

TWO WORLDS.
ONE CHOICE.
NO PERFECT ANSWER.

AN
O D Y S S E Y
— IN —
S P A C E
—
F A L L A C Y
—
J. S H I K H A



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Arrival Fallacy

I woke up with the same brittle staccato voice in the back of my head. There are days like this when I wake up clammy and panicky; as if my head is under a salty sea, doused in a brine of my sweat rather than the concentrated water. I can't breathe, quite literally. I look around the room, the red light flickers in its cold obstinacy, glinting off the grey surfaces. I try to absorb the light in, as if doing so would help me recover my breathing fits again. It's been eight months on this expedition and I'm the only one who still acts crazed whenever an alarm goes off or when a fellow crew dies.

Today the voice in my head lacks patience; "it's not worth it, it's not even worth it and you know it. All your life you've been running after something as if it lay into a fast forward, ahead of you, transmitting its wake for your ambitious embrace. But the fact stays that the thing has been left

behind, far behind, and its shallow outline shall forever haunt you.”

A willingness doesn't always convert into an execution of plans. The panic palpitates through my bones, my heart hammers an excruciating pulse, I sit up with a start, my eyes flooding with tears as I break into involuntary sobs and gasps.

Focus. Focus. I repeat to myself. But I can't, the voice in my head fades to a whisper, its vicious effect still lingering. I try to describe the things around me, the smell, the colours, the sounds; just like my therapist taught me. What a stupid way for diversion. The gravity free space is just an expansion of inner void as if lumbering into an emotional osmosis. I can't smell anything. The only colours that are a constant visual palette are ceramic blue, silver, red, green and a neon yellow. I look at the monitors, trying to read the parameters and do some mental mathematics to help me break through the chain of negative thoughts. The alarm ricochets its dulling sonority. I listen to it, attuning my attention to the rhythmic beep fading and reappearing. I can't help myself from breaking down. I lament these emotions still tethered to me in a gravity free space. Wasn't it supposed to break free and warp out in extreme silence? It's almost unnatural how I still remember the tiny details of a life that presumably happened an entire lifetime ago. Before coming here, I was a sodden mess, tearing up into an acrylic burst of tears and medications and bingeing on netflix series, trying to redeem myself of the sins that I didn't even commit. It's hard to not think of a life up here. It's hard to not want to imagine human intimacy amidst this lonely act of time. My therapist once pointed out that I have a very creative head. But I don't

exactly understand; I mean of course I think about creating a creative wreck out of my skin, I think of creating an aesthetically pleasing environment for dying, I think about scenic vistas while I head off a cliff and plummet into deep waters and drown myself on purpose. All the talking made her highlight that I think in pictures, my mind has a rich visual imagery and that I wasn't quite cut off for physics and astronomy but rather something that could offer an active artistic catharsis. I'd often remind her that life was beyond the lunatic fallacy of turning trauma into art and if one tried hard enough, they could spill their negative thoughts and obsess over numbers instead.

My life changed disproportionately, yes disproportionately when I finished high school and was admitted into the number one college for pursuing undergrad in cosmological sciences. I devoted no less than ten hours everyday, devouring academic books like my life depended on it. I channelised every ounce of my energy and fate to work it up through multiple research and accreditations to renowned research institutes. By the time I was in second year, I was already burnt out and had tried taking my life almost thrice. From a distance, my life was seemingly perfect. I'd managed to manoeuvre a strict balance between my social and scholarly life. My high school boyfriend and I shifted into a live-in across the university campus into a neat little apartment. We spent the days frolicking through the suburbs, driving through an exuberant nightlife, donning that happy honeymoon phase of a new dating period. We agreed on almost everything, there were no differences and the romantic spark and love making kept everything in a frivolous upkeep. Luke came from money, he was the only

son of a rich businessman and his mother was the professor of linguistics at Harvard. Undoubtedly, he had accomplished far more than any other kid his age but all these unacknowledged privileges in life had made his parents more ambitious.

I feel like dying. I say out loud one day, my head propped against his chest and my legs leaning in an awkward L shape against the wall. I watch his face turn from a neutral expression to that of a surprise and then to disgust. For a moment I think the confession would make him want to turn me out like some kind of an antiseptic disposal. But he rather sits amused like a statue.

It's as natural of an urge as is puking after one too many shots or like shitting. I continue in my defence. *I can't help it. And I know nobody would care.*

He takes my arm in his hand and turns my wrist upward, his glass like fingers tracing around the old scars. *I'd always wondered what these lacerations were about. You're quite an artist.* He looks at me sympathetically and I turn to sit up with a full fledged rage.

Really? I retort angrily. *That's all you could think of saying. I don't want your pity.* I stammer.

