Apogee

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Apogee

by OpalApparition

Summary

Shane Hollander is the youngest Commander in ISS history; straight-backed, closeted, and so tightly on his own leash that seven months in orbit with Ilya Rozanov have not produced a single crack in his composure.

Ilya Rozanov is the Russian cosmonaut who *should* have had his job, won't stop bouncing a tennis ball off the walls, and is still looking for a fissure. Thankfully, a solar storm finds it for him.

or: Near-death, zero gravity, and the wrong man's hands in exactly the right places.

A Cosmonaut!Ilya x Astronaut!Shane AU 🚀

Notes

Apogee

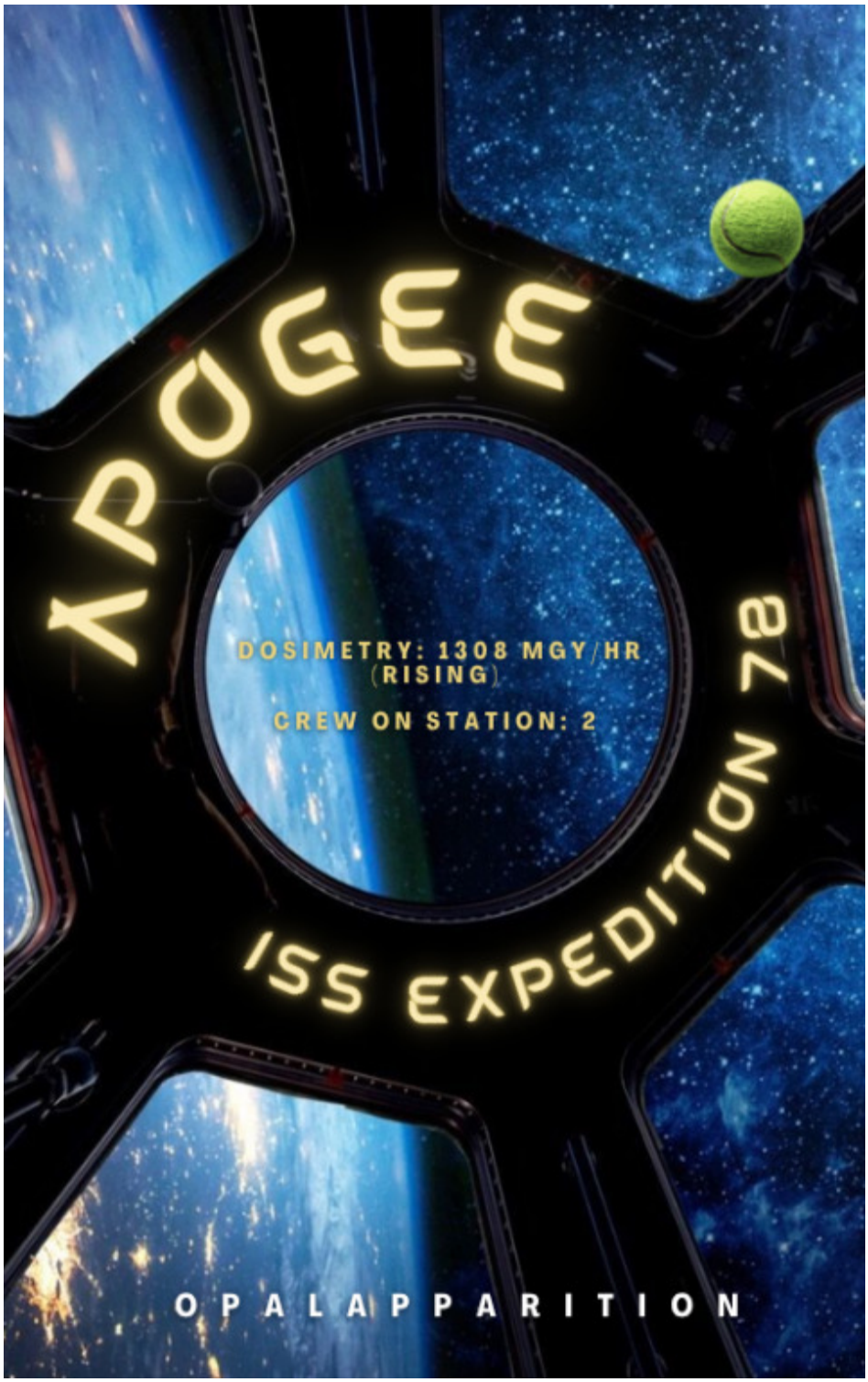
ap·o·gee
/ˈapəjē/
Noun
The point in the orbit of the moon or a satellite at which it is furthest from the earth.

This story is brought to you by my love of the stars, of science, and for all the AU's that are a little bit "too out there."

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: Apogee/Апогей by SilentConstellation
- Translation into Русский available: Апогей by masturblaine

Chapter 1: Space Oddity



ISS Expedition 78 | Flight Log | UTC 03:15 | MET +00.00 Dosimetry: 0.4 mGy/day (nominal)

Crew on station: 6

The growth plate on Sample 4 had clouded overnight.

Shane noticed it during his first pass through Destiny, the US lab, at 03:15 UTC, which was the middle of the crew's scheduled sleep period and the only time the station's American module belonged entirely to him.

Rose kept a strict schedule for the lab during waking hours—sample rotations, imaging sequences, centrifuge maintenance—and Shane respected the schedule because it was Rose's lab and Rose's science, and he was the Commander, not the principal investigator. They'd worked out how to share a workspace two years ago, during the eighteen months of pre-flight training at Johnson, back when they'd also been working out how to stop dating each other.

This wasn't working. It would never work.

The drawer where he kept that confirmation was the same one where he kept everything else he didn't look at directly; a drawer with no bottom, it turned out, because he kept filling it and it kept holding and he'd wondered whether the drawer was the point, whether he'd built his entire life around the architecture of a cabinet that existed only to stay shut.

He'd told Hayden about the breakup over a Sunday call, and Hayden had said *"Dude, that sucks, I'm sorry"* and then talked about his youngest's ear infection for twenty minutes, and Shane had been so grateful for the pivot that he'd looked up pediatric ear infections afterward so he could ask follow-up questions the next week and have something pre-planned to talk about.

That was the friend he was. The kind who researched your kid's ear infection so he'd never have to talk about his own feelings.

Nobody dated in microgravity. Nobody expected him to want anyone. Four hundred kilometers of vacuum was overkill, probably. A studio apartment in Gatineau would have accomplished the same thing. But the ISS had better views and nobody asked why you were single. The station gave him the one thing Earth never had: a legitimate reason to want no one, and for the wanting to be true.

It also meant he never slept well.

Shane had never been able to sleep a full eight hours in microgravity.

Ugh, 'microgravity'. The CSA media training called it "microgravity." Journalists called it "zero gravity." Astronauts called it *floating*. The physics didn't care what you called it—the station was in freefall, and so was everything inside it, and Shane's body had adapted to the permanent plummet months ago, running on six and a half hours of sleep, and the remaining ninety minutes were his to spend in the one place on the station where nobody needed him to be anything other than a pair of hands and a functioning brain.

Chris Hadfield had talked about this, the stolen hours, the private communion with the lab, the ISS as a cathedral at night. Shane had read every interview Hadfield had ever given before his first flight, had watched the "Space Oddity" video more times than he'd admit, had traced the line from Hadfield's command to his own and felt the weight of inheritance in it:

two Canadians, twenty years apart, trusted with the same improbable job. Hadfield had made it look effortless. Shane was learning that the effortlessness was a performance, and the performance was exhausting, and the lab at 03:15 was the only place he could set it down in the rare moments of solitude.

He was aware of how this sounded. *Commander of the International Space Station seeks alone time to look at crystals at three in the morning.* If his flight psych could see the schedule he actually kept versus the one he reported, there would be a conversation.

Down here the stars were close enough to count. Shane never counted them, because discovering a thing, naming a thing or a star or a feeling, gave it mass, and mass had gravity, and gravity bent orbits, and he could not afford to *bend*.

So he distracted himself with work and being the best.

Overhead panels were dimmed to their nighttime setting, blue-white LEDs dialed down to a glow that turned the equipment racks into a canyon of soft-edged shadows. The hum of the Environmental Control and Life Support System—*ECLSS*, pronounced like the name, though Shane had never gotten used to how casual that sounded for the machine keeping six people breathing—was the loudest thing in the module. Below it, the whisper of ventilation fans. Below that, the faint, arrhythmic *tick* of the protein crystallization unit's thermal cycling, a sound that had wormed its way into Shane's sleep patterns so thoroughly that he sometimes heard it in his dreams.

He'd built a routine around these stolen hours. Float in. Check the growth plates. Log observations Rose would review in the morning. Adjust the gooseneck lamp. Let his hands do the work his mind wanted to do all day but couldn't, because during the day the Commander's job was meetings and status checks and making sure Cliff remembered to swap the CO2 scrubber filters and making sure Rozanov didn't dismantle anything load-bearing out of boredom.

He pulled the crystallization cartridge from its housing and held it under the lamp.

His hands under the lamp were his mother's hands. Shane had known this since he was fourteen, reaching for a centrifuge dial at a school science fair, and the recognition had arrived the way stars arrive at dusk: not sudden, but slow, the shape always there, waiting for the sky to darken enough to see it.

He had her narrow wrists, the same squared-off nail beds, the same ratio of finger to palm that looked wrong on hockey gloves and right on precision instruments. Yuna Hollander had been a chemist before she married his father, before she'd shelved the career for Ottawa and a bilingual household and a son who looked enough like both of them to confuse strangers in grocery stores.

What are you? a teammate's mother had asked him once, at a tournament in Saskatoon, bending down to his nine-year-old face with a smile that expected a fun answer. He'd said *Canadian* and she'd laughed and said *no, but what are you really* and his mother's hand had landed on his shoulder and steered him away and Shane had understood, with the clarity of a

child who learns a rule by watching it get enforced, that the answer she'd wanted was the one he would spend the next twenty years not giving.

He photographed ambiguously enough to be everyone's projection. Shane knew he was a parallax error in human form, his position shifting depending on where you stood to look at him, never resolving into a fixed point, because the observers couldn't agree on the angle and he had long since stopped correcting them: not quite Asian, not quite white, a Rorschach test in a flight suit. Canada's blankest canvas. The face they could project onto without having to see, the way you could stare at the night sky and find whatever constellation you'd already decided to look for.

He'd never asked whether the selection board saw that as an asset or simply didn't see it at all. The question sat in the same locked drawer, the endless cabinet, floating in that black hole of *all the things I do not want in the light*.

Still, he suspected the answer was a third option: they saw exactly what they needed to see, which was a photogenic bilingual astronaut who could appear on the cover of both *Maclean's* and *L'actualité* without either readership writing letters.

His French was the polished kind: completely fluent, interview-grade, suitable for government press conferences and pre-launch Q&As with Radio-Canada.

They would hate the French he'd grown up with, the *rink* French, the version that lived underneath: *mange d'la marde*, *va chier*, *fils de pute*.

Gutter Quebecois picked up from eighteen-year-olds in the QMJHL dressing room who thought it was hilarious to teach the prodigy how to tell a ref to go fuck himself. Shane had been fluent in filth by sixteen and silent by seventeen, the year the CSA recruiter first showed up at one of his games and the language went into the same locked drawer as everything else that didn't fit the youngest Commander in ISS history.

The droplet inside rotated in its vapor diffusion chamber, suspended and slow, and even before Shane angled the cartridge into the light he could see the problem. Fourteen days of controlled nucleation, and the lattice boundaries had gone soft where they should have been sharp, hexagonal faces blurring into each other, the clean geometry dissolving into something nebulous and formless, like sugar dissolving in reverse.

He frowned, pulling a stylus off the heavy strip of Velcro sewn directly into the thigh of his standard-issue USOS tactical cargo pants, and reached for the laptop Velcroed to the Destiny rack beside him.

Sample 4, Day 14, opacity at crystal-solution interface, possible secondary nucleation.

He was mid-keystroke when the hatch behind him banged open.

"Hollander." Rozanov's head appeared through the opening upside-down, because Rozanov had never in seven months oriented himself to match the module's labeled ceiling. His light brown hair drifted around his face in a messy, weightless halo of unwashed curls, the waves freed from gravity to stick out at every angle. "You are awake."

It wasn't a question. Shane didn't dignify it with an answer.

"Good." Rozanov pulled himself through the hatch and into the lab, rotating lazily until his feet pointed more or less the same direction as Shane's. He entered a room the way a rogue comet entered a solar system: off-axis, too fast, dragging heat and debris, bending everything nearby toward the inconvenience of his trajectory, and he was wearing a grey Roscosmos sleep shirt unzipped halfway down his chest and a pair of athletic shorts that looked worlds away from the stiff, meticulously patched collars of Shane and Hayden's CSA gear. A stray bungee cord hooked haphazardly through a belt loop in stark contrast to Shane's meticulously organized Velcro patches. The green tennis ball was already in his right hand, the felt worn pale on one side where his thumb had rubbed it bald over seven months of orbit. He gave it an idle squeeze, and the foam compressed and held its dent the way a pillow holds the shape of the head that slept on it—evidence of repetition, of return, of a hand that always came back.

"Sveta says the water recycler in Zvezda is making noise again," Rozanov said, gesturing aft toward the Russian segment.

Shane suppressed a sigh. If the primary life support in the Russian service module went down, the maintenance schedule for the entire station was going to bottleneck.

"So fix it."

"I fixed it last time. And time before." Rozanov bounced the ball off the rack beside Shane's head. It ricocheted into the far wall and he caught it without looking. "Is American water recycler hardware. Your hardware, your noise."

"I am Canadian. It's in the Russian segment. Your segment, *your* noise." Shane kept his eyes on the laptop. The routine with Rozanov was simple: don't engage, don't react, don't give him the satisfaction of looking up from whatever you were doing, because looking up was losing, and everything between them—from crew assignments to who got the last pouch of acceptable coffee—had calcified into a competition neither of them would name out loud. "Log a maintenance request and I'll schedule it."

"Schedule," Rozanov repeated, tasting the word. He bounced the ball again—*thock*—this time off the ceiling, and it caromed past Shane's ear close enough that he felt the breeze. "You will *schedule* it. Like is dentist appointment."

"Like it's a maintenance task that gets prioritized alongside every other maintenance task," Shane said. "We don't just tear into life support systems without Houston reviewing the procedure."

"Ah, yes. The procedure."

Shane believed in systems the way Canadians believed in snowplows: if you maintained them properly, the world remained navigable.

Rozanov looked at systems the way Russians looked at winter roads: obstacles that existed to be driven through.

Rozanov floated closer. His knee bumped the rack Shane was braced against, and he didn't correct for it—stayed there, a half-arm's length away, the tennis ball resting in his upturned palm. His face, in the lab's blue-tinted nightlight, was all angles—the sharp line of his nose, the dark slashes of his eyebrows, the stubble was smattering over his sharp jaw. Shane caught the faint smell of the Russian segment's air scrubbers clinging to his shirt, a slightly different chemical signature than the American side, sharper, less filtered. "Fifty pages of diagnostics to tell you a pump is broken. A Russian pump. Houston will spend three days forming a committee, and I could fix it in ten minutes with a wrench and some tape. Water recycler keeps your crew alive. I would not *schedule* this."

Your crew. Not *our crew.* Seven months, and Rozanov still drew that line.

"It's on the list, Rozanov."

"Your list." He grinned—the lopsided one, slow and crooked, assembled like he had to remember where all the parts went. "Many things on your list. Maybe I make own list. Fix it myself, put on *my* report, send to Moscow." He tossed the ball up and caught it. "They like when I am proactive."

"You mean *insubordinate*."

"Is matter of perspective, no?"

Shane closed the laptop hard and the Velcro complained, its ripping sound was louder than he'd intended, and Rozanov's grin widened by a fraction, which meant he'd won this round, which meant Shane had reacted, which meant—

"Shh. Careful Mr. Rulebook," Rozanov said mildly. "You will frighten the paperwork."

Shane had lost, and he knew he'd lost, and the worst part was the heat in his face that confirmed it. "Schedule it or don't, Rozanov. When it breaks, I'll fix it myself, and I'll cc Moscow on the repair log so they know who let it get there."

"Hey." Hayden's voice drifted through the open hatch from the direction of Node 2, the station's forward connecting hub, followed by Hayden himself, pulling his way along the ceiling handrails in a Canadian Space Agency t-shirt and sweatpants. His hair was flattened on one side from the sleep restraint. "Svetlana's blending things again and I can't—why are you two awake. Is this a party? Are we having a party at three in the morning?"

"Hayden." Shane exhaled. "Go to sleep."

"I *was* asleep. The blender happened, and then *you* happened." He anchored himself to a foot loop and rubbed one eye with the heel of his hand. "I could hear you from Node 2, man. Both of you."

"We are having professional discussion," Rozanov said.

"You're having a fight about plumbing."

"Professional plumbing discussion."

“Shane’s right about the rotation, for what it’s worth.”

Rozanov looked at Hayden the way one might look at a dog that had wandered into a conference room. “Pike. You fly the capsule. You do not know shit about anything else. Why are you here.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck you too Rozanov.” Hayden rolled his eyes and looked at Shane with the long-suffering patience of a man who had been Shane’s crew partner through three training cycles and two backup assignments and knew, with the certainty of long friendship, that Shane was two exchanges from losing his temper.

Shane shook his head—barely, the smallest motion—and Hayden’s mouth twitched.

“Right. Well. Svetlana says if anyone wants tea, she’s making tea. *Why* that needs a blender I am not sure, but, like, whatever.” He pushed off and floated toward the hatch, then paused, gripping the frame. “Also, Cliff says the port-side radiator panel is reading six degrees over nominal and he wants to talk about it at the morning briefing.”

“Noted,” Shane said.

“Cool. Great. Love being awake.” Hayden disappeared through the hatch. His voice carried back from the corridor: “Svetlana, tell them to stop fighting—”

A response in accented English, too faint to make out the words but carrying the unmistakable cadence of Svetlana’s dry amusement, drifted back through the ventilation system.

Rozanov was still floating beside Shane’s rack, the tennis ball resting on his fingertips. He raised an eyebrow.

“You should sleep, Commander. You look tired.” He kicked off the hatch frame backward, one hand trailing the grab rail, his body rotating to clear the corridor without looking—the push-off and the turn and the course correction all one unbroken motion, a man who’d logged enough hours in freefall that the station moved around *him*. His shirt rode up on the push-off —a two-inch stripe of skin above his waistband, the flat plane of his lower abdomen, the dark trail of hair disappearing downward—

—and Shane’s eyes went there and came back in the same half-second, a reflex so practiced it had its own muscle memory: look, look away, swallow. The way an event horizon swallowed light. The way a telescope swallows starlight and converts it to data and files the data and never once asks whether the star wanted to be seen. Seven months of accretion, collecting what he refused to observe, and the archive was bloated, and the archive had teeth.

The ball left Rozanov’s hand—*thock*—caught it—*thock*—bounced it off the hatch frame on his way through. “I will fix water recycler myself. Don’t worry. Won’t put on *your* list.”

He was gone before Shane could answer. The green tennis ball’s distant percussion faded down the corridor toward the Russian segment, each impact a little softer, a little further away, until the ECLSS hum swallowed it.

Shane reopened the laptop. His fingers hovered over the keys.

Your crew.

He pulled the crystallization cartridge back under the gooseneck lamp and studied the clouded growth plate, which was an acceptable thing to study, unlike the afterimage still burning behind his eyes of Rozanov's forearm braced in the hatch frame, the tendons flexing as he'd swung through, the careless strength of a man who didn't know what his own body did to a room when he moved through it.

Or knew exactly, and didn't care.

Or knew exactly, and cared *very much*, and aimed it like a weapon specifically at Shane.

Gritting his teeth, he glanced back at the growth plate. The lattice. He made himself look at the lattice.

The droplet rotated in its chamber. The lattice was still wrong. He logged the temperature, checked the thermal cycling sequence against Rose's protocol notes, and was reaching for the pressure calibration log when—

From somewhere in Node 2, the sound of Hayden laughing at whatever Svetlana had said in the galley. And further away, from the direction of the Russian segment, another muffled *thock.*

Shane typed. The station hummed around him: fans, scrubbers, the tick of the crystallization unit, six people breathing the same recycled air in a tin can hurtling through the dark at seventeen thousand miles per hour. A normal night. The kind of night where the most pressing problem was a clouded growth plate and a Russian flight engineer who didn't know how to stay in his own module.

Then the alarm hit.

Not the carbon dioxide alarm, which was two short bursts and a pause. Not the fire alarm either, which Shane could have identified in a dead sleep. This was the SPE klaxon: a shrill, continuous tone that drilled through the module and rattled inside his skull. Solar particle event. The dosimetry boards along the lab wall flipped from green to amber in sequence, left to right, and the numbers beside them were already climbing. Shane's personal dosimeter on his waistband vibrated once, then again.

Forty milligrays per hour. Sixty. Then more.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 03:18 | MET +00.02 Dosimetry: 84 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 6

The particles were *here*, each one carrying enough energy to shatter molecules, to strike and split and strike again in a chain reaction inside living tissue; invisible bullets passing through

the station's hull and through Shane's body, and every second between now and the inside of a shielded spacecraft was a second that could not be taken back.

Shane pushed off the rack and was through the hatch into Harmony before his hands had finished sealing the cartridge. Muscle memory. Thousands of hours in simulators and hundreds more up here had written the choreography into his tendons: grab, twist, push, orient, grab again. He pulled himself hand-over-hand through Node 2, past the darkened Columbus module, and reached the comms station in twelve seconds.

The main panel was a mess. Half the status lights were cycling amber. The walls here weren't solid; they were a grid of modular racks, every square inch covered in laptops, strapped-down cables, and soft-sided storage bags. It was a high-tech hallway where 'up' and 'down' were only defined by the orientation of the labels on the lockers, and the S-band link was dropping packets—Houston's transmission came through in broken fragments, every third word swallowed by static.

"*—Station, Houston, we are tracking a Class—*" Dead air. "*—proton flux already exceeding —current dose rate—second event behind, coronal mass ejection, CME arrival—*" More static. "*—significantly above forecast—full evac—repeat, recommend full immediate—*"

Even through the static one thing had been clear: A coronal mass ejection. A wall of magnetized plasma thrown off the sun hard enough to flood near-Earth orbit with high-energy particles.

Shane pressed the talk button. "Houston, Expedition 78, Commander Hollander. You're breaking up. Say again on the evac recommendation."

Static. Then, faintly: "*—Aurora storm shelter gives you substantially better shielding than Node 2—CME arrival imminent—repeat, take the Aurora—*"

Full evac. Everyone off. Shane's hand was already moving toward the all-call before the S-band dissolved into a noise floor. The TDRSS Ku-band relayed a wall of white noise, and the internal networks failed to handshake with any ground station through the interference. Houston vanished.

Ground control to Major Tom.

Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong.

In a song, it was fun. The difference was that Bowie's Major Tom had drifted away from Earth on purpose, serene in his tin can, content to float. Shane was in a tin can too, but the tin can was taking a dose, and he was not serene, and he was not floating away—he was the one left holding the comm switch while the static ate the signal.

Major Tom's circuit went dead and he didn't seem to mind. Shane's circuit went dead and four hundred kilometers of vacuum had never felt thinner.

He keyed the channel. "All crew, Commander Hollander. SPE in progress," Shane's voice was the one the CSA had spent two years polishing: level in any situation, bilingual, and

scrubbed of any tremor. It was the voice of a man who followed the telemetry, and he already had the active emergency checklist pulled up on a tablet. “We are taking a dose now. Dosimetry amber and climbing… fast. Houston is calling full evacuation over standard shelter-in-place protocol for it and the following CME. The Aurora’s hull provides dedicated storm-shelter shielding our modules lack, and the vehicle remains in rapid-depart configuration from yesterday’s cargo transfer. All six crew on Aurora, forward port. Suit up, strap in. We are leaving. You have eight minutes.”

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 03:22 | MET +00.04 Dosimetry: 90 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 6

Hayden’s confirmation came first and immediately: *Copy, Commander. Moving to Aurora. Get your ass moving Shane.* Then Cliff, with a quick *Aye, don’t need to tell me twice*, already in motion by the sound of his breathing. Rose, clipped and professional: *Copy. Lab secured, on my way.* Svetlana, in the background of Rose’s transmission, a rapid affirmative in accented English.

Four voices. Shane waited for the fifth.

The S-band crackled. The ventilation fans hummed their indifferent hum. No fifth voice came.

Of course.

Shane checked the telemetry on the wall-mounted tablet, searching for his missing, silent, fifth.

The fifth crewmember, Flight Engineer Rozanov, wasn’t moving toward the lifeboat. The beacon in Zvezda was stationary, a stubborn gold dot on the station map—and Shane knew exactly what he was doing, because it was what Shane would have done. Rozanov would be at the manual valves already, triaging the cooling loops, running the same damage-loss calculus Shane was running but from the Russian side and probably faster, because Rozanov had been born with his hands inside a machine and had never needed a checklist to tell him what was broken. It was the correct call. It was the Commander’s call, and Rozanov had made it without consulting the Commander, because Rozanov had never fully accepted that the Commander was Shane.

Regardless, the crew snapped to action, and the station was alive with hatches squealing open, the whir of a ventilation fan kicking to high, the distant clang of someone grabbing a rail too hard. Shane pushed off the comms panel toward the forward port. The Aurora capsule —Canada’s first domestically built crew vehicle, six seats and a heat shield thick enough to matter—was docked fifteen meters from where he floated. Eight minutes. He could be suited and strapped in *four*.

He was passing through the Node 2 junction when the lights flickered.

The overheads cut to black. Shane's hands found the grab rail before his vision adjusted—muscle memory again, his body running procedures his brain hadn't authorized—and then the emergency strips kicked in along the floor, amber and low. From deep in the Russian segment, a sound he had not heard in any sim: a structural groan, metal flexing under a high-frequency vibration. A Single Event Upset must have tripped the ventilation controller in Zvezda; he could hear the fans screaming at an overspeed they weren't rated for, hitting a resonant frequency that rattled the module's very bones. Then, a bang that punched through fifty meters of aluminum hull and registered in Shane's molars before his ears processed it. Not a hatch. Not equipment cycling. The mounting bolts on a secondary rack, likely already fatigued by years of vibration, had finally sheared.

It sounded like a rifle shot translated through fifty meters of aluminum pressure hull. Shane's inner ear registered the vibration before his brain categorized it: something in the Russian segment had broken loose.

Three seconds later, the caution and warning panel lit up with a new alert. *Hatch closure: automatic.* Zvezda-Zarya inter-module hatch. The station's safety protocols had registered an anomaly in the Russian segment and sealed the passage to isolate it.

Rozanov was in Zvezda.

On the wrong side of that hatch.

Because of course he was. Of the five people Shane could have lost behind a sealed bulkhead during a radiation emergency, the universe had selected the one who treated station protocols like a buffet—take what you like, ignore the rest. Shane had watched Rozanov bypass two separate maintenance checklists in the last week alone, and now here he was, stuck in an isolated module, and it was going to be Shane's problem to solve.

Everything about Rozanov eventually became Shane's problem.

Shane grabbed the Node 1 intercom panel—the hardline, wired directly through the hull, independent of the S-band. "Rozanov, Commander Hollander. Report."

His own formality, stating his own rank, sounded absurd—Rozanov would never call him "Commander" back. Rozanov, who had finished second in the Commander selection eighteen months ago—second by a margin so narrow that three of the five board members had needed a second ballot—would hear the title and parse it the way he always did: not as rank but as a scoreline. Shane 1, Rozanov 0.

Every time Shane gave an order, the number refreshed.

Two seconds. Three. Shane's fingers pressed the panel hard enough that his knuckles ached. He kept his breathing even through his nose, the way he'd trained for vacuum-Loss of Pressure drills—slow inhale, slower exhale—while his pulse hammered so hard he could feel it in his wrists, his throat, behind his eyes. Rozanov was behind a sealed hatch in an isolated segment during a radiation event and Shane was standing on the wrong side of it holding a talk button.

Calm down. First problem. What's the first problem?

His training had a procedure for this. His training had a procedure for everything.

Shane pressed the button again. In seven months, Rozanov had not once responded to an all-call within the expected window. Shane had started building a three-second Rozanov delay into his mental timelines the way you'd build in lag for a satellite relay. The man was not late. He was on Rozanov Standard Time, which observed no UTC and answered to no governing body.

"*Rozanov,* goddamn. Report."

"I am here." Rozanov's voice came through tinny and compressed by the hardline speaker. "A rack mount sheared off the starboard wall—the secondary equipment bay, the big one. Is blocking the corridor. I am fine, I am not hurt, but the rack is wedged between the hull and the opposing mount and I cannot get past it. Also your station has closed the hatch on me, which is *rude.*"

Shane's mind was running two tracks simultaneously. Track one: Rozanov was alive, not injured, sealed in Zvezda behind an auto-locked hatch with a dislodged equipment rack blocking the passage on his side. Track two: the clock. Six minutes and change until Hayden needed to begin startup sequencing. The Zvezda-Zarya hatch could be manually overridden from the Zarya side, but Shane would have to get there, access the override panel, cycle the hatch, and then help Rozanov clear the jammed rack and—

—and Rozanov *still* had to traverse the full length of the station to reach the Aurora.

That would take more than the minutes they had.

The dosimetry was at ninety milligrays per hour and still rising—he'd read the panel in the corridor without breaking stride, the number branded into his short-term memory. At this rate, every ten minutes cost them another measurable fraction of their annual limit. The four crew on the Aurora would be behind centimeters of PICA-X heat shield and Nomex insulation within minutes of hatch close. Shane and Rozanov would be behind aluminum hull paneling designed to stop micrometeorites, not solar protons. And the second event—whatever Houston had been trying to tell them about the CME—hadn't arrived yet.

"Can you move the rack?" Shane asked.

"Is wedged. I am trying. The bolts sheared and the housing is jammed against the—" A grunt. The sound of metal scraping metal. "No. Not fast. Not alone. I need leverage, and there is not a good angle."

Shane looked at the forward port. Twelve meters away. Four of his crew were already moving toward it; he could hear Rose and Cliff in the vestibule. Hayden would be at the controls. Svetlana was close. In five minutes, the Aurora could be sealed and separating.

He looked toward Zarya. Toward the sealed hatch, and Zvezda beyond it, and… Rozanov.

“Hollander.” Rozanov’s voice came through the hardline again, and the teasing had dropped out of it. “Go. Get on the Aurora. I will get the rack clear and take the Soyuz if I have to.”

“The Soyuz hasn’t been prepped for emergency departure and you know it.”

“So I prep it.”

“In how long? You’ve got a jammed rack and a sealed hatch between you and the docking module. That’s two hours minimum, and we’re at ninety milligrays per hour *right now*—before the main event hits. Houston said there’s a CME behind this. If that arrives while you’re still wrestling with the Soyuz umbilicals, you’re looking at acute exposure with no shielding and no medical officer, because Svetlana will be on the Aurora where I sent her.”

“Then is two hours at ninety milligrays. I took more than that during the Mir-tribute EVA last year when we clipped the edge of the South Atlantic Anomaly. I have had worse.”

“I don’t *care* what you’ve had worse before, it *stacks*.”

“Hollander, *go*.”

Shane was gripping the intercom panel with both hands. His feet had drifted free of the floor rail and he was floating at an angle, tethered to the wall by nothing but his own hands. Through the Node, he could see the vestibule lights: green, ready, the Aurora waiting.

Hayden’s voice cut through from the forward port. “Shane! I’ve got Cliff, Rose, and Svetlana—where’s Rozanov? I need you both in here. Two minutes to hatch close.”

“The Zvezda-Zarya hatch auto-locked and there’s a dislodged rack on Rozanov’s side. He’s stuck.”

“Fuck. *Shit.*”

Shane looked at the vestibule.

