

THE LONG IAPETAN NIGHT

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THE LONG IAPETAN NIGHT

Heaven welcomed me with the smell of disinfectant and a strange strumming tune. Funny; I never believed there was an afterlife, let alone like this. I was cold, beyond shivering. My body was made of stone, and my mind trapped in it. Or was this Hell?

The tune was odd, otherworldly. Rhythmic but disharmonious at times, and happy and sad at the same time.

Suddenly it stopped, and I heard footsteps.

"Welcome back, Lev," a sonorous voice said.

Only then did I manage to open my eyes. They stung, and all I saw at first were

blurry shapes, but then I focused on a broad face half-drowned in shadow. Its onyx eyes and bushy beard felt familiar.

I opened my mouth to speak, but only wheezed.

"Don't talk, rest," the bearded man said and laid a surprisingly gentle hand on my forehead. "You're up early, still thawing."

He must have detected the question in my eyes, because he added: "The shuttle has woken you, but the VR protocols were corrupted, so you can't enjoy sims while you're warming up. I can put up a projection that you can watch on the ceiling."

I was beginning to remember. *Atalanta*. The cold sleep. Our captain.

I managed to produce a few sounds, horribly distorted, but he understood. "The music?"

I blinked.

Then I closed my eyes again, as the strumming noise carried me back into blissful oblivion.

* * *

Six years and eight months. We'd been under longer than anyone had in the past century. Was it worth it?

I still felt stiff and slow when I shuffled through the empty corridor toward the common room. The bracelet around my left wrist indicated I was in good enough condition to make the journey and eat lightly, for the first time in years.

Only two people sat there: Captain Turushno Rayochi, and Doctor Altun Armatis.

"Good morning, Lev!" she said. Her voice was a loud firm contralto, which seemed strangely out of place here. I still felt like I was in a dream. Only when I took the first hesitant bite into a soft protein stick did I feel grounded in reality. The stick had almost no flavor, but to my taste buds, long unused to actual food, it resembled an explosion.

"How are the rest?" I croaked.

"Waking up. Everyone should be okay."

"Can I see . . . ?"

"The others? Oh—you mean the outside? Go to the porthole in corridor five," Altun suggested.

My whole body ached, but I dragged myself there with determination. I had to see. Not on a display, not in VR; I had to see with my own eyes what no one had seen for the past century.

I stopped with my face pressed against the thick fiberglass. My breath condensed on it, and I realized how cold I still felt. Yet it was nothing against the cold outside.

Everywhere I could see, darkness. The icy surface was almost pitch dark, too. We'd landed in the middle of Cassini Regio, within the Turgis Crater. All the ice was covered by dark dust. But I could still see the crater rim towering in the distance and the star-studded sky beyond it. It was night, and night it would remain for two dozen more Earth days. Outside, it would still be cold, dark . . . peaceful. It distantly reminded me of the long arctic winters in Bilibino. Beyond the town, there would have just been snow, hills, and sharp towering rocks.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I scarcely noticed the captain coming. I wondered what his dark eyes saw out there—did the gloomy land remind him of home, too? Most of us had come from the far north, if only because some of such settlements proved more resilient in the Big Plunge.

"It is," I said hoarsely.

"Come. We'll be complete soon. We should celebrate."

I slowly followed Captain Rayochi back. Iapetan low g was a soothing balsam to my cold, aching body.

"What about the other crews?" My voice was coming back to me; I no longer sounded

like a broken gramophone record.

“We’ve received a transmission from *Atalanta IV*. They are awakening. No news from Titan yet, but it may be too soon for that.”

I nodded, reassured. *Atalanta* had deposited two crewed modules on Titan, two here on Iapetus, and enough relay stations throughout the Saturnian system that we could contact each other or Earth most of the time. A fine second start for human presence out here.

In the common room, Altun was just examining our geoscientist, Tonraq Scott. The chief engineer, Bálint Veras, already clutched a cup of tea in his deathly pale hands. The last member of our crew, biochemist and environmental engineer Raisa Nalino-va, entered the room. She managed to produce a faint smile, though obviously still groggy and sore from the cold sleep.

We were all recovering slowly. Altun stated with satisfaction that no serious problems had occurred during our time under.

We ate dinner, our first meal together in the new world. After the long cold sleep, even the bland rice with dried vegetables tasted heavenly. Captain Rayochi surprised us by producing a plastic bottle filled with saké. Courtesy of knowing the right people and some huge leeway, or a part of the mass allowed for personal possessions? I didn’t ask, just gratefully accepted the cup. In the low Iapetan g, the liquid flowed in slow, almost languid motion.

The captain raised his cup, and the quiet hum of our combined voices faded.

I half-expected a speech about the vast expanse we’d overcome, and how the greatest challenges still lay ahead of us, but Turushno Rayochi was never one for speeches.

“Too long was the night of the world,” Rayochi spoke. His dreamy dark eyes stared not at the wall before him, but somewhere much farther, into the deep endless void out there. “It’s time we saw the day.”

It would be easy for me to dismiss his words as the musings of a sentimental older man. I didn’t live through as much of it as he had. His parents would have seen and remembered the coming of the night; mine were already born in its wake.

Rayochi reached for his tonkori and began strumming. The sound was as disquieting and unsettling as always. This time, the captain sang. His hoarse deep bass contrasted strangely with the high tunes and at the same time accompanied them perfectly. I didn’t understand the words. He sang in classical Ainu. But later, he told me that although the language was almost extinct, the song itself was new—younger than the captain. It spoke of the darkness that had surrounded the world; of the wars that ensued; of the hunger, and winter, and hatred. It gave them almost lifelike proportions, as if they were fickle deities playing with humanity’s fate. We were the heroes and villains for their amusement.

For me, this view of the Big Plunge was difficult to grasp. In my family, we never viewed it as . . . poetic, or even mythological, like it seemed from Rayochi’s songs and tales. It was merely an unfortunate natural disaster. It could have occurred at any time; it just did so in the late twenty-first century. There was nothing poetic about it, just much stupidity, lack of foresight, and bad decisions.

How little suffices to turn us into barbarians, I pondered.

A deadly cascade: A VEI-8 volcanic explosion in Campi Flegrei occurs. Naples and adjacent towns: destroyed. Other cities are devastated by quakes. In much of Europe, ash obscures the sky. A harsh winter follows. Crops die worldwide; famine, thirst, and diseases spark further conflicts. Millions die; millions flee; millions fight. Some states fall; some descend into totalitarian regimes; some are lucky and only their economy suffers.

Scarcely a year later, an extreme solar eruption sends us into the pre-satellite era, and in some regions, even into the pre-electricity era. Data is corrupted. Communications disruption results in more chaos. Crewed spaceflight is suspended; even if

there was any money for it, the infrastructure needs to be rebuilt.

The Moon colony struggles to survive; most citizens evacuate to Earth, destabilized as it is. The small Mars settlement falls into disarray. As to elsewhere . . . I recalled the ghostlike landscape outside. A century ago, people had been here. Then—they either died or tried to evacuate and met their deaths later. Nobody really knew.

Both the flare and volcano could have gone off at any time. The coincidence was tragic and somewhat ironic. It showed us the fragility of our civilization. And while Earth plunged into decay that would take decades to overcome, colonies and bases elsewhere faced extinction.

Suddenly, the melancholic song ended, and I was drawn back into the present.

Rayochi lay his tonkori aside and lifted a cup once again. "To our new world," he said simply.

"To our new world," we echoed.

* * *

This is truly a new world! I can barely comprehend it, but we're really here.