Well, I always knew there was something wrong with your head. I've never seen a normal kind of genius. Besides your taste in music, movies and men is quite questionable. I just didn't have the stomach to be blatant and forthright while projecting such a sensitive issue.

That's the thing about Luke, one can't stay mad at him. He's not just a mathematician but an equally assertive

manipulative person. He could twist a knife through your belly button and still manage to get away without looking like a psycho. Luke and I shared not only the room but habits as well. His mother often said that I was just the female version of Luke behaviorally. It's the nicest thing I've heard about myself because his mother is proud of him, unlike my own who doesn't have a clue about my major or city of residence. I left my family after I turned eighteen. I've always defined my familial relationship as analogous to budding in hydra, the image of cell division of the matured bud still doodled in my seventh grade science textbook. I always knew I'd run away the first thing into adulthood. My parents had an unhappy marriage, a mark of provocative violence and mistrust. My mother never fully acknowledged that my sister's untimely death was a result of emotional abuse and neglect. Till date she maintains that what happened was just an unfortunate sickness of the head - an impulsivity of a rash decision. As a family, we never brought the family up for discussion because it gave my Mom "chills" to go through the entire scenario.

Most of those who knew me, identified me as a dork who rarely agreed upon social conjecture and lived a life of eclipsed asceticism. I never really complied, what seemed inappropriate to the rest of the world seemed purgatory to me. I could go on without food for days and brag about it. I held a secret superiority to all my anorexic friends who were envious of my energy levels and skinny frame.

That's not meaty enough. Luke often complained like every male on the planet. But I stuck to blatant refusal for sexual objectification. It wasn't until the final year that I began to

hate my skin and bones and skimmed ribbed appearance. I saw what he meant when he asked me to get thick. His new girlfriend was apparently a petite blonde with a ravishingly hot appearance and he flexed his pick like an absolute misogynistic male which wasn't a thing to be proud of.

Would you like some pizza?

Sam barges into the control room where I lay chickened and moist with scare. I stare at him, my eyes torn in an elliptical shape. I nod fervently.

Are you alright honey? He asks, stepping forward.

That's it. That's it. I'm gonna be OK. I think as he places an arm around my shoulder and lets me lean my head against his diabolically sharp shoulder blades. There's something about their structural rigidity and slight protuberance that comforts my inner demons. Sometimes I forget that the only sense that havens a sense of relief in space is this touch, this perpetuating warmth of emotions- a sense that I'm being loved. Well honestly I have never really fallen in love ever since I broke up with Luke. All my relationships were aromantic and largely benefitted physical lust over everything else. But there's something about Sam that makes me cling to him.

Sam cups his hand behind my neck and circles his other thumb over the nape and whispers *it's OK. It's gonna be OK* and then leans in to place his warm lips against my mouth. I'm fatigued but not enough to not desire to kiss him back. *Let's go.* He says after a while. *I've made the most delicious pizza ever. It's gonna be quite a party.* He winks.

If it wasn't for wholesome moments like these, I would have still been missing earthly pleasures. My sense of smell is perfunctory but I can tell that the food circling over the counters is amazing.

How'd you do it? I ask amazed.

Told you I'm a magician of some sort. Sam beams with pride.

It's a null and void. All the beauties that you think are held by explorative sciences in deep space are a myth. A myth to lure teenagers and connived urgency for passion. Now it's obvious when people ask if I love it up here and I say I do. I stopped questioning my career once the entire hall of world renowned scientists and researchers broke into a thunder of applause on my dissertation. Something about the peer reviews and ratings motivated me to continue the toxic climb and follow my childhood dream.

My high school literature teacher often used to say that people from broken families make the best writers, little did she know that some turn into aggravated scientists with an excessive need to control and know - they balance through numbers instead of feelings of fulfilment. But on the contrary I've never been the dominant one, neither in my relationships nor in friendships. Some people have said that I've been authoritative but I'd disagree. I consider myself to oscillate between extreme submission and extreme resistance. But in either case, I seldom do anything to have my way around.

Luke was the best thing that happened to me in high school and college. I considered myself the luckiest girl on the planet to be able to date someone like him. It's like he

mirrored my soul, knew exactly what I wanted and how I wanted. I've never been a believer of religion or love but something about his presence never made me question either. Luke and I grew up within the vicinity of the same neighbourhood and dorms of the same high school. But there was a humongous difference in the ways our lives were enriched and marked by the folks that raised us. For Luke, learning and being the best had no compulsion, he did it simply because he enjoyed it. But for me, it was a means of escape. A way to cope with the solemn solitude and grim environment of my home. I didn't want to end up like a junkie disowned by parents, meticulously devoted to a screaming and fault finding routine of addiction and death. Ashlyn(my sister) and I were never close. She was three years older and had an unstated rivalry to the tiniest bit of affection that my parents sometimes bestowed my way. I wonder if I was the cause of her death. Now that I think of it, despite not wanting to, I blame myself for the acute morbidity.