He looked at the Zarya hatch.

Four crew on Aurora. Two minutes to hatch close. Three milligrays of additional exposure for them, trivial, a rounding error on a medical chart nobody would ever flag.

Or: override the Zarya hatch, clear the rack, transit Rozanov back through four modules to the forward port. Fifteen minutes minimum. More likely twenty. Twenty minutes at ninety-plus milligrays per hour—call it thirty milligrays—for four people who didn’t need to absorb a single one, because their Commander was staring at a hatch instead of giving the order.

He could save four people right now, for certain. Or he could gamble all six on a rack that might not move and a clock he couldn’t see.

The math said *go*. The math had always been the loudest signal in him, louder than want, louder than the unnamed thing that had kept him awake in his sleep station staring at the ceiling while Rozanov’s breathing traveled through the thin wall between them.

The math was clear and the math was right. Numbers didn't care who lived with the answer afterward. They simply described the universe as it was.

… And Shane had followed the math his entire life, had built a career and a closet and a continental reputation on the math, and the math said: save the four you can save and let the fifth take his chances.

Shane had never been a gambler.

But he had never been the kind of person to give up or leave someone behind, either, and one of those records was going to break in the next ten seconds.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 03:26 | MET +00.08 Dosimetry: 99 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 6

He keyed the all-call. "Pike, you have command of the Aurora. Full evac minus two. Hollander and Rozanov are not boarding. Execute departure on my mark."

Orders like that were why commanders existed. Not to be brave. To decide who left and who didn't.

For half a second, the channel held. Then it broke open.

Hayden first: "Shane, what the *fuck*—"

And Rozanov, from Zvezda, his voice ripping through the all-call with a fury that made the speaker distort: "*Nyet!* Hollander, *no*. Get on the Aurora. Do not be stupid."

Svetlana over both of them, already in Russian: "*Ilya—Ilyusha, ty menya slyshish'? Pozhaluysta—*"

Do you hear me? Shane caught fragments; *pozhaluysta* spelled out in his head as '*пожалуйста'*, and he thought it meant 'please', and Rozanov's name, his first name, again and again, a hook she kept throwing into the static hoping it would catch.

"*Sveta.*" Rozanov's voice changed on her name. The anger dropped out of it for exactly one second, replaced by the way he sounded when he thought no one important was listening. "*Ya v poryadke. Uspokoysya.*"

"*Ty ne v poryadke!*" She was shouting now. "Shane, I'm coming back out, I can help him with the rack, I am the smallest, I can fit—"

"Svetlana, *no*. Get on the Aurora."

"Hollander." Rozanov again, and the softness he'd given Svetlana was gone, stripped back to bare fury. "You have *time*. You have two minutes. Use them. Get on the fucking spacecraft."

Cliff's voice, underneath: "Holy fucking shit—" and Rose, cutting across him: "Shane, let me come back and help, we can get the rack clear if—"

"Everybody *stop.*" Shane's hand was shaking on the comms panel. He could hear all of them at once—Svetlana's Russian fragmenting into sobs she was swallowing, Hayden's breathing gone fast and shallow the way it did before he hit things, Rose mid-sentence, Cliff swearing, and underneath all of it, Rozanov, who had gone quiet in the way that was worse than shouting.

"I'm… staying. Just me. I'm going to get Rozanov out, and we'll shelter until the storm passes. That is not a discussion. You need to go and do your job, Pike. Launch."

"Then let me do my job and pilot all of us out of here. I'm not leaving you, man. Give me ten minutes, we get Rozanov out together, and all six of us leave."

"You hold the hatch and that's ten more minutes of radiation the crew—*my* crew—doesn't need to take. And if the rack doesn't move, you've burned your launch window for nothing. If there's equipment failure you are *all* stuck. You're flying four people to safety. *That's* your job right now. Do your job, Hayden."

"*Hollander.*" Rozanov again. "I don't want you here. Do you understand? I do not *want* this."

"You—*Shane*—son of a bitch," Hayden cursed, and Shane could hear the Aurora's startup sequence running: the fuel cell priming, the guidance alignment tone. His hands already doing what his mouth was protesting."You get him out, you hear me? You get him out and you both shelter and I swear to God, Shane, Jackie and I are going to *murder* you."

That was Hayden: loyal to the bone and smart enough to know when loyalty meant following an order he hated.

Also… strong. Hayden was strong. When they got home—*if* they got home—Hayden was going to hit him. Shane had seen Hayden hit a vending machine once at Johnson for eating his dollar, and the vending machine had surrendered.

Shane was going to get worse than the vending machine.

Four kids. Hayden had four kids and Shane was godfather to each one; the oldest was seven, and the youngest had been born three weeks before launch, and Shane had held her in the hospital and she'd wrapped her fist around his index finger with a grip that shocked him for its strength. Hayden had cried, which Hayden always did, loudly and without embarrassment, the way Shane had never learned to. Jackie had been laughing at both of them from the bed, and Shane had stood there with this brand-new person holding his finger and thought: *I want this. I want this exact thing, except the version of it I want doesn't exist I don't think? I don't know how?*

The vestibule lights shifted from green to amber. Hatch closing.

But Hayden *did* know how, and he had it, and Shane loved him and them and all of it more than he could bear and Hayden had to *go*.

If he died here, Hayden would tell Jackie, and Jackie would tell the kids when they were old enough, and the story they'd tell would be about Commander Hollander staying behind for his crew. A hero. Clean and simple. Nobody would tell the part where Shane had stood in Node 2 and thought about a baby's grip and a life he'd never let himself have and had almost —almost—climbed onto that capsule and saved himself.

Shane pushed off from the intercom panel and floated to the small, thick-paned porthole of Node 2. Most of the station's walls were opaque, but here the blackness of the vacuum pressed right against the glass. He could see the long, metallic spine of the station—the truss —stretching out into the dark, capped by the massive, gold-foil wings of the solar arrays. Through the small round window, he watched the docking clamps release—four heavy bolts retracting in sequence—and then a push from the springs as the Aurora separated from Harmony's forward port. The capsule drifted backward, white and blunt-nosed against the black. A small maple leaf decal near the docking ring was visible for a second before it rolled out of view, and then its thrusters fired in a brief flare of orange and it angled away, dropping below the station's orbital plane.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 03:34 | MET +00.16 Dosimetry: 105 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

Shane's hand was still on the glass. The cold traveled through his palm and into the bones of his wrist and nested there, a small winter he would carry in that hand for hours. The capsule shrank to a point of light against the dark—indistinguishable, at this distance, from any star—and Shane watched it redshift into nothing, his crew becoming a constellation of one, then less than that, then a memory dressed as math, a trajectory he could plot but not follow.

Gone.

Then his mind reassembled itself. *Be calm. Focus. What's the first problem?*

Radiation, obviously. The dosimetry was still climbing. The main event—the CME, whatever Houston had been trying to describe before the S-band died—was still incoming, arrival time unknown. What they were in now was the overture.

When it hit, if it hit, the numbers on those panels would make the current readings look like background.

He and Rozanov needed to identify the best-shielded location on the station. They needed to calculate the cumulative dose against time. They needed to inventory food, water, and medical supplies for a stay that could stretch as long as the storm wanted. They needed to establish whether the hardline comms could reach Houston through the interference, or whether they were truly cut off until the particle flux dropped.

Shane pulled his hand from the glass and pushed off toward Zarya.

Immediately, the station was different with four people missing. Shane's skin registered it before his brain did—the hairs on his forearms lifting, his ears straining for sounds that had

vanished. The fans and pumps that maintained atmosphere and temperature were constant, the same steady mechanical breath they'd always been. But the human layer underneath—laptop keys, a cough from the Japanese Kibo lab, Hayden's podcast leaking through his headphones two modules away, the soft thump of someone pushing off a wall—that was gone. What remained was the station talking to itself: the CO_2 scrubbers already adjusting to four fewer pairs of lungs, the thermal regulators compensating for four fewer bodies' worth of heat. Shane pulled himself through it hand over hand, and the air tasted thinner in his throat.

The Zarya module was dim, lit only by the emergency strips and the green and amber pinpoints of status LEDs on the equipment racks. Shane pulled himself to the Zvezda-side hatch and found the manual override panel. The hatch status indicator was red, *Loss of Signal* from the sensors on the Zvezda side, which had triggered the automatic isolation protocol. Not a pressure breach. The station's software couldn't read the sensor data through the SPE interference and had defaulted to caution.

He keyed the override sequence. The panel beeped twice, rejecting it with a flashing INHIBIT on the display.

He tried again. Same result. The system wanted confirmation from the Zvezda-side sensors before it would release the hatch, and the sensors weren't talking.

"Rozanov."

"Hollander, you are insane." Rozanov's voice on the hardline was slightly out of breath. He'd been working on the rack.

"The hatch override isn't accepting my sequence. I need you to hard-reset the sensor relay on your side—panel ZV-4, behind the port-side equipment bay. That should clear the fault and let me cycle the hatch."

"*Hollander.*" The accent thickened around the 'r', rumbling. "You *stayed*."

"Panel ZV-4, Rozanov."

"You stupid fuck. You could have gotten on the Aurora. You had *time*."

The accusation in it was double-edged. Shane heard both blades: you're an idiot for staying, and you made that decision without me. Rozanov had told him to go. Shane had overridden him. In any other context, that was chain of command functioning as designed—the Commander outranking the Flight Engineer, full stop. But Rozanov had never treated the chain of command as settled law. He treated it as an ongoing appeal, and Shane had just handed him new evidence for the brief.

"I did not have time."

"You had time and you stayed because I am stuck, and now you are stuck also, and—"

"*Panel ZV-4.* Can you reach it?"

Another pause. The sound of movement—fabric against metal, a grunt, Rozanov's breathing shifting as he contorted around whatever the dislodged rack was doing to the corridor.

"*Da*. Yes. I can reach it. Give me a moment. *Blyat*."

The speed of it needled him. Shane had been reaching for the override manual in his memory—panel designation, relay reset sequence, steps one through six—and Rozanov had already been moving, navigating by touch in a blacked-out module, fingers finding the right panel behind a jammed equipment rack like the station's architecture was written into his hands. Shane could run command. He could coordinate six crew across two segments, manage a mission timeline, interface with three space agencies in two languages. Rozanov could find a relay panel by feel in a module he hadn't seen in hours, in the dark, with a dislocated rack pinning him to the wall—and he'd done it in the time it took Shane to remember step three.

In moments like this the gap between commanding a station and understanding one yawned wide enough for Shane to feel the draft.

Shane floated in front of the sealed hatch in the dim amber light of Zarya, listening to Rozanov work through six inches of aluminum. The station's mechanical systems hummed around him. Through the small porthole in the hatch, he could see nothing; Zvezda's lights were off on the other side.

A click. A buzz. The hatch status indicator flickered from red to amber to green.

Shane entered the override sequence a third time. The panel accepted it. The hatch locks disengaged with a heavy *thunk* that he felt through the grab rail in his hand, and he pulled the hatch open.

Zvezda's emergency lighting was a deep amber-red, dimmer than Zarya's, and it took Shane's eyes a second to adjust. Unlike the sterile, white-plastic aesthetic of the US segment, the Russian modules felt utilitarian and cramped, the walls lined with olive-drab padding and exposed pipes, and smelled like a machine shop.

Shane hated coming over here. It always felt like stepping off a spotless laboratory floor directly into the belly of a diesel engine, like descending into a rugged, vintage submarine and the corridor ahead of him was half-blocked by the dislodged equipment rack—a big one, a secondary power distribution unit that had torn free from its starboard mounting bolts. It had drifted across the module's narrow interior and jammed itself diagonally between the port-side hull and the opposing rack, creating a barrier of sheet metal and exposed cabling that filled most of the passable space.

On the other side of it, wedged between the jammed rack and the aft wall, Rozanov was braced with one foot against the hull and both hands on the edge of the displaced housing. His hair had gone feral; the messy waves that normally sat in some state of artful disorder were plastered dark with sweat to his temples and sticking up at the crown, and the grease streak on his forearm had been joined by a second one across his left cheekbone, following the line of the bone like war paint. The gold cross had drifted up on its chain and tangled in the collar of his T-shirt. His shoulder seam had torn, and through the gap Shane could see the curve of his deltoid, the skin flushed and damp from exertion.

Shane looked at the rack housing instead. Focused on the sheared bolt pattern along the mounting bracket. Structural failure, clean fracture, no thread deformation—good, that meant the housing could be repositioned without—

Rozanov's head came up. His nostrils flared, his lips peeled back from those unnaturally white teeth, and his eyes—hazel, pale against the amber emergency lighting—locked onto Shane with a fury that would have been impressive if it weren't so unearned.

"You are an idiot," Rozanov said.

"Push on three." Shane gripped the metal housing, his knuckles white against the grey paint. He didn't have Rozanov's instinctive grasp of the station's guts, but he had the schedule, and he had the stripe on his flight suit. He was the one the world expected to bring everyone home, even the man who should have been in his chair.

"A *complete* idiot."

"One."

"The biggest—"

"Two."

"—idiot I have ever—"

"*Three.*"

They shoved.

The rack groaned, caught again. Ilya wiped sweat from his forehead, leaving a streak of grease. "Do you know the joke about Soviet engineering, Hollander? What is as big as a house, burns twenty liters of fuel an hour, puts out a shitload of smoke, and cuts an apple into three pieces?" He kicked the base of the rack and it didn't budge. "A Soviet machine made to cut apples into *four* pieces. And here we are, trapped by a rack that couldn't even manage its one job of staying bolted to the fucking wall!"

"Save the jokes for later, I am *begging* you."

Shane braced his feet against the hatch frame and pushed the rack from the Zarya side while Rozanov drove it from the Zvezda side. In gravity, the unit would have weighed close to two hundred kilograms. In microgravity, the mass was the same but the weight was nothing; the problem wasn't heaviness but inertia and geometry. They had to break the housing free from where it had wedged itself and redirect its momentum without letting it jam somewhere else. Shane got his fingers under the edge of the mounting bracket and lifted while Rozanov kicked the base. The rack groaned, shifted six inches, caught again.

"Angle it," Shane said. "Toward the floor—*your* floor."

"There is no floor."

“Toward Earth, then. Toward the ventilation grille.”

Rozanov repositioned, got his shoulder behind the housing, and heaved. The rack broke free with a shriek of metal on metal and drifted aft, rotating lazily in the red-amber light. Rozanov grabbed it before it could hit anything else and guided it against the aft wall, where he braced it with his body while Shane found a cargo strap to lash it down.

They were both breathing hard when it was done. Shane’s palms were scraped from the mounting bracket’s raw edge, and Rozanov’s T-shirt had ripped further at the shoulder seam. They floated two feet apart in Zvezda’s dim corridor, the lashed-down rack behind Rozanov, the open hatch behind Shane.

Rozanov’s hand went to the cross at his collar. Pressed it flat against his sternum and held it there, thumb white on the gold, and his eyes tracked over Shane’s face the way they tracked over a systems panel when a readout didn’t match his expectations—moving between data points, rechecking. His lips parted around the start of a word that didn’t come. Then his thumb dragged once across the cross and he let it drop.

“So, *Commander*.” Rozanov drew the rank out long, let it sag in the middle, and dropped it like a piece of equipment he’d been asked to carry but hadn’t agreed to. The grin arrived a beat after the words did—assembling itself mouth-first, the muscles around his eyes pulling in a different direction, the whole configuration seated slightly off-center. “Is just us.”

Shane wiped his palms on his shorts. His hands were shaking too—adrenaline and exertion—and he hated that Rozanov could probably see it.

“We need to get behind the WRS racks in Node 3.” Shane shoved the irritation down where it belonged—below the dosimetry numbers, below the missing crew, below the clock he couldn’t see, and into the next instruction. “Highest mass density on the station. Grab water, grab food—whatever you can carry in one pass. We’re not coming back out here until the flux drops.”

“Mm,” Rozanov said, which was particularly inelegant for someone that always knew the worst thing to say at the worst time. His hand dropped to his thigh and found the tennis ball—neon green, perpetually Velcroed there like some kind of cosmonaut security blanket—and closed on the fabric of his shorts an inch below it. He corrected, peeled it free, squeezed it hard enough that his knuckles blanched and the foam compressed into an oblong that held its dent for a full second after he loosened his grip. He didn’t look at Shane.

Shane had never seen Rozanov not have a retort. It was unsettling in a way the radiation alarm hadn’t been.

The ball. The *goddamn* ball. Every crew member got one personal item—one—and Shane had brought a framed photo of his parents’ lake at sunset because he was a normal human being, and Rozanov had brought a tennis ball that he bounced off walls, off equipment racks, off the back of Shane’s headrest during film night while Shane’s entire body vibrated with the effort of not turning around and shoving it down his throat. Seven months. Seven months of *thock, thock, thock* echoing through the modules at unpredictable intervals, and Rozanov’s lazy grin whenever Shane’s shoulders climbed toward his ears.

He wanted to shove it through the nearest waste port and never see it again.

Rozanov squeezed the ball again, turning it over in his fingers, not quite looking at Shane. “Hollander, you stayed.”

“We’ve established that.” Shane was already pulling himself back through the hatch toward Zarya. What Rozanov meant, and what Shane heard underneath every repetition, was: you chose wrong. A Commander’s first obligation was to the crew, and Shane had fulfilled that—four people on the Aurora, safe, Hayden at the controls. But a Commander’s second obligation was to the mission, and the mission did not benefit from two senior crew members trapped behind a water tank absorbing chromosomal damage. Rozanov would have sent Shane to the Aurora, taken the Soyuz, and handled the rest alone, because Rozanov had always believed he could handle anything alone, and the infuriating thing—the thing Shane’s pride snagged on like a hangnail—was that Rozanov might have been right.

“Move, Rozanov.”

“Could be on Aurora right now. Halfway home.” Rozanov pushed off the aft wall and followed him through, catching the hatch frame one-handed and swinging his legs through the opening. His shoulder brushed Shane’s in the narrow passage between modules. “Hollander why the fuck are you *here*?”

“I wasn’t going to leave anyone trapped in an isolated segment during a radiation event. *Move.*”

“My hero.”

They were in Zarya now, pulling themselves hand-over-hand toward Node 1. Shane grabbed two emergency water rations from the supply locker without slowing. Rozanov snagged a medical kit and tucked it under his arm. They moved through the station in tandem, module by module, the hum of the empty station filling every gap between words, and Rozanov was laughing, muttering something in Russian, and Shane could hear the grin without turning around.

This was the problem with Rozanov. Not the tennis ball, not the accent, not the way he left crumbs floating in the galley for Shane to clean up like some kind of zero-g janitor. It was this—the inability to register a situation at appropriate emotional volume. The station was irradiated, they were cut off from ground control, four of their crew were gone, and Rozanov was *amused.* Shane wanted to grab him by the front of his shirt and shake him until the grin fell off. He wanted to demand to know what the hell was wrong with him, how he could face mortal danger with the emotional register of a man inconvenienced by a cancelled flight.

He wanted, badly and against his will, to know what it felt like to be that free.

“Stupidest man alive, Hollander. My hero, the fool. Captain Canada, thick of ass and thin of brain.”

Heat crawled up the back of Shane’s neck. “Shut *up*. Can’t you take anything seriously? You would’ve done the same.”

“No. I would not have done same. I would not kill two men when only one needs to die. You are so bad at math, Hollander.”

Shane pulled himself through the Node 1 junction and banked left toward Node 3. The dosimetry panel he passed read one hundred and eighteen. Higher than Zvezda. The station’s shielding wasn’t uniform—some modules were better than others, and the ones they were passing through were among the worst.

“Faster,” Shane said.

Rozanov caught up to him in the connecting tunnel, close enough that Shane could hear his breathing

“Storm peaks in about six hours,” Rozanov said, “*Maybe* nine or ten based on the flux curve on the Zvezda dosimetry panel. I had time to read it while you were taking forever with my hatch.” He caught a grab rail and adjusted his drift. “Then we wait for it to pass, then we wait for your friends at NASA to pick up their phone.” A pause. “Try to be fun.”

“Please try to shut up.”

They hit the Node 3 junction at the same time.

Shane came through the hatch low, angling left toward the Water Recovery System racks. Rozanov came through high, pushing off the ceiling frame with both hands, and their trajectories intersected with the inevitability of bad orbital mechanics. Rozanov’s shoulder caught Shane across the chest and they spun—a slow, stupid rotation that sent the water rations drifting off Shane’s hip clip and the medical kit tumbling from under Rozanov’s arm.

Shane grabbed the front of Rozanov’s shirt with both fists and hauled them to a stop against the rack housing. The fabric bunched in his hands. Rozanov’s face was six inches from his—the grease streak on his cheekbone, the hazel eyes wide with adrenaline and locked on Shane’s.

“*Blyat,*” Rozanov said.

“Behind the WRS,” Shane said. “*Now.*”

“Bossy.”

He let go of the shirt. Rozanov caught the drifting medical kit out of the air without looking and kicked off the rack toward the gap behind the water recovery system.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 03:40 | MET +00.22 Dosimetry: 118 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

The gap behind the WRS racks was not a shelter. It was a mistake in the station’s architecture—a pocket of dead space between water storage and hull with a chaotic nest of power ribbons—and it had been designed to accommodate plumbing, not two men who between them

represented a combined thirteen feet of limb and torso. Rozanov had wedged himself in first—back against the curved hull, knees drawn up, his longer frame filling the depth of the space—and what remained was a narrow channel between Rozanov's thighs and the rack housing that Shane was supposed to fit into as if they were components designed for the same assembly.

"Come on, Hollander. Is not going to get bigger."

Shane turned around, set his back against Rozanov's chest, and lowered himself into the gap.

The aluminum hull of the station was useless against high-energy protons; they'd pass through the metal and secondary-scatter like buckshot. But the hydrogen-rich water in the WRS tanks would soak them up. It was the only wall on the station that actually meant anything right now, and the fit was immediate and total. Shane's shoulder blades hit Rozanov's sternum. His hips settled between Rozanov's thighs. Rozanov's knees came up on either side of Shane's ribs—bracketing him, penning him in—and when Shane tried to extend his own legs, they hit the rack housing after eighteen inches, which meant his knees were up too, his feet braced against the back panel of the WRS, and every part of him that wasn't touching metal was touching Rozanov.

The aluminum hull behind Rozanov's back was useless—high-energy protons passed through it like light through a window and scattered off the heavier nuclei inside, producing secondary radiation that was almost worse than the primary. But hydrogen stopped them. Hydrogen had the highest stopping power per unit mass of any element—one proton per nucleus, maximum energy transfer per collision. Water was eleven percent hydrogen by mass. The WRS tanks held roughly four hundred liters. At the current geometry, that gave them maybe twenty centimeters of water-equivalent shielding on the sun-facing vector—enough to attenuate sixty percent of the primary proton flux at the energies they'd been seeing.

Sixty percent. It was the difference between a bad day and a career-ending one. It was not the difference between living and dying. Not if the CME was as bad as Houston's fragmented warning had suggested.

But it was what they had.

"*Blyat,*" Rozanov said, behind his ear.

"For once I agree with you."

The back of his head was against Rozanov's collarbone. He could feel the ridge of it through his hair—hard, anatomical—and below that, the broad slab of Rozanov's chest expanding against his shoulder blades on every inhale. Shane's lungs kept trying to sync with the rhythm. He had to deliberately offset his breathing by a half-cycle just to maintain the fiction that his body was still his own.

Shane trained for cameras, for press conferences, for the CSA promotional footage where he floated through the cupola with his perfectly tucked polo, his forced rigid posture fighting the natural zero-g hunch, and Earth behind him, looking like the future of Canadian spaceflight.

His body cooperated with that project—photogenic, proportional, built along lines that photographed well in a flight suit and reproduced cleanly on magazine covers. Rozanov's body had been built for a different kind of work. The chest behind Shane's spine was thick through the sternum, deep through the ribcage—a mechanic's chassis, broad where it needed to bear load and dense where it needed to absorb impact. His forearms were roped with tendon and vein in a way that Shane's were not, the scaffolding of a man who'd spent thousands of hours gripping wrenches and ratchets and the manual overrides of airlocks that hadn't been redesigned since the Mir era.

Shane had hands that operated a robotic arm from a control panel.

Rozanov had hands that went *inside* the machine.

The dosimeter read one hundred and thirty-two milligrays per hour.

Hydrogen-rich water in the tanks reduced the incoming dose rate, absorbing the scattering protons, but the raw exposure already in Shane's tissues manifested physically. Fatigue settled heavy into his marrow. The distinct taste of *metal* coated the back of his tongue, chased by a creeping wave of nausea. Rozanov's knee dug into Shane's floating rib. Shane shifted left to escape it and his elbow caught the rack housing with a dull clang that rang through the gap.

"Stop moving," Rozanov said.

"Your knee is in my kidney."

"Fuck your fucking kidney, you have two."

Shane tried to wedge himself further into the gap and succeeded only in grinding his shoulder blade into the hard ridge of Rozanov's sternum. Rozanov grunted—a sharp, irritated exhale through his nose—and his hand came up and shoved Shane's shoulder forward without ceremony.

"You are—*blyat*—you are like a bag of elbows. How are you this shape? You are an astronaut, not a—a folding chair. Sit *still.*"

"Oh shut the fuck up," Shane growled. He was perfectly *normal* and *standard* like most astronauts because they all had to use the same equipment, so his height, weight, visual acuity, and pointy *elbows* were all perfectly normal, it wasn't his fault that no one had thought about *compatible spooning geometry with hostile Russian cosmonaut*, which in retrospect was an oversight. "I'm *trying*—"

"*Try* with less of your skeleton."

Shane's lower back was cramping where it pressed against Rozanov's hip bone. He tried to arch away from it and his skull knocked Rozanov's chin. The impact clicked Rozanov's teeth together—Shane heard it, felt the flinch ripple through the chest behind him—and then Rozanov swore in a long, colorful streak of Russian that needed no translation and both

hands closed around Shane's upper arms and *yanked* him backward, rearranging him like cargo that had shifted during launch.

"*Ow*—"

"Be still or I will *make* you still, Hollander."

"Believe it or not, I hate this as much as you do."

"No. No you *don't* because I am the one who is *trapped under you* because you did not get on the spacecraft when I told you to get on the spacecraft, so you do not get to complain. You lost comfort privileges when you decided to be a *hero*." The last word came out serrated, the Russian *r* dragging through it. Rozanov's hands were heavy on Shane's arms, a physical manifestation of the way he'd been trying to crowd Shane out of his own command for seven months. "Now stop moving your—*blyat*, your hip, stop—"

Rozanov shifted—a rolling adjustment of his hips that changed the angle of his torso by maybe two degrees and ground the inside of his thigh against Shane's hip in a way that sent a flare of sensation up Shane's side so vivid he had to close his eyes.

When he opened them again, the arrangement was fractionally better—his head resting in the hollow below Rozanov's collarbone instead of directly on the bone—and catastrophically worse, because the new angle meant Rozanov's arms had nowhere to go except alongside Shane's body, forearms settling on the outside of Shane's thighs with a weight that didn't feel accidental. Rozanov's knees came up on either side of Shane's ribs. His chest pressed the full length of Shane's spine. His breath landed on the crown of Shane's head in warm, even intervals that Shane could feel in his hair follicles.

Shane was sitting in Ilya Rozanov's lap. There was no clinical or operational or euphemistic way around it. He was sitting between Rozanov's thighs with Rozanov's chest against his back and Rozanov's heartbeat thumping into his shoulder blade and Rozanov's breath stirring his hair, and he was the Commander of the International Space Station, and his ears were generating enough heat to register on infrared.

And the problem—one of the problems, perhaps the most immediately survivable of the problems—was that in literally any other circumstance, if it was literally any other person apart from Rozanov, this might've been an almost welcome predicament.

Seven months on the station. Seven months of sharing a module with five other crew members and a ventilation system that carried sound through the walls like they weren't there. Seven months in a sleep station the size of a phone booth where the curtain didn't lock, Cliff was six feet away on the other side of a panel, and jerking off required the strategic planning of a minor space operation: fan noise for cover, one hand braced against the wall to keep from drifting, the constant awareness that any sound above a controlled exhale would travel. Shane had managed it maybe four times in seven months. Each time he'd felt like a teenager sneaking around his parents' house, which was pathetic at twenty-nine, and each time he'd finished too fast and floated there afterward with his heart hammering and the taste of his own silence in his mouth.

But he had also not been touched—*really* touched, with skin and intent and the understanding that the touch was wanted—in years that he'd stopped counting because counting them gave the number weight. And that drought was not the station's contribution.

This drought was Shane's, tended with the same discipline he brought to his protein crystallization experiments: controlled environment, no contaminants, perfect conditions for growing absolutely *nothing*.

It was all by his own hypocritical design.

He'd come close with Rose. Twenty-seven or twenty-eight, her apartment after a launch party, her fingers at his collar, and he'd wanted to want it so badly that he'd mistaken the wanting-to-want for the real thing. Her mouth on his and his hands in the right places and his body performing adequately and his mind a thousand miles above it all, watching, monitoring, checking the gauges.

He was *different* and he knew it and even after Rose he'd been so good. So exactly what they expected. He'd sat across from CSA flight psychologists and answered their questions about relationships and stress and support systems, and everything else: *Do you have a partner? No. Are you interested in pursuing one? Not at this time.*

The partner he didn't have was never the girlfriend they were picturing, and he never corrected them.

And now he was behind a water recovery system with a dosimeter climbing and Ilya Rozanov's body pressed against every inch of his back, and every system Shane had built to contain this was failing at once.

Because it was *Rozanov*.

Because Rozanov had a jaw that could cut glass and a mouth that never stopped moving and hands that Shane had watched for seven months—repairing relays, catching the fucking tennis ball, gesturing through arguments—long-fingered, blunt-nailed, a scar across the left knuckle that Shane had memorized the shape of before he'd realized he was doing it.

Because Rozanov's eyes were hazel and Shane had spent months pretending he hadn't mapped their color the way he'd map a planetary atmosphere, the green rim like methane haze at the edge of a gas giant, the gold near the pupil like refracted light through a hydrogen envelope, the whole shifting spectrum a world Shane could study from a distance and never, ever land on.

He'd also been looking at everything else, taking it in like data, because there was so much to see. Because Rozanov had shoulders that strained the seams of his T-shirts and a strip of golden skin at his hip where the shirt rode up when he reached for overhead panels, and a smattering of dark hair beneath his navel Shane had spent seven months training himself to look away from.

He could recite the serial number of every panel within eyeline of Rozanov's hips. RS-TEK-4412. US-WRS-0097.

He looked away now the same way he did not stare at the sun, because the sun *burned* and Rozanov had a body that promised the same.

And all the while he knew it was there. He felt the pull of it the way the station felt the pull of the planet beneath it: constantly, inescapably, the tether that defined the shape of every orbit.

Shane had been falling toward Ilya Rozanov for months and calling it *floating*.

All of that was against him now. The collarbone behind his skull. The thighs along his hips. The breath on his neck. Rozanov's heartbeat thumping through Shane's shoulder blade at sixty-two beats per minute, and Shane's own pulse was running almost double that, and the discrepancy was a crisis in itself, made worse that there was nothing but *time* now, to sit and think about it, and *panic*.

"You are an idiot," Rozanov said, three inches behind Shane's right ear, and his breath moved Shane's hair.

Goddamn, sixty-two. Shane's heart rate was sixty-two when he was *asleep*. On a *good night*. He added this to the growing list of reasons Rozanov was infuriating, filed it between *bounces tennis ball during my briefings* and *looks like that on purpose*, and then his vision tunneled and the list dissolved.

"You've said." Honestly at this point he was grateful for the insults to distract from the radiation, the very real issue of proximity.

"I will say more. There is nowhere to go and you are *here*, so I will say everything I am thinking, and what I am thinking is this: you are the stupidest man on this station."

"That's up for debate. The one other man on this station is *you* after all."

