

The Void That Comforts

The emptiness of space is briefly filled with terror and screams as I frantically grasp for the tether that disguises itself as my last hope. The line goes limp in my hands and flails in the open emptiness as distance builds between the space station. I look back at the station and see the only friend I made on this expedition, Ivan. Ivan grasps the leg of a ladder as he watches me float hopelessly.

Pulling my wrist up to my visor, I'm stunned by the blaring red warning that occupies my communications screen. The beeping I once was not aware of fills my helmet. Every attempt to make radio contact is hopeless, and every scream is left unheard. Eventually, the space station is out of sight, and with every rotation I make, Earth seems to further itself from me, as if I am being exiled from the only place I call home. My gaze locks onto my wrist; the bright red light shines onto my face as I gradually raise my arm. I stare at it, not willing to attempt another round of blood-curdling screams. The light provides me the only comfort available in the void, and the reflections in my visor seem to reflect a different face every time I look up. No longer did I scream.

The anguish of those I love fills my helmet, and the cries of my wife and my children manifest around me, and in what seemed like hours, they finally end. The reflections dissipate, and I am left looking in a mirror. The scared man in front of me breathed heavily. He gasps for air as tears and mucus run down his face and into his beard. His blonde hair seemed to darken as his hair began to soak with sweat, and deep red cracks filled the surface of his ocean blue eyes. My gaze fades back to my wrist in a futile attempt to nullify my mind, and the watch I was given by Ivan read 11:35 AM. Only forty minutes ago, we were safe and sound in the station. Sadly, time is the least of my concerns. My mind returns to the past as memories flood my thoughts.

The three days before the initial launch were the most nerve racking. Waking up to my beloved wife Zofia, wondering when I will see her last.

"How long are you going to be gone?" Zofia, my beautiful wife whispered, parting hair from her eyes as she spoke.

"I am not sure, honey. But I assure you I will be back soon," I said as I pulled back the covers and shut off the alarm.

There was not much time for goodbyes. My strict schedule stated to be at the gates of the space agency at 5 AM exactly. Hurriedly, I dressed and approached the garage, I never was one to abide by a schedule, but this time was an exception.

"ID please," said the weary but awake security guard.

I looked around, and despite being here many times before, everything always seemed new to me; as I pulled forward into the complex, the giant monument that stated the authority of the building read, "Polish National Space Agency, Built-in 2023." This place sealed my fate, and I knew it. Walking through the empty lobby and gazing upon the airplanes and space shuttles hanging blissfully above me, I could not help but shudder at the thought of being in one.

The debriefing room was brightly lit, and a hologram with my mission details was portrayed in a deep red font. I was assigned to expose the Chinese Lunar Mining Expedition. They found large deposits of helium-3. A mineral capable of ending the energy crisis plaguing our world.

"BEEP BEEEEP," the monitor strapped to my wrist blared loudly, awakening me as it warned of critically low oxygen levels.

I did not bother to acknowledge the warning. I realize my impending doom as it becomes harder to breathe, and the stars seem to wrap me in cosmic dust. The purple dust and stars dissolve my suit until my naked body is all that remains. The cosmic dust consumes the skin on my body and replaces my cells with their perfect form. The cosmos dissolve my hands, and they embrace their new shape. The color of the cosmos paints over my once human body, and supernovas explode across the galaxy that inhabits me.

Lost in my trance I fail to acknowledge the figure that seems to manifest toward me and take the shape of a dog. One with the cosmos, just as I. It stops in front of me in what seems like feet but could be miles.

"Woof, woof woof," the dog barks at me, joyfully wagging its tail. Shedding stars and cosmic dust as it wags its tail. I gaze in awe and confusion as it stands before I.

A red collar hangs loosely from its neck. I kneel down and scoop it into my hands gently. "Laika," it reads. Laika gently bites my hand and gestures to follow her. We walk through the galaxy, shedding stars and entire solar systems. I do not question Laika or the current state of my body and mind. I accept it. Laika stops abruptly and nudges her head toward the place I once called home. Millions of lights scatter the dark side of the Earth. The shock of this sight stuns me. Earth was never this bright when I used to inhabit it.

"Lots has changed since you have been gone," Laika calmly said. There is no room to be surprised anymore. The talking dog is merely the least of my worries.

"When did all of this become possible?" I whisper, overwhelmed with sadness and joy.

"Well, it could not have been possible without you," Laika explains as she gestures towards the space station I was stationed in.

"You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both betrayed by our own people," Laika sadly tells me as we walk past the recently built space elevator.

"What do you mean betrayed? I never had any enemies," I attempt to clarify with Laika. She gestures to my watch, and I understand immediately.

"What about Zofia? Is she ok?" I anxiously ask Laika.

"She is fine. She resides in the home you two always dreamed of living in. Raising your children in your good image. Often looking at your constellations and stars provides great comfort. She feels your undying love every second of the day," Laika replies as she places a paw on my hand to comfort me.

I do not question Laika further. I sit next to Laika, accepting the cosmic dust as it comforts me. Letting it consume me as I wait...