuckles to himself.

I clear my throat, “Clayton wants me working with Chelenko. ASAP. I’ve got to go.” I try to rush off, but he holds me tight, keeping me with him.

“See you tonight?” The question lingers in the air between us.

A few weeks back, I all but moved into the Kibo module. He’s been joining me over there more often than not. It just made sense at the time.

There’s not much traffic in the Japanese lab, which makes it easier to get a few extra hours of uninterrupted sleep. Which reminds me...

“One of the new crew has put Kibo back in action. Guess we’re back in our own crew cabins tonight,” I say.

His grip loosens on my waist as he strokes one hand up my spine.

Clayton’s deep baritone voice cuts through the rising tension, tinny through the



comms, “Kid, you on your way to Columbus yet? ”

I tap my comms to reply, “Heading there now.” I look up at my blonde Adonis, “I have to go, Luca. See you later.”

“Promise?” A playful smirk plays across his lips.

My throat tightens, and I know if I speak my voice will wobble, and my thin veneer will crack. So, I plaster on my best media smile and nod instead.

I really need to sort my head out.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Switch out the old parts, weld this plate back in place, and move on to the next panel. On and on I go.

I've always loved this. Good, old-fashioned, hands-on work. Working with my hands helps keep my mind wonderfully blank. The feel of cold steel against my skin, the smell of heated solder wafting through the air, and the comforting familiarity of the stir-friction welder in my grasp.

Back on Earth, I was part of a team developing new techniques to remove the opaque capacities of materials, essentially turning steel or even wood as transparent as glass, but without compromising on the structural integrity.

It was cutting-edge R&D, but right in this moment, I'm no better than an overqualified mechanic hiding out with basic circuitry.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't glad about it.

That's one of the many reasons Müller and I never worked. He was too ambitious, always striving ahead in—

“Nope.” I shake my head.

I'm not thinking about him.

Just work.

Chelenko has been working on getting the Columbus lab module repaired and back up to working order.

It took a heavy hit in the form of budget cuts, but it's wasted space up here when every inch matters, and so it's currently something of a passion project until the ESA decides they want the lab recommissioned.

The last time I saw Columbus in action was when I had my own experiments to perform here. That was over five years ago. Now it sits empty, waiting to be wanted again. I know the feeling.

The once cutting-edge technology has aged, failing to keep up with modern progress. The whole station has. The ISS needs a huge overhaul.

Perhaps that is why Chelenko enjoys it. I wonder if he likes the solitude. He is akin to a lone hermit crab scuttling along in a sea of stars.

What does he think about me encroaching upon his solitary existence? I wonder as the snip of his wire cutters sound behind me, echoing from his end of the room. I hear the whir of his friction welder spinning up, before the rumble of it pressing against the metal.

I follow his lead and fire up my device.

Finally, peace once more.

I relax into the methodical, routine fixes that even a grad student could complete.

After a long, stretching moment, there's a knock on the stainless-steel panel above me. Sliding out from underneath, welding tool in hand, I push up my goggles .

Long, elegant fingers tap rhythmically against the metal. A small smile tugs at my lips.

“Are you free? Solo for uno memento ?” Luca asks, his eyes darting to the grinding and sparking over in the corner, where Chelenko continues to beaver away with a work ethic past Soviet Russia would be proud of.

I nod, smiling as he pulls me up to him. He wraps me in his arms and buries his nose in my hair as he inhales. “I missed you.”

“You just saw me,” I protest.

“Si , hours ago, Fiore ,” he pulls me into him, “But that was before...”

I freeze, stilling against him.

He means before our recent interloper. He must know. I bet Matherson told him. She probably took delight in spilling the beans on Matthias and me.

Luca pulls me in closer, snug, until my hips are flush against his and I can feel how much he missed me. Every single red-hot, girthy inch of him.

With my chest pushed tight against his, he peers down at me, eyes half-hooded and gaze hungry.

“I want you,” his warm breath fans over my neck as his wandering fingers clutch at the curves of my hips.

“What? Here?” I squeak, glancing over at the back of the lab to make sure Chelenko isn’t watching us. Sparks continue to shoot out of the wall cavity, just as they start to ignite between us .

I'm not immune to his charm. My body hums with anticipation. It's reacting despite my mental turmoil.

Luca nods slowly, his eager hands cupping my ass, one large palm for each cheek. His eyes darken as he leans forward. I angle my face up to his, our noses almost touch. I can smell the minty toothpaste on his breath, can practically taste it, and I clench my thighs together in anticipation as he—

The harsh sound of a throat clearing echoes behind us.

“Store ich gerade ?” Müller's harsh tone resonates through the small module, slipping back into the strong rural accent of his youth, as it often did in the past, when he's upset. Or annoyed. Right now, I'd say the latter.

His lips purse into a severe line, his narrowed glare honing in on Luca's hand blatantly palming my arse.

“Was treibst du denn da ?” Matthias glares at me.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, the tension already brewing a headache behind my eyes. I push back from Luca, and hurt rises in his eyes, making me pause.

“Speak english, Müll—”

“Matthias.” His glare flicks to Luca, then back to me, “You know I don't like it when you call me Müller.”

“Matthias Müller,” I repeat, ignoring the flare of his eyes and clench of his jaw.  
“Luca Nespoli.”

“Luca Nespoli. Matthias Müller.”

“Jep . We’re acquainted,” his large body tenses tight as he clenches and unclenches his fists by his sides. “Not as well as you, it seems.”

I frown.

Luca smirks at me. All the vulnerability of this morning is gone as he openly, almost defiantly, palms my butt again. Müller’s narrowed eyes dart to Luca’s hand and back up to my face.

“What do you want, Müller?” I snap.

“I know who he is,” Matthias moves closer, “I want to know who he is to you .”

I pause.

The hiss of the air recyclers becomes overloud in the silence. Anxiety rears its ugly head, and I default to professional Alex. Work-mode engaged.

“Nespoli is a mission specialist. BioMining.” I turn to him for confirmation.

“BioRock,” he nods enthusiastically, his eyes lighting up. “Microbes can extract minerals directly from the rock for us. Fascinating. The implications are endless...” He trails off, noticing Müller’s displeased expression.

Feeling brave. I clear my throat, “Our personal relationship is none of your business.” I narrow my eyes at Müller.

“We’re lovers,” Luca states with the confidence only a hot-blooded Italian can muster .

I’m positive my internal groan is audible.

“Müller, why are you here?” I fold my arms over my chest to put a little distance between myself and Luca. All the while, Luca gives another squeeze of my arse. I refocus my glare on him instead.

It’s beginning to feel an awful lot like some kind of pissing match, and I forgot my umbrella.

Fucking men .

If only I were into women, my life would certainly be a lot easier.

Neither man shouts. But their presence is overpowering, screaming at me. I feel the walls closing in, trapping me between a rock and a hard place. A very hard place, I can’t help but think as I glance at the front of Luca’s still half-tented grey joggers.

“A grand gesture–.” Müller’s words pull back my attention. His own eyes flaring wide as he notices Luca’s tent.

“Yes,” I grit out. “You said that already. Why? What do you want?”

He sighs, defeated. “I want my wife back.”

Luca drops his hand from me as if I scalded him.

Finally, I’m granted the personal space I’ve been seeking. His boyish features contort as he frowns down at me, brows slanting across his sun-kissed forehead in an unasked question .

I pray a tear in the hull rips open, sucks me out, and the void of space swallows me whole, leaving no trace behind.

“I’m not your wife.” I turn back to my work. “You’re wasting your time and mine. Leave. I have work to do.” I reach across the counter and pull my goggles back on, arming myself with the welder.

Without waiting for a response, I crouch down to head back under the panel, replacing burnt-out wires before my emotions betray me and I say something I’ll regret. I spin up my friction welder.

“We’ll see about that,” Müller mutters.

I turn to Luca. “You should go too.”

“ Alex– ”

I raise my hand, welder in tow, “We will be planet side in less than twelve hours.”

“ Fiore –”

“This was fun, but my ex turning up is... inconvenient.”

Inconvenient. As if an ex popping out of the metalwork is a normal everyday occurrence. A slight spanner in the works to the otherwise daily routine.

10:00: Spacewalk for orbital maintenance

13:00: Matthias comes to ruin my peaceful fucking existence.

“No, Fiore. You wound me.” Luca clutches his hands to his chest as if pained.

“Stop. We’re finished. It’s over.”



His jaw drops, hands still clasped together.

With a tight purse of his lips and a single, heated, lingering look, Luca relents. A glance over my shoulder shows the embers of the hidden hurt burning in his eyes – that and a defeated droop of his wide, unjustly muscular shoulders.

I watch him leave, my eyes coming to rest on Matthias as Luca passes him. He smiles at me.

He actually fucking smiles.

“No.”

“Alex?”

“I said no, Müller.”

“But–”

“Get out,” I shout. My arm shoots straight out, pointing at the exit.

He swallows, “You're angry.”

I laugh humourlessly.

“Ok, but I will be back,” he says before he ducks out of the open hatch.

Four months ago, I was fully committed to swearing off men. All men. Not just six-foot-tall, workaholic Germans with eyes the colour of soft tree moss and–

Stop getting distracted, Alex .

Two months ago, I would have sworn it was only a playful flirtation. Nothing serious. I definitely won't let one thing lead to another.

Now look at me, with my new lover introducing himself to my husband. Ex-husband . I can't help but cringe at the word 'lover' , it implies so much more than sex.

“ Nakonets ,” Chelenko grumbles as he releases his welder to the worktop, adjusting the velcro to keep it in place before reaching across for the wire micro-cutters. The loud clatter brings me out of my mental spiral.

I turn my gaze to him, blinking. “What?”

“I said...” He pauses as he lifts his visor, a thick line of grime frames his surly face. “Finally.”

He gestures at the open hatch behind me, where Luca and Matthias were. “This why no women in space is better.”

“Pardon?” A harsh giggle burst out of me.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:20 pm*

“Da . Is complication.” He waves a gloved hand at the space around us. “Up here... is better only men. No women.”

“With your sunny disposition, I’m sure your wife misses you something terrible. I bet she wishes she could come to space.”

He snorts. “I have no wife.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

He frowns at my words but doesn’t say anything more. He simply grabs the wire cutters and reaches back into the cavity of the wall.

“Yeah, nice talking with you,” I mutter .

I lean on the countertop, ready to dive back into my work, when a low rumble sounds.

Quiet. Slow. Subtle.

I glance around the room, but all appears well. Probably nothing.

“Space rats.” I snort to myself.

I grip the counter’s edge and slide my legs under – that’s when I hear it.

A thousand tiny clinks.

The test tube housing is shaking, the small glass vials clattering beside one another. The magnetic inventory clipboard is dancing along the cabinet doors, the attached pen barely holding on for dear life.

What the fuck...

Metal rattles all around me. Glass beakers clink. The emergency lighting kicks in, bathing Columbus in an ominous green hue. My water sloshes inside its bag, churning like a tempest.

The room shakes. I'm lurching several feet forward, ragdolling through Columbus.

Racks of test tubes shunt forward, shattering as the fridge doors halt their escape. Fluids seep between the glass shards like a perversion of a lava lamp.

One of the large white cargo bags thrashes in the turbulence. It pulls forward with enough force to tear itself away from its velcro bindings, setting it on a direct collision course with me .

"Fuck." It hits me with the fury of a heavyweight gut punch, altering my trajectory and thrusting me against the corner of a steel counter.

I gasp as all the breath whooshes from my lungs, before another lurch has me scraping along the equipment rack on the back wall.

Adrenaline lances through my veins. My brain rattles against my skull. My body pinballs through Columbus. My arm smacks on a handhold bar. Pain shoots along my nerves, lancing up into my elbow. I clutch it to my chest. My whole body burns. I try to gulp some air back into my lungs.

Inhale. Exhale. Don't panic. Slow breaths.

In. Out. In. Out.

“Incoming meteor storm,” Anderson shouts out through the comms, though I can hear his panicked cry echoing through the station. “Brace for impact.”

Bloody Hell.

Time to panic.

I scramble to orientate myself. My ribs complain against the movement as I tuck one foot under the bar just as the first wave of burning rocks starts pelting the station. There could be thousands of them .

Or worse, one of those micro meteors. As deadly as they are rare.

I try not to imagine the carnage. Ignoring the memories pulling forward of the small cluster of them that took out two modules and half the Solar Array of the Chinese Tiangong Space Station. That was only last year. The three crew on board had to emergency evacuate to Earth.

Please, don't let it be one of them.

My mind whirs, quickly running the numbers on how long the station's air will last... Eighteen days. A generous estimate to be sure, depending on worst-case scenario conditions, but who really knows how—

A grunt from inside the open wall cavity.

Fuck. “Chelenko!”

I push off hard, the burn of my ribs quieting to a numb ache as I soar across the lab. I

crash into the rack of equipment on the far wall. Glass beakers shatter from the impact, the shards floating inside their containers.

Reaching inside the open wall panel, I grab his flight suit and pull hard.

A deep crimson gash covers the side of his head. The blood beads off and drifts away in a stream of dark bubbles.

“Still with me, Chelenko?” I squeeze both his hands with mine. He squeezes back, his grasp weak.

“Come on, you can do better than that.”

He squeezes again, harder this time, but still far weaker than he should.

“Don’t worry about hurting my delicate female fingers. ”

He laughs, splutters, coughing up blood. Too much blood. The beads collect between his teeth and gums. Escaping in small bursts of bubbles with each cough. One hits me on the cheek, clinging to my skin a moment before sliding away.

Fuck. “Well, that’s no good, Comrade.”

He grunts acknowledgement.

“Impact in five... four... three... two...” The comms crackle.

“No time for pleasantries. This will hurt. You’re going to have to trust me.”

He gives me a jerky nod.

I kick off the racking behind and pull Chelenko along with me. He cries out in pain as we fly across the module. My palm hits the panel first as I reorient us both, sliding my fallen comrade towards one of the empty pull-out counters.

I am extremely grateful for the lack of gravity as his massive body easily glides across the lab towards the supplies wall, tucking neatly under the counter.

With straps from the wall, I belt us both in. They are usually for securing supplies, but I hope they can handle some human cargo. The last buckle snaps shut just in time for the fire and brimstone to hail down upon us.

A lone meteor rips clean through Columbus, filling the room in front of me with a sudden, brilliant light. It glows a dancing iridescence. I watch frozen, time slowing as the glowing hunk of rock glides through the room like a rogue wave – beautiful as it is deadly.

My vision blurs, white out, slowly readjusting as I blink again and again.

It's inside. There's a hull breach. The wire caging that winds its way through the exterior walls of the stations must have ruptured.

Where's the point of entry?

My mind and body war over the urge to look. I can't risk it.

I hate to think how much radiation we just absorbed. Three months of Natural Background Radiation? A year? A decade's worth?

Bloody hell, remind me to get checked out for any abnormal cells once we're home.

The lab shudders as meteors continue to rain down on the outside of the station.

Burning hunks of rock pelting against the metal. Hollow thunks sound off, over and over, like popcorn in a pan.

A few of the experiments escape their confines in the racking, one of which - a metal cube - dings off the floor, the side crumpling in on itself before it floats off towards the open cavity in the wall where Chelenko was working.

I frown.

Multiple breaches?

Slowly, the rumbling of the room draws to a standstill.

I hold in a deep breath. And wait.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:20 pm*

### CHAPTER FIVE

“...I think that’s the last of it,” hesitation quivers in Anderson’s tone. My comms crackle in and out.

I reach down to check Chelenko. His head at least seems to have stopped bleeding, a bubble of red fluid clings to his brow, but as I wipe it away, raw flesh is revealed. Angry, broken flesh, but blood no longer beads along the wound.

More concerning is the single blown pupil on his left eye. That has me worried. Very worried.

“Danger passed ,” Anderson calls out, his voice more certain this time.