"I am not *done*," Rozanov snarled, "*You*. There are satellites with more intelligence than you—old ones, Soviet ones, the ones that do not even work anymore. You are dumber than Sputnik and Sputnik was a *metal ball with an antenna.*"

The insult was delivered with genuine venom. Rozanov's chest had gone rigid against Shane's back, the muscles between his ribs locking down, and his hands had curled into fists on Shane's thighs—Shane could feel each knuckle through the thin fabric of his shorts.

"You had time. You could have gotten on the Aurora. Pike was waiting, the hatch was open, and you stayed for—what? To sit behind a water tank?"

"I told you that I wasn't going to leave you behind, I stayed so I could get you out."

"I did not *ask* you to get me out. I told you to *go.*"

"Last I fucking checked," Shane snarled, and seven months of swallowed rank-challenges climbed his throat at once, "you are not the one responsible for this expedition. I am. And I don't follow orders from the runner-up."

“Runner-up,” Rozanov spat. “I have logged more hours outside a spacecraft than you have spent awake on this station. You have simulator badges and a polite smile for the cameras, *Commander*. You are a kid playing with a multi-billion dollar toy, and now there is a good chance we *both* die because you could not bear to leave when you had the chance.”

“Probably,” Shane replied.

“So please explain how this is better. Explain the math to me, Hollander. You love math.”

Shane didn’t answer. The math, honestly, was not great. The math said that if the CME arrived within two hours, their cumulative dose behind the WRS racks would approach the threshold where long-term stochastic effects became statistically meaningful—a phrase that sounded clinical in a textbook and sounded like *cancer* when you were sitting in someone’s lap four hundred kilometers above the Earth.

He didn’t share this with Rozanov.

Rozanov’s complaining mutters dropped into Russian—a low, continuous and angry stream that Shane caught in fragments. *Durák.* Idiot. That one he knew.

Then more*: Upryámyy*. Stubborn, he thought.

Rozanov always did this when he wanted to strip Shane of his authority; he retreated behind a linguistic wall where English protocols couldn’t reach him, weaponizing Shane’s partial fluency to make him scramble. *Hollander* dropped into the Russian like a stone into a river, dragging unfamiliar syllables behind it, and from the cadence of the sentences Shane was fairly sure he was being insulted in ways the English language couldn’t fully accommodate.

Shane couldn’t see it from this angle—his head was below Rozanov’s chin—but he could feel the motion: the arm shifting, the shoulder rotating, Rozanov’s hand slipping into the narrow space near Shane’s shoulder to find the chain. And then the movement of Rozanov’s thumb closing around the metal cross, a repetitive back-and-forth that Shane felt pressing directly against his own skin.

Was he terrified too? Was he praying?

One hundred and forty on the dosimeter.

Going up. Still going up. Two hundred ninety.

Shane ran the math because the math was the only part of this he could control. Cumulative dose since the alarm: roughly thirty-five milligrays. Extrapolated over six hours at the current rate—but the rate wasn’t holding, the flux curve was parabolic, and without the external sensor array he had no model for the decay. The CME had hit the magnetosphere; the numbers weren’t just climbing, they were jumping now, taking massive leaps.

Three hundred and ten on the dosimeter.

Three hundred and fifty.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh *fuck*.

Shane's brain was running the integration automatically: area under the curve, dose rate times duration. In the lab, physics was an invisible dance. Controlled nucleation, thermal cycling and it was beautiful, intricate choreography that powered reactors and grew crystals. It was gorgeous when things were normal. But the dance had broken. Now, it was just high-energy protons acting as bullets, splitting atoms in his own tissue, a chain reaction he couldn't diagram his way out of, integrating under a curve he couldn't see the shape of, and the curve was still climbing, and each increment represented damage to base pairs in his DNA that his body would either repair or not repair according to probabilities he could calculate but not influence.

There was nothing Shane could do. No system to override. No checklist to execute. He was running the odds like a flight controller, but the scenario playing out in his head wasn't a Houston simulation; it was the final act of *Alien*, where the only remaining procedure was blowing the airlock and praying.

Ellen Ripley had a flamethrower and a cat.

Shane had a water recycler.

There was no procedure with numbered steps that would produce a predictable outcome if performed correctly and it was a horrible helpless, devouring feeling that was swallowing him head first.

And it wasn't the first time he'd felt this way.

He'd been six years old the first time he'd sat through an earthquake—a small one, a 3.2, barely enough to rattle the dishes in the Ottawa kitchen. His mother had pulled him under the table and held him against her ribs and hummed, off-key, and the humming had drowned out the sound of the glasses shaking in the cabinet. He remembered the melody. He'd never figured out what song it was. He'd tried to find it once, at sixteen, scrolling through Japanese folk songs on his laptop with headphones in so his father wouldn't ask what he was doing, and he'd never found it because his mother hummed everything slightly sharp and the version in his memory didn't match any recorded version, and eventually he'd stopped looking because the search was replacing the memory, overwriting the original with near-misses, and he couldn't afford to lose the original.

He could not afford to lose the original.

And now his body was absorbing radiation that would rewrite his DNA the way his search had tried to rewrite his mother's song—close but wrong, near-miss after near-miss, until the original was corrupted beyond recognition—and there was no procedure for this. One step: *wait.*

Wait. Sit in another man's lap and let invisible particles shred your chromosomes and wait. No sub-steps. No contingencies. No branch points. Shane could feel the failure propagating the way you feel a bridge fail—not all at once but in sequence, load-bearing members giving

way one after another, each failure transferring stress to the next member, the whole structure heading toward a state he could model and predict and absolutely not prevent.

Shane's breathing changed.

He noticed it the way he'd notice a caution light on a panel, nearly disembodied from the experience itself, registering data first, implication lagging. Inhales stacking too fast, not completing. His diaphragm pulling in sharp, shallow contractions that moved air without exchanging gas. Fingers tingling, then going numb—not radiation, wrong mechanism, wrong timeline—hyperventilation tanking his blood CO_2, pH rising, peripheral vasoconstriction propagating outward from his core. He could diagram the entire cascade on a whiteboard. He could label every ion channel, every receptor, every synapse in the chain. He could not make it stop.

Ignorance would have let him panic in peace. Instead he was having a panic attack *and* peer-reviewing it in real time, which was not the multitasking the CSA had in mind when they selected him for his ability to manage concurrent tasks under pressure.

Three hundred and fifty-seven.

On the rack beside them, the status display for the CO_2 scrubber flickered, a column of hex code scrolling uselessly across the screen as a stray particle flipped a bit in its memory. Shane's vision was narrowing. The dosimetry display blurred, swam, split into two overlapping images that his brain could not reconcile. He blinked and it didn't help, which meant his eyes were wet, and the wetness was not sweat.

"Hollander."

Rozanov's thumb had stopped on the cross. Shane felt it through the contact between their bodies—the suspension of a rhythm that had been running since the muttering stopped. Rozanov's chest was rigid against Shane's back again, the muscles between his ribs locking, and Shane registered distantly that his own breathing must have been transmitting through the same contact points—that Rozanov could feel every rapid, shallow, failing contraction of Shane's diaphragm the same way Shane had felt the stroking of the cross.

"Hollander." Rozanov's chin lifted off Shane's head. "Hollander, you are having a panic attack."

And there it was—the thing Shane had almost dreaded more than the dosimetry, more than the CME, more than the slow arithmetic of irradiated DNA. Rozanov had seen him break. Not a stranger, not a flight surgeon behind a desk in Houston, but the one person on this station—on this planet, in this orbit—who had a competing claim to Shane's chair and the talent to back it up. Every breath Shane failed to complete was a data point Rozanov could carry back to Earth. Proof that the board had picked wrong. Shane's hands locked tighter around his kneecaps and his lungs refused to fill and the worst part, the very worst part, was that he needed Rozanov to fix this and Rozanov was already fixing it and that was its own kind of defeat.

A fucking panic attack. He knew what it was.

Sympathetic overdrive. Not lethal. Will resolve. I am not dying. Yet.

Knowing this helped exactly as much as knowing the name of the ocean you were drowning in.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 04:00 | MET +00.42 Dosimetry: 361 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

The dosimetry display swam. Shane blinked and it kept swimming, which meant his eyes were wet, which—

"*Shane,*" Rozanov said, and the accent broke the word open—*Sha-yne*—two syllables where one had been, refracted, made foreign and familiar at once. Seven months on this station and Rozanov had never used it. Had called him Hollander, Commander, *Captain Canada*, had once called him *the little astronaut with the freckles* during a patch-in with Star City that Shane was not supposed to have overheard. Never this. Never the bare first name in a bare low register, stripped of every weapon Ilya Rozanov usually carried in his mouth.

Rozanov's palm pressed flat against Shane's sternum, the heel of his hand on the bone above Shane's heart, fingers splayed wide enough to span from his clavicle to the top of his diaphragm, and he held it there with a weight that had nothing to do with force. The pressure reorganized Shane's entire sensory field. Everything that wasn't that hand went distant.

"*Dýshi so mnoy,*" Behind Shane's ear, the consonants half-swallowed by the accent. "Breathe with me, Shane. I am going to breathe in, and you are going to feel it against your back, and you are going to match it. *In.*"

His chest expanded against Shane's back. The hand on Shane's sternum didn't push—it held, gave his lungs a surface to press against on the inhale, a fixed point in a body that had lost all its fixed points. Shane's diaphragm caught, hitched, tried.

The inhale was shallow. A quarter of what his lungs could hold. Rozanov didn't comment on it.

"Out. Slow. I don't care if it is not a full breath. Let it go."

Shane let it go. The exhale was ragged and wet and his spine curved deeper into Rozanov's chest on the release, and Rozanov absorbed the weight without shifting.

"Again. Slower. Listen to me. You are not dying. Your body thinks you are dying and it is wrong. Your body is *stupid*, like the rest of you, and it is getting this wrong." The chest behind Shane expanded again, slow, exaggerated.

"Again. In."

In. The hand rose with his sternum. Shane's ribs expanded—a third of capacity this time, maybe more—and the back of his skull pressed into the hollow of Rozanov's collarbone, and he could feel the pulse in Rozanov's throat against the crown of his head, and Rozanov's

heart rate was sixty-eight now, up from sixty-two. Against Shane's shoulder blades, Rozanov's intercostal muscles had locked—every breath landing at the same depth and the same interval, mechanical in a way that Shane recognized from his own vacuum-drill breathing patterns. Four-count in, four-count out. Rozanov was running a protocol. And at the heel of his palm, against Shane's sternum, a tremor surfaced on every other exhale and disappeared when Rozanov pressed harder—overriding it with force, choosing which signal reached Shane's body, and Shane's diaphragm was matching the rhythm behind him because his body had found a cadence it could synchronize with and it was *taking* it, greedily.

"Again. Hold. Two, three—out."

Out. The shudder was smaller this time. Shane's fingers loosened on his kneecaps by a fraction. The crescents his nails had cut were stinging as circulation returned.

He felt nauseous. Shane felt sick. Rozanov was *better* at this. At *this*. The animal part of being a person. The part where a human body failed and another human body caught it. Shane could run the station; Rozanov could run *Shane*, and his body had surrendered the chain of command in under ninety seconds without so much as a vote.

Fuck.

And he was so stupidly grateful for it anyway.

"Again."

In. Hold. Out. The dosimetry display resolved into a single image on the third cycle.

"*Khorosho, vot i vse.* That's it. You are doing this," Rozanov said, behind his ear, and his register had dropped into a range that Shane's ear snagged on—low, unperformed, the accent thicker than usual because whatever filter Rozanov ran his English through before it left his mouth had switched off. He sounded like a man talking to himself in a dark room, and Shane was the dark room. "Your body is having a bad reaction and you are overriding it. That is all this is. You are not losing control, you are regaining it, and you are doing it well, because you are annoyingly competent at everything, and this is no different. Again now. In. Hold. Out. Like you are a real astronaut and not a Canadian they sent to make the rest of us feel better about ourselves."

"Fuck—" Shane's voice cracked on the word. His eyes burned, and he blinked and the burning got worse."—you."

"Later, if you want, since lungs are working. Breathe in again."

In. His lungs filled to half capacity. Rozanov's chest pressed his shoulder blades and Rozanov's hand pressed his sternum and he was suspended between the two, held in a space that was eighteen inches wide and contained the only other living person within four hundred kilometers, and his body was calming despite his brain, or perhaps because his brain had finally exhausted itself and ceded the negotiation to the palm on his chest.

Three hundred and sixty-one, then—three hundred and sixty.

The single-digit drop registered through Shane's entire body. Not the breathing exercise. Not a decision. A release that ran through his obliques and his hip flexors and the long muscles bracketing his spine, all of them unlocking at once as if the dosimeter's decline had cut a wire his whole nervous system had been hanging from.

"Going down," Rozanov said. The hand on Shane's sternum didn't move. "You see?"

"I see."

"Good." A pause. Then: " Because if you lose consciousness, I am required to perform rescue breathing, and I remember your VO2 max from training. Is only 'average'."

That wasn't how rescue breathing worked. That wasn't even *right*. "My VO2—max is—*ninety-second percentile*—"

"For a *Canadian*." Rozanov's thumb moved on Shane's collarbone in a single pass, there and gone. "Which is, what, sixty-fifth percentile for Russians? Seventieth if we are generous?"

"That's—not how percentiles—you don't *scale* them by—"

"And your resting heart rate was sixty-one on your last physical. Mine was fifty-four. So when we are discussing which of us is more likely to have a cardiac event behind a water recovery system—"

The sheer statistical illiteracy of this was so offensive that it cut through the residual panic like a blade through—no, not a blade. Like a boot through wet snow. A brick through a window. Graceless and effective. Shane's breathing was his own again, even almost functional, and what had driven it there was not the breathing exercise or the hand on his chest but the visceral *need* to correct Ilya Rozanov's understanding of exercise physiology and shut him *up*.

"Resting heart rate is not predictive of acute cardiac events and you *know* that, any first-year physiology student—"

"Oh, also, while we are on the subject of your professional failures—your crystal experiment is ruined. Sample four. The lattice clouded. I saw it yesterday when I was adjusting the Ku-band relay and it was very obviously compromised."

"You were *looking at my samples?*"

"I was passing through. The clouding was visible from the hatch. You did not need a microscope to see it, Hollander. Also, your rack labeling is wrong. You have the temperature logger on Bay 3 but the readout cable routes to Bay 5. Very sloppy, *Commander*. Perhaps if you spent less time with the manual and more time with the hardware, you would see."

"The cable routing is *intentional*, it's a cross-reference calibration for the—" Shane stopped. Drew a full breath through his nose. Let it out through his mouth. His hands had released his kneecaps entirely. His breathing was steady. His pulse had dropped below ninety—he could

feel it in his wrists, no longer hammering but thumping, a rhythm he could live inside. "You're… you…"

"Yes, *Commander*?"

Rozanov had identified the failure—Loss of composure, panic-loss-of-function, call it what you wanted—and instead of logging it, instead of banking it for the next time he wanted to challenge Shane's authority, he'd burned it. Weaponized it in Shane's favor. Turned it into anger because anger was functional and panic was not, and he'd done it with the efficiency of a man who understood exactly how Shane's operating system worked and had chosen, this once, to be a technician instead of a saboteur.

"You're doing this on *purpose.*"

"Doing what?"

Shane looked at him—sweaty, rumpled, the gold cross hanging crooked outside his collar, hazel eyes steady and unrepentant and every defense Shane had built—the rank, the schedule, the composure that functioned as architecture—had collapsed toward a single point, and the single point was Ilya's hand on his chest. A singularity. The place where all the known physics broke down and the only law that remained was proximity.

Because *of course* Rozanov understood how his brain worked. Of course Rozanov had mapped it. Shane had spent twenty years hiding himself from teammates and flight surgeons and CSA psychologists and every woman who'd ever tried to reach him, and this man—this Russian disaster with his tennis ball—had read him in seven months with the same offhanded competence he brought to fixing a toilet pump.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't *fair* that the first person who'd ever really looked at Shane's wiring was the one person Shane couldn't afford to let see it.

And it was too late, because he'd already seen it, and he wasn't looking away.

"Making me angry so I stop panicking."

"Mm," Rozanov said. "Is working, yes?"

Shane stared at the dosimeter. Three hundred and twenty. His breathing was steady. His hands had stopped shaking. His face was hot and he was pissed off and he was… more… pissed off than he was frightened.

"... My rack labeling is not sloppy."

"Is sloppy. When we get out of here I will show you. I will draw diagram."

"I don't need a *diagram* from a man who spelled 'maintenance' wrong on three consecutive logbook entries."

"English is a garbage language," Rozanov said dismissively. "French is also garbage but at least it sounds nice. Why do you have two garbage languages when you could just speak

Russian?"

"You misspelled it in *your own logbook.* In the Roscosmos system. In *Cyrillic.*"

"Oh you read Russian now?"

Shane wheezed. "I know what *obsluzhivaniye,* 'maintenence' looks like because I double check everyone's logs, and I know what it looked like in your logbook, and those were not the same word."

"The Cyrillic keyboard on the Zvezda terminal sticks on the second row. This is a known issue. I have filed four maintenance requests, which I spelled correctly in Russian, and your American partners have done nothing because they do not read Russian."

"I hate you. That's not how this works, that is—the maintenance requests route through the Russian segment ops desk in *Korolev*, not through—how did you even get let *up* here—"

"Shane."

"—NASA, so the fact that Americans can't read Russian is completely irrelevant to—"

"*Shane.*"

Two hundred and forty-two. The curve was bending. The peak—or at least this peak, the initial SPE before whatever the CME would bring—was behind them, and the numbers were retreating in grudging increments. Shane tracked each one with the part of his brain that had come back online: the flight-controller part, the part that could hold data and project trajectories and function.

The other part—the part still cataloguing the weight of Rozanov's forearms along the outside of his thighs, and the heat of Rozanov's palm through his shirt, and the way the thumb on his collarbone kept moving in absent, aimless arcs that Rozanov probably wasn't even aware of—he left alone. It was running its own processes. It didn't require input.

It needed to be *ignored*.

"If you are going to sit in my lap," Rozanov said, "and grind your ass against my dick while you insult me, the *least* you can do—the absolute minimum, Hollander—is use my first name. This is common courtesy. I think even a Canadian would agree."

Shane's flush climbed from his collarbones to his hairline and he felt his face burning roentgen red—a full-body thermal event entirely unrelated to particle bombardment—and his hips locked rigid against the frantic, useless impulse to shift *away* from the specific physical reality he could now feel against his lower back, because shifting would require *movement*, and movement was what Rozanov had just accused him of, and any direction he shifted would grind him further into either the rack housing or Rozanov's lap, and both options were equally unsurvivable.

"I am not *grinding*, I am *sitting still* in a space that is *eighteen inches wide*—"

“You are not sitting still. You have not been still for one second since you sat down. You are —how do you say—*fidgeting*. With your whole ass. Against my—”

“*Rozanov*—”

“Wrong name.” The hand on Shane’s sternum pressed once. “Try again.”

“—your equipment is what caused this, the rack was American-made but it was mounted to a Russian bulkhead with Russian hardware that your engineers specced at six-millimeter bolts when the shear load *clearly* required eights—”

“Still wrong name.”

“—so if we’re assigning blame for why I’m currently sitting in your lap behind a urine recycler—”

“*Water recovery system,*” Rozanov corrected. “You said this yourself, ten minutes ago. Multi-stage distillation process. Very sophisticated. Now say my name.”

Shane’s mouth worked. He could feel every inch of Ilya Rozanov’s thighs along the outside of his hips, and the specific anatomy of Ilya’s chest behind his shoulder blades, and the breath landing on his crown, and the thumb on his collarbone, and the *other* thing, the thing pressed against his lower back that he was going to aggressively not think about except that it was *there* and it was unambiguous and his body was responding to it in ways that were going to become their own crisis if this gap didn’t get wider in the next thirty seconds.

“*Ilya,*” Shane said, and got it wrong; the first vowel too short, the L too hard against the roof of his mouth, the second syllable lilting upward as if he were tasting it. He heard himself say it and wanted to be ejected into the vacuum. He compensated immediately: “Your bolt spec was wrong and your spelling is an embarrassment to the entire Roscosmos program.”

Ilya’s breath caught and released in a short burst against the crown of Shane’s head, maybe the precursor of a laugh, and Shane could feel the effort it took to kill the rest of it: the abdominal wall tightening behind his lower back, the ribcage locking, the whole body clamping down on whatever had tried to escape.

“You say it very wrong,” Ilya said, “but is better.” The thumb on Shane’s collarbone traced a single arc and lifted. “Pronunciation needs work. I will teach you. When we are not dying.”

“I’m not sure we’re dying right now.”

“When we are not *maybe* dying. Better?”

“*Everything* about this needs work.”

One hundred and eighty. One hundred and thirty-eight. The numbers dropped, and Shane tracked them the way he’d track a reentry corridor—each decrement a confirmation that the parabola was symmetrical, that what climbed would descend. Nineteen minutes. The spike had lasted nineteen minutes from peak to the moment the dosimeter dropped below one-forty and Shane’s hindbrain released its stranglehold on his adrenal glands.

Nineteen minutes in which two men had breathed between machines while particles passed through them at the speed of light, and Ilya Rozanov had put his hand on Shane Hollander's chest and held it there, and Shane had let him, and neither of them had said a single true thing about why.

One hundred and thirty-five, and still dropping. One hundred. Ninety. And then… holding… at eighty-five. Shane shifted forward, and Ilya's hand lifted from his sternum. The air that replaced it was station-temperature—twenty-two degrees Celsius, the same as every other cubic centimeter of atmosphere on this station—and it felt like a wound. Shane did not have a framework for air feeling like a wound.

He added it to the file and the file went into the drawer with everything else.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 05:00 | MET +01.42 Dosimetry: 85 mGy/hr (holding)

Crew on station: 2

"We should run system checks," Shane said. "That rack tore out of a power distribution mount—if it damaged the secondary bus on its way down, we could be losing thermal regulation in the Russian segment and not know it yet."

"*Da.* Yes." Ilya's legs withdrew from around Shane's hips, and the disassembly was no more elegant than the assembly had been—Ilya's knee catching the inside of Shane's thigh hard enough to make him hiss, Shane's elbow cracking the rack housing, both of them grunting and shoving against each other in the gap until they separated with the gracelessness of two components pulled from a housing they'd been interference-fit into.

Shane drifted port. Ilya drifted starboard.

Two feet of recycled air opened between them.

Shane filled it with procedure before it could fill with anything else.

"I'll take the US segment—Node 1 through the Lab. You take the Russian segment. Hardline check-in every fifteen minutes." He was pulling himself out of the gap, hands finding rack edges, his body remembering how to be a single unit moving through a station instead of half a unit pressed against another half. The tremor in his fingers had settled to a hum he could manage if he kept his hands occupied. He was very good at keeping his hands occupied.

"And what are we looking for, Commander?" Ilya asked it lightly, the way he asked everything—as if the answer were a formality and he'd already decided what he was going to do regardless—but he hadn't pushed off yet.

"Hull integrity first. If that rack sheared hard enough to trip the isolation protocols during the initial event, there could be secondary damage we haven't seen. Pressure seals, thermal regulation, anything structural so we can avoid a blowout." Shane ticked through the list each item a rung on a ladder that led him further from the gap behind the WRS and the shape of Ilya's body against his back. "After that—we haven't had comms with the ground since the

S-band dropped during the SPE; Houston can't help us if the station's falling apart, so structure first, comms second."

"And the Soyuz."

Shane's hands stilled on the rack.

The Soyuz was docked at Rassvet, the Earth-facing Russian cargo module on Ilya's side. It was also their only ride home, now that the Aurora was four hundred kilometers below them with the rest of the crew. If the SPE had done to the Soyuz what it had done to the station's electronics…

"Right. That too."

"Okay, Hollander," he said, snatching up that god forsaken tennis ball again, and the *thock* of it hitting a grab rail followed him through the module. One strike, two, three—diminishing with distance—and then the station swallowed the sound, and Shane was alone.

He pressed his palms flat against the WRS housing. The metal was cold against the crescents his nails had cut into his skin. His sternum still held the shape of a hand that was no longer there, and the cold wasn't overwriting it.

Three seconds. He gave himself three seconds.

Then he pushed off toward Destiny, and his hands were reaching for the first diagnostic panel before his body had stopped moving. The work was waiting, and his body wanted it the way his lungs had wanted Ilya's breathing cadence—greedily, without asking permission, already turning toward the nearest thing that offered forward momentum.

The system checks took two hours.

The S-band, and their communications, remained dead. Shane confirmed that first, cycling the communications rack and running the link diagnostics before moving on when the system returned the same inert error code. It was a problem for later.

The problems for *now* were all the other station diagnostics… which he ran *twice*. Power distribution, thermal control, atmospheric monitoring, the protein crystallization experiment that was almost certainly ruined but still warranted data collection—and by the time he'd logged the final entry, his hands had stopped shaking and his brain had re-established its normal operating hierarchy of *task, next task, next task after that.*

And the laboratory was always filled with tasks, even though it was different to be alone in it. Especially with Rose gone. Her handwriting was still on the whiteboard blocking out sample schedules in blue marker, her small, squared-off print, and her backup gloves were still clipped to the rack where she'd left them.

Shane pulled the gloves off the clip and held them. The station's designers had given up on normal storage decades ago; every surface carried strips of Velcro so tools and gloves could

be slapped down before they escaped into orbit.

Small, size six, the fingertips stained with silver nitrate from the microgravity fluid experiment she'd been running in Kibo. He turned them over in his hands. Rose had good hands. He'd noticed that first, before anything else—at a mixer during candidate selection in Houston, her fingers wrapped around a beer glass, short nails, no rings, and he'd thought *I could hold that hand in public and it would look right* and the thought had been so cynical and so precise and so *sad* that he'd walked across the room and introduced himself anyway, because sadness had never stopped Shane from doing the correct thing. Only from wanting it.

She deserved better than what he'd given her. He'd given her eighteen months of a man who showed up on time and said the right things and kissed her with his eyes open, checking, always checking—*is this working? Am I performing this correctly?*—and she'd been too kind or too proud to tell him that she could feel the inspection happening through his lips. When it ended, she'd said *I think you're looking for something I can't give you* and he'd said *I'm not looking for anything* and both of those sentences had been exactly half true.

He clipped the gloves back onto the rack. The lab was his now. The samples, the schedules, the whiteboard with her scribbles. All inherited. Shane was good at inheriting—at picking up what others set down, at tending their gardens with the discipline he couldn't spend on his own.

Shane pulled up her last data log and picked up where she'd stopped, the way he'd picked up every responsibility she'd left behind when she boarded the Aurora and the mindless, thoughtless, task in the after.

He'd been in the lab for twenty minutes when Ilya drifted past the hatch. Shane caught the movement in his periphery—a dark shape decelerating in the corridor, slowing, almost stopping. He looked up. Ilya was already gone, the faint *thock* of the tennis ball resuming from somewhere in another unit.

The station's ventilation fans carried sound farther than walls ever did; a dropped tool in Columbus could echo through half the US segment.

It had been like that for weeks before the storm, too. Ilya never came into the lab when Rose was running experiments. He'd linger in the corridor, or find a reason to be in the adjacent node, or send Svetlana to relay a maintenance question he could have asked himself. Shane had assumed it was a personality conflict—Rose was organized and direct and American, and Rozanov was none of those things.

The Soviets and the Americans had never exactly been friendly when it came to space, so Shane wasn't particularly surprised they didn't get along. While their crew functioned well, truly it seemed like only Cliff and Svetlana got *along* with Ilya, while the rest of them merely tolerated.

Hardline check-ins with Ilya—*Rozanov*, no, he was *Rozanov* to him still—came every fifteen minutes, as agreed. Rozanov's reports were clipped and professional by his standards, which meant they contained only two insults per transmission instead of six. The secondary power bus in Zvezda was intact. The thermal regulators were compensating. The dislodged rack had

not shifted against its cargo strap. The dosimetry across both segments was falling in a steady, shallow decline—one hundred and twelve, then ninety-eight, then eighty-five. The SPE was fading. The CME Houston had warned about was still a question mark, but the particle flux was dropping, and for now, dropping was *enough.*

And everything was, surprisingly, almost feeling like it might be *okay*, that they might be *fine*, until:

"Hollander." Rozanov's transmission came through the hardline with a flatness that Shane's ear had learned, over seven months, to distinguish from his theatrical flatness, his bored flatness, his provoking flatness. This was the flatness of a man reading a number he didn't like. "Come to Zvezda. Houston uploaded an SPE forecast model to Destiny's terminal before we lost S-band. I need it."

Shane's hand stalled on the data log. "How do you know that?"

"Because the particle decay curve on the Zvezda array is *wrong*. The slope flattened twenty minutes ago, and your dosimeters in the US segment should show the same if you stop looking at other systems long enough to check. Houston saw this coming. They would have sent updated models. Go to Destiny's terminal, pull the forecast file, bring it here."

Shane was already closing Rose's data log before Rozanov finished the sentence. He found the file buried three layers deep in the uplink queue—timestamped eleven minutes before S-band died, flagged with a priority header that the station's alert system had swallowed whole during the cascade of SPE warnings. He hadn't known it was there. He should have looked.

He pulled it onto a portable drive and was through Node 1 in under a minute.

He found Rozanov floating in front of the Zvezda dosimetry array with both hands braced on the panel frame, his body angled forward, his nose six inches from the display. The amber emergency lighting carved shadows under his cheekbones and turned the grease streak into a dark slash. Even dimmed, the LEDs gave everything the same clinical brightness; the station never truly had night.

He didn't look up when Shane entered.

"Tell me what you see." Rozanov tapped the screen with one knuckle.

Shane hooked his foot through a restraint loop and leaned in. He slid his other foot under the handrail as well; astronauts learned quickly that one anchor point was never enough if you wanted both hands free.

The dosimetry array displayed two datasets: the local readings from the station's particle detectors, and—when the S-band had still been functioning—the projected flux curve Houston had transmitted based on solar observatory data. The local readings showed the declining tail of the initial SPE, the numbers still dropping in their grudging retreat. Seventy-eight milligrays per hour. Manageable. Trending downward.

But Houston's projected curve didn't end there.

The model showed a second peak. Larger than the first. The coronal mass ejection, the wall of magnetized plasma that the sun had hurled into space behind the initial particle burst, was still in transit, and the projected arrival window was narrow: five to nine hours from now. The first SPE had been the shrapnel. The CME was the cannonball.

“This is a Carrington-class storm,” Rozanov said, dragging a knuckle across the projected peak.

The Carrington Event was back in 1859 but haunted the nightmares of today just the same; a solar superstorm so massive it set telegraph offices on fire and lit the night sky with aurora as far south as Cuba. Every astronaut learned it the way every sailor learned the word *Titanic*: the benchmark disaster, the worst-case scenario that training modules used to scare you into respecting the sun.

In 1859 there had been no satellites to fry, no power grids to collapse, no space station with two men inside it.

If a Carrington-class event happened now—*was* happening now—

“Astronauts outside strong shielding,” Rozanov continued, and tapped the glass, “receive lethal doses.”

Shane traced the curve with his finger.

The projected peak flux at CME arrival was three to five times the initial spike. Fourteen hundred milligrays per hour at the median estimate, and the upper bound—the ninety-fifth percentile scenario that Houston’s models assigned a non-trivial probability—the number climbed past two thousand.

Two thousand milligrays per hour. Shane didn’t need to run the full integration; the numbers at the projected peak, sustained over the duration Houston’s model forecasted, crossed every threshold that mattered. Acute radiation sickness, if they didn’t die outright, was assured. Lymphocytes crash within days. And behind that, the cascade: immune suppression, hemorrhage, organ failure; the body dismantling itself at the cellular level because the repair machinery couldn’t keep pace with the damage.

The WRS shielding wouldn’t be enough. Not for this.