I can't wait to climb the great equatorial ridge. Thrice as high as Mt. Everest in some places, yet in the low g of Iapetus, the feat seems ridiculously easy. But on the other hand, it's not. Physical exertion is no issue—but iceslides are. Trigger one, and an avalanche of brittle ice can bury you in slow motion. Not to speak of the ever-present sticky black dust that adheres to solar panels, is next to impossible to get off of spacesuits, and sometimes slides beneath one's feet. But I'm confident we'll get used to this truly alien world.

Everyone else is excited, too. This isn't like the initial Jovian missions where people spent scarcely a year on Ganymede before going back to Mars. If all goes well, other bases will join ours, and there will be a permanent human presence around Saturn. I can still hardly believe I'm here.

Paula says this is a perfect opportunity to investigate the history of this peculiar walnut-shaped moon. I agree, but I see the true importance of our mission elsewhere. We're pushing the boundaries, saying that us humans remain better than AI in so many disciplines and that we'll go farther still!

I've managed to reconfigure our comm protocols so that we have more efficient communications with Endurance II near the Turgis Crater, and with the Earth, of course. I've also tasked one of my comm AIs to sim other ways to spare data. There are some things AI are better at—but we need to guide them!

I wish I could send a vid of this landscape to Mother. But the DSN 2.0 is still limited, and personal comm time will only come up in a week.

No matter. I'll have plenty more to tell home about by that time. We are really here, writing history!

* * *

Black-and-white patched ice was everywhere.

We couldn't see any trace of the station that was supposed to have been in the area, built over a century ago.

How could it have vanished?

"An iceslide might have buried it," Tonraq proposed. "It happens often on the slopes of the ridge."

"We'll see what the radar imaging returns," our captain added. "In the meantime, we know what to do."

My heartbeat quickened when I thought about that. Yes, we do. We are about to restore humanity's presence in the Solar System; give us back these strange new worlds.

At first we struggled to move on the sometimes slippery, sometimes sticky reddish and black dust covering the ice. The landscape began to take on a more nightmarish turn. I wondered how the first expedition a century before us had managed. Did they

have to scrape the dust off of every piece of machinery that even barely touched it, and take extreme caution with every step?

Despite this hurdle, we were able to map the area thoroughly. Stability seemed sufficient for commencing construction. We told the carrier platforms to place inflatable cupolas at given sites, and to assemble the Lego-like parts. I had a Lego set as a child: a cherished treasure, passed down for two generations. No one had made these little plastic bricks for over thirty years. They'd only begun manufacturing them once again shortly before our launch.

While Bálint and I mostly worked on the new habitat assembly with the help of the captain and Altun, Tonraq and Raisa took a rover each day and drove to study different nearby areas. The mystery of the Iapetan ridge was never fully solved; if the crews before us found the answers, they'd become lost in time, like dust in Saturn's rings.

As we got more used to avoiding the black dust, the new base grew over the next few days—and we uncovered more mysteries.

"Come have a look at what we've found," Tonraq's voice, distorted by the ever-present interplanetary hum, crackled on the comms just as I was attaching a new control panel to one of the prefabricated walls. It must have been something of great importance to warrant going off schedule. I checked the panel and entered the already habitable section.

It took a while before everyone was present. Captain Rayochi, perhaps anticipating something big, brought his tonkori.

Finally, Tonraq and Raisa brought their prize. It was a portable Raman, not unlike the ones our suits were equipped with.

"Is it . . ." I dared to interrupt the silence.

"Yes. From the *older ones*. Someone must have lost it on the ridge, perhaps when jumping or climbing the terrain. But that's not all. We checked if it was safe to bring it inside, both for the device and us, and . . . it's got data on it," Tonraq said. "For a century it has waited here, to tell us."

"Tell us what?" asked Bálint, as usual the most impatient of us.

"There might have been life."

Silence follows for a second, broken by several *whats* and *hows*. Iapetus is a dead world, frozen since early after its formation four and half billion years ago. How could there be traces of life? Perhaps in material from the Enceladan geysers? Enceladus was thought to be able to support life ever since the early twenty-first century, but we'd never gotten around to thoroughly testing it, not before the Big Plunge.

"Enceladan?" I offered, though it seemed there was little chance of enough material getting from one of Saturn's innermost moons to all the way out here.

Raisa shrugged. "Maybe. It would be a rare accident, but not impossible."

"What exactly is it? Something telltale, or indirect only?" Altun inquired practically.

"Isotopic anomalies—carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, silicon, sulfur . . . even some elements not known as biogenic on Earth or Enceladus. And something that looks like protein and nucleid acid fragments, even large intact pieces."

"Well, something like that couldn't have lasted long near the surface."

"That's right," Raisa nodded, her eyes shining. "But what if the sample was excavated from deeper below the ridge—an indigenous sample?"

"Can we tell where it came from?"

"Unfortunately, location data are compromised."

A collective sigh of disappointment.

"But it's a start. If the schedule allows, we should devote more time to investigating the deeper subsurface, especially around the ridge. There could be some more recent material closer to the surface, as . . ."

While the discussion continued around me, and Captain Rayochi even seemed to have forgotten about his musical instrument, I stared at the portable spectrometer as if it were an artifact of another civilization. In a way, it was. So we'd been here a century ago? The notion felt too unreal, too absurd—to travel across the vast interplanetary distances just to die miserably when the homeworld fell apart.

My stomach knotted with anxiety and hope that a better fate awaited us.

* * *

Just received news from Mission Control. Hard to believe. They say a megavolcano erupted in Italy . . . Volcanic winter is said to be setting in throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, but it's spreading. . . .

Bad news for crops and energy. And people. Disease outbreaks may follow, fueled by food shortages and failing infrastructure.

How can this be true? We have greenhouses. Green walls within cities. Nuclear power plants. Personalized medicine. We should be able to cope, right?

They say they'll continue to inform us. In the meantime, we should continue with our mission.

Paula is devastated. She has family in Naples and Rome. MC didn't mention them.

We're all struck by the news. Olga is right, we should stick to the schedule and work while we wait for further information. We meant to celebrate spending four years in this eerie place, but now no one is in the mood to celebrate anything. All the accomplishments, all the joy and hard work has gone sour.

We talk with Endurance II all the time. Bill, Derek, and Okoyo are optimistic; Marieke and Greg, on the other hand, think this is the beginning of a decline of civilization.

Look at previous large volcanic events, they say, and observe the rise and fall of empires. Think of the late Minoan civilization, or the Justinian plague, or the famine triggering the French Revolution.

I don't agree with their pessimism. We've had some VEI-6 events in the twentieth and our own century, even a VEI-7 in the year 1815, and survived them all quite intact! It's true that in some ways, we're more vulnerable due to our technology, but at the same time, it makes us stronger. This was allegedly a VEI-8 explosion, ten times stronger than Tambora in 1815, and Naples must have been completely wiped out. It's a terrible tragedy, but still . . . we must manage. We're all around the world, and the Moon and Mars, and now around Jupiter and Saturn, too. This simply cannot shatter our civilization as a whole.

Update: Greg sent us all some treatises on the fall of civilizations. What was he thinking? How could this be helpful to anyone at this time?

There is a big cloud spreading over Europe and farther, MC admits, and the cold spreads, too. There's a threat of acid rains. Worldwide crop failure is practically a certainty.

They tried to sound optimistic but weren't fooling anyone. Worst case scenario: we can expect no further help from Earth, no relief or supply missions in the foreseeable future. We either stretch our resources and innovation to survive here potentially for decades—or we embark on a journey home. The next launch window is in two years. We should know enough by then.

Derek suggests we develop both contingency scenarios and see which one is more viable. Most of us on Endurance I vote to test out the "leave" part, while the majority of Endurance II crew wants to test the "stay" plan. All the better this way. We'll test the in-situ fuel production efficiency for the journey home, while they try the long-term energy and food supply solutions. I still think it's madness to stay. It's bitter to abandon the dream of a future Iapetan colony, but better than to die here.