I unzip Chelenko’s flight suit to the waist. His white vest is a mess of crimson. I lift it, peeling the wet fabric from his skin, releasing a few beads of blood that escape, floating off into the air.

His torso is mottled with deep, dark-blue and black bruises all the way along his chest and abdomen. The bruising interlaced with silvery scars from past injuries. I can’t imagine the rest of him is faring much better.

My fingers pause at the waistband of his pants. Just above his hip bone, the sharp tip of the wire micro-cutters are stuck in. Deep. About an inch or so.

I’m no doctor, but I’m thinking this is bad. Very bad.

I click my tongue as I try to think my way out of this mess. My mind whirs a mile a minute. Hull breach. Chelenko stabbed in the gut. My ribs still burn furiously. And is it getting colder in here?

My eyes dart around, searching. The engineer in me concluding we need some duct tape. The universal tool for a quick fix-em-up.

“Is bad, eh?” Chelenko coughs, his breath labours.

“No! No... I was just admiring this hot bod you've been hiding.”

He laughs, groaning as a shudder ripples through his body. “Funny hurts,” he grunts.

It wasn't a complete lie, I muse as I apply pressure around the wound. My hands press against his abdomen. His brows pull down into a deep frown, reminding me of how he's usually a scrooge about just about everything.

“Everyone, sound off,” Clayton calls out, his voice tinny over the comms.

“Anderson. Aiko's in command central with me.”

“Nespoli. Yuri and I are with Hadfield and Pesquet in Harmony.”

“Matherson here.”

“Reiter, Müllers here too. In Leonardo.”

There's static over the comms. Peake? Chelenko?” Clayton's voice rumbles. “Check-in.”

“Peake here.” It cuts out, and I give it a little percussive engineering as I whack it

before trying again. “Peake here. Chelenko needs medical attention in Columbus.” The comms link sounds gravelly, cutting in and out. I don’t know how much they heard, but at least they know I’m alive.

“Alex? Where are you? Anyone with her?” Müller's panicked voice cuts in.

“I’ll check on her, she was in the lab with Chelenko last I saw,” Luca calls out.

A muffled banging sounds. I release the straps holding me, and peer out from our little impromptu burrow to check where it's coming from.

My face drops as I spot the now-sealed shut hatch. Müller’s wide eyes and panicked face peers through the small glass panel, his cheeks ruddy and hair mussed as if he flew here.

“Peake? We are dead yet?”

“Still breathing.” I pat his arm lightly, and he grunts in reply. “Hold on, Chelenko, I’ll be right back.”

Unfolding myself from beneath the counter, I push off the metal surface, rushing to the door and banging my hand on the glass.

“I’m here. My comms are playing up.”

"Gott sei Dank." Müller places his hand against mine, our palms separated by a few inches of glass.

He speaks into his comms. “Got them. Peake and Chelenko in Columbus. They’re trapped.”

“Chelenko needs a medic,” I glance back at Chelenko under the counter, before I hush my voice, leaning closer to the glass separating us, as if that will help shield Chelenko from the reality of my words.

I open my hand, releasing the red beads into the air. At his frown, I crush one, smearing the blood across my palm.

“It’s...bad.” I mouth, shaking my head.

My throat constricts, threatening to release a sob, so I take a deep breath.

“Are you hurt?” He slides over to the computer console beside the hatch, tapping away.

“I’ll live. The door?” I try to keep the sobbing at bay with quick replies.

Now is not the time for a breakdown.

The static interrupting my comms as I speak is not really conducive to a calming environment.

He blanches. Returning his gaze to mine as he presses his hand against the glass once more.

He hits his comms. “Müller here. Chelenko needs a medic.”

“I saw it .” I wonder aloud.

“Saw what?” he asks.

“Straight through. Right in front of me.”

I hear thunder along the corridor. A series of thuds against metal .

“Alex, you aren’t making much sense. What happened?” Müller asks.

The thudding grows closer, merging with the pounding of my heart.

“Meteor.”

“ Sheisse .”

A rush of blonde hair appears. Matthias quickly pulls away and is back at the console keyboard.

“Alex? Mio Dio , you scared me. Are you hurt?”

Müller ignores Luca. “ Mein Herz . I promise you, I will get you out of there.”

Luca’s eyes widen, blanching as he processes whatever information the computer console has displayed. Even pressing my face closer to the glass doesn’t quite get me the right angle to read it.

Scrubbing one hand through his blonde hair, his eyes dart between me, the air-locked hatch, and the console. He’s panicking. Whereas Müller?

He’s cool as a cucumber. Jumping straight into action. His clever fingers glide over the console’s keyboard as his eyes skim over lines, upon lines, of reports – the red lines of text mirrored in his black pupils.

Trust me.” Matthias says as he puts his hand back on the glass against my palm. He scans my face as if etching it to memory before he speaks into the comms.

“The system is detecting a hull breach inside Columbus. They’re leaking atmosphere. Heat pumps disabled. Automated emergency containment procedures in place. The system won’t let me override.”

The panic I was holding back flows free. Nausea rises in my stomach. Tears prick at my eyes as I attempt to steady myself. The hard metal of my prison walls scrapes against my back as I push myself against it.

steady myself. The hard metal of my prison walls scrapes against my back as I push myself against it.

I collapse along the wall into a crumpled heap, floating a few inches from the metal paneling. Embracing the fetal position.

I am going to die.

In space. Less than 12 hours before I’m due home. The universe is a cruel mistress.

A harsh laugh erupts from me. Luca looks concerned. Müller is back at the console, tapping away.

Luca lowers into a crouch on the other side of the door, level with my ball of despair. The thin strip of glass allows us to see each other.

“It’s okay.” Though his concern wears deeper with each passing second. Frown lines form like small crevices across his forehead and wrinkle around his eyes. He doesn’t think I’m making it out of here.

“How is Chelenko ?” Matthias asks.

A distraction technique, but it’s bloody working . Work-mode Alex can survive

anything.

I swipe the tears from my eyes, the salty water floating away in small spheres. I'm sniffing as I look over to Chelenko. His eyes are shiny, and his lips are contorted in a grimace.

"Wire cutters sticking out his gut." Luca winces at my callous words. "Head injury, too," I add.

Luca plucks an ornate cross from beneath his grey t-shirt, rubbing his thumb over the worn metal – the gold rubbed smooth from past worries. He mutters a prayer under his breath before he signs the cross over his chest and finally gives the metal crucifix a chaste kiss.

"It's not as bad as all that. Is it?" I jest, still on the precipice of hysteria. Or perhaps I can blame it on the dwindling oxygen supply.

"You will be ok. We still need to talk." He offers me a meek smile that hurts my heart to see.

"Luca, about that. I meant what I said before."

"Shh, we'll talk once this is," he sighs, searching my eyes. " Tutto finito ."

I nod, relenting.

"Peake," Chelenko grumbles from beneath the counter, trying to sit up, leaning back on his elbows.

I slide across the floor to him. "I'm here. I got you."

He groans. “Medic?”

“On the way, I’m sure. It’s one of the new girls.”

“More women,” he grumbles.

“Maybe we don’t say that to her. We want them to save your sorry arse, remember? ”

He guffaws once, before it descends into a coughing fit. I jump up and grab a bag of distilled water from one of the racks. Ignoring the ‘Not fit for human consumption’ warning label, I unscrew the cap and offer it to his lips. He takes a few small sips before pushing it away.

“ Spasibo .” He leans back against the floor, no longer working against the straps holding him in place.

“Need rest.”

This does not sound like good news.

“Wake me... medic...”

I nod, brushing hair back from his face as he closes his eyes. A slight smile forms as he leans into my touch.

“Medic update?” I call out on my comms.

“ Incoming. ” Clayton’s calming voice responds – at least it should be calming, but I’ve worked with him enough to know that that is his ‘shit has hit the fan, but we follow protocol’ voice.



“Let’s make you comfy,” I say to Chelenko, looking around for something soft. There’s nothing but clinical metal, hard plastic and glass.

I pull my t-shirt off from beneath my flight suit and bundle it up, sandwiching it between his head and the hard, cold metal beneath as a makeshift pillow. He grumbles as I lift his head, his eyes remaining firmly shut. I give his hand a quick squeeze before I head back to the hatch door.

The odds of him making it out of here in one piece are looking slim to none – luckily, I always did root for an underdog.

“Luca?” I call out, craning my neck to try to spot him at the window.

“I sent him away,” Matthias says, not looking up from the console.

“Müller–

“We don’t need him here.”

“Müller–” I raise my voice, and my mind flicks back to a previous argument, one of many towards the end of our marriage.

“Matthias.”

“Fine,” I take a deep breath. “Matthias.”

“Yes, Alex?”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

His gaze dances over my face, his eyes wild as he takes me in. “I calculate you have

five hours of air if the breach remains the same size. Plenty of time for me to figure this out.”

I nod, instinctively holding my breath a moment as if to prolong those five short hours.

I watch as he works, his brows furrowing with concentration. He looks older now, much older than before, or perhaps I just hadn't noticed it when we saw each other every day .

He always had a serious look about him. Some might call him stern. Hell, he didn't make many friends during his PhD days. I bonded with my fellow students over our tyrant professor. Not Matthias. He was probably Director Buzzkill, enforcing the procedures and protocols.

But they just didn't know him. Didn't try to know who he was beneath the mask he wears. I don't think he ever let anyone see who he really was. No one except for me.

I watch as he works, laser-focused on the task at hand. He almost frowns, the furrow between his brows twitching.

“Why are you here?” The words are out before I even realise I've said them.

“You need help. I'm helping.”

I can barely glimpse the squiggle of red lines on the console from where I am pushed up against the glass.

“No. I mean here . Space. The station. Why aren't you back on Earth? Where's Tiggie?”

He scoffs. “You worry for the cat?”

“You didn’t put him in one of those kennel places, did you? He doesn’t like strangers.”

“The cat is fine. Mutti hat ihn .”

“She’ll make him fat again.”

He snorts out a harsh laugh, as if his throat is unpracticed, and it squeezes at my heart. I know this man. I know his body, his face, his everything. I used to be able to read him like a book. We would laugh for hours, until our throats were hoarse, and now his body barely remembers how.

I try to size him up through the small window. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not the one trapped.”

“Does Dianna know you’re here?” He ignores me. “I always thought you two would be good together.” He ignores that as well. “I’m sure she was quick to step into my shoes.”

Now he looks up, and it feels too intimate, too exposing. “She didn’t. I didn’t want her.”

I pause, considering how he might have been completely alone these past few years, and not as quick to move on as I had always thought. Discarding our memories and focusing on what truly matters to him - his work.

“I—”

“I never wanted her”.

“I...”

He sighs, “She was not you.”

I owe him an explanation. An apology...

“Luca–” I begin.

“I don’t want to hear his name from your mouth.”

“Müll–” A small wrinkle forms between his brows. “ Matthias . He’s an engineer, like me, he can help. ”

One of his thick brown brows raises. “He collects rocks. I fail to see how that could help.”

I don’t even attempt to hide my eye roll at this infuriatingly stubborn man.

“I came here for you. I will be leaving with you.” He says as I watch the scrolling red lines of text reflecting in his eyes.

“Yeah, about that.”

We both turn to face the voice, Clayton, who has Callie and Luca in tow. “We’ve lost contact with Earth. Looks like it’ll be a little longer for that ride home”.

### CHAPTER SIX

“You good, Kiddo?” Clayton surveys me through the glass.

“Surviving,” I say.

“Good girl.”

I smile. Clayton has always been the unofficial Dad of our motley crew ever since my and Matthias’ first trip up here.

He moves back, ushering the medic forward, “This is Doctor. Hadfield.”

The doctor, Callie, comes forward.

She looks young, her green eyes bright and earnest as she attempts to drop to her knees in front of the door. Her movements are a little jerky and ungraceful as she fights against the lack of gravity.

Finally settled, one hand clinging to the hatch, the other steadying herself on the footholds along the floor. “Can I see the patient?”

“He’s over there.” I gesture over my shoulder. “Wasn’t sure if I should move him any more than necessary.”

She chews her bottom lip, thinking, before shaking her head. “Usually no, but desperate times and all that.” She gives me a small smile. “Try to move him all at

once. Is there something you can use as a stretcher?”

I stand up, floating away from the window as I survey the room.

Over by the open wall cavity that Chelenko was working on, there's a dust sheet velcroed down along the floor.

Small flecks of solder cling to the fabric.

I lift it, shaking off the worst of the debris.

A small piece drags itself along the floor towards the wall cavity – just a gentle reminder of the vacuum of space slowly sucking out my much needed oxygen.

“I think we might have more than one breach.” I throw a thumb over my shoulder, pointing at the wall. “Chelenko was working there.”

Luca nods through the window. Doctor Hadfield remains with a warm smile on her face.

I lay the sheet out next to Chelenko, flattening out any kinks, before I eye up his prone form.

“Right, Chelenko, I’m going to need you to work with me here.

” He grumbles as I grab one of his big hands in mine.

“Stay with me, big guy. Give me a squeeze if you can hear me.” He gives my fingers a weak squeeze.

“Okay, we got this. Doc’s right here.” I lean in closer, dropping my voice so they

can't hear us on the other side of the door.

“Remember to play nice with her. Just got to get you over to her so she can check you out. ”

His eyes flutter open for a moment before closing. He swallows. His Adam's apple bobs before he gently nods his head, still gently squeezing my fingers.

“Okay, I got you.”

I try to keep him as straight as possible as I slide the sheet under him. Grateful, yet again, at the near weightlessness of space.

Despite my best efforts to keep the movement to gentle tussling, he groans.

Grabbing two ring stands from the rack, I remove the metre-long poles from their clamps and place them on either side of Chelenko, using the sheet's velcro edges to keep the poles in place. Finally, I take a step back to check over my makeshift stretcher, nodding. This could work.

“Right. I'm ready to get you moving, just a few quick pulls and we'll have you with the doctor.”

I'm not sure who I am trying to reassure. Him, or myself .

“Let's go, big guy.”

“Take me to woman doctor,” he says.

Taking the stretcher from the head, I push the metal poles forward as one. He cries out in pain, blood beads spurting from his mouth to splutter across my face.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

“Tell me you have good news,” I say to Clayton, wedging the datapad under one arm as I grip the handlebar. He throws a hairy, burly arm over my stiff shoulders. I fight the urge to bat him off.

My shoulders are tenser than the thread holding that Italian kid’s vest together. I don’t know what I’ll do if Alex—

No. She will get out of that room. I will get her out. I promised her – and myself. I won’t break that promise.

I will not return home without her. I refuse to go back to the veil of despair that’s haunted me these past few years. Ever since I watched her walk out the door, without even attempting to stop her. I was weak . Afraid.

I watch over my shoulder, as Clayton steers me further away from the others, and clench my jaw at the sight of this Gigolo , with his disheveled blonde hair and baby-smooth chin, hovering by the window and throwing soft eyes at my Alex . Mein Herz.

When I saw his wandering hands all over her ear lier, I saw red, and I had to bite back the urge to throw him out the nearest airlock.

“How are you holding up, Matty?” Clayton interrupts my internal spiral.

“Alex needs me.” I assert.



I didn't come up here expecting her to run back into my open arms. Too much time has passed for that. Too much hurt. However, this was not a contingency I had foreseen, nor planned for.

I was foolish to think she would have remained unattached.

I just wasn't expecting him . It's not Luca specifically – I have never met the kid before.

It's what he represents. Luca couldn't be more my opposite if Alex had tried.

It's as if she used an algorithm to track him down. He's everything I'm not, and I'm trying to ignore how much that thought hurts.

He's in the heights of youth, and I'm...well, I'm finding a few too many greys peppering around the temples these days.

I'm still in decent enough shape, but he is a Shrank. His biceps have biceps. Who has that much muscle mass after four months spent in an absence of gravity? I wouldn't be surprised if steroids were at play. Not sure how NASA or the ESA let that slip past them.