“The water is not enough,” Rozanov said.

“No.”

‘No’ such a small word with such a *large* meaning, two letters and a single syllable that all meant *this kills us. Slowly. Over days. But it kills us.*

Shane stared at the curve. His brain was running the integration automatically—area under the curve, dose rate times duration, the merciless arithmetic of energy deposited in tissue. He could feel the answer forming before he’d finished the calculation, the way you feel a structure fail before you hear the sound.

“We can’t stay, so we’ll need to take the Soyuz,” Shane said.

Rozanov was already shaking his head, but Shane pushed past it. “What are you shaking your head for? The Soyuz has better shielding than any module on this station. The descent capsule is designed for reentry—the ablative heat shield, the structural mass of the capsule walls. If we seal ourselves inside and run the environmental systems on internal power, we’d cut the effective dose by another forty, fifty percent on top of the water. That might be enough to keep us below the acute threshold.”

“Come,” Rozanov said.

They traversed the length of the Russian segment, Zvezda through Zarya, past the Progress cargo vehicle docked at the nadir port, to the aft docking compartment where the Soyuz MS sat attached to the station like a lifeboat on the hull of a ship. Rozanov moved ahead of Shane through the passage, pulling himself with the efficiency of a man navigating his own hallway in the dark, and Shane followed, cataloguing the route: how many hatches, how many meters, how long it would take to make this transit if they needed to do it at speed.

Rozanov reached the docking compartment first and stopped.

Shane pulled himself alongside and saw it immediately.

The compartment’s internal pressure was nominal—its hatches had held, the seals were intact—but the Soyuz’s orbital module, the spherical section that served as the airlock and living space above the descent capsule, had taken damage. A secondary equipment rack—smaller than the one that had blocked Zvezda’s corridor, but mounted on the adjacent bulkhead—had partially torn free during the SPE-induced vibration event. One of its mounting brackets had sheared and the corner of the rack had swung outward on the remaining bracket like a door on a single hinge, and the swinging edge had struck the Soyuz’s umbilical interface panel.

The panel was dented.

Two of the four fluid lines—the ones that connected the station’s coolant loop to the Soyuz’s thermal management system—had crimped at the connector. One had cracked.

A frozen bead of coolant hung in the air near the breach, caught between the vacuum of the damaged line and the station’s atmosphere, glinting under the lighting strips.

“Thermal control,” Rozanov said. He reached past Shane and ran his finger along the crimped lines, touching each connector. His hand moved with a sureness that didn’t need to think about where things were—muscle and metal in conversation, the station’s anatomy mapped into his fingertips. “Two of four lines compromised and one cracked. We cannot run the Soyuz thermal system on two lines; the descent capsule will overheat within ninety minutes of sealing the hatch.”

“Can… you repair it?”

Rozanov’s hand dropped from the panel. He floated back half a meter and looked at the damage the way Shane had seen him look at a failed component during a maintenance EVA

six weeks ago, eyes tracking each fracture line, mouth flat, already sorting what could be salvaged from what couldn't.

"The cracked line, no. Not without a replacement connector, and the spares are in the Progress cargo manifest, Bay 7, which is—" He pointed aft, toward the Progress vehicle docked beyond the Soyuz. "On the other side of the Soyuz docking interface. Inaccessible without depressurizing the compartment and doing an internal transfer, which takes four hours minimum and equipment we do not have staged."

"The crimped lines?"

"*Maybe*. If the crimp hasn't fractured the interior wall. I would need to pull the connectors, inspect, re-seat, pressure-test. Again, it would take hours. And if the interior wall is cracked, then I have the same problem as the first line and those hours wasted."

Shane ran the timeline. The CME arrival window started… when? Anywhere from four to nine hours? Hours for a repair that might not work, leaving a small margin before the storm hit—maybe one hour to run up the Soyuz environmental systems, verify thermal stability, seal hatches, and strap in. And if the repair failed, they'd have burned all the time of declining-but-still-elevated radiation exposure in the docking compartment, which had the worst shielding on the station, for nothing.

"It's not enough time," Shane said.

"No."

'No' again. Such a small word, but it filled the compartment entirely.

A frozen bead of coolant drifted near Rozanov's shoulder. Shane watched it rotate, catching light. A tiny sphere of glycol solution, freed from its system, going nowhere.

They, too, were going nowhere.

"So." Rozanov caught the bead between two fingers and wiped it on his shorts. "No Aurora. No Soyuz. No comms. The CME comes when it comes and we are not sure *when* that will be exactly, and the best shielding we have is a water recycling system that will cut the dose by sixty percent, which is not enough." He ticked these off on his fingers without drama, the way he might inventory a supply locker. "Have I missed anything?"

Shane hadn't. Rozanov hadn't. The math hadn't missed anything either; it had delivered its answer with the indifference math always had, and the answer was that two men on a station with aluminum walls and a broken lifeboat were going to absorb enough ionizing radiation to unravel them at the molecular level, and there was no checklist for that.

"No."

Shane looked at the crippled Soyuz and its dented panel. The cracked line with its frozen bead of coolant already drifting toward the ventilation intake. He looked at the hatch behind him—the long corridor back through Zarya, through Node 1, through the empty station to

Destiny where his ruined crystal experiment sat in its rack and his career, his entire life's architecture, was worth exactly as much as the shielding between him and the sun.

Rozanov was watching him, and he had the tennis ball in his hand, squeezing until his knuckles were white. "Then… it is already over."

"Yes. It's—yes. Okay," Shane said. His own voice reached him from a distance, as if the word had to travel through the four hundred kilometers of vacuum below them before it arrived at his ears. "Okay."

"Okay," Rozanov repeated, and the repetition did not make it mean anything different.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 07:00 | MET +03:42 Dosimetry: 78 mGy/hr (declining)

Crew on station: 2

Then Rozanov tucked the tennis ball against his thigh and pushed off the wall.

"Come on, Hollander." He caught the hatch frame one-handed and swung through. "If I am going to die on this station, I am not doing it sober."

"*What?*"

But Rozanov was already through the hatch and moving aft, back toward the Russian segment, and Shane was left floating in the docking compartment with the crippled Soyuz and the frozen coolant bead and the dosimetry numbers he'd already memorized and could not un-memorize. Fourteen hundred at the median. Two thousand at the upper bound.

The numbers would be waiting for him whether he followed Rozanov or not.

Chapter 2: Stray

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 07:01 | MET +03:43 Dosimetry: 77 mGy/hr (declining)

Crew on station: 2

He followed Rozanov.

Not immediately. He gave himself thirty seconds in the compartment, long enough to check the cargo strap on the torn rack one more time, long enough to verify that the cracked fluid line wasn't leaking atmosphere as well as coolant, long enough to run his hand along the Soyuz's docking ring and feel the cold metal under his palm and understand that this machine was not going to save them. Thirty seconds of being a Commander with no one to command and nothing left to command them to do. Then he pushed off the bulkhead and pulled himself back through Zarya, through Node 1, and into the US segment, where the lights were still on emergency amber and the CO_2 scrubbers had long since calibrated to two bodies instead of six.

The air tasted different with four people missing. Thinner, or maybe that was psychosomatic—the knowledge of absence registering as a chemical change on his soft palate. Through the lab's small window, Earth rotated beneath him in its endless, indifferent scroll: ocean, cloud, the brown edge of a continent he couldn't identify from this angle.

Night was eating the Pacific.

He should eat.

Shane hadn't eaten since before the alarm. His hands selected a vacuum-sealed meal packet from the galley rack—grilled chicken with brown rice, 440 calories—and he carried it to the galley table and did not open it.

He looked at the packet. The packet looked back.

He'd eaten this meal, or its seven identical variants, for two hundred and fourteen consecutive days. He could rehydrate it and spork it from the pouch and log the caloric intake and feel the specific, joyless satisfaction of a body maintained according to specifications. His nutritionist in Houston had designed the plan. His flight surgeon had approved it. The macros were optimized for bone density maintenance in microgravity, and they worked, and Shane followed them because Shane followed things that worked, and he did not want to eat this chicken.

He was not, if he was being honest with himself in this galley on this station where honesty had suddenly become cheap because the future had shrunk to a window of single digit hours, sure why he was holding it. His body wasn't hungry. His body was running on cortisol fumes and adrenaline residue and the particular hollow feeling that came from knowing the exact

mechanism by which you were going to die and not being able to do a goddamn thing about it.

He was… going to die.

The chicken wasn't going to fix that. The chicken wasn't going to fix anything. But his hands had reached for it anyway, because that was what his hands did at this hour—reach for the scheduled meal, rehydrate, consume, log—and his hands hadn't gotten the memo that the schedule was dead.

He was still floating over the unopened packet when Rozanov drifted through the Node 1 hatch.

He'd changed his shirt. The torn one was gone, replaced by a tight-fitting dark grey Roscosmos undershirt pushed up at the sleeves, baring his forearms to the elbow. As usual, he wore his jumpsuit unzipped, and the top half was rolled down over his hips. The grease streak on his cheekbone was still there, and his hair had achieved full insurrection—compressed on one side, corkscrewing on the other, a single strand floating straight up from his crown in the microgravity, swaying with his movement like an antenna. The gold cross had been tucked back inside the shirt collar.

Under his arm, he carried a bottle.

Shane stared. The shape was unmistakable: a full, seven-hundred-milliliter bottle of *Stolichnaya*, the red and gold label slightly peeled at one corner. It had been on this station for seven months. It had survived preflight inspection, cargo manifest review, and the personal item weight limit—which meant Rozanov had either falsified his declaration form or redistributed mass from his personal allowance in a way that would have impressed an accountant committing fraud.

"How did you get that past inspection?"

"I am Russian. We are born knowing how to hide vodka. Is genetic." Rozanov hooked one stockinged foot through a restraint loop—the thick callus on the top of his foot visible from months of anchoring himself this way—and let his body drift into a perfect, sprawling neutral posture, arms floating loosely in front of his chest with the bottle balanced on his stomach. "You must be miserable not to be able to report me to anyone. Condolences. Drink with me."

"That's a violation of approximately nine different—"

"Hollander." Rozanov held the bottle up between them. The overhead LEDs caught the liquid inside—clear, still, shifting with the micro-currents of the station's ventilation. "The sun is going to kill us in—" He checked an invisible watch on his bare wrist. "Six hours. Maybe less. Maybe more, I am not the one with the pretty forecast model. But sometime between now and later, the CME hits and we absorb enough radiation to turn our bone marrow into soup. So."

He unscrewed the cap and fitted the squeeze nozzle; silicone, jury-rigged, the kind cosmonauts had been building since the Mir days to keep liquids from escaping into the cabin

atmosphere. Rozanov had come prepared. Of course Rozanov had come prepared. He held it out, nozzle first, and waited.

“You can eat your sad chicken. Or you can drink with me. One of these will make the next six hours bearable and it is not the chicken.”

Shane looked at the chicken packet. He looked at the vodka.

He took the vodka.

The first pull entered his mouth in a single, controlled stream. Warmer than he expected, body temperature from seven months of storage against Zvezda’s thermal duct, and the heat of it meant the alcohol vapor hit his sinuses before the liquid hit his tongue. His esophagus lit up. A bright, clean stripe of heat from palate to sternum. He hadn’t had a drink in… a year? Longer? His body registered the alcohol with the startled intensity of a system receiving an input it had deleted from its library.

He remembered, once, back in college someone asked about the effects of alcohol and drugs in space, and his bemused professor explained that alcohol in microgravity might hit faster because the fluid distribution in the body shifted upward, more blood in the head, less in the legs, a faster route from stomach to brain.

Shane was confirming this experimentally. Sample size of one. Not publishable, but compelling.

He swallowed, breathed through his nose, squeezed a second pull, and handed it back.

Rozanov’s eyebrows climbed. Whatever he’d been expecting—protest, a lecture, some version of Shane’s procedural rigidity—this wasn’t it. He took the bottle back and drank, watching Shane over the nozzle.

“You are full of surprises today, Commander. I was beginning to think they installed you from a kit. Made you in secret Canadian factory.”

“Yeah, well.” Shane pushed the chicken packet toward the galley ceiling, where it drifted and slowly rotated among the other detritus of a station being lived in by ghosts. “Today was surprising. I think the regs can survive one drink. It’s not like I will.”

Shane had never been funny on purpose before. His mother would have been proud. His mother would also have been horrified that he was drinking Russian vodka in space instead of doing literally anything else, but Yuna Hollander was four hundred kilometers below him and could not intervene, and this was maybe the first advantage of orbit he’d found that the CSA hadn’t listed in the recruitment brochure.

“Besides.” He gestured at the empty galley, the vacant modules beyond it, the whole hollowed-out station. Dark humor was new for him, but so was imminent, unavoidable, acute radiation sickness and death. “Who’s going to stop me?”

“Not me.”

Rozanov tilted the bottle and a sphere of vodka separated from the lip—small, perfect, wobbling with surface tension. It drifted between them, catching the LED strips on its surface. Rozanov leaned forward and caught it on his tongue—the sphere flattening, his mouth closing, his throat working once on the swallow. He exhaled through his nose with his eyes half-shut, and the whole operation took three seconds and carried the ease of a thing practiced many times in private.

"So," Rozanov said. "If we are lucky and the CME is on the low end and the shielding holds and our DNA is very forgiving." He spun the bottle between his fingers. "The SEUs are going to be a nightmare. Half the secondary memory on the Lab's flight computer is probably corrupted already."

"Probably."

Shane should have cared about that. An hour ago he would have cared about that. The flight computer was his responsibility, and the corrupted memory would mean re-flashing the BIOS, rebuilding the navigation state vector, manually re-entering the attitude control parameters—days of work, if they lived long enough to do it. The fact that he couldn't make himself care about the flight computer should have been alarming. Commander Hollander would have been alarmed. Shane Hollander—the version sitting in this galley with vodka in his stomach and a cosmonaut's eyes on his mouth—was discovering that Commander Hollander had a surprisingly short range, and that range ended at the lip of the vodka bottle.

"We'll re-flash the BIOS later. If there's a later."

Rozanov studied him over the bottle. "This does not sound like Commander Hollander. Commander Hollander would already be making a checklist."

"There… um, I think there's always a checklist in my head, but as of now, 'Commander Hollander' is off duty."

He was sitting in a tin can. He was far above the world. Planet Earth was blue, or would be if he looked, and there was nothing he could *do*.

"*Bozhe moy.*" Rozanov pressed a hand to his chest in theatrical shock. "He admits it. Write it down. Put it in the logbook. Hollander is off duty. The ISS is now under the command of—"

"Rozanov I will kill you before the sun does, don't push it."

"—the more handsome, more intelligent, and more—"

"*Rozanov.*"

"—charming cosmonaut who should have had this job in the first place." The grin was back, crooked and wide, and it was doing the thing it always did—covering for everything underneath it—but this time Shane could see the seams. The grin didn't reach the skin around Rozanov's eyes. The skin around Rozanov's eyes looked tired, and old, and afraid.

Shane took the bottle back and drank. The second pull was easier. The third was *almost* pleasant.

Rozanov had brought food from the Russian segment: a foil tube that he squeezed directly into his mouth. The smell was immediate and layered: beet, dill, something rich and dark underneath.

“Borscht,” Rozanov said, before Shane asked. He held the tube out. “It is better than your sad boy kibble.”

Scoffing because *boy kibble*, Shane took it. The borscht was warm—likely heated against a thermal duct in Zvezda, which was a maintenance violation, which Shane was not going to think about—and the first mouthful landed on his palate with a density that made seven months of rehydrated protein packets feel like a rumor of food. Beet and beef and sour cream and dill, actual ingredients rather than formulations. His stomach clenched around it with a greed that startled him.

He squeezed a second mouthful. A third. The dill bloomed across the roof of his mouth and his salivary glands ached with the novelty of tasting a thing that tasted like a *thing*—like his mother’s kitchen in August, miso and ginger, meals that had ingredients instead of macronutrient ratios, food that existed because someone had wanted to feed someone rather than optimize them. Two hundred and fourteen days of grilled chicken and brown rice, and the part of Shane that was supposed to be grateful for optimal bone-density maintenance was staging a mutiny over a tube of Russian beet soup.

He handed the tube back without comment, because anything he said would land as a concession, and Rozanov’s eyebrows were already doing enough gloating for both of them. But his tongue ran along the inside of his teeth, chasing the last of the sour cream, and he did not want the chicken packet back.

He wanted more borscht. He wanted a beer. He wanted to sit at his parents’ lake house with his feet in the water and eat a bowl of rice with a fried egg on top, the yolk running over the sides the way his mother made it, and the wanting hit him with a specificity that the last seven months of controlled intake had never produced.

It wasn’t even hunger. It was homesickness, wearing hunger’s clothes.

They passed the bottle between them. The vodka settled into Shane in layers; first the esophageal heat, then a loosening in his shoulders, then a warmth behind his sternum that spread outward into his arms and softened the edges of the galley, the equipment racks, the chicken packet he’d abandoned near the ceiling. The anxiety wasn’t gone. The CME was still coming. But the fear had migrated from the front of his skull to somewhere deeper, a background frequency instead of a siren, and the distance between those two locations was exactly the width of the bottle passing between their hands.

Rozanov was right. Getting drunk was better than doing nothing.

Rozanov had abandoned his restraint entirely and was floating at roughly thirty degrees off the vertical that didn’t exist, the bottle resting on his stomach. He looked like a man who’d

been born in microgravity and merely visited Earth out of courtesy. Shane, by contrast, was still locked into both foot restraints, spine straight, hands on the table edge. Even loosened, his body defaulted to infrastructure.

“Why?” Rozanov said.

Shane could hear, nested inside the word, the question Rozanov wasn’t asking: *why did they pick you?* Rozanov had been to space before. More EVA hours, more mechanical fluency, a first rotation under his belt when Shane had none. The selection board’s decision had made Shane the youngest Commander in station history and made Rozanov his subordinate, and in eighteen months neither of them had discussed it directly—a mutual avoidance that functioned less like diplomacy and more like two men agreeing not to look at the same wound.

But that wasn’t what Rozanov asked.

“Why did you decide to become an astronaut for CSA. Captain Canada. All of this.” He circled one finger, indicating the station, the orbit, the career, the sad bland chicken packet slowly rotating above them. “Why.”

The CSA’s pre-flight media training had included a module on crew bonding conversations—suggested topics, suggested boundaries, a pre-approved anecdote about learning to skate on a frozen lake in Quebec that was warm and relatable and revealed nothing. Shane had memorized the module. He opened his mouth and the skating story did not come out.

“I wanted to be the best at the hardest thing I could find.”

The vodka had bypassed the anecdote. His own words startled him—not because they were untrue but because he’d never said them that plainly, without the professional framing that usually wrapped them in palatability. *I was drawn to the challenge. I wanted to push the boundaries of human achievement.* Interview answers. Resume language.

What he’d just said was underneath all of that, and it was blunt and stupid and it barely made sense.

But it was honest.

Rozanov snorted as if this was obvious. “Yes,” he said. “I know this about you.”

Because you wanted the same thing, Shane thought, and the vodka made the thought louder than it should have been. *You wanted the same thing and you’re better at half of it than I am, and the half you’re better at is the half that matters up here, and we both know it, and you will never forgive them for choosing me and I will never stop wondering if they were right.*

Rozanov turned the bottle. “You wanted to be ‘the best at the hardest thing’,” he repeated. “You know, there is a word for this in Russian. *Otlichnik.* The perfect student. The one who sits in the front row and raises his hand for every question and the teacher loves him and the other children want to throw him out the window.” He drank. “I was one of those other children, one of the ones they threw out the window.”

“Shocking.”

“Ah, but you see that is a *good* thing. It is a compliment, Hollander. The *otlichnik* works the hardest and gets the highest marks and everyone admires him, and then one day the building catches fire, and he stands in the hallway with his perfect marks and waits for someone to tell him what to do. And the kid they threw out the window? He is already outside.”

“We call that an ‘asshole’ in Canadian.”

“And the asshole lives.” Rozanov caught the bottle as it drifted, a one-handed snag without looking. “So you wanted to be best astronaut?”

“The best at anything. The hardest thing.” Shane’s thumb ran along the edge of the table. “I was good at everything when I was a kid. School, languages, hockey—everything came fast, and the things that came fast didn’t cost enough to mean anything. I think I realized along the way that I needed to find the thing that would destroy me if I got it wrong, and then not get it wrong.”

And… maybe… the risk of *breaking* was just as tantalising as *overcoming*.

“And this is what you found?”

“This is what I found.”

“And? Has it destroyed you, *otlichnik*?”

Shane thought about his crystal experiment with its clouded lattice boundaries. His crew on an Aurora capsule somewhere below him. His parents’ lake, which he hadn’t seen in fourteen months. That he was never going to see any of it, or them, ever again.

“Maybe. Ask me again tomorrow.”

Rozanov accepted this with a short nod, understanding perhaps the need to lie around the truth with a prettier, impossible, hypothetical.

He would not be asking tomorrow.

Rozanov drank and passed the bottle. Shane drank and passed it back. The exchange had found its own rhythm, the bottle warming between their hands.

“Your turn for a question then,” Shane said. “Why did you decide to do this?”

“I wanted to leave.” Rozanov said it with the same inflection he’d used to read back a pressure gauge an hour ago—same pitch, same cadence, utterly flat. Then his mouth twisted. “Now you will make a face, and say an annoying Canadian thing, very sympathetic and warm, and I will want to break the bottle. So do not make the face.”

Shane, who had been making the face, stopped.

“Russia is Russia.” Rozanov’s eyes moved to the galley window, where massive cloud formations dragged a shadow across the Indian Ocean. “I love Russia in the way you love a thing that made you and also broke you and you cannot separate the making from the breaking. But I wanted to be far from it. Four hundred kilometers—” He tapped the ceiling. “Is quite far.”

The bottle came back to Shane. He held it but didn’t drink.

“And… my mother told me stories when I was small,” Rozanov said. “You know the Gagarin story?”

“Of course, everyone knows he was the first to orbit.”

“No, *no*, not the flight. After,” Rozanov said, waving his hand. “He landed in a field—parachute, flight suit, the whole production, and a farmer’s wife and her daughter were standing there with a cow, and they were terrified. And Gagarin said to them—” He adopted a pompous baritone. “‘*Do not be afraid. I am a Soviet citizen. I need a telephone.*’ My mother used to tell me this when I could not sleep. ‘Don’t be afraid, Ilyusha. Even the first man in space had to ask a farmer for directions.’” He drank. The grin held for another second and then folded inward, collapsing along a fault line Shane hadn’t seen until it moved. “Very pretty and very funny, my mother. And, of course, she also told me about Laika.”

Every astronaut knew the name too. The stray dog the Soviets launched in Sputnik 2, November 1957—one-way trip, no reentry system. She’d orbited Earth in a capsule the size of a washing machine and died from overheating within hours when the thermal control failed. The Soviets maintained for forty-five years that she’d been painlessly euthanized after a week. The truth came out in 2002, at a conference in Houston, delivered by one of the scientists who’d worked on the mission. She had died frightened and alone and overheating in a metal box, and no one had ever been sent to bring her home.

“Bedtime stories about a dog playing fetch in the stars. Back then I was too small and too simple to think of it as anything but a beautiful sort of dream. As an adult… I know better, but I like the bedtime story more. So.” He caught the bottle out of the air between them without looking. “I come up here, too. Find her. Play in the stars and return home for us both. Or at least that was the plan.”

“And so the tennis ball?” Shane asked.

Rozanov shrugged. “Dogs like fetch.”

The station orbited. The vodka orbited between them—bottle to Shane, nozzle to lips, bottle back to Rozanov—and the rhythm of it had replaced conversation for long enough that Shane had started tracking the intervals. Fourteen seconds. Eleven. Nine. They were drinking faster.

“Return home for us both,” Shane said. “You said ‘play in the stars and return home. For us both’. You and Laika?”

Rozanov caught the bottle one-handed and drank, and the swallow worked through his throat before he spoke—a gap long enough for Shane to hear the CO_2 scrubbers cycle twice.

Rozanov did not pause before speaking. Not ever, not in seven months of arguments and check-ins and provocations delivered at the speed of thought. The pause was its own kind of data.

“Sure,” Rozanov said. “Me and the dog.”

He drank and passed the bottle. Shane took it and didn’t lift it to his mouth. The vodka was warm against his palm and he was thinking—slowly, each thought having to push through alcohol and adrenaline residue and the leaden knowledge of the CME bearing down on them to reach the front of his brain—about *return home for us both.* Not *return home like she couldn’t.*

For us both.

As if Laika were only half the equation, and the other half was someone Rozanov hadn’t named, or… maybe… he *had*.

The gold cross. The one Rozanov wore inside his shirt collar, the chain fine enough to tangle in fabric, the pendant heavy enough to drift forward in microgravity whenever he bent over a systems panel. Shane had seen it catch the light a hundred times in seven months and never once seen Rozanov take it off. Not during EVA suit-up, when every loose item was a snag hazard. Not during sleep, when most crew removed their jewelry to keep it from floating into the ventilation intake.

And Shane had never seen him take a personal call. Not once. Hayden called Jackie and the kids every Sunday at 1400 UTC, the whole galley filling with the tinny shrieks of four children competing for the microphone. Rose’s mother called on Thursdays. Cliff’s wife sent video messages that he watched in his sleep station with headphones, laughing at intervals. Even Svetlana called home—her sister in Novosibirsk, her father, a rotating cast of friends whose names Shane had picked up from overhearing Russian he only half-understood.

Rozanov called no one. No one called Rozanov. In seven months, Shane had never heard his personal comms terminal chime.

For us both.

The vodka had slowed his brain to a crawl, but even at that speed the pieces were fitting into each other with the mechanical certainty of a docking procedure: Rozanov’s mother was dead.

She had been dead for a long time, maybe—long enough that the grief had calcified, long enough that he could fold it into a bedtime story about a dog in a capsule and deliver it with a shrug in a galley four hundred kilometers above her grave. And the tennis ball—the *stupid* tennis ball, the one personal item Rozanov had chosen over photographs or books or anything a psychologically normal human being would bring to space—was not a fidget toy.

It was not a weapon of low-grade harassment.

It was a fetch ball for a dog that had never come home, carried by a man whose mother had left and never came home either, leaving the boy behind with bedtime story lies and beautiful dreams, and Shane had spent seven months hating the sound of it bouncing off walls.

His throat closed—a pressure behind his palate that tasted like vodka and shame and the specific weight of understanding someone too late. He wanted to say the right thing. He ransacked his brain for it, some combination of words that would acknowledge what Rozanov had just handed him without making it heavier, without performing sympathy so loudly that Rozanov's walls slammed shut and Shane lost him behind them.

He didn't have it. The CSA media training had not covered this. The flight psych modules had not covered this. Nothing in Shane's career had prepared him for the moment where a man he'd spent seven months resenting told him, sideways and in a dead woman's bedtime story, why he was here.

Shane had been performing spectroscopy on Ilya Rozanov this entire mission, breaking his light into component wavelengths, cataloguing each frequency, mapping the emotional composition from the output without ever touching the source. He knew Rozanov's anger spectrum and his boredom spectrum and his competitive spectrum the way an astronomer knew a star's chemical signature: by reading what it emitted from a safe, analytical distance. But the spectrum Rozanov was emitting now between sips with *Laika* and *Mother* didn't match anything in Shane's library.

It was a new element, and the cross turned between them in the recycled air, twinkling beneath galley LEDs at the apex of each rotation, gold winking in and out of visibility like a pulse.

A dead woman's heartbeat, still keeping time.

Shane had spent his whole life learning to want things from a distance, and to study the light without approaching the source, to catalogue and classify and never close the gap between the observation and the thing observed. He had turned himself into the world's most disciplined telescope, pointed at everything he loved and focused on nothing, and here was Ilya Rozanov telling him that he had done the *same*, and that it had cost him the *same*, and that the dog had never come home.

Shane lifted the bottle and drank. The vodka burned a line down his center and landed in his stomach, and he passed the bottle back without wiping the nozzle—he'd been doing that all night, wiping it, a reflex, and now he didn't, and the not-wiping was the most articulate thing he could manage.

Rozanov took the bottle and noticed. Shane saw him notice; the hazel eyes flicking to the nozzle, the fractional hitch in his hand before he raised it to his own mouth. He drank from the same spot Shane's lips had touched and they passed the bottle back and forth without speaking—two full transits of the bottle between them, the nozzle warm from shared mouths, the same small circumnavigation repeating, mouth to vessel to mouth, and each repetition wrote itself deeper into Shane's body than the last, the way a river writes itself into rock, not by force but by returning, and returning, and returning. A liturgy neither of them had named.

Mouth where mouth had been. The oldest sacrament: *I was here, and so were you, and neither of us left.*

The fans hummed. The scrubbers cycled. The station carried them eastward over a planet neither of them was looking at, and the vodka tasted different from the place where Rozanov's lips had been, or maybe it tasted the same and Shane had only now stopped lying to himself about wanting it.

Rozanov broke the stretch first. Of course he did—he had never met a gap he wouldn't fill, a wound he wouldn't cover with gauze made of his own audacity.

"So." He spun the bottle between his fingers, a slow rotation that caught the galley LEDs along the Stolichnaya label. "We have hours. No mission control. No crew. No cameras, no comms, no—" He waved the bottle in a lazy arc. "No *anything.* What does Commander Hollander want to do with all these unwatched hours?"

Shane opened his mouth and what came out was "Run a secondary diagnostic on the ECLSS backup logic?" which was so transparently ridiculous that Rozanov didn't even bother dismantling it—he just looked at Shane with both eyebrows raised until Shane's ears went hot and he took the bottle back and drank.

"Oh my god, Hollander, you are so boring. Tell me about the good things. Sex. Is someone waiting for you?" Rozanov asked. "At home. A girl?"

"No."

It came out too fast. A single syllable with too much air behind it, and Shane heard himself say it and wanted to swallow it back, repackage it, deliver it again with the appropriate half-second of consideration that would have made it sound like an answer instead of a flinch. Rozanov had heard it too. One eyebrow climbed, then the other—slow and patient.

"No girl," he repeated.

"I said no."

"You are—" Rozanov gestured at him with the bottle, drawing his outline in the air from head to foot. "You. This face. These—" He flicked his fingers toward Shane's cheekbones. "You were voted number one in Cosmopolitan. *Number one.* I was number five, which is *wrong*, by the way—I am clearly a three at worst, and the only reason I was five is because the readership is American and Americans do not understand bone structure—but *you.* You were number *one.* And you are telling me there is no girl."

"There's no girl."

"Boy?"

The galley was twenty-two degrees Celsius. Shane's skin was at thirty-seven. The differential should not have produced the prickling wave that climbed from his hip bones to his

collarbones, but it did, and the heat was concentrating in his face, building toward a threshold his composure was not rated for.

"I—"

"Is fine either way," Rozanov said, and his register had dropped half an octave, the teasing still present but seated deeper, the vowels rounder. "I am asking because I am curious, and because you are avoiding the question, which makes me *more* curious."

Shane's thumb pressed into the galley table. The grain of the laminate registered against his skin—ridged, synthetic, real.

"There's no—can you stop *looking* at me like that—there's no anyone. Boy or girl or—no one, Rozanov. Happy?"

"But you dated Landry. I remember. Everyone was talking about this."

"Dating, sure, but—shit, Roz."

"But *what*?"

"I dated her, yeah. I've never *been* with anyone."

Rozanov blinked. "Anyone," he repeated.

"Anyone."

"*Ever.*"

"That's what *never* means, Rozanov."

"You—" Rozanov pushed off the wall. He didn't drift closer, he *moved*, a single hard kick that brought him within arm's reach, and he stopped himself with a hand on the rack above Shane's head. His eyes tracked over Shane's face—forehead to jaw, cheekbone to cheekbone—and his nostrils flared and his lips peeled back from those white teeth in a look closer to fury than disbelief.