* * *

Captain Erenki's face was tense. Today's regular exchange of news between us—*Atalanta III*—and her *Atalanta IV* crew seemed to hold some surprises.

"A crater nearby seems to have been . . . modified. Smoothed, even polished, I'd say, and reshaped by the original crew," she announces.

The second module had landed nearly four hundred kilometers from us, north of Seville Mons, just where the leading and trailing hemispheres of Iapetus merged in a true mosaic of black and white ice. Unlike us, they had no problem finding the original base. The images they'd sent us were eerie: dark empty corridors coated with frost, long-dead instruments and computers, deserted bunks . . . no bodies, though. Did the crews escape? But where? And why didn't they take more from the base?

"We believe it was meant to serve as a solar collector, to concentrate the sun rays in the center. See for yourselves."

I looked at what truly had resembled a giant dish in disbelief. A solar collector—*here?* Where the sunlight falling upon us is a hundred times dimmer than on Earth, at times when it falls upon us at all and we're not plunged in the darkness of the long Iapetan night?

Only someone very desperate could have reached for this solution. They must have thought they were stranded here. Why? Had the Big Plunge occurred near the end of a launch window? I didn't remember the late twenty-first-century Saturn-Earth windows, but there was nothing easier than to look it up . . . and no. They had time. So did they . . . *decide to stay?* In that case, where was the rocket, or the bodies? Had they used one module, or two? I had no idea. Even their names and histories were lost to me. If anyone knew, the information wasn't readily available publicly. They were ghosts of the past.

Tonraq and Raisa seemed very interested in these past crews, especially their scientific knowledge. For me, they were just ghosts—but nonetheless I wished to see their world. I couldn't go back in time, but there was the abandoned station and its allure. And though I felt like no one else here, except maybe Rayochi, would see it that way, there was the second crew, and I found a kindred spirit in Valentina Shipka. Like me, she was very young for the mission, and like me, she could hardly imagine the pre-Plunge world. Her expertise was applied geophysics.

"The interest runs in the family," her somewhat hesitant, shy voice carried through the cabin. The comm capacity between *Atalanta III* and *IV* was limited, but we were allowed voice-only communications, provided they didn't coincide with important data transfers. "My grandma used geophysics to hunt for fossils—used the Geiger and radar images to find dinosaurs! My mother used it to hunt for oil reserves. And here I am. . . . When I was little, I imagined a career like Mom's, to help secure energy for the community. I'd never imagined I'd be probing alien ice."

Rayochi may have been a dreamer and a poet besides a pilot and data scientist, but he wasn't truly post-Plunge. He'd talked about the old world as if he'd known it, though he didn't. For us, it was history.

"Any news on the Raman data?" Valentina inquired.

"No. It's too early to get our own samples."

"Has it occurred to anyone that the samples might be from neither Enceladus or Iapetus?"

I'd already laid back in my bunk, my eyes closed, but this made me snap them back open. "What do you mean? Like Earth, or Mars? But such a transfer is so improbable . . ."

"No. I mean something far *more* improbable."

It took a second to sink in. "You mean from another star system? That really *is* improbable."

"But you can't tell from the fragments, can you?"

I had to admit she was right. Still, the likelihood was so impossibly low! That an asteroid or comet coming from another star would crash right here, carrying traces of very alien life . . . Or, as my imagination raced like always in those strange moments before going to sleep, perhaps it didn't crash. Perhaps it could have been a seeder pod. Or even a piloted ship!

No; that would be going too far. Perhaps it was better to change the subject. I asked about the first expedition's base.

"It gives me the creeps," Valentina confided. I imagined she was tucked in her bunk as well, just wishing to talk to someone before sleep. I vaguely pictured her face, but I'd grown familiar with the tone of her voice over just a few days. It was the unexpected cadence, the not-very-melodic rhythm of it. "I suppose . . . it would have been better if there were bodies. It's scarier without them. Like a stage prop, or a ruin left by some civilization too ancient for us to comprehend. I'm not even trying to imagine what had become of the first crews. But we're going to research it more thoroughly tomorrow. Maybe I'll see it differently then."

"I'll look forward to hearing about it."

I really was. But the *Atalanta IV* crew fell silent just a day later.

* * *

I don't know how we managed to hold on. It's been exactly a year since the Campi Flegrei explosion and almost a month from the last time MC messaged. We don't know the reason for their silence, but it's not hard to guess. Twenty-seven days ago, the Sun erupted with a strength unprecedented in modern history.

It must have fried all satellites in the inner system, perhaps as far as the belt. Ours were affected, too, but survived with only some loss of data. On Earth, even with its magnetic field, lots of ground-based infrastructure must have been destroyed. But mission control had backups, shielded sites, contingency plans! They must contact us soon, for sure, to tell us to return home, with a supply ship rendezvous en route, or that we have to at least make it to Mars.

They couldn't just leave us, could they?

Greg says that even if individual people from MC wanted to help us, the overall conditions may not allow them to. Loss of infrastructure—and social upheaval, he stresses. What if mobile networks are down? Navigation? Transport? Half the bare necessities of modern human life?

I'm beginning to hate that guy. He always sees the worst in a situation and tries to sell us his goddamn defeatism! I refuse to give up like him.

The conundrum remains: Should we produce fuel to get us home, or try to survive in this icy wasteland?

Suddenly, the black-and-white mosaic outside doesn't seem eerily fascinating, like a fairytale landscape. It's ominous. We may be imprisoned here unless we act fast and launch in the coming window. We're just entering the porkchop, we still have time. . .

We spend a long evening discussing it, and then another and another.

MC remains silent. That, perhaps, tips the scales.

In the end, we decide to leave. Although the Earth seems to be in shambles, it still has everything to support life—and civilization. The uncertainty of the world that awaits us is preferable to the certainty of this cold prison. With the new fuel production units all running, we should have enough fuel to get us back to Earth the slow, Hohmann way by the end of next month.

Finally, we're going home.

Update: No, no, no! How could this happen? Can we really be imprisoned here?

An iceslide buried the main fuel production field yesterday. It came out of nowhere, triggered seemingly by nothing: an avalanche of a hundred tons of ice hurtling down the slope of the crater. It should have been stable there—not like next to the ridge!

In any case, we can't make this launch window. Twelve more goddamn years in this frozen hell!

The Endurance II crew doesn't seem too devastated, especially Greg.

I wonder . . . what if we shouldn't ask what triggered the slide, but rather who?

* * *

"Almost there."

Bálint spoke, perhaps to assure himself rather than us. Altun and I sat behind him in the rover. I could see Altun's profile through her suit's visor, and the doctor looked as calm as ever.

I doubt I did. Certainly I didn't feel calm. There was no explanation for the sudden silence.

The base our colleagues had been building rose from the horizon. It looked just like ours, made from identical prefabricated sets. But behind it stood something else, half-buried in the ice but unmistakable.

Our predecessors' station.

"*Atalanta IV*, this is the rover *Beotia*. Do you copy?"

There was no answer to Bálint's hail.

Nor did anyone reply on the suits' emergency frequency.

A shiver went down my spine as we came to a halt near the main airlock.

"Looks undamaged," Bálint announced.

"Their main rover is parked outside, backup should be in the storage unit." Altun's voice sounded level and measured. "Someone ought to be inside, if not everyone. Can you open it?"

As if on cue, Bálint finished the manual override, and the airlock opened. We stepped in, not bothering to strip the suits or take down our helmets, though the environment seemed safe by all possible readings.

"The inner comms system is working," I said. "I'll announce our presence."

I did so—but the others ought to have known about our arrival already. Yet no one came to meet us.

"Let's go through. Someone must be here."