A warm, firm palm squeezes the nape of my neck, in a move overly familiar considering Clayton's not spoken to me for the better part of the past three years.

Clearly long enough for me to forget how Americans have the inability to keep their hands to themselves.

No prizes for guessing whose side he took when Alex decided to leave.

And it was her choice to leave.

She left me, the space agency and the country. She couldn't get away fast enough.

Then, like the Geist from Mutti's stories from my childhood, she was gone without a trace. All evidence evaporating alongside her, to the point I started to question whether she was ever real. The only clues she ever existed are the remnants of the memories haunting my dreams.

And Alex haunts mine.

She haunts my very existence.

She has taken up residence in my mind.

The past three years have been hell without her. I couldn't think. I couldn't work. All I had was sleep, to look forward to my dreams of better times, when she was in our bed, in my arms.

"Matty?" Clayton speaks.

Pulling my eyes from Alex, I point my narrowed glare at him. He loses the smile real quick, dropping his arm from my shoulder.

"Alex needs me." I assert again.

At the mere mention of her name, my eyes dart back to her, and my gut clenches. My mind spirals with thoughts of how she is on the wrong side of a depressurising airlock .

I could lose her for good. I waited too long to come for her. Nausea churns in my gut, and for the first time in my life true terror runs through me. With a gulp, I push the sensation down, deep down. Deeper than hell down.

Clayton pats my shoulder again. “Com' on Kiddo. Talk to me.”

Despite everything, the time, the distance, he always did have a way to cut through the bullshit, as he calls it, and see right through to the heart of the matter. Something only he and Alex could manage.

I sigh. “I just wanted to talk to her.”

“You came all the way to space just to talk to her?” He shoots me a sceptical look. “Don't bullshit a bullshitter. I've known you a long time, Kid, her too.” He quirks one of those thick black brows at me.

I shoot him an irritated look. That doesn't stop him from being correct. He has known us since we were practically kids, fresh out of school and trying out for the space programme. At my silence, he continues.

“She came to run away. You came to chase her.” The silence lingers between us, exposing the truth. “Either way, she isn't going anywhere. We'll get her out of this, together .” He stresses together, giving me another pointed look.

I glance back over at Alex through the thin strip of glass. Dr Hadfield is walking her through the motions on how to treat Chelenko's gut wound, and Luca is there to smile at her. She smiles back, and rage boils inside me. All of her smiles should be mine. She should be mine.

Instead, she's slowly dying.

Running out of air. Trapped. And it's my fault. My fault she left. My fault that I didn't stop her and beg her to come back sooner. Mutti was right, I am a fool.

“This guy...” I start.

“Nespoli?” Clayton scratches his chin. “Yeah, figured you’d have something to say about that.

” He brushes the back of his hand against his stubble, tilting his head as if weighing his words.

“He’s a good kid. Been good to her, treats her right.

Didn’t think it was my place to say anything. Not your place either.”

I turn back to him, frowning. He chuckles, throwing his hands up in mock fear.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. Look, cornering her like a rat up a drainpipe, ain’t gonna make her come running back to your open arms.”

When he’s right, he's unfortunately, very right.

“Besides, we got bigger fish to fry.”

“Oh.” I raise a brow.

“Earth.”

“Ja , lost contact.” I wave my hand at him dismissively. “Metal in the meteors, solar flare, could even be a problem with the TDRS. It’ll pass—.”

“No.” His fingers tighten around my arm, trimmed nails biting into the flesh as he pulls me further away from the others. His eyes dart about us before he drags them back to meet mine, leaning in conspiratorially.

“Earth’s gone.”

I frown. “What do you mean gone?”

“Shh, keep it down. This is. Need. To. Know. Until we decide how to deal with the Alex and Chelenko situation.”

As if I had forgotten, mein Herz is trapped and alone.

I clench my fist by my side, picturing Alex.

Whilst I’m here having my time wasted, she is with that Gigolo .

Who I doubt is competent enough to survive a single trip to the Behorde , let alone have any business being on this station, but let him prove me wrong, and I’ll continue to squash the violent urges his face is inciting in me.

I clench my jaw.

“You hearing me, Matty?” Clayton says.

Lowering my voice, I ask. “What do you mean gone?”

“Just gone. Poof.” He makes a comically poor attempt at an explosion with his hand.

“Got Anderson and Aiko looking into it. But the general consensus so far ain't good.”

I grunt, my eyes flicking back to Alex, who’s ripping the sleeve of her blue flight suit to use the rags as bandages.

“Need you, Kid. ”

“Ok. Fine. Paragraf 32b, Section seven of the contingency guide?” He nods slowly at my words, understanding.

“Yeah, probably. At least until we make contact with home. I’ll get Anderson on it.”

“And Alex?” I ask.

“Got a crew meeting in ten to talk about that. Hadfield and Pesquet got an idea, but you ain't gonna like it.”

I give him a curt nod, watching Alex brush blood across her forehead as she wipes a few strands of sweat-slicked hair back and out of her face.

“You hear me, Kid?” Clayton says.

“ Ja , meeting in ten,” I wave my hand at him, absently, my mind drifting back to Alex.

If I can’t get her out of there, then I’m going in to get her. I don’t care if I take the whole station down with me. I’ve already endured three years without her, barely alive, just going through the motions of living.

I’m not staying in a universe without Alex.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

I watch the rise and fall of Chelenko's chest. Slow and steady. A visual reassurance that he continues to live.

His cheeks have lost any ruddiness. He's sallow and pale and too still and it's freaking me out. The artificial light giving him the look of a corpse.

I adjust the foil blanket I scavenged from the supplies inside Columbus, tucking it around him, mindful of the pliers jutting from his hip. I know enough about human physiology not to pull them out, especially in space, where blood could float off and pool anywhere.

He's in a sorry state. More asleep than awake. I worry every time he drifts that it'll be the last time. That he won't find his way back.

Brushing his hair back from his forehead, his skin feels clammy. Sticky from dried blood. I wipe my palms against the leg of my flight suit, creases line the front of it, but I am past caring.

"Alex?" his gruff voice splutters.

"I'm here." I shuffle closer, holding one of his hands in my own.

"Still alive."

"Of course. We're getting out of here in one piece." I glance down at the pliers,

quickly slicking my eyes back to his. Forcing a small smile, “Mostly in one piece.”

He grunts in an almost laugh.

“How are you?” He asks.

“How am I?” Terrified. Exhausted. “Surviving,” I say.

He nods gently, his eyes fluttering shut once more. “So quiet.”

“Quiet? I suppose with the hatch shut it blocks out a lot of noise.” I say.

The droning from the Russian modules is muted. The air recyclers are muffled. The rabble of the crew is gone. Leaving behind nothing but the sound of our breathing and a slight hum of electricity. “I thought you’d enjoy some peace and quiet for once.”

“I like sound of people.” His breath labours as he speaks. “Happy.”

“I didn’t know. I always thought you liked the solitude.”

“Silence is sadness.”

“Chelenko, I never pegged you as the sentimental type.”

“No.” He pauses for a moment, long enough that I wonder if he’s drifted into sleep once more. “My mother... always quiet. Always sad.”

“Your mother? I bet she’s waiting to hear from you real soon.”

“She is dead.”



“I’m so sorry, Chelenko.” I inhale. “My mother died too. Cancer. Yours?”

“My father.” His voice nothing but a soft murmur.

I look down at his half-exposed chest, at the intricate silvery scars weaving across his torso, at all the hurt. Did his dad...

“Your scars...?”

He nods. “A gift from him.”

That’s horrific. Barbaric. Who could, who would...? “That must have been hard.”

“Alex, spasibo . For being with me.” He squeezes my hand. I barely feel the pressure.

“We will get out of here together ,” I promise, hoping that I'm not proven a liar.

He nods again.

“And I’ll make the crew throw you a party. It’ll be loud, and in your face, and you’ll hate it.” I laugh as a tear tracks down my cheek.

“Happy people.” Is all he manages before he slips back into slumber. His gentle breathing is a soothing lullaby to my ears.

I release his hand, tucking it inside the blanket. Rising from the ground to survey the rest of the Columbus module .

Against the back wall there is a flutter of fabric, a tell-tale sign of my dwindling air escaping. I gulp back the fear of my reality.

Summoning work-mode Alex, I push off into the room. My eyes glide over the racks and cabinets, taking inventory. The first two transparent fronted cabinets are a non-starter, unless I want to release hundreds of glass shards to float about Columbus like tiny little mines.

The tool rack is over to the left, the contents a little more strewn about than before but still well contained beneath their velcro straps - stir friction welders, an array of wire cutters, screw drivers, wrenches... nothing finesse enough to open the door without risking the rest of the station.

Heat bumps against me like snubbing out a match against my skin.

“Shit.” I flinch, looking down at the small hunk of rock drifting away from my exposed ankle.

I resist the urge to kick the bloody pebble that got me into this mess. If the singed patch of skin is anything to go by, then it would probably just set my sock on fire.

The small meteor drifts onwards, forging its own path as it attempts to burn a small opening through a fabric supply crate. I push the crate forward, away from the meteor. “Last thing we need is a fire in here,” and watch as the small pebble continues on undeterred .

I look up at where I saw the meteor originally enter the station, reaching for the metal paneling. I finger the small hole, barely wider than my fingertip, and feel a faint suction against my skin.

“See, already found the problem. We’ll be out of here in no time.” I turn back to Chelenko’s unconscious form. “Nothing a little solder can’t fix.”

I grab the stir friction welder, line up the solder around the edges and fire it up. The

metal easily heats, melting together to form a small scar in the metal paneling.

My lips turn up in a satisfied smile, “Got it.”

I twist around. A twinge in my abdomen makes me pause. Unzipping my flight suit, I give myself a quick once-over, using the reflection in the stainless-steel countertop to try to catch the state of my back.

Bruises as far as the eye can see. I look like I was in a paintball fight, and my team lost. Blacks, blues and purples mar my skin. An eerie map of injuries spreading around to my tummy and up to my chest. No blood - that I can see.

I stretch, my muscles protest, but everything appears to be in working order. Zipping up my flight suit again, I hide any injuries. I don't want Matthias to worry. I don't want anyone to worry, but especially him.

My eyes return to the doorway – the damn sealed hatch– searching for him through the glass.

### CHAPTER NINE

I try to sift through the data dump I managed to dig out of the computer, as I drift up and down the corridor leading to Harmony. The movement helps me think clearly.

My eyes skim through the text. Automated security protocols. Manual Overrides. Volumetric estimations. Stock inventories. Past experiment logs. None of this is remotely useful to helping Alex.

I flick my wrist to check the time. Time enough that I won't be the first one sitting there waiting.

I reach the kitchen area, our make-shift emergency HQ whilst we sort through our current mess of affairs, at 0530 UTC – station time.

Pesquet, the brunette woman who came up with us, is beside Reiter, their noses in their datapads.

Matherson sits beside them, Clayton leaning on the back of the chair she tucked herself into.

Anderson and Aiko walk in just as I reach for a pouch of water, with blonde Gigolo appearing mere seconds behind them. Likely trying to squeeze in more time with Alex, as if we're expecting the inevitable.

What will flowery words and charming smiles do to save her? Nothing .

Yuri moves forward through the room, crinkling a half-finished packet of pickle-flavoured crisps (if the picture on the front is anything to go by) in his hand as he munches.

My stomach lurches, reminding me I haven't eaten since I left Earth.

“Shall we get started?” Clayton's eyes coast over the room as we all crowd around the make-shift conference table, in a space designed to accommodate no more than one, maximum two persons.

“Where do we stand with the lab?” Clayton asks.

“It's—”

“We—”

Gigolo tries to talk over me, and I glare at him, silently waiting until he concedes.

Clayton sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face before he points to me. “Matty, go.”

“There's a breach in the hull. Left side of the Columbus module.

Appears to be inside a wall cavity, likely caused by the...

” I flail my hand a little, my tongue counting each tooth as I search for the right word.

“... Schwei?brenner . Chelenko was using it for maintenance right before the meteor storm.”

Luca nods. “I saw him welding in the far corner.”

“And...”

Everyone pauses. Matherson looks up from her datapad .

“A micro meteor from the storm tore clean through the top of the lab.”

Reiter rolls his eyes. He is my closest friend, but we have conflicting opinions on a number of topics – the protective capabilities of a Whipple shield, or rather the destructive capabilities of micro meteors, is up there.

Right alongside the possibility of time dilation, and his fascination with Xeno paleobiology, or ‘lizardmen’ that he is convinced exist.

“Alex saw a meteor inside the station,” I add.

“She could be mistaken.” Hadfield offers, “Alex will not be in the best state of mind considering her current predicament.”

“She saw it. I believe her.” I say.

“Any good news?” Clayton urges, with a hopeful look.

“I calculate they have,” I look down at the Breitling, nestled on my wrist. “Four hours of air.”

“I’ll start a countdown.” Matherson chimes in as she hunches over her datapad, 4:00:00 blinks in big foreboding font on the large screen over the table, immediately beginning the countdown.

Each moment dropping away, second by second, the numbers flicking, time depleting, and making my throat tighten at the thought of Alex alone.

I tug at the collar of my t-shirt, easing the zip down on my flight suit in an attempt to give myself some breathing space, and stave off the fear threatening to climb back up from the depths of Hell it was cast.

“Ok, people. Let’s huddle.” Clayton prompts the silent crowd.

“Environmental controls won’t let us open the hatch now it’s sealed shut. Not unless it detects the same pressure on both sides.” Yuri strokes his chin, thinking aloud.

“Can you do a workaround?” Clayton asks.

He clicks his tongue. “Niet . With more time, maybe.”

We watch the countdown tick down further.

“What about a manual override?”

“That’s only good for the two-part external airlocks. This is a connecting hatch between modules.” Yuri sighs.

“That brings us back to fixing the breach.” Clayton directs.

“I go for a walk. See what I can repair from the outside.” Luca offers.

“We cannot risk rupturing the hull integrity further.” As much as I’d love to watch you fly out an airlock . “ A larger breach and they could both be sucked out into space. I’d prefer that not happen.”

Luca frowns at me for shooting down his plan.

“Matty...” Clayton warns. I slump against the wall of the pantry racking, exhaling a

harsh breath .

“What does Houston have to say about this?” I ask. “ Is the TDLR fixed? Comms working?”

“Anderson?” Clayton asks.

Everyone goes quiet, the only sound is that of the mechanical hum of the pumps and fans maintaining the internal atmosphere of the station.

All eyes are on Anderson. Aiko shifts uncomfortably beside him. It doesn't take a genius to figure out something is very wrong.

I know the comms signal is gone, dropped out into nothing, and I know more than most right now. That said, I haven't had a chance to look out of one of the few windows up here to see the truth of the matter.

“We’ve got good news and bad news...” Anderson rubs the nape of his neck awkwardly as his eyes dance over the datapad screen in front of him.

“Bad news first. Like ripping off bandage.” Yuri winks at Pesquet, making Matherson roll her eyes at him.

Matherson answers first, leaning back against Clayton’s arm. “Earth has gone dark. Zero contact.”

“We have double-checked the radio target, but there’s nothing there,” Anderson adds.

“A whole fucking planète doesn’t just disappear.” Pesquet frowns.

“It didn’t.” Aiko's delicate voice chimes in, “Earth isn’t gone.”



“Wait. We thought Earth was gone?” Reiter leans forward.

Aiko nods slowly, attempting to tuck her silky hair behind one ear.

“But it’s not. Earth’s fine. As best we can tell.” Anderson assures us.

I drum my fingers along the bar of the handhold, barely containing my impatience, as my mind returns to Alex and her dwindling oxygen levels. As if torturing me, the bold numbers lose yet another minute. And another minute, the numbers rolling over. Counting down, lower and lower.

“What do you mean, ‘best we can tell’?” Luca asks this time.

Anderson takes a deep breath before he speaks. “Well, we are no longer orbiting Earth.”