"Twenty-nine," he said. "Twenty-nine years. With this." His finger jabbed toward Shane's face—not a caress, an accusation. "With these *freckles.* With this—" He gestured at Shane's body with the bottle, a sharp downward slash. "You have been walking around looking like *this* and no one has put their hands on you. No one."

"I don't see why this is making *you* angry; this is not about you, despite what you seem to think everything is—"

"Because it is a *waste,*" Rozanov snarled, and the word cracked down the middle, half English and half Russian, and the rage in it was so disproportionate to the conversation that Shane's brain stalled trying to process it. "Because you—you sit in your sleep station and you eat your bland packet food and you run your diagnostics and you follow your *schedule*, and

meanwhile you have this *face* and this *body* and you have never let anyone—you have never —"

He ran out of English entirely. The Russian that replaced it was rapid and guttural and contained hand gestures that were unambiguously obscene. And mid-gesture his hand veered —loss of trajectory, a drunken miscalculation, or not—and his knuckles grazed Shane's collarbone. The barest scrape of skin on skin. Rozanov's fingers flinched back like he'd touched a live wire, curling into a fist that he redirected into a jab at the air between them, and Shane's vodka-slow brain caught the switch a half-second late:

The hand had been reaching for him.

The fury was not *at* him. It was *about* him, for him.

"Rozanov—"

"Do you know how *angry* this makes me? Do you know what it is like to—" He stopped. His mouth shut with an audible click of those white teeth. He'd hit his own wall—the one he'd built the bravado over—and Shane watched him reverse course in real time, the fury draining from his face and the grin sliding back into place, but slower than usual, arriving from further away, and it didn't reach all the way up. "Twenty-nine years old. A virgin. The freckles—*blyat, i eti chertovy vesnushki*—you have committed a crime against your own freckles, Hollander. They deserve better. *I* deserve better. The *world* deserves better."

"You're acting like I did this *at* you. Like I've not done anything specifically to inconvenience you, Rozanov. How does my virginity affect *you* personally?"

"Because I have *eyes,*" Rozanov said, as if this were the most obvious thing ever spoken aloud. "Because I have been looking at your stupid freckles for *months* while you lecture me about bolt specifications and it has been—do you understand—it has been *very difficult*—and now you tell me *this*—that no one—*no one*—"

His hand tightened on the rack above Shane's head, the tendons in his forearm standing out. "And this storm? This is the gift of the radiation. It burns away the bullshit. You spent twenty-nine years fearing the cost of the truth. But we are dying, Shane. What is the cost of your lies now? Nothing. You have nothing, you have never had someone give you what you deserve, and with this fucking storm, no one ever *will*. "

He stopped. The agitation drained from him in a single exhale, replaced by a stillness that Shane had never seen on him before—not in seven months of shared modules and competing egos and a thousand small collisions. The bottle dangled from his fingers. His eyes held Shane's, and the hazel had gone darker under the galley lights, the green receding, the gold forward. He was floating a foot from Shane's face, and his breath smelled like vodka and borscht, and his lips were parted by a centimeter, and Shane's peripheral vision had collapsed to a tunnel with Rozanov's lower lip at its center.

"Here is what I think," Rozanov said, and his register had dropped into a range Shane had heard only once before—behind the WRS racks, with Rozanov's hand on his chest and the dosimeter falling. "I think you have spent your entire life years being perfect and it has made

you *miserable*, and I think you are going to die up here having never let a single person past that—that *wall* you built out of discipline and early bedtimes—and I think that is so *stupid* I cannot stand it."

He finished the bottle and sent it spinning in the air between them. "We're going to die anyway, so let me fix this. Let me in. Hollander, you *cannot* die a virgin and I cannot be the man that allows this to happen."

Shane watched the bottle turn and he was thinking about the CME again and wasted time, how all of this was likely wasted time, because in just a few hours there'd be maybe fourteen hundred milligrays at the median, two thousand at the upper bound, and that nothing that they had, the WRS racks or the Soyuez or anything, would be enough, and he was thinking about his parents' lake and the framed photograph Velcroed to his sleep station wall, and underneath all of that, rising through the calculations and the grief like a thermal column, he was thinking about Rozanov's mouth and what it might feel like against his skin.

So this was where they were now? End of the world, fuck-or-die, let's fuck *because* we will die?

"I'm not ready to say that we're going to die," Shane said.

"Tsk. *Semantics*. Ready or not, the CME is coming. Equipment could fail; the ECLSS is running on backup logic, the thermal control has been garbage since the spike—" He held up one hand and folded the points down finger by finger, pinky to index, his face utterly straight. "Also there are twenty thousand pieces of orbital debris larger than ten centimeters, any one of which hits this station at seven kilometers per second. No warning. Very dangerous up here, *Shane.*" He spread his hands, palms up, a shrug and an offering at once. "And really, with half the systems down, who would even know?"

The grin surfaced—lopsided, lazy, and working hard to cover for everything underneath it. "And you are drunk. And I am drunk. And we are probably going to die up here and you have never been *fucked*, Shane, this is—I cannot allow this. My conscience will not permit it."

"Your *conscience.*"

"I am a man of deep moral feeling."

"And those deep moral feelings are why you've been such a pain in my ass? Why you smuggled booze up here?"

"And you are so lucky I did, and now you witness this as an example of my moral feeling. I saw the future: I saw this moment, you and me, irradiated, alone, dying, and your criminal virginity—and I thought, *Rozanov, this man will need a drink and probably my dick. No one should meet their death sober.* And I was right. You see? I am practically a saint."

Saint Rozanov, the patron saint of one way trips and bad decisions, Shane could almost picture it and the cheap candle that might be made in his honor with tennis-ball green wax behind the glass, and he was… laughing.

He didn't want to be laughing—laughing *conceded* ground, it made things fine, and Rozanov collected conceded ground the way other people collected stamps to hoard in a collection—but the vodka had dissolved whatever mechanism usually intercepted laughter before it reached his mouth, and Rozanov watched him do it with an unguarded hunger that Shane, even drunk, even terrified, could not misread.

The laughter died.

They were close.

Rozanov had drifted nearer during his monologue, or Shane had drifted toward him, or the station's ventilation currents had nudged them together—it didn't matter, the result was the same: ten inches between Shane's mouth and Rozanov's mouth, and the vodka on both their breaths meeting in the gap.

Rozanov's grin vanished. The muscles around his eyes unlocked, leaving the skin around his cheekbones slack. He stared at Shane's mouth, waiting for the rejection, and Shane realized with a lurch that Rozanov was afraid of him—afraid of what Shane was about to say, afraid that it would be rejection..

"Tell me no," Rozanov said, "and I go back to the Russian segment and drink the rest of this by myself and we never talk about it. I mean this, Shane. You say no, and this disappears."

His eyes held Shane's. Steady. The offer and the exit, side by side.

Shane opened his mouth to say no. His tongue hit the back of his teeth, the consonant forming—and stalled there, because Rozanov was *waiting*, giving him the exit. Deferring to his call. For the first time since they had both wanted and fought over the role of Commander, Rozanov was treating Shane's authority as absolute, and he was doing it over *this*, and the bitter irony of it—that the one decision Rozanov would let Shane make without argument was the one Shane was least qualified or experienced to make.

Shane pursed his lips, a wry, brattish curl tipping upwards at the corners. "Your accent makes you sound like a Bond villain who failed the audition. Are you going to keep monologuing or touch me?"

Rozanov's breath left him in an incredulous, laughing burst that fogged the air between them and then his hand was on the back of Shane's neck and his mouth was on Shane's mouth and the bottle of Stolichnaya drifted forgotten toward the ceiling, turning end over end in the light just beside them.

The kiss had momentum. It had momentum, and so they were moving, sent further by physics and Rozanov's push-off from the galley wall which sent them both backward, and Shane's shoulder blades hit the edge of the hatch frame and he grunted into Rozanov's mouth, and Rozanov laughed against his teeth and adjusted the angle without breaking contact—one hand braced on the frame above Shane's head, the other fisted in the front of Shane's shirt, and he kissed the way he did everything else: like he'd been thinking about it for months and had *opinions* on how it was meant to be done.

Which meant he was going to *show* Shane how it was done.

Shane's foot was still hooked in the floor restraint. It was the only thing keeping them anchored, and when Rozanov's weight shifted and his hips pressed forward, Shane's ankle twisted in the loop and the pain was a bright, irrelevant flare that his brain catalogued and dismissed in the same beat because Rozanov's tongue was in his mouth and his hand was sliding from Shane's shirt to his waist and *up up up*, under the hem, oh god, *please*, and the first press of Rozanov's palm against his bare ribs sent a full-body shudder through Shane that broke the kiss.

They stared at each other. Breathing hard. Rozanov's hand was still on Shane's ribs, fingers splayed, warm and rough and *there*.

"Your foot," Rozanov said.

"What?"

"Is stuck." Rozanov looked down at the restraint, then back at Shane, and the grin that spread across his face was filthy and fond and absolutely unbearable. "You are kissing me with your foot in a stirrup. Like a horse."

"It's a *floor restraint*—"

"Like a *little* angry horse." Rozanov reached down and worked Shane's ankle free with both hands, which required him to fold almost in half between Shane's body and the hatch frame, his face level with Shane's hip, and he looked up from that position, all but kneeling before his crotch and his suddenly *very* eager dick, and held Shane's eyes and Shane's brain went offline for a full second.

But maybe that was par for the course, considering how many other of their systems like comms, like the Soyuz, and whatever the fuck else was also offline.

Rozanov straightened. Without the restraint, they were untethered—both of them—and the galley's ventilation current caught them immediately, a slow drift toward the port-side wall. Rozanov didn't fight it. He hooked two fingers into the waistband of Shane's pants and pulled Shane with him, and their bodies bumped the wall and rebounded gently, spinning a quarter-turn so Shane's back was against the overhead storage nets and Rozanov was below him and the orientation was wrong, all wrong, except there was no wrong up here, no up or down, only the direction Rozanov was pulling him and the direction Shane was going.

"Not here," Rozanov said. His mouth was against Shane's collarbone now, lips moving over the ridge of bone. "Not in the *galley*, Hollander. I am not—there are crumbs. My crumbs. Everywhere. You have told me forty times."

"I don't care about the crumbs—"

"You *do* care about the crumbs, you have always cared about the fucking crumbs, Hollander. Do not start lying to me now because I'm going to finally give you want you want. All nine inches of what you want."

Shane laughed—a sound punched out of him, involuntary and too loud—and Rozanov caught his wrist and pushed off the storage net with his free hand and they were moving. Through the galley hatch, into Node 1, the station's central junction where four modules branched off in different directions, and the amber emergency lighting turned everything sepia and strange, the familiar architecture of the station made foreign by the color and by Rozanov's hand on his wrist and by the fact that Shane had never navigated the ISS with his lips swollen and his skin buzzing and another man's saliva cooling on his neck.

Rozanov pulled himself hand-over-hand along the ceiling rail, towing Shane behind him. Shane grabbed a handhold to redirect their drift and overcorrected—they swung wide, and his hip caught a cable bundle strapped to the bulkhead, and the impact sent a laptop bag drifting off its Velcro strip.

"Smooth," Rozanov said, not looking back.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere with a view."

They passed through the connecting tunnel into Node 3, Rozanov pushing off surfaces with the flat of one foot, Shane catching rails one-handed, never fully stopping, every movement flowing into the next, and their trajectory was good but Shane kept watching the wrong things: bunching muscles in Rozanov's back shifting under his T-shirt. The way his curls drifted wild around his head in the airflow, haloed in amber. The strip of golden skin at his hip where the shirt rode up, the same strip Shane had spent seven months training himself not to look at, and he was *looking* now, openly, greedily, and the looking felt like the first full breath after months of breathing shallow.

Months of fasting. And now, feast.

Rozanov stopped at the cupola hatch and turned around. Above the hatch, the emergency light was on and it was shining into those hazel eyes, the hazel there turned aurum and blown pupils eating the color like black holes swallowing the sun— and he looked at Shane the way he'd looked at him behind the water recycler, when his hand had been on Shane's sternum and his heartbeat had been the only steady thing in the station.

Except this time the fear was gone and what had replaced it was a hunger so naked that Shane felt it biting at his skin.

"I want to see you," Rozanov said, and his accent thickened on the vowels—*I vant*—the way it did when he stopped monitoring it. He reached out and hooked a finger under Shane's chin, tilting his face up toward the hatch. "In there, with the windows. I want to see all of you, and I want the whole planet behind you when I fuck you."

He pulled the hatch open. The cool, ambient hum of Node 3 was immediately swallowed by the visual roar of the planet. Brilliant, liquid-blue Earthshine spilled through the circular opening, washing the harsh fluorescent light out of the module and painting the rugged, expectant planes of Rozanov's face in a stark, shifting cyan.

The cupola was the station's crown jewel: a seven-windowed observation dome mounted on the Earth-facing port of Node 3. Shane had spent hours here during his rotation, watching hurricanes spiral across the Gulf of Mexico and city lights stitch coastlines at night. The windows were thick optical-grade fused silica, and right now the shutters were open and the station was crossing the nightside Pacific, and the dome was filled with *Earth.* Now, the interior light was off and the only illumination came from below: Earth, filling every window, the endless stars beyond.

Greedily, Rozanov pulled Shane through the hatch by the front of his shirt.

They drifted up into the cramped dome, Shane's hip narrowly grazing the folded joysticks and dormant monitors of the Robotics Workstation. It was a space built strictly for one operator, maybe two if they held their breath, and now every cubic inch of it was filled with the overwhelming physical reality of *Rozanov*. And everywhere else, the planet hung below them and around them, filling every window with a luminous blue-black curve stitched by lightning from a storm system over Polynesia. The terminator line bisected the view. Beyond it, the dayside glowed with the impossible blue of an atmosphere seen edge-on, a bright scythe against the black. Stars packed the margins—not the scattered handful visible from Earth's surface but the full, obscene density of an unfiltered sky, thousands and tens of thousands, white and amber and ice-blue, so thick in the galactic plane that individual points dissolved into powder.

And it was moving. At seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour, the Pacific didn't just sit beneath them; it tore past in a dizzying, silent rush of bruised clouds and dark water. Ghostly, translucent reflections of their tangled limbs overlay the spinning planet on the innermost panes of glass, layering the terrifying speed of the orbit directly over their breathlessness.

It was beautiful. It was everything and almost everyone.

Except for the pair of them in these overtime, stolen moments.

Shane had seen this view two hundred times from the observation rotation and never once felt devout. He felt it now. Not worship of the planet or the stars but of the smallness of this dome against all of it, the absurd holiness of two people sealed inside a glass reliquary while the universe poured itself out on every side, indifferent and total and unutterably bright.

Rozanov pulled Shane into the center of the dome and turned him and pressed him backward against the nadir window. Shane braced his stockinged foot under the worn blue grip of the perimeter handrail, his toes curling to lock his weight in place. The glass hit Shane's shoulder blades and it was cold instantly, the vacuum's mouth pressed against the other side of the silica, four inches and ten thousand degrees between warm and nothing. He shivered as their ragged breathing began to fog the inner pane, leaving a ghost of condensation against the stars, and Rozanov's body sealed against his front, and Shane was held between the coldest thing in the universe and the warmest, and the warmest was winning, and the warmest had always been winning.

And below Shane, *through* Shane, the Pacific Ocean rolled in darkness. Seven and a half billion people on the marble underneath him, and the only one who mattered had both hands on his hips and was looking at him like he intended to take him apart and swallow the pieces.

“You know what I think about,” Rozanov said, and his mouth was against Shane’s jaw, his lips dragging the words into Shane’s skin, “every time you are in the lab with her? With anyone? Every time someone hands you a sample and your fingers touch?”

Shane’s stomach dropped. “Rozanov—”

“Seven months.” Rozanov’s thumb dug into the groove of Shane’s hipbone. “Seven months of you and your dog Pike, of your *Rose.* You think because it ended, it is over? I watch you hand her things. Pass her tools. Smile at her. That polite little smile, the one you give to everyone, like you are not thinking about anything.” His other hand slid up Shane’s ribs under his shirt, knuckles dragging over each one, counting them. “Everyone at Houston thinks you will get back together. There is a betting pool—did you know? Landry and Hollander, round two. But I know you won’t. You want to know how I know?”

Shane’s hands fisted in Rozanov’s shirt. His brain was shorting out. “How.”

“Because you look at *me* the way you should look at her. Because you *never* looked at her the way you look at me.” Rozanov pulled back far enough to meet his eyes. Lit now by the cold, ancient dust of the Milky Way and blinking service panels, the grin on Rozanov’s face was cruel and delighted and starving. “Not even *before*, when you were trying so hard to love her. So hard. Trying so hard to be secretive, and *failing* because I saw anyway. I watched you at Johnson, in training, you and her in the commissary, her hand on your arm, and your eyes went right over her shoulder… drifting… out of orbit, always landing on me when you thought I would not notice. Every time. You did not even know you were doing it. She is *brilliant*, Hollander, she has a PhD and she could not see it, what was right in front of her, but I could. I have been watching you not love her since the beginning.”

Rozanov was being cruel, and he was being possessive, and he was being presumptuous, it was Rozanov claiming territory he hadn’t been given—and Shane’s cock throbbed against Ilya’s hip and his hips rolled forward anyway, and the truth scalded him: he *wanted* to be claimed.

He had gone uncollected his whole life, the lost article in the bin that nobody came back for, and Rozanov was standing in front of him saying *mine* with his whole mouth and his whole furious, entitled, beautiful arrogance, and Shane’s nervous system was answering *yes* from a depth he hadn’t known existed. Not *yes, fine.* Not *yes, I suppose.* The *yes!* of a man who had been wandering a house with every door open and every room empty and had finally heard someone call his name from a room at the end of the hall, and the name sounded different in Ilya’s accent, sounded like a place Shane could actually live.

It didn’t make Shane want to be *nice* about it though.

“Fuck you Rozanov,” Shane breathed, but it came out wrecked, more plea than protest.

“Hush. We are getting there.” Rozanov kissed him hard, tasting like vodka, and he kissed with his whole *body*, hips pinning Shane’s against the glass, one hand sliding up to cup the back of Shane’s skull and control the angle. He kissed Shane until Shane’s lungs burned, then pulled back a centimeter, let Shane gasp against his mouth, and swallowed the gasp with his

tongue. Shane's hands fisted tighter in Rozanov's shirt because if they didn't hold onto something, then he really would be *lost*, untethered and floating into abyss.

His cock was hard and his skin was burning everywhere Rozanov's fingers pressed.

"And," He mused, teeth scraping Shane's earlobe. "That is the wrong name. We fixed this already. Try again."

"I—fuck—*Ilya.*"

"Better. Now, your clothes. Off. Off." Rozanov broke the kiss to strip Shane's shirt over his head.

Fabric shushed, and the omnipresent thrum of the station's cooling fans seemed to fade, leaving only the deafening rush of blood in Shane's ears and the rasp of tearing fabric. The shirt caught on his wrists, his ears, refusing to drape or fall—microgravity turned undressing into a wrestling match with textiles. The heavy zipper pull of Ilya's own unzipped Roscosmos jumpsuit drifted lazily in the air between them as Rozanov balled the shirt up and launched it behind them without looking, putting his mouth on Shane's collarbone before the cool station air had finished hitting bare skin.

His cross and its chain spilled upward like a drop of liquid metal, anchored only by the fine, shimmering tether of the chain around his neck.

Shane's hands found the grip bar above the window, needing an anchor and snapping to the closest thing instinctively, the same way his hand found grab rails during emergencies. His fingers locked on the metal and the grip stretched him out against the glass—arms overhead, torso elongated, stomach and chest exposed to the amber emergency light and to Rozanov's mouth, which was tracking downward from his clavicle at a pace that made his abdominal muscles contract in anticipation.

Below his feet, through the glass, a lightning storm pulsed over open ocean, each flash a brief white nerve firing in the planet's dark skin. Shane watched it upside down while Ilya's mouth moved across his ribs and thought, deliriously: *this is what it looks like from the outside. This is what a body looks like when every circuit fires at once—bright, and brief, and seen from a terrible distance by someone who can do nothing but watch.*

He was done watching. He let his head fall back against the glass and closed his eyes and gave himself over to being the storm.

Rozanov's hands ran down Shane's sides from his armpits to his hips. Rough palms, callused palms. Rozanov was fucking *strong*, and his thumbs dug into the grooves above his hipbones, fingers wrapping around to the small of his back. He touched Shane like he was taking inventory—thorough and proprietary and greedy—cataloguing the topography of Shane's body like it would never happen again.

Because it wouldn't.

“And such a stupid woman,” Rozanov murmured against his sternum, “Landry had this”—his palm flattened on Shane’s stomach, fingers spread, possessive—”and she did nothing with it. Didn’t know *what* to do with this. Hah. Could never do what I’m going to do to this.”

“Don’t,” Shane said, and his hips jerked forward against the pressure of Rozanov’s hand, which was mortifying and involuntary and Rozanov noticed, of course Rozanov noticed.

“Don’t what?” Rozanov’s teeth found the ridge of Shane’s pectoral and bit down. Shane’s spine arched off the glass so hard the grip bar was the only thing that kept them from launching into the center of the dome. The pain was bright and specific and it crossed a wire in his nervous system that turned it into a different signal entirely, and the sound he made ricocheted off seven panes of glass and came back to him from every direction.

He hadn’t known he could sound like that. He sounded *ruined.*

Rozanov’s hips ground forward in reward—the hard length of his cock pressing through two layers of fabric against Shane’s—and his mouth came up to Shane’s ear.

“Don’t talk about her?” he said, and there was a razor-thin meanness in it that should have pissed Shane off and instead sent heat flooding straight to his cock. “Or don’t stop?”

“Both,” Shane gritted and his hips were grinding forward into Ilya’s grip and his whole body was singing a frequency he’d never heard from it before, a frequency that said: *yes, be mean about it, be angry that other people touched me, be furious that anyone else ever had my time,* because Ilya’s fury meant Shane was worth hoarding, worth fighting over, worth the scene Ilya was making, and Shane had never been worth a scene to anyone. “Neither. Shut *up*.”

Rozanov laughed and his hands went to Shane’s waistband and *yanked*. Pants and underwear pulled off together; off the hips, the thighs, past the knees, balled and launched into the dome where they joined the shirt in slow orbit. Shane was bare against the window. Glass cold on his ass, his shoulder blades, the backs of his arms. Stars behind his head. The Earth below his spine.

And Rozanov still in his own shorts, the cross swaying, floating, against his bare chest, looking at him.

His eyes tracked from Shane’s white-knuckled grip on the bar to his stretched arms to the bite mark reddening on his pectoral to his stomach to his cock which was… fuck… when had he gotten so hard? He was flushed and straining, the shaft curving upwards towards his navel.

And Rozanov…

Rozanov’s gaze climbed back up, slower this time, and his thumb found Shane’s cheekbone and traced the scatter of freckles there, following the pattern down across the bridge of his nose. His lips moved around a word Shane almost missed. “*Vesnushki,*” he murmured, and the pad of his thumb connected one freckle to the next the way a navigator connects stars on a chart, drawing a route across Shane’s skin with the focus of a man who intended to

memorize the coordinates. "*Ty slovno chto-to, vybroshennoye iz kosmosa spetsial'no dlya menya. Zvyozdy*."

"What's that mean?"

"It means—" The thumb dropped away and Rozanov's mouth reshaped itself into that awful grin. Then, louder, with that shard of mean delight back in place: "Nothing important. *Blyat.* You know the cameras are off but the windows are not. Anyone with a good telescope—"

"No one has a telescope that can see inside the—"

"The *entire world* is underneath you right now." Rozanov's hand wrapped around Shane's hip and squeezed. "And you are naked in a window. Commander Hollander, *everyone* can see you. Very slutty. Perhaps most exhibitionist man in history. What would Houston say?"

Shane bit his lips and his dick gave a horrible, traitorous, twitch.

"Oh," Rozanov said softly. "You *like* that."

"Fuck you," Shane managed, but it was gutted, shredded, an admission dressed as a denial, and they both knew it.

Then Rozanov pushed off the window frame and floated downward, or at least the direction that was downward relative to Shane's body, which put his mouth level with Shane's hip, then his thigh. Meaty hands gripped Shane's hips and his thumbs pressed into the creases where Shane's thighs met his pelvis and his mouth landed on the flat of Shane's stomach, an inch below his navel. Open-mouthed. Wet. Shane's cock brushed Rozanov's cheek and Rozanov turned his head into it, Cupid's bow lips dragging along the shaft from base to tip in a slow, devastating drag that wasn't a kiss and wasn't a lick and made Shane's thighs shake so hard the grip bar rattled.

"Tell me what you want."

Years of practice at not answering that question. Twenty-nine years of *I'm not looking for anything* and *not at this time* and the careful, immaculate non-answer that had carried him through every psych eval and every press conference and every night in his sleep station where the wanting had a name he wouldn't say. Rozanov's breath was hot on him and the question was the same question it had always been; the one the CSA asked, the one Rose had asked with her body, the one his own reflection had asked in every dark window on this station, and for the first time in his life Shane did not have a procedurally appropriate response.

He had only the truth, and it came out in a whined "Please."

"You'll need to do better than that, *Commander*. In English or French, I don't care. But you will say it." Rozanov's tongue traced one flat stripe up the underside, root to tip, and stopped, waiting. "You spent twenty-nine years not saying what you want, what you really want, and we are probably going to die, so I think now is good time to practice."

Shane's hands were shaking on the bar. His cock was wet where Rozanov's tongue had been and the air was cold where Rozanov's mouth wasn't and the want was so big it was compressing his lungs.

"Your mouth," he forced out. "I want your mouth."

"Where? Here?" Rozanov kissed at the jut of his hip. "Or… here?" He moved to the other and sucked a purpling hickey.

"*Rozanov.*"

"Where, Hollander?"

"D-don't call me that," Shane heard himself say, and he didn't know where it came from—only that Rozanov had made him surrender his first name behind the water recycler and now Shane wanted it *used*, and he wanted Rozanov's mouth saying *Shane,* lips around the sound and the shape of him. "You made me—you don't get to go back to—"

Rozanov hummed, considering. For a cruel moment it looked like he might just continue to tease him, and then: "Shane," Rozanov said, and his hands tightened on Shane's hips. "Shane." He said it like slowly, reverently, rumbling over the sounds, almost purring, pausing to lick his lips, his fucking *shaft*.

"*Shane*." He pressed the name in a kiss to the blushing, wet tip of Shane's cock, and it burned like a brand. "Where do you want my mouth *Shane*?"

"I want your fucking mouth on my cock," Shane said, and his face burned, and he had never said those words aloud in his life, and Rozanov's eyes went dark and half-lidded and *victorious*—and then Rozanov opened his mouth and took him to the back of his throat in one smooth drop that punched the air out of Shane's lungs and replaced it with a sound that had never existed before and would never exist again outside this dome.

The heat and the pressure and the slick slide of Rozanov's tongue along the underside. Shane's hands nearly ripped free of the bar. His hips snapped forward greedily, held at bay by those strong hands, absorbing the thrust and then tightening on his hips to *hold* him in place, anchoring them both against the reaction forces that would have sent them spinning, and he pulled back slowly, the suction dragging, and sank down again.

Shane's head hit the glass. The station was at the highest point of its orbital arc, the furthest it swung from Earth before gravity bent it back, and from this angle the planet was below his feet and the stars were behind his skull and Rozanov's mouth was on his cock and Shane had never been further from the ground or closer to anything.

"*Tabarnak*—oh fuck—*câlice de crisse*—"

The sacres came ripping out of him from a place deeper than his English, deeper than the CSA media training and the bilingual press conferences and the careful, acceptable, interview-ready version of himself. Quebecois French had its own swearing syntax—you strung the church words together with *de*, chalice of Christ of tabernacle, a rosary of

blasphemy that his grandmother would have washed out of his mouth with soap—and Shane had not used a single one since he was seventeen and took a skate blade to the ankle during a pickup game on the lake behind his parents' house. Twelve years of locked-down, swallowed-back, Commander-appropriate composure, and Ilya Rozanov's throat had undone every year of it in under a minute.

"*Ostie*—Rozanov, *Ilya—ah,* fuck!"

He had *never* been loud.

He had never been anything, with anyone, and now he was everything all at once; a big bang of feelings and sensations and it was all consuming in its hunger, leaving him *loud* and shaking and cursing in French because his English had shorted out, his hips stuttering forward into Rozanov's mouth in desperate thrusts that Rozanov matched and controlled and *drove* with his hands dictating rhythm from Shane's hips. Shane was making sounds he would have been ashamed of on Earth, in gravity, in a building with walls. But shame required an audience, and there was no audience here. There was only Rozanov, whose eyes were open and looking up at him—hazel, blown black, wet at the lashes—watching Shane come apart above him against a window full of stars.

Rozanov pulled off. The loss of his mouth was violent—Shane heard himself *whine*—and Rozanov floated up to eye level, lips red and slick, and his hand wrapped around Shane's cock and stroked, slow and tight, maintaining exactly enough to keep Shane on the edge but not enough to push him over.

"Did you make sounds like this for her?" Rozanov said, and his hand twisted on the upstroke and Shane's vision whited at the margins. "No. I don't think you did. I think you were very proper and very polite and you lay there and *thought about it* and hated yourself for how little you felt." His thumb swept over the head and Shane's whole body jerked. "And then you came back to the station and you looked at my hands while I was soldering and you hated yourself for that, too."

"*Fuck* you—" Shane choked, but his hips were fucking into Rozanov's fist and the words came out gutted, shredded, confirming everything.

"No, *fuck you,*" Rozanov said, and there was real heat in it now, something that had been simmering for months boiling up through the teasing, "I had to watch. I had to sit at dinner and listen to Cliff ask about your *girlfriend* and watch you nod and smile and—" His hand stilled on Shane's cock. Shane gasped. "—and lie. To everyone. To *me.* As if I could not see."

Shane's eyes stung. The cruelty and the hurt underneath it—Rozanov's jealousy of Rose laid bare and ugly, not teasing anymore—cracked open a space in his ribs that felt too exposed. He reached for Rozanov's face. Cupped his jaw, stubble scraping his palm.

"She wasn't you," Shane said. It was the most honest thing he'd ever spoken and it came out small and scraped and plain.

Rozanov's hand tightened on his cock. His eyes held Shane's for a beat too long, something naked and furious and desperately wanted flickering beneath the atmosphere of all his

arrogance. Then he exhaled, sharp, through his nose, and the grin came back—meaner now, covering the wound—and his fist started moving again, fast.

“No,” he agreed, low. “She was not.”

And then he sank back down and swallowed Shane to the root, and this time there was no teasing and no pause, and Shane’s orgasm hit him like a cascade failure—every redundancy tripping at once, starting at the base of his spine and ripping upward, his vision going white, his grip failing, his hands coming off the bar, suspended in the dome with nothing holding him but Rozanov’s hands on his hips. He came into Rozanov’s mouth and Rozanov swallowed and the sound Shane made cracked in the middle and became a whisper became *Ilya’s* name and his body shook in long rolling convulsions and Rozanov held him through it and did not let go.

In microgravity, the aftermath was literal: a bead of saliva drifted free from the corner of Rozanov’s mouth when he pulled off, catching light as it tumbled. Shane watched it float between them—a small, obscene pearl rotating in starlight—and he was trembling so hard his teeth clicked together, hands floating at his sides, every muscle re-strung in a configuration he didn’t have a manual for.

Rozanov floated up to meet him. Eye-level. His mouth was red, swollen, and he wiped the back of his hand across his lower lip with a roughness that sent a secondary shudder through Shane’s spent body. The cross had drifted up on its chain and hung between them, rotating.

Shane reached for him. His hand found Rozanov’s waistband and pulled, and Rozanov drifted forward into his space, close enough that their chests touched and Shane could feel the pound of Rozanov’s heartbeat against his own ribs. Shane’s fingers fumbled with the drawstring on his jumpsuit. The knot was small and tight and his hands were shaking, but he managed to work it loose, pushing the fabric down Ilya’s thighs until he could kick them away into the dome.