I felt bad when we split up, yet there was no danger for us here. It wasn't reasonable to feel that anxious. It was just unfounded, unnecessary fear, I tried to convince myself. But as I walked through the seemingly empty base, my worries only grew.

Everything looked perfectly normal. Perhaps that was the worst part. Normal . . . but deserted.

The common room: a game of *go* laid out on the table; a half-empty water pouch lay next to it; and—

I nearly jumped when I felt a vibration through the floor. But it was just Altun, stepping in. "No one in the bunks."

"Nor here, or the science section."

We returned to the airlock. Bálint was already there, with the same news as us, adding: "I tried the antenna. It's working. I spoke to Rayochi."

"Right. So they must be either in the module, or the original base, unable to hail us."

I had no idea how Altun could still sound so calm. We were talking about six people, missing! The protocol stated clearly that at least one member of the crew should remain on the base at all times, unless evacuation was mandated. But if they evacuated for any reason, why not contact us?

"Lev, come with me to the old base. Altun, you take the module. Check-up on comms every five minutes," Bálint decided.

I followed him reluctantly into the dust-coated icy plain. Barely a hundred meters from the new station stood the old one. I could feel the ice, hardened by radiation and

temperatures of minus 180 centigrade, crackling beneath our feet as we approached the dead place.

Nothing to worry about. Nothing to scare me. I had seen the images from inside—it's just empty. . . .

Nothing to be afraid of in empty places.

"This is where they went in."

Bálint directed us to what must have been an airlock. Though no air remained within the base, it seemed prudent to enter through it and not destroy one of the walls. Who knew—the space might still be useful in the future, if only as cold storage.

"You were in contact with them about this place's exploration, right? Did they say anything before the silence?" I tried to sound as level-headed as Altun before.

"They wanted to revive some of the old tech they'd found—computers, lights . . . The things are said to have been made to work even in vacuum, so they just raised their temperature a bit."

"Right."

We arrived at an intersection. "I'll go left, you go right," Bálint said. Almost at the same time, Altun's voice crackled: "Altun here. Trouble getting into the module. Working on it, will keep you posted."

My helmet's flashlight shone into the pitch-dark corridor, reflecting from the thick layers of frost coating all surfaces. The atmosphere. The frost must be nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide . . . I could imagine it condensing on the cold metal and carbon as the heating gave out, forming a fine mist and then slowly collapsing entirely, just like the governments, economies, and food chains collapsing back home.

"Bálint here. Nothing so far."

"Altun here. Almost got it, will go inside."

I tried the closest door, but it wouldn't move. It must have been frozen in place for decades. But as I took a turn, I saw another, pried open. They must have melted the frost to force it open.

The light cone illuminated a space that must have been a common room with a kitchen before. A table surrounded by chairs still stood in the middle of it, coated with remnants of the air the people had once breathed here. I wouldn't have been surprised at seeing the outlines of plates and water pouches beneath the frost, but I could see no such thing, and grateful for it.

I went on. But the next two doors were completely frozen shut.

"Altun here. I'm inside the module. I think someone's in the cryo pod storage."

I also announced myself.

Silence followed.

"Bálint?" I said then. There was no response. "Bálint, do you copy?"

Nothing. A chill went down my spine. A message on my HUD warned me that my heart rate and breathing had spiked, and that my sweat composition suggested beginning dehydration.

"Find him, but first finish the sweep," Altun said. "The others must be somewhere!"

"Yes." My throat really was dry. I forced myself to take a sip from the suit's water pouch.

Come on. Walk faster. This is just a long-ago abandoned base, everything is frozen. . . .

Another turn. More collapsed atmosphere cracking beneath my feet. The flashlight shone at what resembled the previous section. Untouched, governed by the all-consuming cold. But at second glance, one could notice faint traces of recent activity in the frost. Perhaps the crew had started with reviving this section. But—

I stopped.

Was it just my imagination playing tricks on me?

Then I felt the slight vibration again.

A microquake? Or . . . did someone move somewhere near?

“Bálint?” I said on the comms.

No reply.

I took a careful step forward and stopped again.

The ground quivered.

I activated the suit’s seismic detectors. Perhaps they could lead me to the source. It appeared to be further from the corridor. I touched the left wall lightly, but didn’t feel anything. The right one, though . . .

The slightest hint of a tremor. I walked on, feeling the wall and glancing at the seismometer results on my HUD. While walking, the data was far too noisy, but I could still perceive the tiny changes. The frost evaporated at my touch, though the gloves were barely warmer than the surroundings.

The light fell upon a door. Closed at first sight, but bare of the otherwise everpresent frost at the edges. When I looked more closely, I saw that it was open the barest gap, as if someone wanted to close it, but it had stuck.

And they were still inside.

“Bálint?” I spoke again, quietly despite the fact that no one not on the comms could possibly hear me. “Altun . . . ?”

Nothing.

Must just be interference. I’ll hear them soon, for sure . . .

Cautiously, I jammed a screwdriver from my utility belt into the gap and tried to pry the door open. It gave way smoother than I’d expected, and the momentum nearly threw me against the opposite wall in the Iapetan low g.

I gasped. But something else caught my attention.

The light briefly reflected off what had seemed like a helmet, half-concealed behind a lab table. I would have flinched at the sight had my suit allowed such a movement.

Breathe. It must be one of the crew, and they’d need my help.

The room evidently had been a lab. Shelves laden with instruments lined the walls . . . and behind a heavy lab table huddled a suited figure. I approached carefully.

“This is Lev Anishin, *Atalanta IV*. Are you all right?” I said on a shared frequency.

The suit should have pinged mine, I should have already seen the identity on my HUD, but there was nothing. Trying to ignore the prickling of my skin that was probably fear, I leaned closer.

The inside of the helmet was lightly coated with moisture, some of it frozen in a fine pattern, but I could still see the familiar face. Its eyes were closed, and skin perhaps too pale.

“Lev here, I have a crew member in need of medical attention. Anyone? Respond.”

There was only silence.

I examined the second suit visually and connected to it old-school, via cable. Most systems were working, air recycler, too, if barely, but the inner temperature regulation had probably malfunctioned. I tried rebooting it manually. It caught on immediately, to my great relief, although its comms remained off. The health monitor said that the suit’s owner, Valentina Shipka, had sustained no injuries and only displayed signs of exhaustion, dehydration, and hypothermia. Nothing that couldn’t be fixed.

Another vibration, this time next to me. I froze.

Only now did I notice that Valentina’s hand moved slightly, holding a drill. As she touched the button, the device whirred, sending tremors through the floor. Then her grip on the on button relaxed again.

Moving. Awake.

I collected my wits and pressed the visor of my helmet against hers. "Valentina, can you open your eyes? Can you speak?"

Her eyes flicked open faster than I'd expected. "Y-yes."

"It's me, Lev. How are you feeling?"

"Cold . . ."

"It's gonna be better soon. Tell me what happened."

"This place . . . it tried to kill us!" I could hear her teeth clattering. "We m-must go!"

She tried standing up, but she was still weak, and the suit's reaction times were only returning to baseline. I stopped her gently. "We're going, don't worry. But we have to wait a minute. Calm down. In the meantime, please tell me exactly what happened here."

"They went inside, but the comms crashed. . . . We followed, and this place . . . it attacked."

"Attacked? How?" I tried to sound casual. It was probably just mild shock and hypothermia. Valentina still seemed somewhat confused. Once she recovered, she would make sense.

"Let's go, then," I said when she didn't respond, my visor still against hers. "Your comms don't work. If you want to say something to me, tap my visor."

I recalled a layout of the old base on my HUD. It seemed we were closer to the rear airlock, and it would enable us to see more of the base on the way out; perhaps even find the others. Where else could they be?

Valentina stood up with the help of her suit's servos. I beckoned her to follow.