The room goes silent, dumbstruck. That has me stretching upright from the wall, my drumming fingers halting.

“Where in fuck are we?” Yuri barks.

“We’re not sure—”

“Not. Sure?” My brows raise.

“Uhm, I managed to narrow it down to the Andromeda Cluster, but beyond that, I’m not—” Aiko replies.

“Andromeda Cluster?”

“Yes—” She confirms

“That is 2.5 million years from Earth,” I state.

“Well, we—

The rising voices drown out Aiko's hushed tone, she winces from the shouting, her eyes darting to Anderson with a look of desperation. I bang my fist on the metal bar, startling everyone. Resetting the room. Aiko jumps, clutching to Anderson, as he gives her arm a soothing rub.

“How?” Yuri demands.

“We don’t know,” Anderson answers.

“The radiation spike,” Matherson states. “It could be related.”

The meeting descends into a cacophony of voices, each clambering over the next to be heard. Not for the first time has a group turned to anger in the face of fear.

The Andromeda Cluster... I should be concerned, or excited to see what none have before. All I can think is how relieved I am that I am here with Alex. I just need to get her out of that room .

Clayton stretches out, leaning over Matherson's crouched form. “Give me the rundown on the station.” His deep voice demands the room's attention.

Silence.

“Don’t all rush at once.” Clayton chuckles humourlessly.

“Nav and guidance controls aren’t working,” Matherson states.

“We lost a lot of O2,” Yuri adds.

“Liquid fuel or atmosphere?” Clayton asks.

“Both. I can’t know for sure with the breach in Columbus.”

“Oh, Cupola is blocked off. No hull breach that I can see, but a lot of internal debris is blocking the corridor.” Pesquet says.

“Anything else?”

“The Soyuz,” Luca says.

“I think that’s the least of our worries right now.” I scoff.

“It’s gone.”

“What?” Several voices murmur around the room.

“How ever we got here. It didn’t come with us.” Luca explains.

Clayton rubs his beard. “Anyone got anything to add?” He looks around at the crew.

No one speaks up, and more than a few of them look visibly shellshocked.

“Pesquet. You and Hadfield had some thoughts about Columbus?” Clayton redirects.

Pesquet gives a nod, glancing at Reiter and then back out to address the room. “We still have basic control of the ventilation. We could filter some nitrous oxide into the room. They would both slowly... fall asleep.”

“And then what?” Luca asks.

“A medicated coma would buy us some time.” Hadfield offers .

Pesquet's cheeks flush, as she gulps. “ Oiu , and it would at least be painless.”

“ Nein. Auf keinen Fall! ” I stretch out, thrusting some sealed packets of noodles backwards and further into the pantry racking as I slam my palms against the handhold bar I’m using to steady myself.

“What would that mean exactly?” Gigolo ignores me, chirping up.

“She wants to kill them. Kill Alex . Absolutely not.” I start to pace, kicking off to float towards the drinks dispenser before pushing off the stainless-steel counter and gliding back to the rows of dried food packets again.

“No. I am as invested in our colleague’s survival as everyone else. This is about being prepared for every eventuality. A plan ‘Z’.” Hadfield’s clinical side emerges.

Luca looks horrified, and for the first time, I’m glad he’s here. At least one other person is as invested in Alex’s survival as I. ‘Glad’ might be too strong a word.

“Let's bench that thought for now,” Clayton says diplomatically. The mind boggles at how he can act so non-partisan. It makes me want to wretch.

“Are we done here, or is there more?” I turn to give a pointed look at Anderson.

He shakes his head. “That’s all we know at present.”

I nod, push off the wall, and turn to leave.

“Müller?” Reiter calls after me .

I pause at the entryway. “You can mull over how we’re getting home, I’m going to get Alex out of that room, one way or another.”

“Matty.” Clayton makes me pause. “Without any better ideas, we are taking a spacewalk. Yuri gets suited. At worst we at least need eyes on the damage, at best we get that breach sealed.”

The clock continues its countdown. We lost forty-five minutes to this meeting.

The others are slow to jump into action. I kick off the wall with a little more force than needed, venting my frustration on the metal racking, pushing myself down the corridor heading towards Columbus.

The first thing my eyes seek out is... “Alex.”

Her beautiful brown eyes look up at me, fluttering open as if battling off sleep.

### CHAPTER TEN

“Call me Callie.” Doctor Hadfield coos through the door at us. Chelenko is awake, barely, but still, it’s something, and at this point I’ll take any good news.

“You still with us, comrade?” I ask.

He makes a disgruntled noise followed by a sharp nod.

His left pupil is still blown as big as a saucer, but his head wound has stabilised, the plasma-y blood has begun to congeal over.

He keeps complaining that it feels itchy and tight, but Dr Hadfield assures me that’s quite normal. A sign of healing.

You’d think the big guy has never been injured before, something I know to be false considering all the silvery scars I saw traversing and interlacing across his skin - and those were just the parts I could see.

“Alex.” I turn to the doctor, spotting Matthias behind her. “You need to keep the wire cutters where they are.” She reiterates for the fifth time, like I’m not trying. “Don’t let him move about too much.”

“Keeping him still is like herding cats.”

Chelenko groans. “Can’t we just pull out? Like bad tooth.”

Callie laughs, it's gentle and tender, like her, and I completely understand why she went into medicine.

“We can’t. Right now, you’re stable. If we dislodge it, you could bleed out.”

“Like the least fun birthday party, complete with a Chelenko Pinata,” I say, as I pull a strip of velcro from the storage wall.

I wrap some velcro around the pliers, securing them to his vest. “There.” I give his shoulder a little pat. “Now stop moving.”

Chelenko grunts.

“Hallo . Can I talk to Alex for a moment?” Matthias asks the Doc.

“Sure, I need to go grab something anyway.” She turns back to the window. “I’ll be right back.”

He waits until she's a few metres down the hallway and out of earshot before turning back to me.

For a moment, I am presented with nothing but the black of his t-shirt and my reflection in the glass. My brown hair is loose and lank as it floats up around my head. Blood and sweat plaster loose hairs to my forehead. My skin is pale, blotchy, with an accompanying bloodshot eye.

My eyelids feel heavy. Everything feels so heavy. I am exhausted, bone-weary so, and by Matthias’ concerned expression, he agrees with my assessments. And that makes me feel all the more helpless .

“Alex.” He lowers himself next to the glass, his side against the wall. “I’m here.”

“Matthias.” I give him a small smile, all I can muster with my current level of exhaustion. My energy stores are depleted. The initial adrenaline rush has definitely come and gone, leaving me ready and waiting for a ten-hour nap. “What did the crew decide?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going to get you out of there.”

“Luca—”

“Wants to risk ripping a hole in the hull. I won’t let you die.”

“I’m not dying in here,” I say, my voice quivers, summoning all the integrity of a wet paper bag.

“I’m not going back to Earth without you.” He replies easily.

I believe him.

He's giving me the same look he did in the past. When he was fully, completely, and irrevocably committed to seeing something through to the end.

We fall into a comfortable silence.

Nothing but the hum of the station and the gentle tapping of fingers against a datapad. Chelenko falls back into a light sleep, I nudge him lightly to check if he’s still breathing. He inhales deeply.

I slide myself closer to the glass, my shoulder resting against Matthias’ with just a few inches of reinforced glass separating us. “Matthias..? ”

“Hmm?”



“Matze?”

His eyes raise from the datapad clutched in his hand, to meet mine.

“You haven’t called me that in a long time.” He smiles.

“Why didn’t you sign the papers?” I ask.

“Alex, don’t–”

“I need to know. Before I...”

He looks up from his datapad, frowning at me, “You are not going anywhere. I forbid it.”

“Matze. Please, I need to know.” I beg. I am so bloody tired of begging him. That’s all I ever did in our previous life. I begged him to come home, to be on time. To invest even half into us as he did into his work.

He sighs. “I wasn’t ready.”

“We’ve been separated for three years.”

He nods slowly, agreeing. “You’ve been gone for three years.”

“If I was gone, where were you?”

“Waiting.” He admits. His gaze meets mine, a deep sadness lurking in his moss-green eyes.

“Oh, Matze.” Tears prick at my eyes at the thought of him all alone, waiting for me to

come back, despite feeling as though I had run dry of tears hours ago. “You know, we were both unhappy.”

He shakes his head. “I wasn’t. ”

“You were. You were always working.” I sigh. “And so was I.” I offer him a small smile. “It was my fault as well. I was making you unhappy.”

“ Nein . You are the only happiness in my life. Only you . Nothing else.”

I frown at him. “Is that why you're here?”

He nods slowly. “I told myself that if you were happy, I would leave you alone.”

“And now?”

He releases his datapad leaving it to float in his lap, his eyes like two deep emerald lagoons, moisture giving them a light sheen. “Alex, you almost... died. You still could die. I’m never leaving you again.”

“You should know Luca and I—”

“I don’t care. I just want you. I need you.”

“I think he cares for me.”

Matthias makes a strained noise in the back of his throat, tortured by my words. I feel as though I ripped his heart clean from his chest as his face contorts.

“Do you... care for him?” he asks, so quietly I almost miss it, his eyes dropping to the data pad in his lap.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say, 'Yes.' But the words catch in my throat, leaving me silent. My mind searches for something to say, but like clutching at smoke, it comes up empty. What we had wasn't love. Not for me. It was fun, and I felt wanted .

I shake my head. "No. It's not that simple."

"How long?"

"Recent. We met in pre-mission training, but nothing happened until we were already up here."

He nods slowly, thinking, and then he frowns.

"Wait here."

I laugh, "Where would I even go?"

He dashes out of sight. I can hear the thumps of his feet against the handholds, slowly drifting away until the noise is swallowed up by the station's background noise.

Within moments, he's back again with a satchel in hand, the brown leather worn and a monogrammed 'MM'.

"You still have that?" I ask.

"Of course," he says. "It was a gift."

"I'm surprised you haven't thrown it out. Look how old it is now." I'd recognise the satchel anywhere, but age has not been kind. The leather is worn, the monogrammed 'MM' no more of a VN now. But I remember it.

“I got you that.”

“Graduation gift.” He smiles, that's the second now in the past ten minutes.

“When you finally finished that awful PhD.” I snort-laugh.

He frowns through the glass at me. “Particle Theory is not awful. ”

“Maybe to you.” I laugh, “I thought it would add to the whole professor aesthetic you had going on when you started at CERN.” More quietly, I add, “I didn’t know that place would be the beginning of the end.”

The death of us.

He clears his throat as he thrusts open the flap on the sachet and roots about inside.

I guess we’re done reminiscing about the past. Bloody typical. Shut down once the conversation broaches more difficult topics.

Peer reviewed proposals, and he can talk until the cows come home, the slightest mention of emotional turmoil and he hides behind his work.

“Is that...?” I start.

“ Mutti sends her love,” he says as he flashes me the goods - a tin of delicious home-baked Lebkuchen. If my throat wasn’t so dry I bet my mouth would be watering in anticipation, saliva pooling over my tongue.

“Thank God for Gerda, and for buttery chocolatey goodness,” I sigh. Closing my eyes as I imagine the crunch of the chocolatey outside and the light, fluffy centre. Images flick through my mind as I imagine the rich gingerbread flavour bursting across my

tastebuds.

Matthias chuckles.

“If only you’d look at me the way you look at baked goods,” he sighs, quickly extracting another package from his satchel. “Here it is.”

He holds it up for me to see .

I feel my face light up, a wide smile stretching my dry lips. “A book?”

“How do you... It’s a gift. I wanted to surprise you, but, well, you know how well that went.”

He turns over the beautifully wrapped parcel, showcasing the pretty green paper fastened with a red satin ribbon tied in a bow. It's rectangular and slim. Definitely book-shaped.

I instinctively reach forward, my hand resting on the glass.

I hate this damn barrier between us .

“Open it for me.”

He pauses a moment.

“Please, Matze. I want to see it. This could be the last book I ...” The words catch in my throat.

“Ok.” He pulls the bow with one hand, sliding the ribbon off before tucking it in his pocket. Carefully unwrapping the green paper, a slip of paper escapes its confines,

floating just in front of the door.

He clears his throat, grabbing the note and scrunching it in his hand.

“Wait, what was that?”

“Nothing of importance.” He holds up the book for me. It's gorgeous.

A hardback with a pretty cover of a couple embracing. As he rotates it slowly, I see the prettiest pattern of atomic structures of molecules and mathematical equations painted along the page's edges. The spine reads ‘ The space between us ’ in delicate gold foiling.

“Wow.”

“It reminded me of you . Of us .”

“ Danke schon .”

“ Gern geschehen .”

I smile sadly, a small tear escaping. I might never be able to read it, and it was such a thoughtful gift.

He opens to the first page and chuckles to himself.

“What?” I lean forward, trying to read the first line.

“I am really happy I'm here with you. I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again.”

I smile. “I am glad you're here too, Matze.”

He clears his throat and begins to read aloud. I settle back against the hatch, close my eyes, and listen.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

I look up from the page, Alex's soft snores my cue. She fell asleep to my voice, reading about love, romance, and lab work. That was my old life, at least the lab work part, and it all seems so very far away now.

These words on the page are the closest I have come to intimacy in the past three long years.

I skim a few pages ahead, quickly snapping the book closed when I spot the phrase 'lines himself up with my entrance'.

A flicker of movement in my periphery - nothing but an overhead light blinking. I glance around, my throat tightening. Did anyone see me? Heat rises up my neck, into my cheeks. I scrub a hand over my face. Ridiculous. I am a grown man.

Reaching for my satchel, the worn leather having seen better days, I flick it open and deposit the novel. Remembering the crunched paper in my pocket, I grab it and throw that in the satchel too.

How embarrassing. Matthias 'thinks of everything' Müller and I forgot the damn Quittung in the book.

Smooth .

I crumple the receipt further, scrunching it tight and throwing it into the bottom of the bag. Stupid piece of paper is probably the most useless thing up here.



Well, perhaps the second most useless thing.

My eyes drift over to the entrance of the makeshift HQ set up in the dining module, picturing the Gigolo , with his unkempt blonde hair, shooting everyone a charming smirk as he seduces them into more idiotic ideas that are just as likely to get Alex killed than to save her.

Unfortunately, he seems rather insistent on a spacewalk. Clayton too.

I can see the logic of collating a complete image of any damage to the exterior of the station. However, I fail to see how prodding around out there will help Alex.

As if she can sense my very thoughts returning to her, she lets out a deep exhale followed by another soft snore. At least like this she can conserve oxygen.

Luckily, Chelenko has spent most of his time unconscious, also reducing the burden on their precious air.

A clamour of voices spill out of the opening ahead, the vague noises slowly beginning to formulate whole sentences.

“Yuri, grab Matty too. Get him suited and booted, while....” The rest of the conversation grows indistinct. Clayton's deep voice muffled by the excess of supplies lining the walls.

Flipping my satchel shut, I stretch myself to full height. My hips and knees are stiff from folding myself into this little nook beside the sealed hatch to Columbus.

I'm getting too old for this .

Yuri slips into the corridor. His gaze roams the halls until it falls on me.

“Matty.” His smile spreads wide, “You don’t mind me calling you Matty, do you? Come, we go for walk outside.”

He glides down the hall towards me, quickly covering the distance between us, continuing passed.

I follow, reaching him just in time to have a white space suit boot thrust in my arms.

“Get dressed. I check airlock is still working.” He starts, drifting off as his hands work over the console beside the door.

He mumbles to himself, beneath his breath. I barely catch a word between the ‘ahhs’ and the occasional “ chert ” - usually followed by a quick slap against the machinery. ‘Percussive engineering,’ I hear Alex’s voice say in my mind.

I slide the rest of me inside the suit's torso, slipping into both boots before I reach for the gloves. My hand pauses over them, my eyes focusing on the helmet instead. The black, red and gold patch on my shoulder reflects in the visor. Taunting me.

Home.