Rozanov’s hand closed over his and held it still.

Shane looked up.

The bravado was gone. The grin was gone. What was underneath was unfinished and *young* —younger than Rozanov ever let himself look, his lips parted, his breathing shallow and fast. A man who had wanted this so badly and for so long that having it had overwhelmed the machinery he’d built to manage the wanting.

His thumb moved across Shane’s knuckles once. Then he guided Shane’s hand inside his waistband.

Hot. Heavy in Shane’s palm. The weight of another man’s cock in his hand, the thickness of it, the way Rozanov’s hips rolled forward into his grip with a hunger that the shaking in his thighs betrayed. Shane stroked—experimental, unsure of rhythm, unsure of pressure—and Rozanov’s forehead dropped against his shoulder and Rozanov’s breath punched out against Shane’s neck in a ragged burst.

Rozanov's hand wrapped around Shane's hand on his cock and *tightened*.

"You are—*hng*—you are holding me like I am one of your experiments. Like I will break." His hips fucked forward into Shane's fist. "I will not break. You cannot break me. *Try.* Harder."

Shane gripped harder. Stroked faster. He learned the rhythm from Rozanov's hand over his—the twist at the head, the pressure on the downstroke—and then Rozanov's hand fell away and it was Shane alone, working him in the blue-dark of the cupola with the Pacific scrolling beneath them, and every sound Rozanov made was small and bitten-off and desperate in a way Shane had never heard from him, and he wanted *more*—wanted to pry every last guarded noise out of this man who never stopped talking and was finally at a loss.

"I always wanted you," Shane said, and he didn't know where the words came from, only that they were true. "I was—god for so *long*, and I tried so hard *not* to."

Rozanov made a sound against his shoulder that was in Russian and meant nothing Shane could translate but everything he could feel—guttural, surrendered, *wrecked.*

"I know," Rozanov breathed. "I *know.* Why do you think I was so fucking angry—"

Shane thumbed the slit and Rozanov's teeth sank into his shoulder. Hard, grounding, real—and Shane stroked tighter, faster, and Rozanov's hips snapped forward once, twice, and then he was coming in Shane's hand with a grunt, the cross chain biting into Shane's chest where their bodies pressed together, and the heat spilled between Shane's fingers and lifted in microgravity, small bright droplets drifting free into the dome where they caught more lightning flashes from the clouds and turned, slowly, in the light of the entire world going on without them.

Rozanov's forehead stayed on Shane's shoulder. His breathing was harsh and wet and his arms had wrapped around Shane's waist—when that happened, Shane didn't know, but they were there, locked tight, hands pressed flat against the small of Shane's back, holding on with a ferocity that had nothing to do with orbital mechanics.

Shane's clean hand came up and settled in Rozanov's hair. The curls wrapped around his fingers. He held on.

They floated in the cupola, nude, tangled, anchored to nothing but each other while the station carried them east at seventeen thousand miles an hour.

After a while, Rozanov lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and his mouth was still swollen and his hair was a disaster, and he looked at Shane with an unguarded openness that lasted exactly three seconds before the mask slid back into place and the grin resurfaced, crooked and sated and insufferable.

"So," he said. "The freckles go all the way down. I had a bet with myself. I won."

Shane shoved him. In microgravity, this sent Rozanov spinning gently backward through the dome, still grinning, still naked, arms loose, the cross floating above his collarbone, and

Shane had to grab the bar with one hand and catch Rozanov's ankle with the other before he drifted out of reach.

"You are *the worst,*" Shane said, pulling him back.

"*Da,*" Rozanov agreed, and let himself be pulled. "But you are blushing, so I think I am also the best. And that was not bad for a virgin. Was fun."

"I'm going to *kill* you—"

"I think you won't." He caught Shane's wrist—the one still wet—and pressed his mouth to the inside of it. Brief. Absurdly tender. Completely at odds with the grin still plastered across his face. "Also, you just said my name very beautiful when you came. I would like to hear this again."

Shane's face burned. "Your ego is a safety hazard."

"My ego keeps this station running." Rozanov's thumb traced Shane's knuckle—the same gesture from behind the water recycler—and then his hand slid down to Shane's hip, and his grip changed. Not tender anymore. Assessing. His eyes dropped down the length of Shane's body, then back up, and the sated grin sharpened into something hungrier.

"We are not done," Rozanov said.

Shane's stomach flipped. His cock, still soft, twitched with interest despite having come ten minutes ago, and the heat of Rozanov's hand on his hip was doing things to his nervous system that should not have been physiologically possible this soon.

"We just—"

"You have been a virgin for twenty-nine years and you think one blowjob is enough? No. This isn't amateur hour. Let me show you how to do this, and what you've been missing." Rozanov pushed off the window frame, floated to the edge of the dome, and caught one of the straps mounted along the cupola's interior frame—handholds for EVA prep, bolted into the structural ring. He braced his feet against the window frame and surveyed the cupola's geometry with the same critical focus Shane had seen him bring to a faulty circuit board: identifying anchor points, calculating load paths, mapping the physics of the problem.

Then he reached behind one of the stowage nets clipped to the dome's interior and produced a tube—and Shane's brain needed a full two seconds to process what he was looking at.

"You brought *lube* to the *International Space Station.*"

"Is that worse or better than the vodka?" Rozanov teased, "I cannot tell. You are angry at everything. So up *tight*. You must let me fix it."

"You—in your personal mass allocation—you packed—"

"Yes, yes," Rozanov said, and tossed the tube to Shane. It spun end over end between them, slow and inevitable, and Shane caught it reflexively—a small, medical-grade tube, labeled in

Cyrillic—and a laugh cracked out of him before he could stop it. The absurdity of it—that Ilya Rozanov had smuggled personal lubricant through Roscosmos launch inspection, past a pre-flight manifest check, and up through the atmosphere in a spacecraft rated for reentry at Mach 25—on the off chance that *this* would happen.

"Were you planning this?" Shane said, and he meant it as an accusation, but it came out awed.

Rozanov's grin dropped a fraction. "No," he said, and for once the honesty was immediate and undecorated. "But I was hoping."

Then Rozanov pulled back, and the engineer's focus was back—overlaid with something feral and determined—and he took the lube from Shane's hand and said, "Turn around."

Shane's stomach dropped through the floor of the station. "I—"

"I have been thinking about this since *forever* and I am not going to do it badly. Turn around. Hands on the bar."

Shane turned around and put his hands on the bar.

The glass pressed against his chest, his stomach, his cock—cold, immediate, the void's fingerprint bleeding through silica—and below him, *through* him, the world, the universe, and his own reflection stared back at him from the glass: flushed, wrecked, bite-marked, a person he didn't entirely recognize.

Rozanov's body sealed against his back. Warm where the glass was cold. His mouth found the knob at the top of Shane's spine and kissed there, then lower, vertebra by vertebra, and his slicked fingers slid between Shane's thighs and found him and circled, slowly.

The first finger pressed in. Slow. Shane's forehead dropped against the glass and a sound fell out of him—low, drawn out, involuntary—as his body adjusted to the intrusion. It burned at the edges and it felt *right* in a way that went deeper than nerve endings, right in the way that clicking a hatch seal into its housing was right, a mechanical truth, the feeling of a thing arriving where it was meant to be.

"Breathe," Rozanov said, "Breathe, Shane. Tell me if you need me to stop."

He was giving orders from the wrong side of the power structure. Ilya was inside him and Shane was telling him what to do and Ilya was *listening*, and the configuration was so perfectly backwards from every interaction they'd ever had. Ilya following instructions, Shane dictating the terms, both of them exactly where they wanted to be, and it was so *stupid*, it felt so *good*, that Shane almost laughed, would have laughed, except Ilya curled his fingers and—

"*Ah!* Don't stop!" It came out too fast, too desperate, and Shane would deal with the embarrassment later, or never. "Don't you dare stop."

“Good?” Rozanov’s mouth was on the back of his neck. His free hand was flat on Shane’s stomach, holding him steady, the anchor against the reaction forces that wanted to push Shane into the window and Rozanov away from him.

“Good. More.”

Rozanov gave him more. A second finger, stretching, and the burn widened and the pleasure behind it sharpened and Shane’s hips pushed back into Rozanov’s hand on instinct, seeking, greedy—and Rozanov made a sound behind him that Shane filed away with the same fierce attention he’d given to every involuntary response Rozanov had made tonight. A low, tight exhale. The sound of a man exercising restraint he didn’t want to exercise.

“You know,” Rozanov said, and his fingers curled inside Shane and found the spot that made Shane’s whole body jackknife forward against the glass, “*this* is what I thought about. Not the valve override. Not your forearms. *This*.” Another curl. Shane’s cock, half-hard again, stiffened fully against the cold window. “You, making these sounds. For me.”

“*Fuck*,” Shane said eloquently, and his hips were rocking back onto Rozanov’s fingers now, a rhythm building on its own, his body knowing what it wanted before his brain could moderate, and the glass was fogging where his breath hit it and the bite mark on his pectoral was throbbing against the cold surface and he wanted *more*—wanted the thing he’d never had, the thing he’d spent years not-wanting, the thing Rozanov had smuggled four hundred kilometers up on the hope that this night would come.

“Rozanov,” he said, “I want—”

“Tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me.”

He said it into the glass and his own reflection stared back at him, flushed and wrecked and bare, and the words hung in the recycled air of the International Space Station, and he had never said them aloud, had barely let himself *think* them, and now they were out and they could not be taken back and Rozanov’s fingers stilled inside him and Rozanov’s forehead dropped against the back of his neck and Rozanov breathed, “*Bozhe moy,*” with a reverence that was not teasing, was not mean, was not any of his masks.

Then the fingers withdrew and Shane heard the snap of the tube cap and felt the blunt, slick pressure of Rozanov’s cock against him, and Rozanov’s hand gripped his hip and Rozanov’s mouth pressed against the hinge of his jaw, and Rozanov said, “Hold the bar. Don’t let go.”

Shane tightened his grip just as Rozanov pushed in.

Slow. Agonizing. The stretch was enormous—bigger than fingers, thick and relentless and *filling*—and Shane’s knuckles went white and his breath left him in a shuddering rush and the glass fogged in a wide circle from his open mouth. It hurt. It hurt and underneath the hurt was a pressure so complete it crowded out everything else—every thought, every fear, every calculation—and Shane understood with his whole body what he had spent twenty-nine years not letting himself understand with his mind.

"*Fuck,*" Rozanov hissed behind him, and the Russian curses that followed were not for performance—they were raw and reflexive, dragged out of him by the reality of being inside Shane for the first time. His hands were shaking. Shane could feel them trembling against his hips and the feeling—that *Rozanov* was shaking, that this was overwhelming for *him* too—unlocked something in Shane's spine and he exhaled and his body opened and Rozanov sank the rest of the way in and their hips met and they both went still.

Rozanov's chest rose and fell against Shane's back. Shane felt his heartbeat in his fingers on the bar.

"I can't—I n-need you to—" His fingers were white on the bar. His mouth was trying to build a sentence and the architecture kept collapsing mid-syllable, load-bearing consonants crumbling under the weight of what Rozanov's body was doing to him. "I don't—I don't know how to ask for th—"

And then, because it was Rozanov and lying to Rozanov had stopped being possible about three hours ago: "Move, *move*."

"Always so bossy," Rozanov managed, and then, his mouth against the ridge of Shane's ear: "You are a *terrible* student, Hollander. Good thing I am a patient teacher. Let me teach you how to do this."

And then his hips were pulling back; the first stroke, slow, devastating, the drag of his cock against the nerves inside Shane lighting up a circuit board Shane hadn't known he had—and Shane heard himself make a sound, a wrecked *ah-h* that broke against the glass and came back to him from six other windows, and his engineering brain tried to catalog what was happening and the log entry would have read *full-system override, all manual controls offline, autonomic responses only* except he couldn't hold the thought long enough to finish it —

And Ilya's hands on his hips were not gentle.

They gripped hard enough to bruise. Shane could feel the capillaries breaking under Rozanov's fingertips in real time, and he wanted them, the marks, the evidence of it all on his body to wear like Rozanov carried his mother's cross—proof of belonging, pressed into the skin where only he would know to look, a claim written in a language only the two of them spoke. His skin had been so clean before this. Unprinted. A body that had passed through the world without collecting a single mark that said *I was here, I wanted this, this person was touched on purpose by someone who intended to return.*

Rozanov's grip tightened and Shane pushed back into it and thought: *mark me. Mark me so I can find my way back to this in the dark.*

There was no lazy, gravity-assisted rhythm here. No autopilot. Every stroke required Rozanov to pull against the bungee restraints with his legs while his hands held Shane's hips in place, and the full-body effort of it was visible in the way his muscles corded against Shane's back and his breathing went ragged within the first minute. It was athletic and absurd and so fucking *hot*.

“Shift your—yes—hold *that* —”

“If you move your left hand I swear to—”

“Elbow. *Elbow,* Shane—”

—and somewhere in the middle of it, Shane’s elbow hit the window frame and Rozanov snorted and Shane said “Shut *up*” and Rozanov said “Make me” and Shane reached back and grabbed a fistful of Rozanov’s hair and *pulled*, and the noise Rozanov made was not a laugh anymore.

Shane hadn’t told his hand to do that. His hand had done it on its own, the way his hand found grab rails during depress alarms — reaching for the nearest solid thing before the conscious mind caught up. Except the nearest solid thing was Ilya’s hair, and the grip was not an emergency grip, it was a *wanting* grip, fingers wound deep, pulling Ilya’s head back to expose the line of his throat, and the command had come from somewhere south of Shane’s prefrontal cortex and north of his cock and he did not let go.

Immediately, the pace changed. Rozanov’s hips found an angle and Shane’s vision blanked and the sound that came out of him was barely words, just a *hh-ah—fuck—ah.*

He could almost hear mission control through the static, the supernova roaring his skin, confirming the same telemetry: *lost, lost, gone, you are so far past the point of recovery*.

“*Da,* like that, *fuck,* Shane, you sound—” Rozanov groaned, and his hips snapped forward again, hitting that angle, and Shane’s whole body lit up and his cock was hard and leaking against the cold glass and he was loud, so fucking loud, and Rozanov was *feeding on it*—adjusting angle and force to chase the sounds Shane made, each thrust a calibration, an experiment, reading Shane’s body for data and optimizing in real time. And then, breathless, with a grin Shane could *hear*: “I think you have *always* been this loud and you have been *strangling* it for years, and all someone had to do was fuck you properly and it comes out so pretty. All those years of being *so good*, Shane, for *nothing*—I wanted—thinking about this —*this*—you pressed against a window, Shane, you are—*blyat*—you are—”

His hips snapped forward and the rest of the sentence died in his teeth. Shane felt Ilya’s forehead drop between his shoulder blades and Ilya’s breath come out ragged and stripped, and for three full seconds the only sound was the wet impact of their bodies and the creak of bungee straps under load, and when Ilya’s mouth opened again his English had gone sideways, the grammar crumbling: “You are—I cannot—*Shane*—your fucking *posture* and your fucking *clipboard* and I am—I was—”

A groan ate the verb.

“Don’t stop,” Shane said, “don’t stop, don’t—”

“I am not stopping. I will never stop. You will have to—*ah*—to pull rank, Commander, to get me to stop—you did this to me, sitting across from me at dinner with your fucking *salad* and your fucking *manners* and your straight back and your rolled sleeves and thinking about—” a thrust that punched the air from both of them—”about *bolt specifications*, probably, while I

am sitting there like an *idiot* wanting to put my hands inside your ugly polo and you don't even *notice*. You are so busy being *Commander* that you cannot see when a man is losing his mind for you, and I am *angry* about this, Shane, I am angry that you made me want someone this stupid!"

Shane laughed. He was being fucked against a window four hundred kilometers above the Earth by a man who was still making *jokes*, and he was laughing, and the laughter and the pleasure tangled together into a knot he couldn't separate and didn't want to.

Rozanov's hand came around and wrapped around Shane's cock—still slick, the grip tight and sure—and stroked in counterpoint to his thrusts, and Shane's forehead pressed hard against the glass and the stars streaked in his vision and the pleasure was building to a point so bright and compressed he could feel its gravity in his teeth and his fingertips and the soles of his feet.

The cross drifted across Shane's shoulder. He'd been feeling it for minutes now, the aurum chain floating loose every time Ilya's chest lifted off his back, the gold bumping his skin and spinning away on the next thrust, weightless and undirected, following Ilya's body on a half-second delay.

It brushed his neck. Floated off, and then floated back, drawn by inertia to brush his jaw.

Feeling filthy, *wild*, Shane turned his head and caught it on his teeth, onto his tongue, tasting the gold on his tongue, slick with Ilya's sweat, and Shane closed his lips around the cross and sucked and felt the sound Ilya made travel down the chain before it reached his ears; a vibration first, then a noise that had no language in it, guttural and blown open, the sound of every wall Ilya had ever built coming down at once.

"*Blin, chert. Ty khot' znayesh', chto ty so mnoy delayesh'?* I need you to—*blyat*—you are making it impossible to—I can feel you, you are *right there*. I am going to lose my mind, and I have never lost my mind for anyone, *Hollander*, do not make me the first to—" Rozanov rambled against his ear, cracked at the edges, and underneath it Shane could hear what the words were covering—a plea, a need, the desperate want to make this good for Shane, to be the one who gave Shane this, the first, the *only,* the *last*—

His forehead dropped against the back of Shane's neck and his next breath came out like it had been torn from him, and then, almost viciously: "And you are going to come when I tell you to, because you have been taking orders from the wrong people your entire life and I am *done watching it*—Shane, *Shane*, come for me."

Shane came, thighs locking, and his toes curled hard enough that the joints cracked; a sound he heard even over his own wrecked, splintering *ah-h, ah, Il*—that couldn't finish itself, Ilya's name breaking apart in his mouth the way *Shane's* name broke in Ilya's, the way any name breaks when the body claims the mouth for breathing instead of speaking, pleasure exploding from where Ilya was deepest inside him and radiated outward through every nerve in his body like a solar flare propagating through a magnetic field, not an explosion but an *unfurling*, a thing that had been compressed for twenty-nine years finally permitted to expand, and it was rewriting him as it went, rewriting the geography of every nerve it

touched, and he could feel the old map burning and the new one drawing itself in real time, and the star-chart had Ilya's name on every border and cluster.

His body locked rigid, the sheer kinetic force of it bucked him forward, tearing his hand from Ilya's hair as he slapped his palm back onto the bar just to keep them anchored against the glass. Shane's vision whited out and ropes of his come hit the cupola window in long streaks that beaded and lifted off the glass in microgravity, small bright droplets joining the slow orbit of sweat and debris turning in the dome's interior.

He was making sounds he had no memory of authorizing—wrecked, raw, half in French and half in *nothing*, fucked out psycho babble *yes yes please please Ilya*—and his hand nearly came off the bar but Rozanov's arm locked around his chest and held him in place, held him *together*, and then Rozanov's hips stuttered and his teeth sank into the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder and he came inside Shane with a groan that vibrated through Shane's spine and lodged in his ribcage, and the heat of it—the physical reality of another man's orgasm inside him—pulled one last shuddering aftershock from Shane's spent body and they both went still.

Shane's left hand was still fused to the bar, while his right wandered back up to hopelessly tangle in the damp curls at the nape of Ilya's neck. He tried to open his left hand and his fingers wouldn't respond; the flexor tendons locked, the grip frozen by minutes of sustained contraction. He had to peel his fingers off the metal one by one, each release sending pins and needles flooding from knuckle to wrist.

His arms drifted to his sides. They felt foreign, like borrowed equipment, and when Rozanov's hand found his and laced their fingers together, Shane's grip was weak and shaking and it was the hardest he'd ever held onto anything.

Floating. The Earth below. The cupola windows streaked and fogged and filthy, and beyond them, the entire unfiltered sky. They were the only two warm bodies between the atmosphere and the void. Every other living thing—every dog, every mother, every crew member who'd loved them and left and been sent away—was below, and what remained up here was this: two men holding each other at the top of an orbit that was already, invisibly, beginning to fall.

The stars did not applaud. The stars did not notice. But they were there, all of them, the full obscene catalog, and Shane looked at them and for the first time in his life did not feel small. He felt *held*. As if the dark itself had arms, and one of them was Rozanov's, and the rest were all the distance he'd ever put between himself and wanting, collapsing now to nothing.

Rozanov's forehead rested on the back of Shane's neck. His arms were locked around Shane's chest. His breathing was harsh and wet and ragged against Shane's skin, and his hands—those hands Shane had watched for seven months and longer—were spread flat over Shane's ribs, not moving, not searching, just *holding*.

Shane let go of the bar. His arms floated to his sides, empty and weightless, and he leaned back into Rozanov's chest and let himself be *held* four hundred and eight kilometers above sea level.

Apogee—the highest point in the station's orbit, the apex of the ellipse where distance from Earth peaked before gravity bent the path back down. Shane had thought about the word when he'd accepted the mission. *Apogee.* From the Greek: *apo*, away from; *gee*, Earth. The farthest you could get from the ground and still be held.

He hadn't expected to reach it like this, with another man's arms around him, with the taste of Stolichnaya and skin in his mouth, with every wall he'd built razed to its foundation and the blueprint burning. But apogee was not escape. Apogee was the moment the orbit paused at its greatest height and began, imperceptibly, to curve back toward the world. The math was already pulling them home. He could feel it. He'd been falling toward this since the first *thock* of a tennis ball off a grab rail, and he'd called it floating, and it had never been floating, and the ground was coming, and he was not afraid of it.

They stayed like that while the station carried them over the Pacific and into the dawn. Below them, the terminator line carved the Earth in half—a bruised, glowing violet edge separating the blinding azure of the Pacific from the absolute pitch-black of night. As the station crossed over, unfiltered sunlight suddenly flooded the tiny dome, bouncing off the scratched, multi-paned silica. It threw stark, razor-sharp shadows across Ilya's face and caught the floating, unruly halo of his light brown curls, turning them briefly to spun copper, and the come on the window caught the new light and turned to scattered prisms, and neither of them moved to clean it up because the world was ending and the world was beginning and it was the same world and they were still in it.

Shane's hand was in Rozanov's hair and Rozanov's arms were around his waist and the Earth filled the windows and the stars filled the margins.

Ninety seconds. He gave himself ninety seconds to think of nothing else, to be nothing else.

Those seconds, he lazily catalogued: his body felt like a country he'd visited for the first time, familiar geography seen from an altitude that reorganized every landmark. His lips were swollen. The bite mark on his pectoral throbbed in time with his heartbeat. The ache between his thighs—not pain, or not *only* pain, but the physical record of having been entered and opened and *used*, and that word, *used*, should have bothered him and instead it made him want to press his face into Ilya's neck and stay there until the oxygen ran out.

Which, given the circumstances, might be literal if there was another system's failure.

Shane Hollander: first Canadian to die in space from post-coital cuddling. The CSA would find a way to spin it, and he thought, stupidly, of the initial psych evaluation form he'd filled out so long ago—Page 7, Section C, *Do you anticipate any changes to your personal relationships during or after this mission?*

He'd checked *No.* He'd checked *No* with the same pen he used to sign his crew manifest and his life insurance update and his next-of-kin authorization, and the pen had not trembled, because Shane Hollander did not tremble when he lied.

He trembled *now*. He trembled like a man who had spent his whole life on the leash and had finally, cosmically, slipped it.

Ha.

The laugh that escaped him was small and strange and sounded like it belonged to a person he hadn't met yet. He decided he liked that person. He wanted to meet him on the ground.

"Something funny?" Rozanov lifted his head from Shane's shoulder and looked at him, and his eyes were red-rimmed and wet and the grin that arrived was slower than any grin Shane had seen from him—building from the left corner of his mouth and stalling halfway, unable to complete itself, settling into an uneven, wrecked half-shape that covered for nothing and concealed nothing and was, Shane thought, the first honest thing Ilya Rozanov's face ever had.

Rozanov's thumb found the freckles below Shane's cheekbone. Tracing them, the pad of his thumb pressing each one as if embossing it, setting it deeper, and Shane tilted his face into the touch the way he had tilted away from every hand that had ever reached for him before this, and the reversal happened inside a single muscle—the sternocleidomastoid, turning his head half an inch to the left, delivering his cheek more fully into Ilya's rough palm—and no one would ever know what that half-inch cost him, and no one needed to, and it was enough.

Rozanov's hand was still trembling—Shane could feel each micro-vibration transmitted through the fingertip—and Rozanov's mouth opened around the start of a word that didn't arrive. He closed it. Traced the freckles again, slower, mapping the constellation of them with the same focus he gave to a wiring schematic, as if knowing the precise location of each brown speck relative to the others was a problem he could solve by touch.

Shane turned his face into it. Rozanov's palm cupped his cheek, and the roughness of his calluses against Shane's skin was a sensation Shane already knew he was going to carry in his nervous system for as long as his nervous system lasted, which—and here the ninety seconds ended and the math resumed—might not be very long at all.

The dosimetry was still running in a module they couldn't see. The CME was still bearing down through ninety-three million miles of vacuum. The numbers hadn't changed just because Shane had come in another man's mouth in front of a window the size of a manhole cover. The math was the same. The math was always the same.

Rozanov watched the thought arrive on Shane's face. Shane felt him watching it—the thumb on his cheekbone pausing, the breathing changing, the body against his registering the exact moment Shane's muscles started pulling taut again.

"Stop," Rozanov said. His hand slid from Shane's cheek to the back of his neck and gripped. "I know what you are doing. You are running numbers behind your eyes. I can see the spreadsheet."

"The CME—"

"—is coming. Yes. It will still be coming in twenty minutes. It will be coming whether you calculate or not. So." His grip tightened on Shane's neck—not aggressive, anchoring. "I have a proposal."

“Rozanov—”

“My proposal is this.” He leaned in, his lips finding the hinge of Shane’s jaw, and spoke against the skin there, his accent thickening the consonants. “We are going to die in this station. And I have just gotten my hands on you for the first time after seven months of watching you eat terrible chicken in those terrible shorts, and I am not *finished*.” His teeth grazed Shane’s earlobe. “There are worse ways to go than inside you, Shane. I can think of no better way, actually. So my proposal is that I fuck you until the sun kills us, and we die very satisfied and very dehydrated, and when they find our bodies drifting through this station in—what, six months? A year?—the forensic team will have *questions*, and I think that is very funny.”

Shane’s laugh came out before he could stop it—shaky, raw, tasting like vodka, a laugh that had no business existing in a situation this dire and existed anyway because Ilya Rozanov had just delivered his own eulogy with his mouth on Shane’s ear and his cock softening against Shane’s hip and his dead mother’s cross caught between their chests, and what else was there to do?

“Wow,” Shane said. “That’s your plan. Fuck until we die.”

“Is a *good* plan. You have a better one? Another diagnostic, maybe? You can check the ECLSS backup logic while I—” His hips shifted, and even soft, the contact made Shane’s breath catch. “Multi-task. You like multi-tasking.”

“I’m not going to be multi-tasking while you’re—” Shane stopped. Not because of Rozanov’s hips. Not because of Rozanov’s mouth, which had migrated to the side of his neck and was doing things that would leave marks visible from orbit and… and… he stopped.

He stopped because Rozanov had said inside you, and Shane’s hindbrain had filed that under sex and his forebrain had filed it under yes, more, again, and then Rozanov had said drifting through this station, and Shane’s brain—his beautiful, cursed, never-resting brain that had gotten him into space and kept him in the closet and done both with the same merciless competence—had snagged on drifting the way a satellite snags on a gravity well and swung hard into a new trajectory, pulling him out of Ilya’s arms and into an idea that tasted, absurdly, like hope.

Drifting. Water. Mass. Shielding.

The WRS gave them sixty percent attenuation. He’d calculated that behind the racks during the first SPE. Sixty percent of fourteen hundred was still five hundred and sixty milligrays per hour reaching their tissues. Over the projected storm duration, that crossed every threshold that mattered.

He needed the number below two hundred. Which meant he needed ninety percent attenuation. Which meant he needed roughly three times the shielding mass they currently had.

Where was there more water?

Option one: redistribute the station's existing reserves. The potable water tanks in the galley, the contingency supply in Node 1. Shane ran the volumes—eighty liters, maybe ninety if he drained everything. That bought them another eight centimeters of water-equivalent shielding on the sun-facing vector. Attenuation climbed from sixty to maybe sixty-eight percent. Not enough. Not close.

Option two: relocate heavy equipment. The spare pump module in Columbus weighed eighty kilograms. The ammonia tank in the airlock, another sixty. But the dose they'd absorb transiting that hardware through unshielded modules would eat most of the benefit. He'd be buying shielding with the currency of exposure—spending rads to save rads, and the exchange rate was terrible.

Option three.

The Progress. The cargo vehicle docked aft of the Soyuz, carrying resupply water in flexible bladders. Forty liters each. Seven or eight of them. Three hundred liters of hydrogen-rich mass sitting sixty meters away in an unpressurized cargo bay that was inaccessible from inside because the Soyuz's damaged docking interface blocked the internal passage.

But accessible only from outside.

Which meant a *spacewalk*.

If someone—if Rozanov, who was EVA-qualified and had more hours outside the hull than anyone on the current roster—went out, accessed the Progress dry cargo compartment, and relocated the water bladders to the exterior of Node 3, strapping them against the hull directly above their shelter position behind the WRS racks, the combined shielding—internal water tanks plus external water bladders plus the station's hull—might push their protection from sixty percent to eighty-five. Maybe ninety. The math was rough, the kind of back-of-envelope calculation that would make his professors weep, but the principle was sound. Or sound *enough.*

Hydrogen-rich mass between them and the sun. More mass, less dose. Simple. Elegant.

Insane.

"Shane." Rozanov's mouth stilled on his neck. "You are not listening to me. I am kissing your neck and you are not listening. This is offensive."

"The Progress water bladders."

Rozanov pulled back. His eyebrows drew together, looking offended that the man in his arms could be thinking about *bladders* rather than his dick. "*Chto*? What *about* them?"

"How many are in the dry cargo section?"

"Seven. Maybe eight. Forty liters each, soft-packed." Rozanov pulled back far enough to look at Shane's face, and Shane watched the irritation give way to calculation—the same shift

Shane had felt in his own brain thirty seconds ago, the engineering mind shouldering past everything else. “You want to use them as shielding.”

“Yes, I… *you* gave me the idea actually, I want to strap them to the hull exterior over Node 3. Directly above our shelter position. The WRS gives us sixty percent attenuation. I need ninety to keep us below the acute threshold during the CME. Three hundred liters of additional water on the sun-facing vector gets us close.”

“Close,” Rozanov repeated. “Not there. Close.”

“Eighty-five. Maybe ninety if the packing is tight and the coverage is good on the primary flux path—” Shane was rambling.

“Shane,” Ilya interrupted, his hands tightening on Shane’s hips. “Speak plainly. Do not presume I cannot do the math, but pretend I am a stupid farmer for one minute. The solar protons are the bullets.”

Shane swallowed. “Right. The protons are bullets but with the additional water, there’s be—ninety percent of fourteen hundred is—ah—about one-forty reaching us. Below two hundred. Survivable, so if you pack them tight and stack them, we might get close to ninety percent attenuation on the primary proton energies. We could maybe—*maybe*—but you would need to go out.”

“So I would need to go out.” Rozanov’s hands had not left Shane’s body—one still on his neck, one on his hip—but his grip had changed, tightening in a way that was not sexual. “In an active radiation environment. During the tail of the SPE, with the CME arrival window starting in—what—four hours? Maybe three?”

“The dose rate outside the hull right now is elevated but not lethal. The EVA itself is survivable if it’s fast. The problem is time.”

“The problem is *always* time. How fast?”