I wanted to appear calm, but sweat ran down my brow despite the under-suit absorbent cap. It stung my eyes. Recyclers announced that my CO₂ was spiking. The suit advised mild emotion stabilizers and attention sharpeners. I discarded the suggestion for now, and instead focused on my thoughts and breathing. Deep, calm breaths, and rational thoughts. No matter how scary the long-dead place might have been, it was just that—a place. With no reason, no malice, no agenda. A thing. Now, a thing could be dangerous—the structural stability might be degraded, faulty electronics that would melt the moment they came online might lurk there—but not intentionally. Not by mounting an *attack*.

Behind the next corner, faint light appeared; not a reflection from the headlight. Could some fluorescent panels have reactivated due to the current crew's activity?

Instinctively, I increased my pace. Suddenly, Valentina grabbed my shoulder and tapped my visor urgently.

"Not here!" Her voice, carried through our helmets, sounded panicky.

"Calm down," I said. "This is the shortest route to the airlock."

"No, it killed them!"

Valentina was increasingly upset. The suit should have given her something soothing, but the med system was evidently malfunctioning, too. The sooner we were out of there, the better.

"I'll go first, and you'll see that nothing happens to me, all right?" I suggested.

Perhaps I managed to sound confident enough, because Valentina nodded hesitantly. I set off again. She followed some ten feet behind me, slowly, reluctantly.

A panel shone on a wall in front of us. The frost around it was completely gone.

In the darkness behind it, a large shape could be made out on the floor. I shone my LED there.

A suit.

I walked toward it faster . . .

A blinding flash. The adaptive visor wasn't fast enough to react. The display became a jumbled mess of blurred shapes. A long artificial wail sounded in my speakers, hurting my ears.

I glimpsed something moving in the corridor.

Quivers.

Then—total darkness.

I wanted to take a step ahead, but the suddenly rigid joints of the suit prevented me from doing so.

Calm down. No panic.

I realized that the disturbing sound I was hearing now belonged to my own ragged breath and a tinnitus in my ears. I gulped and spoke: “Lev here. Anyone hear me?”

All of a sudden, with no warning, another visor was pressed to mine. But then I heard Valentina’s voice: “I hope I’ve broken it. Are you all right?”

“I thought so.” The display of my HUD was dark, unresponsive. The flashlight remained dead, too. We were plunged in complete darkness. “What was that?”

“It tried to kill you.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“Try to move. I’ll get out of your way.”

Before I could respond, Valentina was suddenly gone, and I was still drowning in darkness.

I strained against the rigid joints of my suit, and thanks to my strength built by having lived on Earth, I managed to step forward in the moon’s meager gravity. Then another step. At first, I stomped down so hard that I flew up for a moment. Sole magnetization was evidently offline as well. How much time did I have until something vital gave way?

I fumbled for the emergency controls on my left sleeve. By touch, I found the life support control. To my great relief, it was intact, and a small display on the sleeve immediately showed that the systems were in perfect health. Then I tried the comms. My backup antenna was working, but couldn’t pick up anything. Next item on the list was emergency lights.

I reflexively took a step back. In the sudden dim light, I could see a suited figure lying on the floor right in front of me. At first sight, it was clear that they were beyond help. The visor was cracked and beyond frost, dark blots that must have been blood covered the inner surface.

Valentina turned and saw it, too. I couldn’t see her face or hear her, but she took a quick step back.

I touched her visor, compelling her to turn back toward me. “I know the way out. Come.”

I was glad that we couldn’t see the dead person’s face through the debris. Hollow shock replaced terror. I focused all of my mental capacity on getting out. Just one more turn, another corridor, and then the airlock. No more lights ahead. No activity. I only perceived the vibrations caused by Valentina’s and my own steps.

Just a few minutes until we reached freedom—and then we’d need to find out what happened to the others. My throat constricted, not because of fear for myself, but for them.

Finally, I saw the airlock door. I increased my pace, though every step was a strain.

The manual opening was tough, but with Valentina’s help, I shifted the door aside.

I exhaled and stepped in—

Something rammed into me. I couldn’t take a breath; I didn’t even have time to cry out.

I was pinned between the heavy door and the wall, almost unable to move. Breathing was hard. The massive metallic door was pressing against my chest. I couldn’t move my right arm at all, the left one only from the elbow down. If it weren’t for the resilient suit, the door would have crushed me. All safeties must have been turned off a long time ago, but the doors shouldn’t have been capable of so much pressure.

This place is trying to kill us.

For a moment, I succumbed to my panic. But it couldn't have been more than a second. Then I tried to press against the door, and felt that Valentina was attempting the same.

I fumbled around what I could reach on my utility belt with my left hand, but only the laser cutter was within my reach. Useless here.

Block the door, I wanted to say to Valentina, but didn't have a way to do so. She must have thought of it too, though. Did she have any tools of use?

A strained breath. Pain. My gaze flew to the corner of the airlock. Another figure leaned against the wall there. At the same time, I realized there were droplets of blood on the inside of my visor. Had I bumped my head? Was that figure even real?

The pressure suddenly subsided. Valentina?

In that instant of opportunity, I managed to squeeze myself inside the airlock. I almost twisted with pain, but paradoxically, the rigid joints kept me up.

The door—Valentina!

I reached for a heavy spanner on my belt, rammed it into the door's mechanism and strained.

The gap remained wide enough for Valentina to squeeze through. For a second, I was reminded of the very beginning of human spaceflight and Alexei Leonov, who had to vent air from his suit in order to get back into his ship after the historically first spacewalk. Ship . . . more like a can in orbit.

I stumbled toward the figure in the corner. Behind its visor, also stained with blood, I could make out Captain Erenki's features. She was conscious, if barely. I started suit diagnostics and looked back at Valentina. She was busy trying to open the outer door. I held a desperate hope that it wouldn't be blocked because the inner door remained open. All those safety systems must have died so long ago . . .

As if on cue, a gap opened, and behind it light.

This time, we tested by a few careful movements that the door would let us through safely, and then each of us took Captain Erenki under one shoulder, and we went.

We stumbled outside, onto a patch of dark ice, but starlight and the diffused light reflected off Saturn made the grim landscape look so unbelievably bright that I had to blink. The droplets of blood inside my visor were frighteningly dark.

I heard the crackling in the comms I so longed for.

"Lev here," I rasped. "Do you copy?"

"Bálint here, I copy. Are you all right, Lev? I couldn't reach you. I found Timur—dead."

The sudden relief of hearing my friend's voice almost suffocated me. "I—I'm alive. Valentina and Captain Erenki are with me. Both with damaged suits, Erenki injured, her suit failing fast."

"If you can, go toward the module. I'll meet you on the way."

A second voice joined then: "Altun here. Dashmir is with me. He's in shock, incoherent, but not injured. Come here, I'll prepare the surgery. Report the captain's state to me."

The landscape in front of me blurred, and I realized it was my tears of relief.

I suppressed a fit of hysterical laughter and trod on.

* * *

Damn. Damn! I can't just sit here and watch our chance to leave vanish. It's nerve-racking to see us losing the porkchop day by day. . . . We could still make it!

We won't produce enough fuel to carry all of us home, but we could leave Endurance II to their foolish dream of staying, jettison the extra sleeper pods and other dead weight, and we might make it to Mars. The colony wasn't totally self-sufficient the last time we checked, but there must be tech and resources to help us get back to Earth

eventually.

I want to see home.

It's too grim and silent here without Paula. Who knew she was so deep in despair that she'd take a nitrogen tank and hook it to her suit? At least it was quick and painless. However—who's next? If we stay, there will be more who select this option, I'm sure of it. But the others say we either all go, or all stay. And since we can't possibly all go . . .