I’ll never see it again.

Never see Mutti.

Never bring Alex back.

She is going to kill me when she finds out she will never see that damn cat again. Not that it would live long with the portions Mutti feeds him - he’ll be lucky to survive three years without developing diabetes.

A burden for another day.

Yuri is staring at me now. His brow wrinkles.

“Wie bitte ?” I ask, dumbly.

His frown deepens. “Perhaps we go get the Kid to help.”

“Kid?”

“Luca.” Yuri reaches for his comms.

I grab his arm, stopping him.

“Alles gut. I was thinking. Of Earth.”

Yuri’s frown softens, his smirk returning. “All ladies will be crying that I am gone.”

My eyes roll in exasperation. I have my doubts about Yuri’s ‘ladies’. Even stronger doubts about the ROSMOCOS’ Human Resources department, and their non-existent seminars on sexual harassment in the workplace.

“You have woman back on Earth?” He asks nonchalantly as his hands slide the helmet over my head, adjusting the UV filters on the visor.

I frown, “You know Alex is my wife, right ?”

“Da ,” He flaps his hand in an attempt to disperse my comments. “Your wife has boyfriend.” He turns to face me. “What about you?”

“Nein .”

“No boyfriend?” Yuri smirks.

“There was one woman...” I start.

His grin returns in force, his mouth stretching wide. “I knew you holding out on me.”

“It’s nothing...” I begin, my mind reeling back to Earth and the one and only time a woman took an interest in me after Alex left.

“Diana, my assistant.”

Yuri’s eyebrows hike up his forehead. “Chert , you dog.”

“It wasn’t like that. She knew Alex.”

That only sends his eyebrows further into the stratosphere. He turns me around, pointing me inside the airlock.

Looking forward through the small window in the door ahead, I see the endless sea of space. Blackest night stretching forever onwards .

“I worked a lot. She was always there. I barely noticed her. Barely noticed anything...” Through the numbness . I pause, waiting for Yuri.

He grunts as I hear the tell-tale click of a helmet seal locking into place.

I sigh. “She offered herself to me. One night. Right there in the lab - if you can believe it.”

“I believe it.” Yuri chuckles.

“I said no.”

“Why?” He moves forward to the console, the doorway behind us seals closed with a soft hiss, and a clank of the magnetic locks. Yuri turns to face me, smirking through the helmet visor. “She ugly? Sorry, my friend.”

“No. She was pleasant enough. She just wasn’t Alex.” I sigh a heavy exhale.

“Ahhh.” He says, understanding. “You couldn’t get it up.”

“Ja, exactly .” He slams the button. A loud siren sounds off. Lights flashing. “Wait. No . I didn’t say that.” I feel earlier’s heat returning to my cheeks.

“You know, there is pill for that.” Yuri continues.

The computer chirps in, interrupting our conversation. “ Depressurisation in process. ”

“I don’t need a pill.”

“There is no shame, my friend. ”

“I could have slept with her. I just didn’t want to,” I huff, glaring at Yuri. The effect of my stare likely diminished through the many layers of the helmet’s visor.

“Sure, whatever you say.” He waves his hand again.

“It was a sterile lab.”

He looks at me, one eyebrow raised.

I'm protesting too much. Let Yuri think what he wants. The crazy Russian.

“Depressurisation complete.”

Yuri reaches forward, his hand grabbing the door's manual override. “Ready?”

I nod, instinctively holding my breath.

I don't care what people say about the beauty of space. The calm. The peace.

They're wrong.

There is no peace in the endless void.

An infinite tide of darkness ever searching for a land that doesn't exist.

It never stops.

Never ends.

In mathematics we work with infinities and absolutes, but when you're presented with the vastness of true infinity then the word 'space' doesn't cover it.

Yuri pushes the hatch forward, the heavy metal glides easily through the air. He clips his tether to the guideline

and pulls himself through .

I breathe.

One boot forward, then the next. I clip myself to the guideline. A quick tug to ensure

it's secure. Then I push through the open door.

Following the guideline. One hand in front of the other. Examining the metal exterior as I go.

There are a few scrapes to the protective paint covering, but more concerning is the buildup of corrosion. The paint and metalwork is already beginning to flake and lift from the main body of the station.

Unlike the ships of Earth, there is no moisture to cause rust. However, in space, the corrosion usually stems from the bombardment of UV rays and meteors colliding with the station's hull, but the station's true enemy is atomic oxygen.

My eyes flick to where the station's body joins to the solar array. The moving parts are the most susceptible to space corrosion. The last thing we need are the joints seizing up.

The golden wings closest to me are mostly intact, apart from the unhealthy angle of the leftmost arm. And the final solar panel appears to be missing.

Not bad, all things considered.

I shift to my other side, my left hand clutching the metal bar on the wall. My legs flail beneath me for a moment before I steady myself against the metal .

“Scheisse.” I hit my comms on , “ The left side of the station is shredded.”

“Damage report,” Clayton demands.

“Destroyed in the meteor storm. Multiple asteroids have pocked the metal. The solar array is Kaputt. We will be lucky to salvage it for parts.”

And tucked beneath the solar array, cocooned in metal work, that once made up the starboard photovoltaic array, is the Columbus module.

How is Alex still alive in there?

I hit my comms on, “I think my previous estimations are off. Way off. There is no way she has hours left with this level of damage.” Asteroids – plural – must have pierced straight through the hull, and even if they haven’t, station shrapnel surely has.

“How is the other solar array?”

“Appears functional.”

“Comms?”

“In one piece.”

The metal graveyard is bathed in an ominous red hue. Reluctantly bringing my attention away from the safety of the Station, outward to the void.

This isn’t Earth. This isn’t our Sun.

This is a dream. A nightmare.

Overshadowing the Space Station is a gas giant, its surface a swirl of rich oranges and deep purples.

A crimson aura surrounds the planet, encircling it from behind. It spins, the vibrant oranges swallowed by purple clouds as it turns.

Slowly, it reveals the source of the red aura. The eclipse passes, each moment



stretching into the next. Until...

My lips part at the sight. “Wunderbar.”

Never in my life would I have thought I would get to witness this.

“What do you see, Matty?” Clayton asks.

“A giant red star. Larger than our sun.”

The rays are bright enough to tinge the planets and the Station in a crimson smear. The brilliant light is blinding, even despite the UV filters of my visor.

Slowly, my eyes adjust.

Its crimson body ebbs and flows as energy ripples out before splashing back in on itself.

Besides the Red Giant, small streams of flux tether it to a smaller body. A gleaming white pearl against the backdrop of night.

“A binary system.”

“Wow. Sisters.” Yuri laughs.

We must be the first humans to see such a sight.

I jolt, feeling a bump against my shoulder. “We definitely not in Kentucky no more,” Yuri says.

“Kansas.” Clayton’s deep voice mingles with static on the comms .

“Earth gone. Sister suns. Who gives a fuck?

“Kansans?” I offer. Coughing, I attempt to clear my dry throat. “Our main focus is still getting Alex out of there.”

“Head home. We can do some more sightseeing later.” Clayton adds.

I turn to my now silent companion, a rare occurrence for Yuri.

He nods, “Let’s go save your girlfriend.”

“My wife .”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

A faint vibration through the wall echoes overloud in the quiet of the Columbus module. I open my resting eyes. All appears the same.

Chelenko is asleep or unconscious. I choose to believe it's sleep.

Mathias is working away, judging by the muted sounds of tapping I can hear from behind the still sealed doorway behind me.

“Scheisse .”

“Matze?”

“Guess your boyfriend took his little spacewalk after all.”

“He's not my boyfriend.” I pause, listening for the vibration again. “Luca is outside?”

I move towards the damaged panel at the far side, wishing the Columbus Module had a window so I could see what is happening out there. I rest my head against the wall, the metal ice cold against my ear. Nothing but a muffled vibration that could be drilling or even welding.

My comms line crackles. “Knock, knock.” Yuri laughs.

“Alex? ” A voice calls .

“Luca?” I say, “Are you outside?”

“Si, Fiore. How are you? ” He replies.

Clayton interrupts, “Update, gentleman.”

“We’ve located a breach. Moving towards it now. ” Luca says.

“Moving towards it?” I ask. “What’s the noise I can hear then?” A thump against the outer hull echoes through and has me lurching back.

“There is a lot of debris out here,” Luca says. “Yuri, careful. Your line is caught.”

Another thump against the hull, and I'm scrambling over to the racks by the door. Rummaging through the boxes, hoping for a miracle. The comms break down into static, and I tune out what little I can make out, focusing on my search.

“What’s that?” Matthias calls out.

I look back at him, following the line of his pointed finger over my shoulder to the metal lockers. One hangs open with what looks like the leg of a space suit hanging out. “The suit?”

“You have a suit in there?” He jumps up, pushing his face to the glass, trying to examine the suit closely.

“It’s damaged. Been damaged forever. Since before I got up here. Yuri threw it in here so we wouldn’t get it mixed up with the others.” I say, continuing to search for something remotely useful.

“Damaged how?” One of his brows raises.

I shrug, “Does it matter how broken a broken suit is? I’m all for fixer-uppers, but that phrase is usually when referring to a house, or car...”

“Can you show me?”

“...or even that one time I got a bee in my bonnet about that rundown canal boat. Remember that?” I laugh.

“Alex?”

“Besides space suit design, really isn’t my forte.” I wouldn’t trust myself not to fuck it up . I prefer cold, hard steel, or carbon fibre, even plain old silicone. “What even is a space suit made from? Nylon-fibreglass blend?”

“Alex. Breathe.”

I turn to face him, taking a deep breath.

“Show me the suit.”

A snarky retort is on the tip of my tongue, until I see it - excitement flicking across his face, and something else. Relief?

Does he think this could actually get us out of here ?

My legs burn, muscles protesting as I push myself up, gently gliding over to the locker and its strewn contents. My body complains as I pull the suit from the locker, ignoring the stitch forming in my side.

It’s not heavy, not in space. If I had to guess, I would say the oxygen in the room has dropped enough that each breath has my lungs straining to get enough O2 to keep my

muscles in peak working order.

Exhaustion is setting in. Or I got more banged up than I realised during all the excitement earlier.

I roll the suit around, inspecting it. It looks mostly intact, except for a severe tear in the leg.

“There's only one suit.” I point out, as I finger the torn edging of the fabric.

“One problem at a time.”

I turn back to him, my mouth dropping open, “Matthias, you cannot choose me over Chelenko.”

“Alex. Stop.”

“Just promise me, you'll get us both out.” I look down at Chelenko's slumped form.

He sighs, scrubbing his palm over his face. “Ja . I'll get you both out.”

“Matze?”

He looks up at me.

“What are we going to do about the tear in the suit?”

“One problem at a time.”

The thumping outside halts. Silence reigns.

Before the muffled noise of grinding flares up and echoes through Columbus. The vibrations trigger tension in my stomach.

The overhead lights flicker, once, twice, before dimming to nothing. A click sounds before the emergency lighting kicks in, bathing Columbus in an eerie green hue.

This is beginning to play out like a bad movie .

They really could breach the hull further.

“Matze!” I shout out, as I dump the suit and launch myself back to looting the racks for supplies.

“On it.” He disappears from view for a moment.

I cut one finger on something sharp on a tray of sterile equipment. “Fuck.” The blood beads, surface tension making it cling to my fingertips. I put it in my mouth to stop the bleeding.

“If my options are running out of air,” and slowly drifting into an endless sleep, “or being ripped out into space,” where it's a race between all the fluid forcibly escaping my body, freezing, and asphyxiation, “ then I choose sleep, please.”

“We’re getting you out of there, Alex.” Matthias’ voice is firm, unwavering.

That is when I happen upon the holy grail.

I raise up the bright blue duct tape, giving it a quick kiss, before I'm back over to the still-sealed doorway. I wriggle my way into the suit, ignoring the burning in my ribs – at this point, all of me is one giant bruise anyway – and slide myself in up to my waist.

A broken suit is better than no suit , I remind myself as I take my blue miracle tool and wrap tape around the open rip on the suit's leg.

Round and round.

Again, and again.

Until it feels tight against my shin. Ignoring the throb as my circulation fights against the restriction.

Round again.

One more for good measure, continuing until the end of the roll peels away from the cardboard cylinder.

I slap my shin, one last wallop to make sure it's good and stuck. I flex my leg, testing the structural integrity of my quick fix.

"Matze, I'm ready to try the suit now." I give him a small smile through the thick glass, hoping I don't look half as unhinged as I feel. The low oxygen is really getting to me.

My arms strain as I lift the helmet up over my head, slotting it into place. Stupid anaerobic muscles struggling to complete the most basic of tasks. I twist it clockwise, waiting for the telltale click and soft hiss of airflow.

"Sweet sweet O<sub>2</sub>, come to me."

It doesn't come.

"Fuck. It won't seal."



“I know who can help.”

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Yuri hurtles down the hallway, landing in a crouch beside me, his lips pursed in a determined line. “You got a plan?” He asks, eyeing Alex and Chelenko on the other side of the hatch.

I nod.

“Tell me about the damaged suit.”

He frowns, rubbing the nape of his neck, making a show of tilting his head side to side.

“Leg torn clean through. Comms and suit controls non-responsive. No clue if internal thermostat is working, and helmet don't seal.” He looks back at me, concern in his eyes. “I wouldn't trust on spacewalk.”

“I don't need it for a spacewalk.”

His lips turn up in a smile, relief marring his features before he turns to me again, frowning. “What do you need it for?”

I look back to Alex, who gives me a soft smile. Her eyes heavily lidded with exhaustion. Already half clad in her damaged spacesuit.

“I'm going to come in and get you out.”

???

“So, you got a plan then?” Clayton asks, kicking this impromptu meeting off to a start.

“Ja .” I glide back and forth the length of the module, from the food pantry, all the way over to the drink dispensers.

“Care to enlighten the rest of us?”

“The vents are working right?” I ask. Pesquet nods. “We’re going to depressurise the hallway.”

Yuri nods, stroking his bearded chin. “That would let you open the hatch to Columbus.”

Everyone looks down at the suit in the middle of our little huddle with obvious hesitation as their eyes drag over the others in the room.

“What do you need?” Clayton asks.

“There's a damaged suit in the lab. I need us to figure out how Alex can repair it with what she has on hand.”

“That's—”

“It doesn't have to be perfect, just needs to last nine minutes.”

“Nine minutes?” Matherson echoes.

I nod, “I have calculated that’s how long it will take me to get down the hallway,

open the hatch, pull them out and slam it closed behind us.”

“I should go.” Luca volunteers.

“ Auf keinen Fall. I’m going.”

“ Ja , let the Kid risk his life.” Rieter chimes in.

“My plan ,” My wife. “I’m going . ”

“Fine. I’ll fix the suit. What does she have access to in there?” Rieter asks the room.

Matherson scrolls through her datapad for the lab inventory.

“Might be a few hours out of date, they were doing maintenance before this kicked off.” At my glare, she swallows and looks down again.

“Solder, soldering irons, stir friction welder, oxygen masks, sterile tubing, scalpels, clamps, dust sheets, filters, beakers, pipettes, duct tape—”

“Got it.” He shoots me a serious look as he rises. “Let’s go get your wife.”

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Where’s Matze?” Reiter doesn’t answer me.

“I haven’t seen him for over an hour, although time is hard to gauge inside this metal coffin.” I laugh awkwardly. “What even is the time? All the consoles are locked out in here.”

I continue, desperate to fill the silence.

“Security protocols.” I force a laugh. “What the bloody hell do they think they need to protect from inside a room with no atmosphere is beyond me.”

“Are you finished?”

I fidget in my suit. My lower leg throbs beneath its duct tape bondage.

Reiter snorts. “Matthias is busy.”

“Busy?”

“He’s suiting up.”

“Woman, focus on the task.” Reiter barks through the glass.

I roll my eyes. Sir, yes, sir.