“Ninety minutes. That’s eight bladders extracted, transited along the exterior handrails, and strapped to the Node 3 hull. Thirty minutes of margin before the earliest CME arrival estimate.”

“Thirty minutes is not margin. Thirty minutes is a *wish*.”

“It’s what we have.”

“It is *nothing*. It is—” Rozanov’s hand left Shane’s hip and raked through his own hair, the curls springing wild around his fingers. He was doing the same math Shane was doing, arriving at the same numbers, and the numbers were bad but they were not zero, and *not zero* was a country neither of them had been living in for the last hour. “Okay. Say I do it. Say I go out, get the bladders, strap them to the hull. Ninety minutes. Maybe I am fast, maybe seventy. I come back inside, we seal up behind the WRS with—what—three hundred twenty liters of additional water overhead. The CME hits. We shelter. The dose is—forty percent of what it would have been otherwise?”

“Roughly. The geometry isn’t perfect. Some angles won’t be covered. But the primary flux vector—sun-facing—would be substantially attenuated.”

“‘Substantially attenuated’ he says.” Rozanov repeated the phrase with the accent butchering every vowel. “Substantially attenuated means what? We survive? We survive with cancer? We survive but only for a month in agony? I would rather be fucking you.”

“It means our cumulative dose stays below the acute syndrome threshold. It means we don’t die in six hours. It means—” Shane’s hands found Rozanov’s face. He held it between his palms, the cheekbones sharp under his thumbs, Rozanov’s eyes wide and hazel and *alive*. “It means we get to do *this* again. More. I can’t order you to do this. The risk is yours. The exposure is yours. If the CME comes early—“

“If the CME comes early, you watch me die through a porthole. Yes. I understand the scenario.” Rozanov’s jaw worked. “And if I do not go, we both die behind your water recycler in six hours. I understand this scenario also.”

His whole body—the hands in his own hair, the floating legs, the restless kinetic engine of him that never stopped moving—went still. His eyes moved over Shane’s face—forehead, mouth, back to the eyes—reading him the way he read a schematic, looking for the fault, the lie, the place where the wiring didn’t match the blueprint.

Reading data points.

Rechecking.

“I understand you are asking me,” Rozanov said, “to stop fucking you so I can go outside and strap water bags to the hull so that we can—*maybe*—survive long enough for me to fuck you again.”

“Yes.”

“This is your proposal.”

“Yes.”

“And the EVA itself—the suit-up, the transit, the cargo transfer—this is not the problem. The dose rate has dropped. Right now, outside the hull, it is elevated but it is not lethal. The problem is *time.*” His eyes narrowed, running the same calculation Shane was running. “If the CME arrives while I am still outside, I am dead. The suit does not stop solar protons. So the question is not whether I can do the EVA. The question is whether I can finish it before the storm hits.”

Rozanov’s thumb tapped against Shane’s hip—a rapid, rhythmic calculation, the physical tic of a man whose brain processed faster than his mouth. “This… the time is tight. It is not *impossible*.”

“You’ve done longer EVAs.”

“I have done longer EVAs with a partner, a checklist, a ground team reading me procedures, and no coronal mass ejection bearing down on me at two million kilometers per hour.” His lips thinned. “But yes. I have done longer EVAs. But it is ninety minutes if nothing goes wrong. It is two hours if one thing goes wrong. It is death if two things go wrong at the same time.” He looked at Shane. “This is an honest assessment. Not pessimism. I am never pessimistic. I am *Russian*, which is different.”

Shane waited. He could feel the decision forming in Rozanov’s body before it reached his face—the shift in his breathing, the redistribution of tension from his hands to his shoulders, the cosmonaut’s hindbrain already sequencing the suit-up procedure while his conscious mind was still arguing with the odds.

“You are telling me there are two scenarios: one, I stay here with you and we meet the end together, or two, I go outside and we meet our ends miserably and apart.”

“I’m telling you there’s a third scenario. You go, you finish in time, and we both live,” Shane said.

“And in this scenario—the living one—what happens?”

Shane swallowed the lump in his throat and blinked away the sting in his eyes again. He knew that he was buying Ilya’s life with a promise, and the promise had to be real, and it had to be enough. “We live and… and… there will be more. I don’t want this to be a one-time exception because we might die. Not because we were dying. I want… *more.* If you do. I want more on Earth. In gravity. In a bed with a door that locks.” His thumb moved across Rozanov’s cheekbone. “I don’t want this to be the *only* time and I don’t want this to be the end.”

Rozanov went still and with it so too did the restless kinetic engine of him that never stopped moving. His eyes searched Shane’s face the way they’d searched it behind the WRS racks, when Shane had been panicking and Rozanov had put a hand on his chest and breathed for both of them.

“You cannot promise that,” Ilya said. “You cannot promise the CME will be on the low end, or that the bladders will attenuate enough, or that I will finish in time. You are promising a future you do not control.” His thumb tapped Shane’s hip—that rapid, calculating tic. “You are very bad at this. Promising. You have spent your whole life *not* promising anyone anything, and now you pick the worst possible moment to start.”

“Maybe the worst possible moment is the only kind I was ever going to take,” Shane said, and the truth of it hit him as he said it—that he’d needed the world to narrow to a corridor this tight, to a choice this binary, *live or don’t, love or don’t,* before his hands would unclench from the railing and reach.

“And you are doing it *naked*. Which is manipulative.”

“*Rozanov.*”

Rozanov kissed him. Hard. His hands gripped Shane's jaw and he kissed him with the ferocity of a man sealing a contract he didn't trust, and when he pulled back his forehead dropped against Shane's and he stayed there, breathing Shane's air, the tips of their noses touching.

"If I die out there," Rozanov said, "I will haunt this station. I will bounce my tennis ball off every panel in every module for eternity. Mission Control will think it is a ghost and they will be correct."

"And like you said if you die out there, I die in here a few hours later. You'd be haunting a corpse."

"Captive audience. My favorite kind." His thumb dragged once across Shane's lower lip. The grin was gone. What remained on his face was the calculation—the cold, clean math of a man who understood risk the way he understood wiring schematics, who could read a probability and make a decision and live or die by the decimal. "Two hours. I can do it in ninety minutes if the cargo hatch cooperates."

"Will you do it?"

The cupola turned beneath them. Lightning flashed over Polynesia. The terminator crept westward.

"*Da,*" Rozanov said.

"Are… are you *sure*?"

He scoffed. "Of course. A thousand years of sacrifice in our veins, Shane. Every generation of my people must know its own suffering. I curse the sun for this storm, and I curse the price I have to pay to fix it. But it must be done. Because nobody else can. So I make my peace with it."

Hazel eyes drifted over, raking Shane over with a sidelong glance. "But I want it in the logbook. Shane Hollander owes me. The details of what he owes me are classified, but the debt is on the record."

Shane kissed him and it was a contract and a prayer and neither of those things. It was a mouth on a mouth in a station that was trying to kill them, and it was the simplest gesture Shane had ever made—simpler than any command, any checklist, any of the thousand controlled actions that comprised his days. For twenty-nine years he had lived in the complex. In the multi-step, the cross-referenced, the procedurally verified.

And this—lips, breath, the salt of another man's sweat—this was one step, and the step was: *toward*.

"Then let's get you suited up," Shane said.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 10:00 | MET +06:42 Dosimetry: 58 mGy/hr (holding)

After, they scrambled to retrieve their scattered clothes from the cupola's vents, dressing with frantic, clumsy haste, they kicked off toward the Russian segment.

Unlike dressing, *suiting up* was not an easy process, and the Russian Orlan Rozanov used was exceptionally difficult.

It should have taken *thirty* with a ground team and a second pair of hands; it took forty-one with Shane reading procedures off a translated laminated card he'd pulled from the airlock locker while Rozanov contorted himself into the rear-entry hatch, swearing in two languages.

Shane checked the seals. Gloves, wrist rings, helmet lock. Good, good, and good. His fingers ran the perimeter of each one the way he'd run a pre-flight checklist—systematic, thorough, his hands steady even when the rest of him was not. The rest of him was definitely not. Rozanov watched him through the helmet visor with an odd patience, his breath already fogging the polycarbonate in rhythmic ovals.

"Hollander," he said, and then: "*Shane*. It is okay."

It was very much not okay, and it was kind of him to lie about it anyway.

Shane bit down on his lip, still running through everything that needed to happen in his head. They were rushing. Rushing left margins or mistakes. "The pre-breathe—"

"I did twenty minutes on the mask while you were checking seals. Is enough."

It wasn't enough, and Shane knew that standard protocol called for forty. Shane opened his mouth, and Rozanov's eyes found his through the visor, and the argument died because the math was already done: twenty more minutes of pre-breathe was twenty fewer minutes before the CME. Decompression sickness versus a coronal mass ejection.

Pick your death.

"Okay. It's enough," Shane said.

Rozanov reached for his thigh—muscle memory, the hand going where the tennis ball had been Velcroed for seven months—and his fingers closed on the bare fabric of the pressure garment. Empty. The small, lost gesture of a dog nosing an empty hand for a treat that isn't there, and Shane watched him do it and his throat ached with a tenderness so specific it had a shape: the shape of a green felt sphere, the shape of a closed fist, the shape of every comfort object a person carries to the places where comfort is least likely to be found.

"My ball."

"What? The—what?"

"My tennis ball. Is still in the galley. If I die—"

"You're not going to—"

"—*if* I die, you bring it home. Yes*?* You bring it back to Earth. You do not leave it up here to float around with my ghost and her ghost forever, this is very depressing. Put it in your pocket when the Aurora comes back for you. You take it through reentry. It goes home. You will throw it sometimes."

This stupid ball. This stupid fucking *man*. Shane's chest heaved and all at once his eyes were prickling, and he blinked hard, and the wetness didn't clear because the tears had nowhere to go in microgravity—they sat on his lashes and clung, trembling, refracting the airlock's illuminated strips into smeared arcs of light.

"No," Shane said. His throat ached around the word. "No, I'm not—you're going to come back inside and get it yourself. You have to because then you get to finish what you started."

Rozanov tilted his head. The helmet limited the motion to a few degrees but the gesture was pure Rozanov—inquisitive, amused, waiting for the punchline.

"This is a direct order," Shane said, and his throat burned but the words came out steady because steady was the one thing he knew how to be, even now, even wrecked. "From your Commander. You will come back inside this station and you will *fetch* your own goddamn ball. You hear me? Come back. *Come back*, Rozanov. That's an order. That's the only order. Come back and fetch it from my hand and I'll throw it again, every time, as many times as you want, and you will bring it back, because that's the game, that's the whole game, that's what fetch *is*. We throw, bring it back, again and again, and nobody stops coming home."

The grin cracked. Rozanov's whole face split open behind the visor, the pearly teeth white, eyes crinkling, a laugh that Shane heard through the helmet as a muffled bark, and then the laugh stopped and what was left on his face was not a grin at all. His gloved hand came up and pressed flat against the outside of his visor, fingers spread, and Shane put his own hand against the polycarbonate from the other side. The glass was cold between their palms. Shane could feel the suit's pressurization thrumming through it, Rozanov's life support already running, already counting down.

"I hear you, *Commander*. I will see you in ninety minutes," Rozanov said.

"Ninety minutes."

Shane depressurized the airlock and Ilya Rozanov stepped into the void.

Through the small porthole in the airlock hatch, Shane watched him go.

The helmet's gold-plated visor reflected the planet's blinding blue glow, and Rozanov's face behind it was lit starkly from below, features inverted—chin bright, brow dark in the unforgiving shadows—and for a half-second he looked like a photograph taken from the wrong angle, a version of himself that existed only from this side of the glass. Then the tether paid out. He turned, the blue reflecting off his bulky white armor shifting to absolute pitch, and the massive, life-sustaining Orlan suit was instantly reduced to a fragile white speck against the terrifying, infinite black, getting smaller.

Shane's hand was on the porthole the way it had been on the Node 2 window when the Aurora left, and he understood now what he hadn't understood then: that watching someone leave through a window was its own particular country, and he had been living there his whole life, and he was done.

He was *done* being the one who watched. He was going to be the one who was there when they came *back.*

Chapter 3: Fetch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 10:01 | MET +06:42 Dosimetry: 58 mGy/hr (holding)

Crew on station: 1

He was alone on the station now, technically. There was very little he could actually do from the inside while Rozanov—*Ilya,* no, this was… *Ilya*—was similarly alone in the void. Shane remembered that Hadfield had written about the loneliness of command, too; how the title meant being the last person allowed to panic. Shane had read the book at nineteen and thought he understood it. He had not understood it.

Understanding required an empty station and a man you'd just slept with floating eighty meters away in hard vacuum.

The suit telemetry fed through a single functioning screen in Node 3—heart rate, O_2 consumption, suit pressure, CO_2 partial pressure. Shane had dragged the portable display to his shelter position behind the WRS racks and strapped it to a water tank at eye level, and now he watched Ilya's heartbeat spike and dip in green numerals while he stacked internal water bags along the overhead, building the inside half of their cocoon. It hurt to not be able to watch him from the windows, to *be* there in some visible way but… time. Time was against them, and this was just as important as any other task in these twilight moments.

So from here, he could not see Ilya. There were no functioning external cameras as the initial SPE had fried three of the four mast-mounted units and the surviving one faced zenith, aimed at nothing currently useful. Instead, Shane had Ilya's biometrics and Ilya's breathing and, through the short-range suit-to-station loop that still functioned, Ilya's running commentary, which was—characteristically—more than anyone had asked for.

"Fucking hatch is stiff," came through the loop at minute nineteen. Ilya was at the Progress cargo compartment. Shane tracked the sound of exertion under the words—the vowels thinning, the consonants landing harder. How hard it must be to think and move and solve and *be* and then translate it all into another language. For the first time in his life, Shane was sorry he didn't speak Russian.

"Bolts are cold-soaked. I am using the ratchet and it is not—*hnn*—it is not cooperating. The suit is fully pressurized, Shane. Every time I bend my arm to crank, it is like trying to fold a car tire in half."

"Turn it counterclockwise first, then clockwise. The thermal contraction on those bolts pulls them—"

"I *know* how bolts work, Hollander."

“Copy.”

Twelve seconds. Then a metallic screech transmitted through Ilya’s open mic, followed by a rush of expelled air. “Hatch is open. I see the bladders. Count is... seven. Not eight. Seven bladders, forty liters each. Two hundred eighty.”

Shane recalculated. Two hundred eighty instead of three hundred twenty. The attenuation dropped from ninety to maybe eighty-two. Eighty-two percent of fourteen hundred was two-fifty-two reaching them. Still above two hundred. Still above the number he wanted.

But the geometry mattered more than the volume. If Ilya packed them tight, overlapping on the sun-facing vector, the effective thickness along the primary flux path could compensate for the missing forty liters. Maybe.

“Is that enough?”

Ilya hummed, running his own mental calculations. “Hm. I think so. Probably.”

“Okay, then… yeah, okay, let’s run with it.” Finishing his own calculations, Shane wrote the number on the back of his hand with a Sharpie because the portable display only had one screen and he wasn’t giving up the suit telemetry. “Two hundred eighty works. Start moving them.”

“Bossy, Commander.”

The first bladder took nine minutes. Shane timed it on the mission elapsed clock: extraction from the cargo bay, clipping to Ilya’s tether, the long hand-over-hand traverse from the Progress aft end along the station’s exterior handrails to the Node 3 hull position. The bladder was weightless but it was massive—forty kilograms of inertia that didn’t want to stop and didn’t want to turn corners. Every time Ilya changed direction along the golden handrails of the truss segment, the massive silver bladder swung wide out into the void, threatening to pull his center of mass with it over the dizzying, four-hundred-kilometer drop to the Pacific Ocean below.

Shane heard the effort in Ilya’s oxygen consumption, which climbed from baseline to twenty percent above and held there.

“One down,” Ilya said at minute twenty-eight. “Six to go. This is... this is not so bad.”

The second bladder took eleven minutes. The third took thirteen. By the fourth, Ilya’s O_2 consumption had climbed to thirty percent above baseline and his heart rate was sitting at one-forty, and Shane could hear the difference with the pauses between words stretching, the consonants going soft at the edges, Ilya’s accent thickening the way it always did when his body was working harder than his mouth could keep up with.

“*Blyat*. My hands,” Ilya said at minute seventy-three, halfway through the fifth bladder’s traverse. The word came out *hends*. “And…! Fuck! The tether clip is jammed. The latch mechanism is frozen, the thermal cycling has—I cannot get it to release from the guide rail.” A grunt. Metal scraping. “I am pulling the whole assembly. The clip and the rail section. It is

—*hnn*—coming. Coming. Okay. Okay it is free. These gloves are—the pressure, it is like gripping through—I cannot feel my fingers properly."

Shane knew. The Orlan gloves operated at a differential pressure that fought every finger movement; after an hour of continuous gripping, the forearm muscles cramped and the fingertips went numb and a user had to consciously will each grip-release-grip cycle because their hands wanted to curl into fists and stay there. He was suffering. It had to be agony, and the absurdity of his position registered distantly: Mission Control, population fucking *one*, running a timeline on a portable display strapped to a water tank with electrical tape.

In the Apollo 13 film—which Shane had watched eleven times, because he was exactly the kind of person who watched Apollo 13 eleven times—the famous line was *failure is not an option*. The actual flight controllers never said it, though.

What they'd said was closer to what Shane was doing now: listing what they had, crossing off what they didn't, and refusing to look at the column where the two lists intersected. Except Gene Kranz had a room full of engineers. And all Ilya had was… Shane, and all Shane had a Sharpie and the back of his own hand and a cosmonaut with frozen fingers eighty meters away on the wrong side of the hull.

"Talk to me," Ilya said at minute seventy-eight, and his accent had swallowed half the sentence. "The cooling garment cannot keep up. I am sweating, and without gravity it does not fall, Shane, it just pools on my skin. It is stinging my eyes and I cannot wipe my face. Talk to me. Help me."

Help me. As if Shane could *do* anything from here, he couldn't help him, he couldn't reach out and *touch* like Ilya had in the gap for his own panic attack all he had was… was…

"You have the strongest hands on this station," Shane blurted out, because all he had were his words and his want.

Static. Then: "What?"

Shane's face went hot. He was glad—viciously, profoundly glad—that there were no cameras.

"Your arms." His mouth was running ahead of him now, off-leash, and his brain had apparently decided to open the gate and let it go, the same way he'd let the French sacres go in the cupola—language escaping from somewhere deeper than permission, deeper than rank, the kennel door flung wide and every caged thing bounding out at once. "I think about your arms, Rozanov. *Ilya*. I think about them a lot. I think about them when I'm trying to sleep and when I'm running experiments and when I'm eating my fucking salad with my fucking manners across the table from you. I think about how they felt in the cupola when you…"

Shane pressed his hand over his own face. This was all pouring out of him now like atmosphere through a hull breach: fast, total, and impossible to get back. "... When you held me down. I think about you holding me down. I think about you manhandling me and I *liked* it and I want it again, so you need to finish this and come back inside, because I am not done with your arms. Or the rest of you. But… but especially your arms."

Ilya's breathing sounded like a saw through the comms, ragged and starting to struggle as he fought against time and the suit and the bladder, but underneath it a new thread, a frequency Shane had learned to identify in the cupola: Ilya processing a piece of information that he hadn't expected.

"Hollander." Ilya's accent had thickened until the word was almost unrecognizable. "You are telling me this now. While I am outside. While I cannot—" A grunt, the sound of a bladder catching on a guide rail. "—cannot *do* anything about it."

"Incentive structure," Shane said, and the steadiness in it was real this time, not performed—the Commander and the man underneath him finally, *finally*, pulling in the same direction. "Get the bladders locked down. Come back to me. Collect your prize. *Fetch*, boy."

"You—" Another grunt. The creak of glove fabric. "—are a menace. A fucking—Canadian—*menace*. I am filing complaint with CSA."

"Five more minutes to the Node. Clip it and come back for six."

"I think, Hollander, when I come back inside, your arms are the first thing I am looking at." His breathing hitched around a sound that sat in the hinge between a laugh and a sob, and the suit's comm system had no business transmitting it as intimately as it did. "I am going to tie them down. Cables. Railing. So I can fuck you properly without you floating away, because you—*hngh*—you don't know how to *stay*."

Bladder five locked down at minute eighty-one. Heart rate: one-fifty-two. O_2 consumption: thirty-five percent above baseline.

Shane pressed his forehead against the comm panel and kept his hands flat on the console because if he gripped anything he'd leave marks in the metal.

"Tell me what else," Shane said. He didn't recognize his own register. It came from somewhere below his sternum, from the place where the math lived—the math that said Ilya was burning through consumables like a man sprinting a marathon.

A long exhale over the comm. Then: "I am going to put my mouth on every freckle. All of them. The ones on your shoulders you don't know about because you have never looked at your own back—you are too busy being *Commander*, too busy being perfect from the front. No one has ever mapped you, Shane. No one has looked. Landry didn't look. She had you and she didn't *look* at you." A sharp inhale. The ratchet engaging, metal teeth catching. "I looked. Seven months I looked. Every time you bent over a console in that fucking polo shirt I wanted to—*ah*—bite the back of your neck and hold you there."

"Ilya—"

"No. You asked, so now you listen." His breathing fractured—not a laugh, not a gasp, the involuntary sound of a diaphragm losing its rhythm under strain and forcing itself back. "Nobody sees you again. *Da?* What I saw in that cupola—you, shaking, making those sounds, your face when you—that is *mine*. Only mine. I will not share it. I will *kill* anyone

who—” He stopped. The comm clicked—lips pressed together hard enough to trigger the proximity sensor.

Three seconds of dead air. Four.

“Ilya.”

“I am here.” Rough. Stripped bare. “Glove is—”

His breathing came through the loop in long, torn strips. Shane closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the comm panel and listened to the sound of Ilya Rozanov being afraid and refusing to stop talking, refusing to let the fear fill the channel, cramming every spare inch of silence with want because want was the only counter-signal he had against the void, and Shane thought: *this is what brave sounds like. Not the absence of fear. This. A man so frightened his hands are freezing and his lungs are failing and he’s still telling you what he wants, still saying it out loud, still throwing the fucking ball into the dark.*

“—thermoregulation in the right glove is pulling too much. My core is boiling but my fingers are freezing, the joints locking up. It is fine.”

It was not fine. Cold fingers in an EVA glove meant reduced dexterity, which meant slower work on the straps, which meant more minutes outside, which meant the margin shrank from twenty-four to a number Shane did not want to calculate.

I’ll catch it, I’ll catch it, I’ll catch you.

“Keep talking to me,” Shane said.

“About the glove? Or about how I am going to spend the first hour with my hand around your throat, keeping you still, making you *wait*—because you are so impatient, Hollander, you don’t even know, you think you are patient but you are the most impatient man alive—while I take what I want? Because what I want is to hear you beg in French again and—”

His breathing broke. Not a clean break—a splintering, the kind of fracture that ran through the length of an exhale and didn’t reassemble on the inhale. Shane’s hands were shaking on the console. He pressed them harder against the surface.

One. Two. Three. Four.

“Ilya. Status.”

“Strap is secured. Six is done. Moving to seven.” A wet swallow, audible over the comm. “My hands are not—the left is fine. The right is—I can use it. It is slower.”

Shane ran the numbers. Twelve minutes to extract, transit, and secure the last bladder. Margin: twelve minutes at the optimistic end of the CME window. Zero

“You have time,” Shane lied.

“You are a terrible liar. Even over comms I can hear your flinching. You must promise me never to play poker.” The ratchet again. A clip engaging its track. “When we are on Earth. In your bed, my bed, *any bed*, I will take all night. I will have you for *hours*, Shane. I will hold you down with my weight, and I will fuck you so hard you feel me for days. I cannot fuck you the way I want to here, no, not without gravity. I need you to ache, and you will not move until I am finished with you, until you are spent, until I finally let you come at the end, and you will lie there under me, Shane, and you will feel *everything*—every—*ngh* —”

He didn’t finish.

Shane closed his eyes, squeezing them hard, then opened them. The biotelemetry was worse —heart rate one-sixty-one, O_2 burn rate still climbing. Ilya’s body was running out of runway and his hands were cold and the CME was coming and the only thread between them was a comm link and the image of a bed with grey sheets and a locked door on a planet they might never reach.

“I want—I am going to be *insufferable* about this, Shane. You know this. You know what I am like,” Ilya said, and the mask was gone now, stripped away by hypoxia or exhaustion or the gravity of what he was actually saying, “I want everything. And I will not share. I will rip fucking Pike’s arms off. Landry will never see you again. I will not share you, not with anyone, not with the crew, not with CSA, not with your—your *career*. I want all of it. Every sound you make. I want to be the only person who knows what your face looks like when you—*blyat*—” The ratchet. His breathing, wet and labored. “This stupid fucking bolt—”

Shane’s throat closed. He put his hand flat over the biotelemetry readout, covering the numbers, because looking at them and listening to Ilya’s breathing at the same time was going to break him and he could not break.

Not now. Not with Ilya still outside.

“I… ah… Bladder seven,” Ilya said at minute ninety-six, over time and over exerted. “This is last one. Then I am coming back inside and I… will wreck you worse than this storm.”

“Alright. I’ll be waiting,” Shane promised.

His breathing was ragged. The bravado was there—it would be there if Ilya were speaking from inside a coffin—but underneath it Shane could hear the places where his body was failing to keep up with what his mouth was promising. The pauses between words where his lungs seized. The slight slur where the cold had migrated from his fingers into his articulatory muscles, and on his little screen, Shane watched the heart rate. One-fifty-eight. One-sixty. One-fifty-five. The O_2 consumption ticked down as Ilya covered the final stretch—handrail to handrail, the station’s exterior sliding under his gloves, the last water bladder clipped to his tether and trailing behind him. Shane mapped each second against the dosimetry display on the WRS rack and the number there had not changed, had not changed, had *not changed* —

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 11:36 | MET +08:17 Dosimetry: 58 mGy/hr (holding)

Crew on station: 1

But then it did change.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 11:37 | MET +08:18 Dosimetry: 66 mGy/hr (holding)

Crew on station: 1

Shit and—and it was still tracking *up*, faster now.

Seventy four.

Seventy-nine.

They'd run out of time. This was the leading edge of the CME brushing the magnetosphere, the first particles of the real storm arriving ahead of the wall.

"Ilya." Shane's hand found the comm loop. "How… how long to secure the last bladder and get back to the airlock?"

"Ten minutes. Maybe twelve."

"You… no. You have eight. The dosimetry is climbing, Ilya the CME's front edge is *here*."

Then: a sharp exhale that peaked the comm loop's gain limiter, followed by the percussive *clang* of a suit glove grabbing a handrail at speed. Ilya's breathing went ragged and fast—big, gulping pulls that Shane could track by the crackle they put through the microphone. A strap ratchet clicked, clicked, clicked, each click tighter than the last.

Shane heard the bladder hit the hull—a wet, dense thud, forty kilograms of water flattening against aluminum. Outside, the leading edge of the CME began to interact with the exosphere, charging the vacuum with an eerie, high-altitude auroral glow that cast erratic, shifting shadows across Ilya's suit. Ilya swore in Russian, a string of consonants that the suit mic compressed into a snarl against the rising electromagnetic static, and the ratchet clicked again. Twice. Three times. The bladder creaked as it seated against the hull.

Shane's hands were shaking. He pressed them flat against the WRS rack and watched Ilya's heart rate on the biometric feed spike to one-seventy-two, one-seventy-eight. O_2 consumption: forty percent above baseline and climbing. The dosimetry refreshed. Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine.

On the comm loop, Ilya was already moving—tether clips snapping open and re-anchoring in a fast, syncopated rhythm, his breathing a metronome that Shane's own lungs had locked onto without permission.

"*Done.* Moving to airlock. Seven minutes."

"Six."

"You cannot *negotiate* with distance, Hollander—"

"*Move!* Ilya get your ass back on this station *now* so help me God or I will fucking—"

"Yes, yes, always so bossy. For you, Shane, I will try."

The dosimetry read seventy-two. Then seventy-five. The curve was bending upward, the slope steepening with each refresh, and Shane could see the shape of what was coming—the exponential ramp, the wall of magnetized plasma about to break over them—and Ilya was still outside, still exposed, the suit offering him nothing against solar protons, every second out there now measured in damage.

Shane gripped the edge of the WRS rack until his knuckles ached. Ilya's heart rate read one-sixty-seven. O_2 consumption: forty percent above baseline. The airlock telemetry showed the outer hatch still open.

Five minutes.

Eighty-four mGy/hr.

Four minutes.

Eighty-nine.

Three minutes.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 11:49 | MET +08:30 Dosimetry: 94 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

The airlock outer hatch indicator switched from OPEN to CYCLING. Ilya was inside, was sealing the hatch, was—the repressurization count started, air flooding the chamber, the numbers on the screen ticking upward toward station-nominal while the dosimetry numbers ticked upward toward lethality, two countdowns racing each other.

"I'm in," Ilya said. His breathing filled the comm loop, enormous and raw. "I'm in. Repress in progress. Two minutes."

Ninety-six mGy/hr.

Ninety-seven.

The inner hatch unsealed, pulling the sharp, metallic smell of ozone and seared vacuum into the station. Ilya came through it like a man being born—helmet already twisting off, gloves stripped and drifting, bumping into shit, spinning off to be lost and tangled in cables, the rigid, unforgiving mass of the Orlan's torso unit hanging open behind him as he dragged his exhausted body out of the stiff pressure garment with trembling arms.

His curls were plastered to his forehead with sweat. His hands were red, swollen, the fingers curled into involuntary fists, like *claws*, where the gloves had squeezed the blood to the

surface and the muscles underneath had seized. His gold cross had worked free of his thermal undergarment and hung in the air between them, spinning on its chain.

“Come on, come on, no time, I’ve got you,” Shane said, grabbing him by the soaked shirt. The sheer dead weight of him was terrifying; the man who had pinned Shane to the cupola glass with effortless strength just hours ago was now completely spent, his body a loose, exhausted mass that Shane had to haul bodily toward the rebuilt WRS shelter.

“Good, yes,” Ilya panted, slumping and stumbling and then letting the zero gravity hold him while Shane made the final haul. His stiff, trembling hands caught at Shane’s arms for purchase, and Shane dragged him behind the racks and pulled the last internal water bag into position overhead and they folded together into the shelter—the same shelter, the same configuration, Shane’s back against Ilya’s chest, Ilya’s arms around him—as the dosimetry climbed past one hundred and kept climbing.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 12:02 | MET +08:43 Dosimetry: 110 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

Shane felt Ilya’s hands settle against his stomach, the swollen fingers uncurling slowly against the fabric of Shane’s shirt. Ilya’s forehead dropped to the back of Shane’s neck, nuzzling in.

“Fetched,” Ilya said, into Shane’s skin. His breathing was still ragged, each exhale landing warm and damp on Shane’s vertebrae. “Now—now let us not die. Please. Shane. I wanted more than—”

Shane’s hand found Ilya’s wrist. He pressed two fingers to where he could feel the blood hammering—too fast, too hard—and held on, snuggling back into him, collapsing and holding and held all at once.

“Me too, me *too*,” he pleaded, blinking hard again all over as the dosimeters climbed and alarms started to sound. “If—ah, fuck, shit—after this, if we—*after* this, can—can we try for real?”

“After this you will actually need to kill me to be rid of me,” Ilya promised, huffing out a miserable laugh, “Fuck *trying*. Do you understand me, Commander?”

“Copy,” Shane whispered, because he was scared and he was stupid and he did understand.

They held on. The alarms leveled to a steady wail that the ear eventually folded into the background the way it folded in the ventilation hum, and the dosimetry climbed, and they breathed together behind the water and waited for the storm to either peak or kill them.

The outside dosimeters climbed past one hundred and ten, and the numbers did not stop.