So instead of racking up the remaining fuel production, we've been building a solar collector out of a crater, scrambling on this nightmarish dusted ice half a day, day after day! Ridiculous. With the amount of sunlight this far out-system, it will never give us enough power!

We've also built another greenhouse and additional chlorella tanks. So this is how we're supposed to live out our lives here? Living on meager portions of modded chlorella with barely enough energy, fighting the nature of this place, and hoping on unforeseen disaster kills us at any given moment?

Update: An unforeseen disaster! Oh, how fitting!

The new greenhouse lost power, backup too, and everything inside died before we could save it. We're on severely limited rations for at least the next three weeks.

Greg says it's been sabotaged. He has the nerve to say that!

Even if he's right, we have no way of finding out who did it.

I try to convince Olga and Derek to leave. If the others get into their sleeper pods here, they should be able to survive, so this option still remains for them if they find staying awake unsustainable. This is our best chance at living.

I think Derek may be on my side, but Olga isn't.

Doesn't she see she's condemning us to death?

* * *

We sat in the common room of *Atalanta IV's* base. No one spoke for a moment. Only after a lengthy pause, Captain Rayochi on the screen said: "Do you require our assistance? We could spare one more crew member for some time."

"If we can keep Bálint and Lev until this situation is resolved, it should suffice—if you can spare two engineers," Captain Erenki said starkly. Her trenchant manners contrasted with Turushno Rayochi's always soothing composure. The death of part of her crew made the lines carved in her face even more prominent, and her voice fiercer.

"We'll be able to cope for a week, at least. The main hab is ready, and we can keep using the module. But what's more important—do you have any idea what happened in the old station?"

Erenki's face grew darker. Perhaps she thought that Rayochi was questioning her judgment, even though I was fairly sure my captain meant no such thing.

"We're fabbing more robots to go in as we speak. No crew is allowed there until we find out what has caused the incident."

Killed two of my crew, she left unsaid.

Luckily, Altun was able to stitch Erenki together quickly. Dashmir and Valentina were back on their feet even faster, neither having sustained any serious injury. The remaining two were beyond help.

The survivors' accounts were desperately inconsistent, even after the shock had passed. We'd all concluded that they described a series of terrible accidents. Technical failures we'd been insufficiently prepared for. We wouldn't make that mistake again.

But an irrational suspicion that it was no mere accident gnawed in a dark corner of my mind. It felt like actions of something with agency, a *plan*. It was crazy—yet I couldn't avoid thinking that each of us had the same suspicion.

Trying in vain to fall asleep that night, I listened to a recording Raisa and Tonraq had sent about their continuing quest to find past life on Iapetus. Apparently, it

would take a long while—many years, perhaps—before they could say anything conclusive, but they hypothesized that for a short time after its formation, Iapetus might have harbored an inner ocean, just like Enceladus has to this day. On some of the icy moons, life had arisen, and might have been transferred to the others by the intense exchange of material. Though impactors could hardly hurl rocks from the surface of the moons, like on the terrestrial planets, they could have ejected a lot of small ice particles or triggered geyser activity, so life or proto-life could have moved within the system, at least before Iapetus froze completely and acquired its peculiar walnut shape, which still needed a thoroughly tested explanation. . . .

Hearing this recording had a strangely calming effect on me. There was something much bigger than any of us; the knowledge, the science we could do, and also the unimaginably vast history of the place we'd now claimed as our new home. We were nothing but specks of dust. Nothing we did really mattered, except in advancing humankind's collective knowledge by another incremental step.

I was almost lulled to sleep by these thoughts when my comms beeped. Someone was trying to contact me.

"Lev here," I mumbled sleepily.

"This is Valentina. I . . . I wanted to talk to you about this mission."

"What specifically?" I kept my eyes shut, sliding into a dream-like if still awake state.

"I'm afraid this isn't the . . . beginning of human expansion toward Saturn and beyond." Her voice had the same hesitant, not-quite-rhythmic quality as always. "What if it's a futile attempt we're going to die in? For nothing."

I shuddered. "I'm sorry . . . after what's happened in the base, I understand. But we're going to find out what caused the disaster and prevent anything like that from happening in the future."

"There is no future for us," she said in a low voice, barely audible, and then the connection ended.

I considered calling her back, but her gloomy message left me without anything to say. It only called back the specters of the old station. However I tried to rationalize it, whatever good explanation I tried to come up with, I ended up empty-handed. It didn't make sense. The deaths had no meaning, no apparent logical cause. But most of all, the things we'd seen—

A persistent thought insinuated its way into my mind.

Valentina was right. The place was trying to kill us.

* * *

Who knew that Olga would be next? She seemed so stable and determined. But I guess this place gets to us eventually. It's so dark, cold, and isolated.

We've been left alone with Derek. He's beside himself with fear. What's worse, he's been neglecting his duties on the station. I'm having a hard time doing everything myself, especially since I've been trying to restart the fuel production. I'm spending most of my awake time suited, outside surrounded with that horrendous black dust coating every tiniest bit of surface that needs to be left intact, but I have to manage. The optimal window is gone, but perhaps we don't have to wait twelve more years. I ran some simulations and we could use a Jupiter flyby route. It takes longer, but the years don't matter as much if we're frozen. The main point is, it saves fuel.

The mass ratio is still not ideal, though. It could safely carry only one pod; two would be stretching it.

Only one. Is it even worth contemplating? I wanted to leave, yes, but not at the price of leaving everyone else stranded here.

Update: In a moment of weakness, I confided in Derek. But I made the chances with two pods seem greater. He believed me, didn't even want to check the sims.

Will we try to get rid of the excess mass and resupply fuel?

The others would probably notice soon. The ship is closer to our base, but still . . . is it worth trying?

The uncertainty terrifies me. I might soon end up like Derek, paralyzed by it all.

Update: My god, what have I done?

Of course Derek didn't believe me. He must have found some will inside him and run his own sims—and realized the truth and what it meant.

I still don't know whether I'd have been able to leave, to betray everyone like that. He tried.

He dosed me and instructed the med unit to keep me under for two days. He loaded all supplies for the off-chance of waking up in-flight—meds, instruments, food, robots—and drove to the ship. I have no idea how he managed to offload the excess weight and prepare for launch so fast. I had expected it to take at least twice as much time with two people working on it.

He must have skipped many pre-flight checks, acting in a hurry, perhaps driven by fear that the second crew would arrive before he could launch.

They saw the explosion. I was still asleep.

We don't have a ship anymore. Few items were saved from the wreckage, and only one working pod remains. This base was stripped of most necessary supplies. The rest of course suggested immediately that I move in with them, and I hardly have any other option. But all of our chances of survival have now decreased. We could have survived in the ship for some time if both bases became nonfunctional; not anymore. We're perhaps facing decades in here—decades of surviving on modded bacteria, algae, and artificial meat, confined in a fragile can amid the endless icy plains more than a billion kilometers away from home.

Would anyone ever come for us? Is there anyone on Earth still thinking of us?

Is there anything we could still call a technological civilization?

What happened is my fault, much more the effect of mine rather than Derek's fear. What now?

Only one thing remains: try to survive. Try to atone for all my failures . . . although one life is too short for that.

* * *

I watched Captain Erenki's face closely: her grim eyes, lines carved in the skin of her face like a relief in wood, and the downcast corners of her mouth. Only Bálint and I sat across from her.

"I'll cut right to the chase." Her voice was firm, but still I thought I'd heard traces of fear, even . . . panic? "The events on the old base cannot be explained by malfunctions. One, of course. Two deaths and several injuries and damaged suits, hardly."

My throat felt dry. With the corner of my eye, I caught Bálint's gaze. The chief engineer was just as glum as me, but didn't seem very surprised.

"How would you explain them, then?" I asked, immediately scolding myself for the tremor in my voice.