I lay out my soldering iron on the table, along with the rest of my supplies.

The air is starting to thin in here, each breath harder than the last. I don't know the full plan, but either way I think that five hours were an overly ambitious estimation.

At least getting to work, having a plan, it is invigorating. It spurs me on.

A few finishing touches and I'll be....

“Done,” I call out.

Un-bloody-believable. I'm surrounded by millions of pounds worth of equipment, and in the end, duct tape and solder is going to save my life.

“Fertig ?” Reiter looks up from the datapad. “Show me,” he demands.

I groan, lugging my suit-clad self over to the door. My O2 levels have dropped so low that every movement, however small, is a fight to make my limbs enact.

He inspects my handiwork before relenting. “Any water in there you can use to test the seal?”

My eyes cast over the refrigerated units along the back. The metal cabinets above are open, with the contents now strewn about. Half-broken beakers and measuring cylinders bob about in the weightlessness of space. Long gone are the fluids they might have contained.

I sigh, defeated.

Reiter gives the suit another once-over. “Ja . It'll do.”

Just the confidence boost I needed.

“What now?” I ask.

He frowns at me, his oval spectacles sliding down his nose as it wrinkles. “Put the helmet on. Natürlich . ”

He rolls his eyes as if I’m dense and not his intellectual equal.

Hell, he’s never even once spoken to me with anything but disdain, not sure why the threat of death hanging over our heads would change anything.

“But Chelenko...” I trail off as I look over at our fallen comrade.

He’s growing paler. The black, mottled bruising across his stomach is worse. Darker. Spreading.

I worry there’s internal bleeding. But realistically, what can I do about it inside here? Nothing.

Except try to get us both out of here, ideally in one piece, and live long enough for Doctor Hadfield to patch us back together.

I stare down at my duct-taped leg. “Is this really the best—”

“Put the helmet on.” Reiter barks again.

“We’re getting Chelenko out too, right?”

Silence.

“Matze promised.” I prompt again, seeking confirmation. Needing it before I agree to this.

“ Ja, Ja. Chelenko too. Put the helmet on.”

He watches me as I check the tape is holding before I reach for the helmet. I lift it up and over my head, slotting it into place. It clicks, but it doesn't lock .

I turn to Reiter again. “It won’t lock.”

He rolls his eyes as if that were obvious. “You know how to solder, richtig ?” He raises a brow at me.

He knows I do. But I’ll let the snark slide.

Taking a deep breath, I take the soldering iron in hand.

With one hand, I hold the helmet in the locked position, and solder it shut with the other.

Immediately, there's a hum as fresh oxygen starts to circulate.

I take a deep breath. Another. A few more.

I start to feel better, like a shot of caffeine after a long night at the lab.

I look over to Chelenko's prone body, then over to the door. “Now what?”

“Move Chelenko as close to the door as you can.”

“On it.” I reposition him, feet aimed at the hatch.



“Place the oxygen mask over his face and attach the tubing.”

Mist fills the room as the vents pour out more oxygen. I think oxygen?

I look at Chelenko. He coughs but then snores deeply. I quickly adjust the straps of the face mask around his head, connecting the tubing to it and tuck the other end into his pocket to stop it trailing behind.

“Done!” I call out.

“Wait here.” He turns and retreats up the corridor.

“What?” I demand, attempting to crane my neck to see up the corridor beyond the glass window. “Wait here? That’s all I get? ”

The room grows colder, even through the suit, which isn’t a great sign for the internal temperature regulator.

The computer chimes “ Depressurisation in progress.”

“Wait. Tell me the plan again.” The comms control on my arm blinks back a no signal symbol.

“Perfect.”

I bang against the sealed door.

“What the fuck is happening?” I shout. The sound echoes in the suit, ringing in my ears.

I knew this suit was a dud, but I didn’t realise it was actual garbage. I’m surprised it’s

not been incinerated to make space for something of actual value. Space is a premium commodity.

“ Depressurisation Complete. ” The computer finishes, the chirpy voice almost comical considering I am one small step from death, and the cold embrace of space.

“They know what they’re doing. Matze is coming.” I repeat as a mantra to myself. “Everything is okay.”

It doesn’t feel okay. Tears would be tracking down my cheeks if I had any moisture in my body to spare. My stomach churns. Acid burns up my throat, threatening escape.

Thuds vibrate through the metal of the door. They’re coming from the hallway outside, growing nearer until a suit is at the door. White padded arms tapping at the console. The door clicks. The internal magnetic lock mechanism slides open. I wait with bated breath as the hatch swings open.

“Alex?”

“Here,” I call out, grabbing one side of the makeshift stretcher Chelenko is wrapped up in. His skin appears disturbingly teal against the white of my spacesuit’s glove. The rest of him is pale and washed out by the green emergency lighting.

Matthias crouches down, checking the oxygen mask over Chelenko’s face. He follows the tubing down to his pocket and attaches a canister to the end, placing the oxygen tank beside Chelenko.

He takes a sudden deep inhale. A little warmth returns to his cheeks as he continues to breathe. His chest rises and falls evenly as if asleep.

His extremities, however, are quickly purpling. His fingertips appear almost black. Necrotic.

Matthias turns to me.

“You came.”

“I promised I would.”

He gives my arm a squeeze before he bends to grab the other end of Chelenko’s bundled form, removing the velcro holding it in place.

The whole thing lifts, floating a few inches off the metal wall. He is starting to look more purple. Blue veins trace across his skin. Blisters form along his bare arms and exposed chest. I tuck his arms within the fabric, hoping it has a medical benefit instead of simply visually reassuring me.

We drag him out into the hall. No screams of pain this time. I’m not sure if the silence is better.

Matthias releases his side of the make-shift stretcher a few steps past the threshold. He bolts back to the hatch, tapping at the console to reseal the lab door.

The hatch moves. Painfully. Slowly. Sliding back into place with a firm clank.

We wait for the tell-tale metallic clunk as the magnetic locks engage.

The silence stretches between us, nothing but my deep breaths and a machine hum.

Click.

“Pesquet, now,” Matthias shouts.

“Repressurisation commencing .” The computer chirps.

The suit starts to feel heavier again.

I look over to see Matze holding Chelenko, pushing him closer to the end of the corridor. The hatch opening there is now firmly closed.

“Atmosphere secure .”

The hatch ahead is thrust open.

Doctor Hadfield rushes forward, soaring. She lands beside Chelenko, med-kit in tow. Her hands glide over him, searching. She chews on her bottom lip when she reaches the wire cutters.

“Stretcher.” She calls over her shoulder as she rummages through the med-kit. Pulls out a syringe. She taps her comms, “1mg adrenaline injected at 0947.” She stabs it into his chest, dropping the spent syringe. It floats. She starts chest compressions.

She adjusts herself, tucking her feet under the handlebars to steady herself as she looms straight down over him. She pauses, leaning down to breathe into his mouth.

“One, two, three...” She counts. Pushing her feet against the metal walls to plunge down on his chest. “...four, five, six.”

Pesquet arrives. Luca helps her with the stretcher as they place it beside Chelenko’s body. Not body. He’s going to pull through this.

At thirty, the doctor leans down again to give him two more breaths, puffing into his

open mouth.

“Move him on three. One, two, three.”

Between the three of them, they shift Chelenko over to the proper stretcher. He doesn't make a sound, which has me panicking. The air inside my suit feels thinner.

Doctor Hadfield climbs onto the stretcher, tucking her feet under the metal frame as she straddles Chelenko's waist. Being careful not to nudge the wire cutters, she starts up chest compression again, continuing to count from where she left off.

“Let's get him out of here.” She looks to Luca, who nods and grabs the end of the stretcher, steering them down the corridor. He glances back at me, smiling, before Pesquet barks a command at him.

My throat tightens. I need to get out of this suit. I paw at the helmet, but it's welded shut.

“Alex, Alles is gut ?” Matthias comes into view, he has the helmet off his suit, which just makes me panic more.

“I can't breathe.” I choke out.

His brows furrow as he reaches for the solder clasp the helmet shut. Part of it crumbles in his hand, but the seal stays firmly locked. I gulp back the bile racing up my throat and threatening to ruin the inside of the suit.

My lungs burn. My dry throat hurts, as harsh as broken glass on gravel. Matthias grabs me by the shoulder, forcing the suit's console towards his face.

“ Scheisse .”

Without a second's hesitation, he rips the duct tape holding the torn leg of the suit together.

I continue to gulp, desperate for air. My vision is blurring. Matthias' handsome face becomes harder to focus on as the black in my periphery grows closer, trying to envelope me in darkness .

A second later, I feel a sting on my arm, metal slices through my skin, and then a breath.

A small breeze crosses my face as I breathe deep the cool air.

Matthias pulls off the gloves of his suit, discarding them. He pries something metallic beneath the lip of my helmet and the visor. The lid flips open. I lurch forward, throwing up all over his lap. The bile clumps together in an ever-growing, swirling, green and yellow sphere.

He rubs soothing rhythmic circles along my spine, the touch muffled through the thick fabric, but it's still nice. Familiar. Comforting.

He brushes my hair back from my face, holding it as my stomach continues to empty itself.

Nothing is left, and my body still convulses with each dry heave. My insides burn.

He doesn't speak.

And I appreciate the quiet reassurance his presence brings.

"I'm sorry." I look at him, his suit is painted with sick. "I ruined your suit," I say as I wipe away the tears streaming down my face. Snot bubbles out of my nostrils.

“I think I can forgive you.”

He dries my eyes, wiping away the tears, and snot, and God knows what other kind of bodily fluids I'm leaking.

One deep breath at a time. I rest my head against the chest of his suit. Listening as the clamour of the crew grows distant.

Slowly, I feel calm after the storm.

Someone moves towards us, their feet clattering off the metal footholds.

“How are you doing, Kiddo?” Clayton asks. I look up to see his hand resting on Matthias' shoulder, and a deep crease in his brow.

“Surviving.” We both answer.

I sit up, rubbing the bulky sleeve of the suit against my mouth before I smile at Matze. He smiles back, and then we both laugh.

Clayton frowns down at us, opens his mouth to speak, but simply shakes his head.

He grimaces at the swirling ball of vomit. Ripping off one of the waterproof fire containment bags from the wall, he utilises it to catch the fluids for disposal. Protecting the nearby electronics from any water damage and a potential mess.

Not like we can air this place out like a car when someone gets travel sick.

I can't help the laughter that bubbles up inside me. Hysteria finally taking hold .

I laugh. And I laugh and laugh, until my chest hurts. Tears stream down my face. My

cheeks ache from all the smiling.

This is what life should feel like. Laughter, happiness, and hope.



### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next few hours blur together, like trying to recall a good night out but only summoning a few key moments. And just like the morning after, I feel hungover.

My throat is a desert. My tongue clings to the roof of my mouth. My skull throbs, and I might be imagining it, but I swear there's a pulsing sting to my upper left arm. It's hard to tell when everything aches, and right now, I'm too exhausted to care - bone wearily so.

I'm like a bear emerging from hibernation, all bleary-eyed and trying to make sense of my surroundings. And just like a bear, my stomach growls, calling out for food after a long winter.

There's a warmth enveloping me. My head rests on something soft, my arm is cradled between a warm chest and a firm hand lazily stroking fingers along my skin.

"That's nice," I say, my voice cracking.

I don't remember how I got here, but I do remember reaching out to hold Matthias' sleeve, in a silent plea for him to stay. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to keep him near, comforting even.

"Alex?" I hear my name .

Which is probably why my mind drifts in sleep, and I dream of before.

Before the constant bickering and the long nights alone.

When he would work from home and sit on the couch with me beside him, my feet in his lap, whilst I lived a thousand lifetimes vicariously through the pages of a book. Back when we were happy.

“Are you awake?”

I force myself into cognisance. My eyes are dry. I can taste the remnants of salty tears on my lips. “Matze?”

Movement beside me rattles against metal, and then I feel arms around me, a gentle hand stroking along my spine.

I bury my face into his chest, inhaling deeply the familiar scent of him.

Manly musk mixed with... I take another deep breath, sniffing as I extract the crusty sleep from the corner of my eyes.

“You’re safe.” He reassures, his voice still husky with sleep.

I grasp clumps of his t-shirt between my fingers, pulling myself closer. I scrunch my eyes tight, worried I’ll be back behind the airlocked door if I open them.

“Is this real? Or am I dead?”

He chuckles beneath me, my head rises and falls with his breath. I look up at him. He’s...

“Luca?” I ask, rubbing the sleep from my eyes .

He smiles. “Of course. Who were you expecting?” His smile slips a little as he realises what I thought, who I thought I was in the arms of.

“It’s good to see you without a hatch between us,” I say with a humourless laugh.

“You had us all worried.” His wide smile returns. “How are you feeling?”

“All good.” I stretch out my sore, stiff joints, my shoulder pops with the strain.

“Oof.” He rushes forward, concerned. “Just stiff. How long have I been out?”

Where’s Matthias?

I want to know. I need to know. But I can’t bring myself to ask. Luca is here, and that’s important. He’s important.

“Sixteen hours, sleeping beauty .” He lifts my hand to his lips, opening it to place a kiss along my palm. A shiver of pleasure shoots through me.

“Wow,” I say.

“It was a long time. Doctor Hadfield said you were well, but...”

“I needed the rest.” I offer.

“Esattamente .” He smiles softly, his eyes closing slowly. He looks tired, and guilt eats at me.

“How long did you sit with me?”

And why isn’t Matthias here?

Luca reclines back a moment to shrug the blanket from his shoulders. “I’ve been here for about four hours; before that, it was... him .” He says ‘him’ almost reluctantly.

“Thank you for staying with me.”

“Of course, Fiore .”

I nod numbly. Tears form in my eyes. Luca pulls me towards him. He lets me cry into his chest, until his t-shirt has a wet patch the size of my palm.

The tips of his fingers trace soothing swirls along my back, tenderly massaging the tension away. He runs a finger up my spine, shockwaves of pleasure trailing behind it. I shiver, and mistaking me for cold, he pulls me in closer, wrapping me in his strong arms.

I sneak a glimpse up at his handsome, sleepy face, to be met with his piercing brown eyes, already watching me.

I lick my dry lips, and his eyes shoot down, following the motion.

Savouring the attention, I draw it out by slowly sliding my tongue across my top lip.

I push up on one elbow, bringing myself closer.

His gaze struggles to decide between my mouth and my eyes.

We’re so close. My chest heaves with each breath as my breasts push tight against his firm chest. His arms encase me in his grasp.

Our breath mingles. I can’t help but think about how mine must smell awful, but he doesn’t seem to care. Not remotely.

He looks at me hungrily, and I am ready to be devoured. He leans forward, our noses bump slightly. Closing his eyes, he inhales deeply, resting his forehead against mine before he starts to pull away.

I don't want to be alone.

"I am glad you're okay, Alex." I blink, confused at the sudden shift. "Let me call the Doctor to check you over." He moves towards the door. "Hadfield," He calls out.

"Wait, Luca," I say softly.

He pauses to turn back to me. "You are beautiful, Fiore. But the next time I touch you, it will be because you asked me to. Right now, you have too much adrenaline clouding your senses."

"Oh," I reply lamely. He's right. My mind is cloudy, but as the fog clears, there is only one person I want, and he's not here.

Luca squeezes my hand. "I am so glad you're alive." He smiles sadly.

A gentle rapping sounds, before the panel slides open, a blonde head pokes inside, destroying what was left of our intimate moment, and using up just about the last inch of space in here.

"It's me." Doctor Hadfield's gentle voice rings out.

I sit up, trying to reorient myself and bashing my elbow against the stretcher I'm strapped to. Luca doesn't speak, just adjusts himself, coming to lean against the stretcher.

"Ciao, Doctor Hadfield. How's the patient?" Luca asks.

I freeze, my whole body tensing as I remember dragging Chelenko's lifeless purple body from the lab.

"Is he—" I start.