Shane watched them from inside the shelter with his head tipped back against Ilya’s shoulder, reading the corridor panel through the gap between the WRS housing and the stacked water

bags overhead. The display was fifteen feet away and partially obscured, but the digits were large and backlit in amber and he could track them the way you track a tide—by the ground it swallows, inch by inch, while you stand still and wonder where the dry part went.

He realized, miserably, that his own personal monitor was clipped to his waistband, pinned between his hip and Ilya's thigh. He could feel the hard plastic edge digging into the bone. To read it, he'd have to twist sideways, pull away from Ilya, open a gap between his body and the water bags braced against his left side… and expose himself, breaking the seal of the geometry they'd built, the geometry that was the whole point, every centimeter of water and body mass between them and the sun-facing hull arranged to stop exactly this. The corridor panel was visible through the gap between the WRS housing and the overhead bags: unshielded numbers, what the hull sensors registered, the raw flux hitting the station's skin. Those numbers meant nothing to their survival except as a shape—the curve's rise, its peak, its fall. The number that mattered was the one on his hip, under Ilya's leg, recording what actually reached his cells —

—and he couldn't see it. Maybe he didn't want to. Would it matter? Would it change anything at all?

No.

So he watched the panel through the gap and did not move, and Ilya's arms stayed locked around him, and they let the unshielded numbers tell them the shape of the storm without telling them the only number that mattered in regards to whether they were going to live.

One hundred and twenty, then a jump, and one hundred and forty.

The first emergency threshold alarm triggered at one fifty—a sharp repeating tone from the Node 3 panel that Shane had heard once before, during the initial SPE and his chest seized at the sound, every muscle drawing tight at once, his fingers clamping down around Ilya's wrist where he'd been counting the heartbeat.

Ilya didn't flinch. His arms stayed locked around Shane's middle, the swollen fingers pressed flat against Shane's stomach, and when Shane's body tried to curl forward against the alarm his hold didn't give. The ruined hands dug in harder—knuckle joints grinding against Shane's abdominal wall through the shirt fabric, tendons standing rigid from wrist to elbow—and Shane felt his own spine pulled back against Ilya's sternum, held there, pinned by a grip that had no fine motor control left and was operating on brute compression alone.

Two hundred and five. Two hundred and sixty-two.

The numbers on the panel were the unshielded readings—what the station's particle detectors registered in the corridor, outside the improvised water barrier—and Shane kept running the attenuation math in his head, the conversion from what the panel showed to what was actually reaching their bodies behind the mass of water and WRS hardware. If the shielding performed at the upper range of his estimates, ninety percent attenuation on the primary proton energies, then two hundred and forty in the corridor meant twenty-four reaching them. Survivable. Uncomfortable, *career-altering*, neither of them might ever fly again, but *survivable*.

But… if the shielding performed at the lower range—if the geometry was worse than he'd calculated, if there were angles he hadn't accounted for, gaps where the bladders didn't overlap—then the number landing in their tissues was closer to seventy or eighty, and sustained over hours…

… well, they would never fly again *anyway*.

He didn't know which estimate was right. He wouldn't know until the storm passed and they read their personal dosimeters and learned whether Shane Hollander's back-of-the-envelope calculations had saved their lives or merely prolonged them a meaningless nothing longer.

Three ninety seven. Three hundred and ninety-nine.

A second alarm joined the first—higher pitch, faster cycling, the radiation environment monitor in Node 3 responding to dose rates it had never been designed to see. The ISS was built to operate in low Earth orbit behind the planet's magnetic field, where the ambient radiation was a low, constant hum that the hull attenuated to near-nothing. The station's emergency thresholds had been set for solar particle events that the magnetic field would partially deflect. This was beyond that. The two alarms layered over each other and produced a third frequency between them, a warbling interference pattern that filled the module and vibrated in Shane's back teeth, and he pressed his head harder against Ilya's shoulder and watched the numbers climb.

Four hundred and twelve. Four hundred and eighty.

"Shane." Ilya's mouth was against the back of his neck, and his breathing had not steadied since the airlock. "What is the number now."

"Four… four hundred and eighty."

"And for us? Behind the water?"

"It's—it should be forty-eight. If I'm right about the attenuation. If…" Shane swallowed.

Ilya squeezed him around the middle. "What, you can't do math?"

Shane elbowed him in the gut weakly, recognizing the tease but still felt too frightened to laugh. "I did the math in my head while you were outside, I didn't have time to model it properly, the angles depend on the packing density of the bladders and whether you got full coverage over the sun-facing vector or—does it matter? If I'm wrong it's higher. Too high. Leave me alone."

"*No*," Ilya grumbled, pathetically needy and shameless about it now, squeezing him closer, kissing the nape of his neck. "And there is full coverage. I got full coverage because you told me where to put them and I put them there. Every one. I strapped them so tight the tethers nearly cut through my gloves, which is why my hands look like this, which I will complain about later in great detail. The coverage is good. Trust your math, Hollander."

Five hundred and sixty.

The overhead lights in the corridor flickered, signalling their potential death throes while radiation attacked the main power bus. Thankfully the emergency strips were still on, and would likely *stay* on considering they were battery-backed and hardwired and would survive anything short of a hull breach. Single-event upsets were hitting the station's electronics now, individual protons punching through silicon and flipping transistor states, each hit a coin toss between a benign glitch and a cascade failure. Shane watched the overheads strobe once, twice, then hold and then repeat again and again in anxious flickers. At this point… he knew that the solar array controllers were taking damage.

If enough of them latch-locked, the arrays would stop tracking the sun and the power bus would start to sag and the systems that kept them breathing would begin, one by one, to shut down.

And he couldn't do anything about it. Neither of them could.

That was the part that made his skin crawl—the helplessness of it, the anti-training of it, every instinct in his body demanding that he *move*, that he diagnose and triage and fix, while the math pinned him to this spot behind these water bags in this man's arms because leaving the shelter for even five minutes would only kill him faster.

And, inexplicably, stupidly, it felt *safe* in Ilya's arms.

Six hundred.

Six hundred and forty.

Seven hundred and three.

Beside them, the WRS pump shuddered behind them and died. Up until now, its hum that had been constant, so embedded in the station's soundscape that Shane had stopped hearing it months ago the way you stop hearing your own heartbeat, and now with it vanished, the relative quiet screamed its absence, a hole opening in the air that the alarms rushed to fill. Shane's eyes tracked to the pump housing. If the thermal control loops went next, the station would start warming, the air would go stale faster, and the CO_2 scrubbers—already running on backup power—would have less margin before they saturated.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 12:29 | MET +09:11 Dosimetry: 873 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

"If thermal goes—"

"Then we will be warm. And irradiated. And alive, which I prefer to the alternative. Stop cataloguing, Shane. You cannot fix it from here." Ilya's forehead pressed harder against the back of Shane's neck. His lips moved against the skin when he spoke, and Shane could feel the shape of every word before he heard it. "Breathe with me. We breathe, we wait, we do not die. This is the whole plan. I trust you. You trust me?"

"… Yes, of course, yes."

Shane breathed. The air was already thicker—whether from the CO_2 scrubbers running at reduced capacity or from his own fear compressing his lungs, he couldn't tell. He pulled it in through his nose and let it out through his mouth and felt Ilya's chest expand against his back on the same rhythm, the same cadence, the same borrowed metronome they'd fallen into during the first SPE when Ilya had put a hand on his sternum and breathed for both of them in the dark behind the WRS racks.

Nine hundred and thirty.

The two alarms screamed over each other. Shane stopped tracking which was which. The numbers on the corridor panel refreshed and refreshed and each new digit was higher than the last and at a certain point the difference between four hundred and eighty and six hundred stopped being information and became geography—a landscape Shane was passing through, where the landmarks were meaningless because the road only went one direction.

One thousand and fourteen.

One thousand and two hundred and twenty one.

The numbers had passed the threshold where Shane's training offered useful frameworks and entered the territory where the only relevant data sets were catastrophe studies—Hiroshima dosimetry curves, the Chernobyl liquidators who'd stood on the roof of Reactor 4 shoveling graphite in ninety-second shifts because a hundred and twenty seconds would kill them. Ilya would know those stories differently than Shane did, having learned them from people that lived through the actual disaster rather than reading in a textbook, people who have lived them, and lied about them, and carried the isotopes in its groundwater for a generation.

Unlike the SPE which had gone as quickly as it came, the CME lingered; it was a broader wave, a slower pour, and it held the station in its flood for hours. Shane marked time by Ilya's breathing and by the shifting quality of the air and by the overhead panel he'd stopped watching but couldn't stop glancing at—twelve hundred, twelve hundred and forty, twelve hundred and sixty-one—and at some point he realized his body had started to shake, a fine tremor in his hands and his legs that he could not will away.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 13:00 | MET +09:42 Dosimetry: 1308 mGy/hr (rising)

Crew on station: 2

There was no klaxon for *this is the worst it will get.*

The unshielded number climbed past thirteen hundred and Shane stopped watching. He closed his eyes and twisted in Ilya's lap and knocked their heads together, nearly face to face, and the alarms wailed around them, and the station groaned—a deep, structural sound, the truss flexing as thermal gradients shifted unevenly across the hull—and the fans whined at frequencies they weren't rated for, and the lights flickered and died one by one, and they waited.

They waited for a *long* time.

And then.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 14:02 | MET +10:44 Dosimetry: 1296 mGy/hr (declining)

Crew on station: 2

It was… going… down? *Down*? Shane stared at it through the gap in the shelter for ten minutes before he let himself believe the curve had turned as the flood crested and began to recede.

Twelve hundred and fifty. Twelve hundred and ten. Eleven eighty.

"*Ilya*."

"I see it, Shane."

They watched the numbers fall together, Shane's head against Ilya's shoulder, Ilya's chin hooked over Shane's collarbone. The corridor panel refreshed. Refreshed again. Each new number smaller than the last, and Shane felt Ilya's arms loosen by a fraction around his middle—not letting go, not even close, but the tendons in his forearms releasing from their locked position as if his body was reading the display and responding before his brain could translate the digits.

Eleven hundred. Nine hundred. Eight twelve. Seven forty.

The highest-pitched alarm cut off first when the dose rate dropped below its trigger. The second followed. The third—the cumulative dose alarm, the career-limit warble that Shane felt in his ribs—kept sounding, because that number was a ratchet. It didn't go back down. It was carved into their bones now, written in every cell that had absorbed a photon or a proton or a secondary particle over the last five hours, and it would stay there, a permanent entry in the biological ledger that no repair could erase.

Six hundred. Four eighty. Three hundred and ten.

Two hundred. One sixty. One eighteen.

Thankfully, the fans stabilized as the power bus recovered, and even more thankfully, various systems rebooted and started to come back online. The WRS pump restarted with a shudder and a climbing whine that settled back into its old familiar hum. The station was coming back to itself around them, system by system, like blood returning to a limb that had been slept on—pins and needles first, then warmth, then function.

But still they didn't move out from the gap. The decline was slow, and it was too risky to move even with the declining values.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 16:30 | MET +13:12 Dosimetry: 118 mGy/hr (declining)

Somewhere along the way he'd stopped shaking, or Shane had stopped noticing it, which might not have been the same thing, and what remained was a heaviness in his limbs that felt like the aftermath of a fever, the body announcing that it had survived and now intended to be very, *very* tired about it.

"Shane." Ilya's lips moved against his ear. "My hand. I need it."

"Oh." Shane looked down. His fingers had gone white, the fingers interlaced with Ilya's own, the knuckles bloodless, the tendons standing out like cables. The skin on either side of his grip was dark with trapped circulation.

"Sorry." He loosened his hold. Couldn't quite let go. "Sorry, I—"

"Do not apologize. I need it to check the dosimeter. I need to know the number. Let me—"

They disentangled in the narrow shelter, a graceless negotiation of limbs in microgravity—Shane's elbow catching a water bag and sending it bobbing against its tether, Ilya's knee finding the WRS housing with a hollow thud that made him hiss through his teeth. Ilya fished his personal dosimeter from the breast pocket of his flight suit and angled the display toward the amber strip light, squinting through the sweat that had dried on his lashes in a fine, salty crust.

He read the number. His eyebrows climbed. He handed the dosimeter to Shane without speaking.

Shane read it. Then he pulled his own from his waistband and read that.

The numbers were high. The flight surgeons in Houston would go gray when they saw the cumulative totals, and there would be medical reviews and career conversations that neither of them was going to enjoy. But… the numbers were below the acute threshold—*well* below it.

Below the acute threshold meant they wouldn't die this week. Or in a month. Or a year. It did not mean they wouldn't die of this *ever*, but... it would be long enough that it would be hard to tell in their old age if it was radiation cancer or bad luck cancer. It was a grey area instead of binary, and the distinction was the kind of math Shane had built his life on: incremental, probabilistic, a slow curve you couldn't see the shape of until you'd already traveled it. He was learning to live on curves instead of lines.

All those bladders and stacked water and scrap had done what Shane's calculations predicted: shielded them. Most of the proton bullets had hit the hydrogen nuclei and scattered and lost energy and the dose that reached them behind the shelter had been a fraction—a *survivable* fraction—of what the corridor panel had displayed.

Shane sat with that for a long time, the dosimeter in his hand, the number on the screen blurring. His eyes were wet. He blinked and the wetness spilled and he let it, because who

was going to see—Ilya, who had already seen him panicking and hard and terrified and begging—and what was left to protect?

Ilya took the dosimeter out of his hand and Velcroed both of them to the WRS rack. Then he got his ruined hands under Shane's arms and turned him.

The shelter was too small for this. Shane's knees hit the rack housing and Ilya's elbow caught a water bag strap and the whole arrangement they'd built shifted and creaked and neither of them stopped. Ilya pulled Shane against him front-to-front, chest-to-chest, his swollen fingers hooking into the back of Shane's collar, and Shane's arms went around Ilya's ribs and locked there. He pressed his face into the side of Ilya's neck where the skin was damp and sweat-sour from hours of sweat and fear and the thermal undergarment's collar had rubbed a red line into the tendon. The gold cross dug into Shane's cheekbone. He didn't move off it.

"We're alive," Shane said, into Ilya's neck, and his voice broke on alive the way it hadn't broken on a single command or status report or plea in the last eight hours, because the word was too simple for what it meant and his throat couldn't hold it.

Ilya's hand came up to the back of Shane's head. His fingers—still bruised and tender from gripping ratchets and handrails, though the worst of the stiffness had faded during their hours in the shelter—pushed into Shane's hair and held on, and Shane felt Ilya's breathing go ragged against him, the broad chest hitching in a way that was either a laugh or a sob or both.

"*Da*," Ilya said, rough. "Alive. Good. Very inconvenient for Houston because now expensive rescue mission, but good."

Shane laughed—wet, ugly, cracking—and pulled back far enough to see Ilya's face. His eyes were red-rimmed and bright and his lashes were wet and the crooked grin was trying to assemble itself and failing, the muscles pulling in wrong directions, and Shane grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him.

It was graceless and hard and tasted like recycled air and the inside of someone's mouth after eight hours of dehydration, and Shane didn't care. Ilya made a sound against his lips—a punched-out exhale, startled, as if after everything they'd done in the cupola this was the thing that surprised him—and then his swollen hands were on Shane's face and he was kissing back with his whole mouth, wet and desperate and alive, teeth catching Shane's lower lip, tongue pushing in, the kind of kiss that had no technique and no restraint and existed for no reason except to confirm that the other person was still warm and breathing and here. Shane's tears were on both their faces now. He could taste them when Ilya's mouth slid sideways and came back, and Ilya's thumb was wiping Shane's cheek and smearing the wet around instead of clearing it and laughing into Shane's mouth while he did it.

They held each other behind the water tanks, legs tangled, the station humming its mechanical hum around them, and Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's and breathed and breathed and breathed.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 17:00 | MET +13:42 Dosimetry: 81 mGy/hr (declining)

The S-band was still, unfortunately, dead.

Gone, really. The signal processor fried, having taken the worst of the storm, and the link that had been dropping packets and swallowing Houston's words during the initial SPE now reduced to inert silicon. A proton strike to the wrong transistor at the wrong moment, a latchup that had burned through the component before the watchdog timer could cycle a reset, because the watchdog timer itself was corrupted—another casualty, another flipped bit in a cascade of flipped bits that the storm had driven through the station's electronics like a hailstorm through a greenhouse. The hardline between modules still worked (copper wire didn't care about radiation) but the link to the ground, the satellite relay that connected them to Houston and Houston to the world, was a piece of fried silicon in a junction box in Node 1.

Now the storm had passed, the flux was dropping toward the background, and they had time.

Even if the first fix didn't work.

Shane found the obvious failure quickly enough: a fuse in the Node 1 junction box, blackened and split down the middle like a burned matchstick. Canada built robots for space, not communications hardware; Shane knew the Canadarm interface panel better than he knew the inside of this junction rack.

He replaced it from the maintenance kit and re-energized the circuit.

It blew again immediately.

"Something's still shorted," Shane called down the corridor.

"Obviously," Ilya answered from the Russian segment, voice echoing through the open hatches. If this had been a Russian relay unit, Ilya would already have half the casing off and the wiring diagram memorized from training. Cosmonauts trained to repair systems with their hands when computers stopped cooperating; Ilya moved through the relay panel like the wiring diagram lived in his muscles. "Your fuse did not commit suicide."

They shut the line down again and started tracing the path in both directions. Shane worked outward through the USOS relay rack while Ilya opened the Russian-side signal conditioning panel. The station smelled faintly of hot dust and machine oil and recycled air.

Then Ilya went still.

"Ah," he said, with the quiet satisfaction of a man who had just located the problem.

"What?"

"Capacitor," Ilya said. "On the conditioning board. Ceramic package is cracked. Burned through during the storm."

"You can see that already?"

“I can smell it.”

When he pulled the panel the faint char of cooked ceramic drifted out into the filtered air, subtle but unmistakable.

They isolated the board, bypassed the shorted line, and Shane replaced the fuse a second time —this one the last spare in the maintenance kit.

They worked from opposite ends of the signal path and met in the middle, calling back and forth through the station, Ilya’s running commentary on American electrical engineering echoing down the corridor in a way that would have driven Shane to distraction three days ago and now landed in his ears like music; specific, grounding, *alive.*

“American components, Russian Components,” Ilya grumbled to no one in particular, smacking at a panel with his palm, “all made in fucking Taiwan!”

And… since they were alive, once this was fixed and online, everyone else was going to find out that they hadn’t died and about Ilya. Eventually.

Everyone was going to find out about Ilya eventually, because Ilya had the discretion of a car alarm and would probably announce it on the S-band the moment comms were restored. Shane added *manage Rozanov’s understanding of operational security regarding our sexual relationship* to his mental task list and immediately recognized it as the least achievable objective he had ever set.

He paused, thinking.

Did he even want it to be a secret? Why would he?

When Shane threw the switch and the S-band link re-established, Houston’s voice flooded the speakers mid-sentence, as if they’d been broadcasting the entire time the line was dead— which they had been, Shane knew.

Flight controllers almost never stopped transmitting during a comm loss; someone on the ground would have been talking the entire time, just in case the line came back… so they’d been talking into the static for hours, running models and contingencies for a crew they couldn’t reach, not knowing if anyone remained to hear them.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 17:40 | MET +14:22 Dosimetry: 78 mGy/hr (declining)

Crew on station: 2

“*—Station, Houston on S-band, how do you read?*”

Shane keyed the mic. His hand was steady. “Houston, Station. Commander Hollander. We read you loud and clear, thank God. Two crew on board, both conscious, both ambulatory. Ilya and I sheltered behind an improvised water barrier in Node 3 during the CME passage and… and cumulative dose is *elevated* but I think we’re well below the acute syndrome threshold. Um. We—I think we’re going to be fine.”

“Station systems are recovering. We are—” He looked at Ilya, who was floating beside the comms panel, hands folded across his chest and a grin pulling at one corner of his mouth, the lazy, crooked, insufferable grin that showed every one of those unnaturally white teeth.

We. Another small, *huge*, word.

“We are operational.”

Ground control to Major Tom. Your circuit’s live.

Someone in Mission Control whooped—loud, unprofessional, the mic catching it before whoever was running the loop could cut the feed—and Shane’s hand came up to cover his mouth because he was laughing, suddenly and stupidly, his eyes stinging all over again.

He wondered what Houston’s telemetry had looked like from their end — twelve hours of flatlined comms, two crew biosignals, and then Shane’s calm, CSA-approved baritone reporting that they were “operational.” Somewhere in that control room, a flight surgeon was staring at their cumulative dose readings and aging visibly. And honestly, Shane was too, just a little, because knew what the follow-up calls would look like. Blood draws within hours of retrieval. Lymphocyte counts at twelve, twenty-four, forty-eight hours — the body’s own damage report, written in white cells. Long-term monitoring protocols that would outlast his career and possibly his—

He shelved it. The bottomless drawer could hold *new* problems for now.

The next hour was procedures. Status reports relayed to the ground, system checks read off panel by panel, medical telemetry from their biometric monitors that the flight surgeons picked apart in real time—heart rate, blood oxygen, core temperature, all the numbers that told the story of two bodies that had spent five hours absorbing ionizing radiation in a shelter made of recycled water and engineering desperation. The Aurora was safe. Hayden had brought the capsule to a lower orbit and all four crew were unharmed, dosimetry nominal, systems green. A rendezvous trajectory was being computed.

ETA to docking: fourteen hours.

Shane signed off the last status report and floated back from the comms panel. The station was reassembling itself around them—overheads returning to full brightness as the solar arrays reacquired tracking and the power bus leveled out, fans running at their normal speed, the thermal regulators smoothing the temperature swings that had built up during the hours of degraded operation. The mechanical heartbeat of a structure that had been engineered to take exactly this kind of punishment, shaking it off the way a deep-keeled ship shakes off a swell.

Ilya drifted in closer. Since the spacewalk, he’d changed his flight suit—the one he’d worn under the EVA suit was soaked through with sweat and spotted with rust-brown smears from his hands—and had wrapped his knuckles in strips of medical tape from the first aid kit, white gauze wound clumsily over the split skin. The green tennis ball was in his right hand.

He tossed it. The catch was ugly, Ilya’s taped fingers closing a beat late, the ball skidding off his palm and wobbling wide before he snatched it back with his other hand. He tossed it

again. The rhythm was there but the hands weren't. Each *thock* landing wrong, the ball compressing against gauze instead of skin, and Shane could see the way Ilya's grip recalibrated on every catch, the swollen knuckles refusing to curl all the way around the felt. It didn't matter. The sound still burrowed into Shane's skull the way it had for months and lived there like a second pulse.

"So," Ilya said. He tossed the ball and let it float, spinning slowly between them in the recycled air. "Fourteen hours."

"Fourteen hours."

"Cameras?"

Shane checked the panel. The internal monitoring system was still offline; the CCD sensors fried by proton hits during the CME, low priority on Houston's repair list compared to life support and navigation.

"Down still," Shane said.

"Hmm." Ilya plucked the ball out of the air. Held it between two taped fingers, index and middle, the green felt dark against the white gauze, and then, with a slow flick of his wrist, tossed it to Shane.

Catch.

And Shane did, and the foam compressed under his fingers, warm from Ilya's hand, the felt worn soft in the places where Ilya's thumb had rubbed it so often the fuzz was all but gone.

Funny how much he had hated this stupid ball, the annoying *thock thock thock* of it against walls and racks and the back of his headrest, a pulsar's signal, he realized now, regular and persistent and emanating from a collapsed core, a dead star's heartbeat still keeping time long after the explosion that created it. Ilya had been pulsing this signal through the station for seven months, and Shane had registered it as interference when it had been a beacon.

Maybe even a promise because the ball and the story and the fetch and the *come back, come home* of it had always been Ilya throwing, Ilya retrieving, Ilya orbiting. And now Shane held it, and understood: every throw was a question—*will you come back?*—and every catch was an answer, and Ilya had been asking the station walls for seven months because he couldn't ask Shane, and Shane had been covering his ears because he was afraid the answer was *yes*.

So Shane looked up and met his eyes, smiling softly and then… threw it back.

A clean arc, easy, the ball spinning once between them before Ilya's hand closed on it, and Shane watched his fingers tighten on the felt, watched his throat work on a swallow.

And so they lived, and so now they were here, playing fetch between the stars.

"Has it destroyed you, *otlichnik*?" Ilya asked, tossing it again. "Now that we are on the other side?"

Catch.

He caught it again, both the ball and the question beneath what was being asked. The first time had been before death, over vodka, in a conversation between two men who thought they were going to die. And now… this time there was a tomorrow, and Shane was standing in it. Alive.

Irradiated and wrecked and fundamentally rearranged, but *alive*.

"No," he said, throwing the ball back again. And then, because it was Ilya and because lying to Ilya had stopped being possible somewhere around the second pull of Stolichnaya and had never resumed: "But you have all this time until the crew gets back. But I'm feeling generous and I want a *break* from being Commander, so you could try to finish the job if you'd like. I remember promising you more if you played fetch nicely."

Fourteen hours with no cameras, no comms monitoring, no crew, and no mission control. From an operational standpoint, the ISS was currently the most unsupervised government asset in human history.

Fun. Shane was going to make the most of it.

Ilya's whole face cracked open as he grabbed for the ball… and missed, the taped fingers spasming short of a full close, the ball bouncing off his knuckles and spinning away. He caught it on the second try with both hands, clumsy, *furious* about being clumsy, his grin gone so wide that his eyes crinkled at the corners, and the laugh that escaped him was a single, wrecked *bark.*

"*Da*," he said, velcroing the ball. Ilya pushed off the wall and drifted closer, floating across the module on a trajectory aimed to stop exactly where Shane was floating, his taped hands catching the grab rail on either side of Shane's hips.

"Always with the orders, Commander. *Fetch this. Carry that. Finish the job.*" His grin sharpened and it was all canines, the one that matched the danger in his eyes, the one Shane had spent seven months reading wrong. "You know I am not a good dog, Shane. I have never once done what you told me."

He leaned in, mouth stopping a centimeter from Shane's. "But for you I will *come when called*."

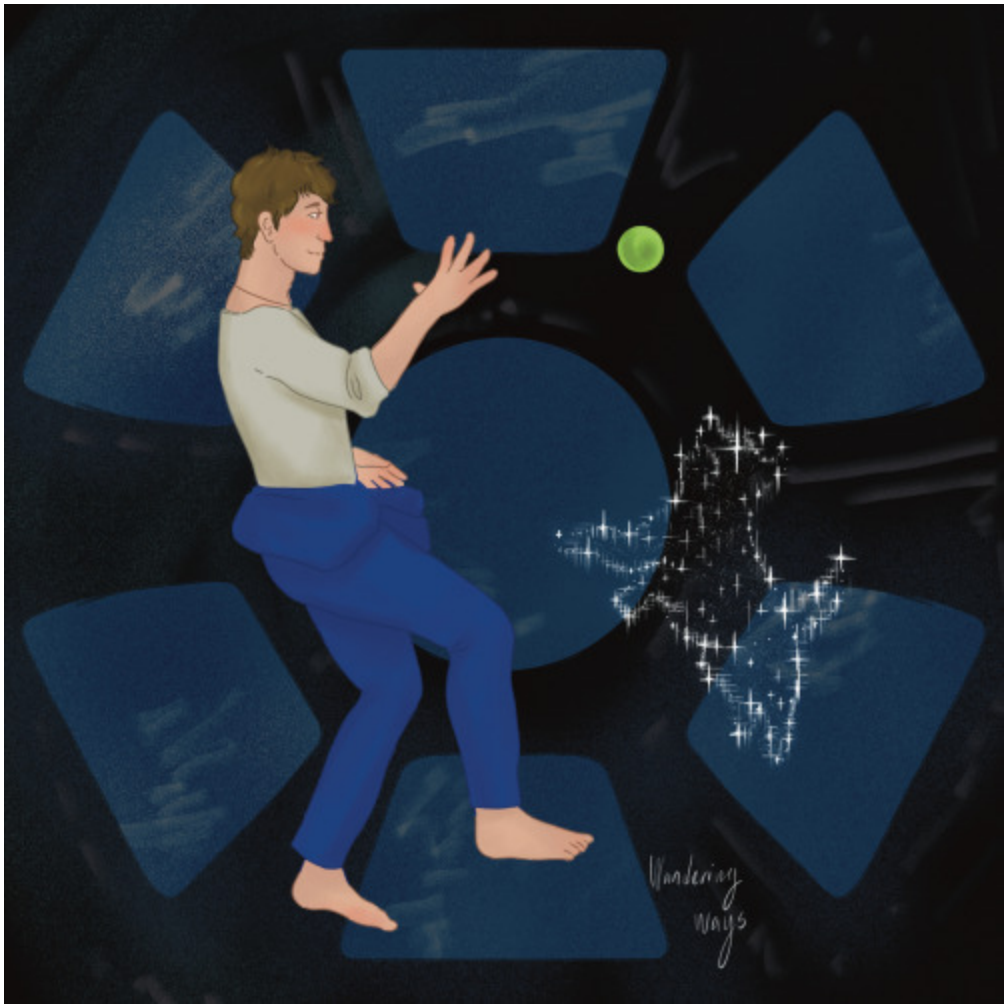
Laughing, Shane hooked a finger through Ilya's zipper pull and tugged him the rest of the way in for a kiss, and the station carried them eastward at seventeen thousand miles an hour, and the orbit had already begun its long curve back, and neither of them felt the fall.

ISS Expedition 78 | Emergency Log | UTC 18:00 | MET +14:42 Dosimetry: 52 mGy/hr (declining)

Crew on station: 2

Chapter End Notes

And... tah-dah, there is Art! by The Witch of the Wandering Ways!



End Notes

Bsky | Tumblr | My Hollanov fics on AO3

My continued thank yous to Aphantastic for beta'ing this beast of a work, to popularghost, and to the very kind friends and engineers I begged to proofread my Cosmonaut Hollanov smut as I bent the laws of physics to my will. There are a few movie, TV, and even a Wolfbird reference in this fic for eagle-eyed readers.

To Roscosmos, the CSA, and NASA… if you are reading this, hi. I am so sorry you're reading this. Big fan of your work.

To "everyone" on this blue marble and the few currently orbiting us up above: *Love you to the moon, back, and out towards the stars again.*

*Note that this work was originally writen as a HUGE oneshot! I am uploading it in 3 chapters for readability. Also, **no, this does not affect or change Wolfbird's update schedule. Y'all just gotta let me write fun things here and there for mental vacations along the way. I will be deleting comments 'reminding' me to go back to Wolfbird.**

Reference

1. "Space Oddity" (Chris Hadfield Cover) - YouTube

2. International Space Station (ISS) Overview: Official NASA documentation regarding the station's role as a microgravity laboratory. - NASA

3. Environmental Control and Life Support Systems (ECLSS) - NASA Reference

4. NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center (SWPC) - NOAA SWPC (The real-world data source for tracking proton flux and solar activity, used to model the "wall of magnetized plasma" and the rising dosimetry readings)

5. "The Sad, Sad Story of Laika, the Space Dog, and Her One-Way Trip Into Orbit" - Smithsonian Magazine

6. The Carrington Event - Wikipedia (A historical record of the most intense geomagnetic storm on record!)

8. And also "Major Tom" (Shiny Toy Guns) in which Major Tom is *alive! And coming home!* - YouTube

9. Want more tunes? I made a playlist here with various tunes. Track 3, Трава у дома (Grass by the Home) - (Земляне) Earthlings (1982), actually has some neat space history to it too.

> The song was so loved by the astronauts that it became their unofficial anthem. For a long time, "Grass by the Home" performed by "Earthlings" sounds invariably before each launch of the spacecraft, when the crew leaves the hotel to the bus which then takes them to the launch site of the cosmodrome.

In 2009, by the decision of Roscosmos, the song was given the official public status of “Anthem of the Russian Cosmonautics”.

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🌌 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🚀 “Commander Hollander to ground control”
- 🥎 “Sure. Me and the dog.”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”

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