"Sabotage. There is a murderer among my crew."

I froze.

"All the survivors, myself included of course, are under suspicion," she continued evenly. "Since you two arrived later on, it couldn't have been your doing."

"Why would anyone do that? They'd be lowering their own chances of survival," Bálint objected.

"You're trying to find a logical reason. What if there is none?"

"That is a possibility. We can let you all undergo a psychiatric examination. Altun is back on *Atalanta III*, but she can do it remotely. We can make sure no one tampers with the med unit."

Erenki nodded. "I agree. If you allow, I'll go first. Contact Doctor Armatis and call me to the infirmary once you've established connection."

We were supposed to build infrastructure for future human habitation, to spread civilization all the way to Saturn—and we could be stopped by *murders*? Was Valentina right that we were doomed to fail?

Valentina . . . three survivors; one of them possibly a murderer. But surely not her!

The examinations were conducted under the pretext of testing for PTSD and other potential aftereffects of the tragedy. None of the survivors manifested any signs of severe mental illness. Shock, stress, mild depression—yes. But no psychoses. No one reacted to stimuli associated with death, murder, and violence outside the norm.

Could one of the two dead have planned the sabotage and fallen victim to his own traps, or let himself be killed? If not, then who?

I shivered at the thought of the missing bodies of the original crew. But surely no one could have survived, even assisted by cold sleep, to this day? Or . . . they couldn't have had *children*, could they? That would have been madness! To doom a child to die alone in this wasteland—certainly no person with a scrap of compassion would do something so horrendous.

Captain Erenki seemed unsatisfied by the results, but there was nothing else to do. Robotic explorers were sent into the base to perform more diagnostics, but so far we lacked reliable data.

Couldn't it have been a series of accidents? I held onto that desperate hope. The thought that we were living in close quarters with a murderer was too paralyzing.

Erenki looked like a caged lion. I preferred to stay out of her way and work on the remaining repairs with Bálint. But later she found me herself. Her expression boded nothing good.

"Tell me, Lev, does Captain Rayochi have ambitions?"

The question took me completely by surprise. "Ambitions . . . That's not a word I'd associate with him. With none of us, to be frank, apart from the ambition to help humanity move forward."

"Hmm," Erenki snarled. My answer apparently wasn't satisfactory. "What about rules, procedures? Is he the type to stick to them?"

"Well, mostly yes, like all of us, but not fanatically. . . ." I was beginning to feel very nervous about the direction of this conversation. Could it be that she feared that Rayochi considered her incompetent and would try to relieve her of command? Or that he suspected sabotage on her part? That he would use us against her? But why would she come to me?

It was a relief when the questions that felt too much like an interrogation had stopped. Something had been off about it. About every single thing that had happened since our sister base had fallen silent.

I was still thinking about it when I laid down on my bunk, exhausted, but too worked up to sleep. My mind raced, full of images of how the original expedition might have perished and whether the same end didn't await us. The collapse of a civilization, small-scale version. I wondered how members of Scott's infamous Antarctic expedition felt when it became painfully clear that they hadn't succeeded in their race and most of them, if not all, would pay with their lives? On the wind-beaten icy plain, with no hope of outside help, no supplies, driven purely by the urge to survive, after they had tried to push the boundaries of human presence a step further.

I was about to take a sleeping pill when the comms beeped.

"Valentina?" I spoke, surprised.

"Lev . . . I need to tell you something." I heard her take an abrupt breath. "Look, I may be the youngest crew member and not understand some things outside my own field, but I'm not naive enough to think that something didn't try to murder us in

there. That place was trying to kill us, and I bet the captain has considered the option that it was one of us. If she's right, no one is safe here. You and Bálint should take a rover and return to your base. Convince the others that you all need to leave. *Atalanta* remains in Titan's orbit, you can get there with the module. Then it's up to you whether you want to join the Titan crews . . . or take the ship and return to Earth."

I was speechless. To run? Leave the mission? Betray everyone who depended on us?

Somehow, I imagined Valentina with a deeply sad smile when she continued: "I'm not asking you to take me with you. You can trust neither me, nor the captain, nor Dashmir. But save yourselves at least. Please."

Finally, I found my voice. "No. You must be wrong. There has to be another explanation. It might have been accidents. Or . . ." I recalled my earlier thoughts about the original crew. No; that was too far outside the realm of the possible.

"Or what? Mysterious aliens, leaving some biosignatures behind and then trying to murder us just for fun? Come to your senses. It must have been a human. Someone who's still here. *Leave.*"

"We can't!"

"You must." The urgency in her voice made me shiver. "You need to go. Otherwise all of us will die here for no reason. Trust me, Lev."

The worst part is that I did.

* * *

I was outside doing solar panel maintenance when it happened. A small impact, triggering an icelike. One large enough to bury the base. I didn't know until I came back and saw . . . only dirty ice wasteland where our home had been.

I wanted to help, but I knew it was pointless. Radar showed the base was shattered. Before I could get to my friends they'd be long dead, even if the event itself hadn't killed them outright.

I was the last one.

Besides resigning myself to death I had only one option. I drove to the second base and got a part of it operational. It could sustain me for a few years if I were lucky.

Not more.

I could die here like the others. Perhaps I should. But I didn't want to.

I couldn't stop thinking about the one cryo unit we'd managed to salvage. It was worth excavating. I wasted two drills on it. In the end, I dug manually, drenched in sweat in my suit, and I thought about whether I shouldn't die anyway. Why go to so much trouble to save my sorry life? As if I deserved to live.

I'm the last one, so I can confess now. I sabotaged the greenhouse.

I made a huge mistake that may have cost everyone else their lives, and there wasn't a day later in my life when I wouldn't regret my action.

Why do something so . . . ill-considered and unprofessional would be too weak to describe it.

Our world was falling apart, our families and friends on Earth might be dying, off-world colonies in mortal peril, and we were here, isolated on a dark, cold world. We were trained to cope with that, but not with the end of the world. I was scared to death.

I was absolutely convinced that we were going to die here, unless we got off Iapetus as soon as possible. I became terrified of the icy desert all around. I was barely able to work outside.

When an icelike destroyed the fuel manufacturing unit, I was sure it had been someone else's work, not an accident. I grew paranoid. I tried to act normal for fear that anyone could have been the saboteur. Some people wanted to remain, didn't they?

I decided I'd make them want to leave.

I don't know if anyone but Greg suspected foul play when the greenhouse was wrecked. If they did, it didn't show—but perhaps they just pretended, like me.

Looking back, I knew I was wrong. I needed help. I became a slave of my anxiety and paranoia. I should have sought medical help, and instead, I doomed all of us. It only takes one to shatter a functional crew. I was the bad apple. I was the traitor. I sentenced us to death. I will never forgive myself. I kept my secret for all those years, while wishing that someone would find out, that I'd be punished and it would be painful. I would have walked unsuited into an airlock if they told me to.

But no one discovered the truth. I wanted to atone, but the best way was to pretend and help others.

No more pretense. I'm alone, I'm the one who deserved to die, but I've lived.

And I don't want to die.

I will try to repair the cryo unit, even if it takes years, and I'll put my fate in its hands. Either it keeps me alive until someone arrives in the future, or I die in there.

There's just one thing I want to say, and I could repeat it over and over again, but it won't be enough. It never will.

I'm sorry.

* * *

There was still plenty of work at the base, and that was perhaps the only anchor keeping me sane. I tried not to think about Valentina's plea, or the paranoia in Captain Erenki's eyes when she was inquiring about Rayochi, or the strange look on Dashmir's face sometimes. I almost jumped when my comm beeped again. This time, though, it was Captain Rayochi.

"We're making do, but the crew morale is low," I admitted when he asked the expected question. "Everyone is scared. It . . . feels strange here."