The doctor holds her hand up to stop me. "I told you to call me Callie, remember?" Her head tilts to the side as she watches me nod numbly. "How do you feel?"

I laugh harshly. "Like I got hit by a bus."

She giggles. "That's a fair assessment."

She puts the end of the stethoscope on my chest, just dipping beneath the edge of my vest. The metal is cool against my skin. Closing her eyes in concentration, she listens before moving the stethoscope over to my back to repeat the process. Finally, she nods, smiling.

"Lungs sound great. Very healthy. You must do a lot of cardio."

My cheeks heat as thoughts of Luca peel through my mind. Naughty thoughts of our - ahem - more physical relationship.

I dropped him, and here I am back in his arms, using him for comfort, and yet pining after another man.

Shame fills me. I shuffle away from Luca, putting as much distance between us as this little bed allows. The movement forces his hand to drop from my side of the stretcher.

Callie is either oblivious to the tension brewing as she continues rambling on about taking blood, or she's well practiced in reading the room and keeping clear of the

drama.

“Make sure you’re drinking lots of fluids and getting a lot of bed rest.” She continues as she packs her implements back into her duffel bag.

She is tucking her stethoscope away when I reach out to grab her arm.

“How is Chelenko?” I swallow. “Did he make it?”

“You should be focusing on yourself. You were subjected to the atmosphere of space. Which may be a vacuum, but it certainly isn't sterile.”

“Please.” I implore her, clutching tighter to her the sleeve of her flight suit.

She takes a deep breath and smiles. “He’s stable—”

“He’s not dead.” I gasp.

“Oh no. Very much alive, although not through lack of trying. Definitely one of the hairier situations I’ve been put through.”

“Can I talk to him?” I ask.

Perhaps I’m foolish, but I feel like nearly dying together brought us closer, like maybe we’re friends now. Or, at least, he’s an older, annoying brother with some grumpy yet worldly wisdom to impart. I could really do with some worldly wisdom right now.

Callie’s eyes drop, she worries her bottom lip before speaking. “He hasn’t woken up yet. ”

Oh.

She squeezes my arm gently, reassuringly. “His body was struggling. I had to put him in a medically induced coma. Don’t worry, I’m monitoring him closely. He’s slowly improving.”

I nod numbly.

Wait...Every two hours?

“Oh, right. Sixteen hours.”

“Approximately,” Callie says.

No wonder my throat feels like the Sahara, and my stomach growls like a sabretooth. I rub at the sting in my left arm, a bandage keeping me from scratching at the source.

“Before I forget, antiseptic wash for the cut. Make sure you clean your arm with it twice a day. Use it until it runs out.” She snaps shut the lid of her bag.

“And, if you’re feeling up to it, the crew is waiting in the mess if you want to come say hi.

” She leans in closer, “A certain someone especially has been waiting not so patiently to see you.”

Matze . Obviously, she means Matze.

I still don’t know what to say to him, but maybe he’ll be happy to wait til we’re back on solid ground.



“Oh, there's something else you should know.” Callie starts.

“Hasn't she been through enough?” Matthias glares at her from the doorway. My heart skips at the sight of him.

“She deserves to know.”

“What? Tell me,” I say.

Callie grabs her med kit with one hand, stretching to full height before she gives him a stern look - the first time I've seen her anything but large, innocent eyes and bubbly smiles.

“Either you tell her, or I will.” She turns back to me with a smile. “There's a crew meeting in an hour.” And with that, she bids me farewell with a finger wave and leaves.

I turn to Matthias. “Well...?” He squirms under my gaze. “What was that all about?”

He sighs in defeat. Scrubbing his palm over his handsome face before he turns to me and holds me by my shoulders. “I was hoping to spare you all this a little longer.”

“All what?” I look to Luca, who fidgets beside me.

“I didn't want you to feel trapped—”

I hold my hand up to cut him off. “If this is about Luca, he and I can discuss it back on Earth.”

“I hope he's patient.” He snorts.

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Luca sighs. “It’s Earth. There’s been a development.”

My frown deepens.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I knew this was too bloody good to be true.

Why change the story of a lifetime just because he claims to have changed. This is just like before - secrecy in the guise of protection.

News flash - I don't need protection. This isn't Victorian-era England. I don't need a man to hold my hand and make the tough decisions on my behalf, sparing my weak feminine sensibilities. I can handle more than he gives me credit for.

I push onwards along the main corridor and head towards... Cupola? Leonardo? I don't know where. I don't care where. I just need space.

I hear Matthias thundering behind me. That arsehole . When was he going to tell me that my trip home had been delayed? Indefinitely .

Rage blooms inside me, boiling my blood, and pulling tight my last nerve, ready to snap at the very next something that comes between me and answers. Or someone, I quickly realise as a hand grips my elbow.

I whirl around, ready to punch Matthias right in his handsome face.

I realise my mistake mere seconds before my clenched fist collides with Matherson's once delicate features.

"Fuck me, Peake. You've got a mean left hook." She clutches at her nose, wiping one

hand on the leg of her jumpsuit, leaving a smear of red behind.

“Last time I do a favour for Cassidy,” she mutters as she pinches the bridge of her nose, instinctively holding her head back as if that might stem the flow of blood streaming from her nostrils in tiny crimson bubbles.

“Sorry. I thought you were Matthias.”

She raises a brow but otherwise nods understanding.

“Clayton wanted me?” I ask.

Her eyes narrow at that.

She has always hated the familiarity Clayton, Anderson, and I have, despite her being ten years my junior. Hell, Clayton’s a bloody old man. Does she think he didn’t have a life before she popped into it?

He probably has jeans older than her.

Had jeans older than her. I guess with no home, none of us have anything now.

Matherson sighs. “Damn it. Don’t cry. You punched me, if anything, I should be crying.”

I swipe at my cheeks, brushing the moisture away. She awkwardly pats my shoulder with one hand, whilst the other holds her still bloody nose .

“Look, if anyone asks, I will deny it, but...” She pauses. “Do you need a hug or something?”

I shake my head, and the look of relief on her face is palpable.

“Not that the guy can’t do with a good one, two, to the face” She accents her words with a quick jab in the air. “Lord knows he deserves it after the attitude he’s been throwing around, but why are you upset with him?”

“Attitude?”

“Yeah, the whole ‘if she dies, I die’ thing he had going on.” She rolls her eyes. “As if none of us are qualified to get an airlock open. One of us would have figured it out eventually.” She laughs nonchalant to the true terror of being the one trapped.

“He said he would die if I died?”

“Yeah—” At my wide eyes, she pauses. “Look, it’s none of my business.” She glances behind herself before turning back to me. “...but Nespoli’s a nice guy, and this Müller seems like—.”

“You’re right.” I cut her off. “It is none of your business.”

I’m not going to get lectured on my love life by someone who has only been legally allowed to drink for a couple years.

She scowls at me, waving her hand. “Forget I said anything. I’ll tell Clayton you survived.” She turns to leave before pausing. “You and Müller deserve each other.” And she pushes off, heading back up the corridor from where she came.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Thuds echo off the metal walkway. I see Müller round the corner, frowning as he passes Matherson, before he spots me. “Alex. Wait. Please.”

I turn and carry on, hoping that the crew meeting will at least delay this conversation.

He catches up with me just as I reach the T junction before the entryway to the kitchen area, placing one hand on my arm. I glare at him until he removes it.

“Alex. You want me to apologise.”

“That would be a good start—”

“I won't. I was protecting you. You almost died.”

This asshole. He hasn't changed one iota.

I poke him in the chest hard. “Listen, carefully.”

Unexpectedly, he waits, and it catches me off guard, leaving the silence to linger between us.

He watches me, waiting patiently. Earnestly.

“I'm listening, I promise,” he assures.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Alex, please.”

To my complete surprise, tears leak from his eyes, the beads of moisture collecting in his lashes.

My heart lurches at the sight. Reminding me of the one and only time I've seen him cry before.

The night I left. Like a rogue wave, the memories of that night crash over me, dragging me down into the deep.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Never leave me again.”

Matthias crashes his lips to mine. Clutching me against him. “I won’t survive it.” He whispers against my mouth.

I never meant to hurt him.

“I was making you unhappy.” Wasn’t I? “I thought it would be better for both of us.”

I moved on. Made a new life. Found new happiness. Hadn’t I?

I realise now that it had all been a plaster, barely patching over the gaping hole in my heart.

I pull back, fighting against his grasp. He clings to me only a moment longer before releasing me.

“I am so sorry, Alex.” His eyes glisten. “I should have stopped you. Begged you.” He swallows. “You have no idea how many times I have relived that night.”

“You’re here now,” I say.

“Always.” He strokes the side of my face. I lean into his touch. “Taking you for granted was the worst mistake



I ever made. Never again. I'm here. Forever and always. However, you'll have me. ”

I have my arms around his neck, forcing him down to my level. Before he can blink, my mouth is on his. Kissing him hard. Coaxing his lips apart. My tongue darts inside to play with his.

His firm hands hold me, clutching me closer. Firm but gentle. Always so gentle with me. Loving.

I pull back, gasping, “I need you, Matze.”

He rests his forehead against mine, a small, satisfied smile tugging at his lips.

“I need you too, Alex . I always did.”

Sweet, but clueless as always.

“No. I need you.” I push one hand between us to cup him through his joggers. “Now.”

Pushing him back against the wall, my tongue delves into his mouth to dance with his.

How could I forget how perfectly we fit together ?

I wrap my legs around his waist, and his warm palms hold me close. His fingers stroke along my spine.

“Someone could see us.” He whispers against my lips.

“Let them watch.”

His pupils dilate.

I lick his mouth, my tongue gliding along the seam of his lips, dipping in to taste him. He moans into my mouth.

I slide my hands up his chest, fisting clumps of his t-shirt as I deepen our kiss .

I grind my hips against him. Needing friction. The lack of gravity makes it difficult to stay as close as I want. Each bump pushes me away again. Noticing my frustration, he wraps his arms around me, slotting one foot beneath a metal handlebar to tether us together.

His arms keep my hips pinned to his, and as I grind against him, he hardens. His joggers begin to strain towards me.

They say good things come to those who wait.

They don't know what they're bloody talking about .

My body is on fire. It's been three long years without him. I'm not waiting another moment.

I thrust up his t-shirt, sliding my hands up his abdomen to his chest, enjoying the softness as my hand brushes across his chest hair.

“Alex, let me take you somewhere private.” I silence him with one finger pressed to his lips.

“How about you let someone else be in control for once?” I playfully nip at his bottom lip. His eyebrows raise, eyes wide as he registers my words.

“What do you have in mind?” His voice is coarse.

“You’ll find out.”

And with that I slip one hand beneath the waistband of his joggers, palming his cock. It jumps at my touch. A moan escapes his lips .

The skin is smooth and warm against my hand. Strokable. I want to snuggle my face against it.

His hands cup my head as I rub myself against him. Nuzzling my nose into his balls, letting his half hard cock lay across my cheek. I inhale him. Snuggling in deeper. Savouring the sensation as his cock hardens against me.

He groans my name. “Alex.”

Noise resonates from the crew in the dining area. Overloud talking mingles with the metal clashing of food containers.

I push Matze back. He doesn’t fight but instead reaches for one of my hands, weaving our fingers together, holding firmly.

We glide down into the Leonardo module. To the very bottom. Hidden amongst the crates and bags of supplies. He rotates us, shielding me from any passersby with his large body.

I reward his thoughtfulness with a kiss, right on the tip of his cock, my tongue dipping beneath the foreskin. His half-hooded eyes are fixed on me.

“You’re a goddess. ”

“Keep looking at me like that, I might let you worship at the altar.”

His breath shudders as I pull him into my mouth, sucking him deep. My cheeks hollow until his cock hits the back of my throat. I swallow instinctively, causing him to hiss as I feel my throat clench around the tip of him.

“ Schiesse . Alex. Where did you learn that?” His breathing is jagged.

I start to move now. Up and down. Sucking. His head falls back as he groans. His cock grows, hardening in my mouth, against my tongue. I can taste precum.

With one handful of hair and another holding my waist, he pulls me up to his face. Our lips collide, his tongue fucking my mouth like I wish his cock would. He tugs at my flight suit, fumbling with the zip that only reaches to my belly button.

One fist still grips my hair, pulling back slightly, the bite of pain delicious as he makes me arch up into him.

He takes one nipple into his mouth, suckling on the tip as he rolls his tongue over it.

I moan. His other hand squeezes my arse.

His hips thrust forward to rub his cock against me through the fabric, gifting me moments of delicious friction before my hips drift away.

He paws at my flight suit. “I need this gone.” His husky voice demands.

He nibbles at my collarbone, my neck, trailing kisses along my jaw, as he pushes it off my shoulders, exposing more flesh for him to kiss.

I wriggle out of the top half, my bare breasts assisted by low gravity to form delicious

globes. Pert little nipples pointing up and begging for attention.

Matze's eyes burn as he takes me in, his head dipping down to lather attention on one nipple, his hand gently kneading the other breast, before he switches his attention to the other.

With my arms free, my flight suit is easily pushed down, all the way down to my hips. Exposing me. He pushes his face between my breasts, inhaling deeply. Groaning as he rests his forehead against me.

“You smell so good.”

He kisses the skin before his tongue takes one long lick beneath one breast.

Another groan. “You taste so sweet.”

His lips trail kisses down my bare abdomen, pausing at my hip bones where the fabric of my flight suit sits bunched.

He watches me as he pushes the fabric down with one hand.

Kissing me along my mons pubis and further still, until he reaches the apex of my thighs.

He inhales deeply. Placing a gentle kiss along my closed folds.

“Lean back.” He demands, his warm breath tickling my pussy .

Using the somewhat soft duffel bag of supplies behind me as a pillow, I lean back, clutching the velcro straps.

He makes quick work of pulling my flight suit down so that it sits down by my ankles. He loops my legs around his neck.

His tongue flicks along my entrance, his nose brushing against the curls of my pubes.

Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I hold his head, pressing his face ever closer. “Your tongue is so warm.”

My thighs quiver either side of his head, warring with the need to clamp together.

“I need you inside me.”

“Gladly.”

He gives my pussy one last kiss. His tongue quickly dips inside before he backs up. A quick glance behind us, then his joggers are down. Rock hard cock on display.

“Alex, you don’t understand the effect you have on me.” He grabs my face with both hands, kissing me deeply. His tongue plays with mine, sending the taste of pussy dancing on my tongue.

With one hand, I guide him, lining us up. With one leg behind his waist, I nudge him closer, until the tip of his cock is pressed against my entrance. He presses forward, breaching me. Slowly. It is exquisite torture.

He reaches across me to grab the metal handlebar, using it to pull himself closer. Sinking deeper. Filling me. Inch by glorious inch. More and more.

Until he’s bottoming out. Balls deep.

He moans, hot breath fanning my face as he rests his forehead against mine. “I love

you, Alex.”

I tilt my face up, “I never stopped loving you, Matze.” I kiss him softly. He smiles against my lips.

I gasp as he starts to move. Slowly pulling out, just to thrust deep inside again. The obscene wet slapping sounds perfect.

“You’re so wet.” He groans as he bottoms out inside me once again. My juices leak down onto his balls as they slap against me again. Beads of moisture pool together, clinging to our joined flesh.

He pulls out again. Slamming home again, flinging the beads of moisture swirling in the air around us.

“You feel so good.”

My thighs start to quiver once more. Pleasure builds inside as my pussy flutters around his cock.

One hand strokes along my cheek, brushing away some sweat-plastered hair. “So beautiful.”

Leaning into his touch, I kiss his hand. Sucking one of his fingers into my mouth. Running my tongue along the full length before I nip, eliciting a deep moan from him.

I continue to suck his finger deeper into my mouth, working up and down his finger in time with his thrust.

“ Sheisse . I can’t.... last... longer.”

“Good, I want you to fill me.”

His motions turn jerky and erratic, as he pistons himself in and out of me. Our bodies collide, pushing us apart. He grabs my ass with his spare hand, clutching me to him as he chases the finish line.

He is so bloody close to pulling an orgasm from me.

Then he rips his hand above, slumping forward, his hips jerking back and forth in spurts as he takes my mouth with his. His tongue swirls with mine. Warmth blooms inside me as I clench around his cock as it shudders and tenses.

He laughs, “Am I dreaming?”

“Do you dream of me often?” I purr.

His eyes capture mine, burning with an intensity I have never known.

“ Always .”

My pussy flutters around his length as he slowly pulls out. I whimper aloud at the sensation of him leaving me. The emptiness it leaves behind.

Only for a moment before the room fills with my moans as his thick finger enters me. His warm palm cupping my pussy as his thumb rubs circles around my clit. I gasp.

“You didn’t think I’d forget to take care of you, did you?” He blows a stream of warm air across my clit. “I want to watch you come.”

He adds another finger. One at first. Stretching me wider. Pumping in and out.



“I know you can take more.”

He adds a second finger.

A third.

Using his cum as lube to finger fuck me to oblivion. The beads of it webbing between his fingers with each withdrawal, quickly swallowed again with each thrust.

“Fuck. Matze... please,” I beg.

I’m drenched and quivering. Desperate for release.

“A little more, mein Herz .” His straight, strong nose nuzzles along my navel before snuggling his face against my pubes. “You smell incredible.”

“Matze, please...”

“One more,” he demands.

Slowly, he pushes in a fourth finger.

An incredible feeling of fullness envelopes me as he stretches me wide. Until he meets resistance.

Slowly extracting his hand and pushing in again.

My pussy milks his fingers, slurping with each stroke. Our body fluids mingle. The small pale-white pearls rush to escape with each new thrust. Twirling in the air as they orbit our twined bodies.

I reach forward to catch a drop, open my mouth and clean my finger with my tongue.  
“Delicious.”

He groans. “So sexy.” He leans forward, his head inches away. “Now come for me”

I can feel my eyes roll back with each slurp, my pussy slowly swallowing his hand again and again. The pleasure builds again, so close to a crescendo.

My whole body tenses in anticipation.

“I’m so close.”

His lips clasp over my clit, sucking it into his mouth as his cum covered fingers stroke inside me.

I explode .

Stars dance behind my eyes. I gasp, collapsing against him. Riding the shockwaves. Gentle shudders run through me.

You haven’t felt truly boneless until you’ve had a mind-blowing orgasm in space.

Slowly, he removes his hand; obscene slurping echoes in the small space as he pulls each finger free. His handsome face watches me as I examine his hand, the perfect beads of moisture clinging between his fingers, like dew left on spiderwebs in the early morning.

“You look very beautiful like this.” He says as he admires my spent body .

“Thank you,” I murmur, snuggling my face against him. His chest rumbles with laughter.

“I should be thanking you, mein Herz .”

He kisses my head again, and I feel content for the first time in a long time. Snuggled in his arms, my head rests against his chest. I can feel the lull of sleep pull at me.

A crackle sounds around us.

“Matty? Check in .” Clayton’s baritone voice rings out overloud in our little pocket of sin, hidden behind the boxes and crates stored in Leonardo Module.

“Can this wait?”

“‘Fraid not. There’s been a development.”

Matthias groans, adjusting me against his chest.

“This better be good,” he mutters under his breath before flicking the comms back on.

“What is it?”

“We sent out a distress beacon hoping to make contact with Earth.”

“And?”

“We just got a reply.”

“We will be right there.”

“We?” Clayton asks.

“Alex and I.” He smiles down at me as he says my name.

“Copy that.”

Matthias adjusts himself before redressing me. He slides my flight suit back up my legs. Covering my shoulders, he zips me up just enough to cover my breasts but still give himself a nice view.

As he turns to leave, I pull him back. “Do you think they know?”

“That you’re sticky with my cum?” He asks, amused.

I frown at him.

“No, I doubt anyone realises anything. Everyone thinks you’re still asleep, unless Doctor Hadfield told them.”

“Are you worried?” He pauses, “Do you regret...?”

“No regrets. Just a little nervous.” I confess.

He grips my hand tighter, bringing it to his lips for a quick kiss.

“We will do it together.”

I can't help the smile that breaks out across my face.

I stop, pulling his arm back. “There’s one thing I need before we meet the others. ”

“Anything, mein Herz .”

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“ Lecker? ” Matthias asks.

I nod, moaning as I take another bite.

He chuckles as we make our way to the dining area. Our fingers entwined – one of his warm, large hands enveloping my much smaller one.

A tin is tucked under his other arm whilst I munch my way through my third Lebkuchen. Or was it my fourth? Fifth? I’ve lost count, but the delicious spices blend together perfectly. I hum in delight.

He frowns at me, shaking his head at my obvious foodgasm. I’ve been waiting for these for a good six months; pardon me for savouring the moment.

Up ahead, a jabber of voices spills out into the hallway, even over the droning sound of the air recyclers. As I turn the corner, no one pays us any mind. No one besides Luca.

His eyes glide down between us, settling on our latticed fingers. Before he quickly glances away.

My stomach clenches. I feel awful for the guy. Just because it wasn’t love doesn't mean what we had wasn’t special. We were friends, and it doesn't sit right with me to ditch him so suddenly.

“Ok, mein Herz ?” Matthias asks.

I smile up at him, nodding.

We enter further into central command.

The rest of the group are all leaning over the table, Reiter and Yuri are prodding at a screen in front of them, mumbling sounds of disagreement.

“It’s analogue. Look, here...” Matherson schools them, her finger pointing at the screen.

Aiko is meekly hanging back as she leans into Anderson. The only person missing is Dr Hadfield, and... I need to check on Chelenko.

He is one stubborn bastard. Roles reversed, I'm not sure I would have survived it.

A little squeeze of my hand has me tearing my attention away. As I look up, Matthias is looking back at me, his moss-green eyes twinkling in reassurance.

“You got this.” The edges of his eyes crinkle as he smiles, bringing the back of my hand to his mouth to lay a kiss along my knuckles.

Further inside the module, Clayton's voice calls out above the other babble. “Now, we’ve got bad news and bad news. What would you like first?”

I swallow harshly, my throat feeling itchy and dry.

“Guess we’ll start with bad then,” Matherson smirks.

Yuri nods, “Like ripping off bandage.”

Clayton rubs his chin, his fingers brushing against his coarse beard before he takes a deep inhale.

“As you all know, we have lost contact with Earth. We’re on our own out here.

No Houston. No nothing,” he leans back against the wall slightly, his fingers thrumming against the stainless steel.

“We sent out a distress call on all analogue frequencies. Hoping for...” he sighs, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“Something to get through. That was before we realised we were millions of light years from Earth.”

“Jeez. When you said bad, I didn’t realise you meant depressing.” Matherson rolls her eyes.

“Oh, it gets better.” Anderson chimes in.

Matherson's eyebrows climb higher up her forehead, her eyes wide.

“Yes, I was getting to that.” Clayton huffs. “We got a response.”

“Houston—”

“Not Houston.”

“Then who?”

“Seems the Chinese Space Station got ripped halfway across the universe, the same as us.”

“Tiangong Station?” Aiko perks up, swiping an obsidian lock behind her ear just for it to escape and climb above her again. “They were operational and manned. A small crew of three. ”

“Manned sounds right. Unfortunately, their response was too garbled to make any sense of it. Matty, perhaps you can take a crack at it.”

The crew notice us for the first time, loitering half in the doorway, our hands still clasped together.

“Welcome back, Peakey,” Anderson greets me with a warm smile. “You had us a little worried back there.”

I can feel heat flushing to my cheeks under the group's stares. Matherson is the first to look away, her eyes quickly shooting back to Clayton.

“I’ll take a look.” Matthias takes the datapad.

“We walk over to our neighbours and invite them inside. Dio knows we need more supplies. Half of the solar array is fucked.” Luca says.

“I wouldn’t mind some fresh air,” I add.

“That brings us to the worse news,” Clayton says.

“If this was the bad news, what's the worse news?” Matherson asks.

“Tiangong Station looks rough.”

“Rough...?” Aiko tilts her head to the side.



“Like a bull in a china shop.”

He brings up an image on his datapad. A grainy depiction of a space station.

Only a third has any obvious illumination from within, and even more disturbing is the back end – a T-shaped junction of metal jutting out into two airlocks designed for connecting to shuttles.

Significantly more advanced than our Soyuz docking procedures.

One side looks open, the hatch hanging wide off its hinges. That can't be right.

Beside me, Matthias is tapping at his datapad, sifting through the static on the message we received. His brows furrow as his eyes squint at the screen.

“I think I found something,” he hits play.

A deep voice breaks through the static, “ This is Commander... Yang Zhu of ..... Station... In case of... death–”

Screams rattle through the speakers.

The room drops to a deafening silence.

Heavy breathing and something that sounds eerily close to bones snapping. Just my overactive imagination. The trauma of the past days lingering as nightmares in the back of my mind.

Another snap. I flinch.

A shrill scream.

Metal clashing.

Static fills the void.

Air rushes back into the room as everyone takes an audible breath.

“What in the ever-loving fuck was that?” Matherson starts.

“Nothing good,” Clayton states.

Matthias swipes over the data pad once more .

“Wait. There’s more.”

We all pause, waiting with bated breath as a delicate voice whispers against the static.

“Give it here. I can make it louder.” Matherson snatches it from his hands, tapping across the screen. “There.”

“ ...is gone. I repeat. Do not look for us. Do not come for us. It’s not safe.... THIS IS A RECORDED MESSAGE. MESSAGE HAS BEEN SET TO REPEAT. MESSAGE DATE 21/05/2027. MESSAGE WILL NOW REPEAT. ”

I look down at my watch, the large hour hand ticking past the date in the background. Today is the 6th of April. 2025. “We left Earth days ago...” I breathe out. “How...?”

“Tiangong station must have arrived here before us,” Aiko answers calmly. I feel anything but calm.

“Long before us.” Matze’s mouth drops open. The whole crew stares in horror at the datapad.

“Two fucking years?” Yuri’s brows furrow. “Doing what?”

“Waiting. Surviving.” Pesquet offers.

“Pfft. Not well.” Yuri scoffs, directing our attention back to the grainy image of the station. A single light flashes orange on the far left airlock door.

“How is this possible?” Matherson asks, tapping the datapad again .

The message repeats in Chinese.

“It’s not,” Clayton assures, resting one palm on Matherson’s shoulder.

“It most assuredly is.” Reiter pipes up, a look of delight alighting his usually shrewd features. He immediately turns to Matthias. “I knew it”.

“Come now, Artur, this is hardly conclusive proof.” Matthias retorts.

He thrusts his finger in Matthias’ face. “Mark my words.”

“It is what we all have been thinking.” Reiter reaches for his datapad. “This is proof.”

“Proof of what?” Matherson asks.

“Time dilation. Natürlich .”

Clayton pats Matthias’ back. “How does that help us get back?”

“It doesn’t.” He sighs.

Clayton nods at me. “Without a better idea, I guess we’ll be taking the long way

home.”

The crew with return in

BLOOD IN THE AIR

Read on for a preview

### CHAPTER ONE

Four minutes. My patient has been dead for four minutes already, and I wait longer.

Every muscle is poised, ready for action. All I can hear is the gush of my blood pumping through my veins, rushing in my ears.

Thump.

Thump.

My whole body is wound tighter than a pocket watch. My palms are sweaty as I grip tighter at the med kit, my knuckles white against the black straps. 0945. I watch the minutes tick along on my watch.

I've never brought a patient back from death longer than six minutes, and that was a unique case – the body catalysing into a self-induced hibernation once the child's body hit the arctic waters. Six minutes under ideal conditions lead to that positive outcome.

I glance down at my wrist. 0946.

New patient. No medical background. NASA should have one on file, but NASA isn't here. I only know what I can see, what I could observe peering into Columbus through the two-inch strip of glass in the sealed hatch through the sealed hatch .

Male. Roughly 5 ft. 10. On the leaner side, I'd hazard 140lbs. Russian, Slavic

descent. Blood type... Let's start with O+ and hope for the best.

Ailments include a stab wound from a foreign object to the right iliac fossa, head injury, low oxygen levels, blood loss, and exposure to the vacuum of space, which brings all new issues to contend with.

Space may be a vacuum, but it's sure not sterile.

That's one of the reasons I'm up here, exploring the petri dish of bacterium the expanse has to offer.

Somehow, I hadn't quite expected my first twenty-four hours to pan out like this.

The clamour of the background comes to the foreground, the hissing of the ventilation struggling as it repressurises the module. The corridor is a tight fit for the four of us.

“ Atmosphere secure .”

No sooner than the computer chirps out confirmation, Yuri has his hands on the hatch, removing the probe's head and flinging it open as wide as possible in the narrow three-foot corridor.

I push forward, gliding to a halt just off from Chelenko's purpling body. Welts rise along his exposed flesh.

In my best attempt in zero-G, I drop to my knees and check over the patient. My hands glide over his face, his arms, checking his neck. No pulse. Another glance at my wrist. 0947. We are well past best-case scenarios now.

My hands continue lower, searching. I pause as they reach the wire cutters. I can already feel myself chewing at my lip – a terrible habit, only slightly more hygienic

and not as unsightly as picking the dry skin from them.

I rip open his jumpsuit, and the worn zipper groans in complaint. I take a few heated breaths against my cupped hands to warm them before I slide them down his chest, pulling the jumpsuit open wider.

A spiderweb of silvery, healed scars covers his skin like a map of past injuries, the scars thickening over keen points—this poor man. I can only hazard a guess at the kind of torture he has endured.

My practiced hands glide to the sternum, finding my mark.

“I need a stretcher,” I call over my shoulder as I rummage through the med kit, pulling out a syringe.

I tap my comms, relying on the comms recorder to track my notes, “1mg adrenaline injected at 0947.” I stab it in his chest, drop the spent syringe, and leave it to float as I start chest compressions.

I’m too used to my assistants knowing my every move, anticipating my every need, and ready to respond – snatching up discarded needles.

Counting up from one, I sing in my head. Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin’ alive. The tune keeps me on beat for compressions. At thirty, I pause, leaning down to breathe into his mouth before kneeling over him again.

Pesquet arrives. Luca helps her with the stretcher. They place it on the floor beside Chelenko’s cadaver. Not cadaver for long if I can help it .

At sixty, I lean down again to give him two rescue breaths, puffing into his open mouth. “Move him on three. One, two, three.” Between the three of us, we shift him over. He doesn’t flinch, twitch, or make a noise.

Zero stimuli to my touch.

With no time to lose, I clamber on top of the stretcher, straddling Chelenko, being careful to give the foreign object protruding from his abdomen a wide berth. My feet find a natural anchoring point tucked beneath the metal frame of the stretcher's sides.

Back to compressions. I plunge down on his chest with the full weight of my body and feel a crack, the vibrations running up my arms.

Fuck.

"Fractures to the costa verae three and four," I say to the recorder.

Continuing anyway, I adjust my hand placement to mitigate further damage, but even so, cracked ribs are better than death.

"Let's get him to med bay," I say with all the authority of the Head Surgeon. The reality is, I don't even know if this place has a med bay. I think I will be lucky if there's a well-stocked med box – not including what I brought up with me. I'll have to make do with any surgical equipment left over in one of the labs.

I look at Luca, who nods. He grabs the end of the stretcher and steers us down the corridor. I can hear Pesquet barking commands at him.

I look at my patient below, wondering if I'm actually witnessing the ruddiness slowly seep back into his cheeks. Or perhaps it's wishful thinking.

"Don't worry, Chelenko. I've got you," I grit out between ragged breaths as I continue singing 'Stayin' Alive' in my head.

Unsure if the rush of adrenaline coursing through me has me imagining the slight squeeze of fingers I feel weakly clutching my ankle.