"What about Captain Erenki?"

My stomach knotted. It must have been a routine question; I should have expected it, too. . . .

"Does she seem fully in control—of the mission, but mostly, herself—to you?"

"Yes," I said, but Rayochi must have noticed the slight hesitation.

"I had a very strange conversation with her today. I'm afraid that she might do something ill-considered. Leave the mission, for instance."

"No, certainly not that! She's under a lot of pressure here, but she would never!"

I gulped. I couldn't avoid thinking of Valentina's words the previous day . . . and of the fact that they'd nearly convinced me.

Rayochi's voice remained as calm and soothing as ever. "More experienced people have succumbed to less pressure. This place has a strange effect on one's mind. The perpetual ice, isolation, and close quarters. Perhaps it would help if each of us found their own cleansing ritual of sorts, to find oneself. . . ."

I was in no mood for Rayochi's stories and superstitions. They had no place here! Not here, not now. Had I remained the only rational person on the moon?

Excusing myself for necessary repairs, I ended the transmission. But as soon as the welcome silence fell, it was interrupted by footsteps, the characteristic *click-click* of the lightly magnetized soles making walking in the meager local gravity easier for us.

Valentina Shipka strode through the corridor. She nodded to me, but didn't even slow down—but I had to ask.

"Valentina, wait, please. Did you seriously mean it when you suggested that Bálint and I leave you? Because I hope that's not the only solution."

She stared at me, first in incomprehension, then almost angrily. "*What?* First you try to persuade me to spy on my own crewmates, and now this nonsense?"

I opened my mouth, but before I could figure out what to say, Valentina turned and quickly walked in the direction of Captain Erenki's cabin.

Spying on her crewmates? What the hell was she talking about?

The encounter only confirmed to me that waiting would resolve nothing—and nor would running. If we could find answers anywhere, it would be at the old base. The robotic explorers remained stubbornly silent, though. Something was wrong with the place, but turning our backs on it wasn't an option.

When I presented my plan to Bálint, he looked at me as if I'd gone mad. "Have you forgotten what happened to us there the last time?"

"I don't like it either, but we have to go back and find the answers."

"Or inadvertently destroy evidence left behind by the saboteur," he objected darkly. "It's madness."

Madness . . . that threatened to engulf us if we didn't get our answers soon.

"Bálint, something very strange is happening. Erenki is nervous and keeps asking me about Rayochi. He, on the other hand, seemed to be thinking of this as some . . . predestined failure. Valentina doesn't remember our conversation from last night, but hints at something I never said at all. Something's off, whether we leave the base or not. We have to go back."

Bálint wrinkled his brow.

"All right," he said finally. "It didn't escape me that we're in trouble no matter what. But this time, let's prepare for an unfriendly welcome, just in case."

* * *

Extra oxygen tanks. Toolboxes. Reserve flashlights. Repair foams. I felt as if we were preparing to enter a battle zone. I didn't feel prepared at all.

We agreed to start in the section where I found the injured Erenki and the dead crewmember, not far from the lab where the terrified Valentina had retreated. If something out of this base set off the incidents, not one of us, it was focused around there.

We were already en route when Captain Erenki's voice, ordering us to turn back immediately, sounded on the comms. Neither of us slowed down.

This time, the airlock door couldn't catch me by surprise. We jammed it more thoroughly than the last time with Valentina, and went in.

How to describe the station? It felt too unreal, too insane to be true. Perhaps that was why I felt so little fear. It was like being a distant observer projected into my body: a mere telemetry operator, quickly thrashing one of our explorer bots that attacked Bálint; disconnecting a panel that threatened to emit an EM pulse and damage our suits; walking on and on into the heart of the base. The space felt alive, though it had been dead for nearly a century.

Bálint and I never split up, so that we made the discovery together.

It took us a longer than expected to get through the safeties of one cabin. And when we finally did, the door didn't move. Something heavy was blocking it from the inside. We had to torch through an adjacent wall.

But inside the otherwise bare room stood what we'd been searching for: a lone sleeper pod. Could the base have been . . . protecting it somehow? Why?

It contained a frozen body, long past any hope of reawakening, but also data: unencrypted private logs of the crewman. The data was barely corrupted at all. So now we listen. . . .

* * *

Seen Greg, I'm sure of it!

He came back to haunt me. Must have survived the ice somehow, or turned into something...

This place is full of horrors. But it won't get to me, no, I'll stay sane no matter what!

I must be careful, though. He's out to get me, to destroy my chance of survival, to

wreck the pod!

Hah, if I'd known I'd be working on the sleeper pod for nearly three years, I would have killed myself! So much time, alone, trying to keep everything working, alone but for the ghosts on the black ice.

Update: I think they tried to put something in my chlorella. I stopped eating it a week ago. I'm not feeling all that well, but it must be their doing, I'm sure I'll get better before I go to sleep. The pod is nearly ready. Just a few more days, I think.

I can use that time to stop the nightmares. Greg, Paula, Olga . . . They must not reach me when I'm defenseless. But I can rig the station: kill them, or if they can't be killed, make them turn on each other.

I'll make damn sure no one comes to get me while I'm asleep.

* * *

We listen, startled, disbelieving, horrified.

While the Earth had very nearly plunged in the Dark Ages, our own darkness had played out a tragedy here. Avoidable; unnecessary; nearly ridiculous. One that eventually killed everyone then, and two of us. One that we nearly succumbed to, even if separated by a century of progress.

After listening through all of it, Bálint, Dashmir, and I examined the station systems more in-depth. Now that we knew what to look for, we were able to spot and erase the traps. There were many, but the most ingenious and terrifying was the simple AI that listened to our transmissions, analyzed the content and learned to mimic us. It had talked to me as Valentina; to Valentina as me; to Erenki as Rayochi . . . and made sure we'd be left in the dark and turn on each other. Feed people false information, and you can become their puppeteer, even if "you" are an AI with no awareness and general intelligence to speak of.

Just a few days, and we were reasonably sure there were no more such traps. We finally summoned up the courage to step into the base again. It resembles a ghost town; but the specters have been cast out. Now it's just a memorial to the tragedy that happened here.

Still, two people are dead.

We hold a service for them, and decide to bury them in the ice. That's where the original crew was buried, and we don't have many other options. Raisa and Tonraq say it won't compromise the search for the possible long-extinct life, and I want to believe them.

The schedule slowly returns to normal. Hopefully, so will we.

I stand at the edge of the Turgis Crater, out for a routine maintenance of our new seismic network. To make sure we don't succumb to ice slides as easily as they did.

From my position, I overlook the vast expanse of the bright Roncevaux Terra glimmering in the new sunlight. After a month spent in darkness, we finally see light.

We keep telling ourselves that we're wiser now. We have solved the mystery; persisted; managed to build a base for others to occupy later. We don't know if and when they'll come. Dispatches from Earth say to hold the fort; that a multitude of missions are being prepared, and that we're entering a new and bright era.

Too long was the night of the world, the captain had said after our awakening. *It's time we saw the day.*

I blink in the light of the distant Sun shining through the filigreed beauty of Saturn's rings. Behind them, as a tiny bluish dot, I spot the Earth; so very distant and fragile. I hope the captain was right. Yet it seems naïve to me now, too simple.

Another disaster—and what would happen? Another plunge, another collapse. More terror and paranoia. The one from a century ago nearly shattered us. We can tell ourselves stories of reason and bravery, but we're not immune to fear, the same fear that haunted our ancestors in dark caves.

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We can see the Sun now, but this is still most certainly a world of darkness. And as long as we carry the darkness within, there always comes night after the day.

Author's note: *The story was published in Czech in 2018 (subsequently winning the Aeronutilus Award for the best short story); it was never published in English.*