Even though I can't smell pizza and taste it's efficacy, something about the preservatives and toppings certify that it has to be delicious.

Look at you looking at him like that. Roger grins. *Your devotion is adorable.*

I feel the heat rise up to my face as Sam squeezes my palm in affirmation.

Come on now Roger, I am a ladies' man. I'm not just feeding you all but creating dining exquisites in space. Where on earth would

you find people that are lofty with Lagrange's as well as good with creating excellent cuisines.

I laugh heartily, catching a glimpse of my scarlet face in the disc leaves me even more embarrassed.

Honestly, I'd give it a try. Come on does a space baby not sound cool? Roger bursts.

Hey! Hey! Watch your language young man. Sam slaps his arm.

I float back to my room and rummage through the books that I've already read quite a few times now. Reading was a bounty that I took for granted on earth. Little did I know that it's scarcity would leave me devastated up here. I stare at the console panels, fixating over the meaninglessness of life and the simultaneous urge to do something about it. For a fickle moment I lumber over the vast stretch of darkness ensconced outside the glass sift contouring like a sinusoidal wave function. Sometimes I fancy it to be dark waters and try to think that I'm deep under the oceans instead of space.

People with a head like mine do end up in demanding fields like this. I sometimes just thank the stars that I wasn't mad enough to have my research thwarted over searching extraterrestrial life. I didn't want to be a scapegoat for another one of those fancy ideas with baseless conclusions. I knew a fellow who devoted his lifetime, sure of the fact that he'd discovered some kind of an aquatic life form on Kepler 62f. But he never had substantial data to back him up, yet he managed to keep the research funded till the day he died. You can never really tell what a space scientist is upto: a science fiction or a real research? And ironically, the field often rewarded the ones who came up with fictions rather

than facts. The earth as we knew now had more faith in the mathematicians who were no intellectual threat.

Hey! Is it cool if I spend the night here?

Sam asks. It's cute how he is considerate about my personal space. It makes me want him even more. I nod.

My mom called, and she's planning for our wedding. Sounded very excited about it.

I smile, trying to keep nervousness off the fringes.

Wow. That's cool. I say without meaning to sound rude.

There's something deeply intimate about watching someone vulnerable, naked with their feelings. Sam buckled himself beside my bunk shelf. My thoughts wandered as my eyes traced the outlines of his slim space suit. Was the astronomical anatomy really as different as they mentioned? Sam and I had never tried coitus in space partially because he had Christian feelings that construed a physical relationship before marriage as an impious act and partially because there were cameras everywhere and I didn't want to emerge as the new porn star being casted live across all the American channels. I lay there, brooding over the entirety of my life.

My head was a messed up place and my therapist described it as a mansion with infinite chambers, literally infinite. There were rooms where the memories from my earliest childhood still ran fresh. Even the days that had nothing significant or emotionally intense were petroglyphed with a lost sense of perfection. There were rooms that she mentioned were my personal favorites: my usual hiding spot when I was

undergoing enigmatic stress or when I lacked a libido relief. These rooms were mostly connected to the early days of my relationship with Luke. He was the best partner I've ever had and the break up had traumatised me like nothing else. There are days when I wake up surprised to not find myself in a bedside in our room. Sometimes I wanna call him and talk; nothing romantic just continue the conversations that we left mid-way long ago. All these thoughts that revolve around him make me feel guilty, like I'm cheating on Sam except that it can't be TRUE because Luke has been dead for six years now and I try to overcome the guilt by convincing myself that he's merely a pastime haunt.

Then there are also the rooms where I've bottled my sister's memories and let the emotions pent up so I can act as a refugee in this guilt ridden saturnine.

There are rooms that have repetitive vistas of the road trips that I frequented during my early grad years. Long stretches of asphalt surrounded by gleaming grey horizons and the white sun like a polka dot in distance, Radiohead pouring over the speakers. *You've such a sad taste in music, no wonder you're depressed.* My dad had once highlighted. For him the root cause of my sadness stemmed from the genres I was into and not because of the recklessly unpredictable upbringing. But of course, this gloomy disposition was dense indeed. People that I barely knew would often run tangential blows and agreed that my presence translated some sort of a heavy, indescribable mourning. But I always felt that it was the genes and not the genres that needed blaming. I was a magnet for sadness and not the other way round.

Luke was the barrier that kept me on the throes of sanity and ambition. I clung on to him like he exuded oxygen for my survival alone. Without him my will to not exist would have been rampant and met the same fate as my sister's. When you've suffered from too much living, you just want to rest. It always used to surprise me that people planned their futures and modernized everything. The way the curriculum in schools was wide enough for discussions on sex and gender (encapsulating umbrella terms) - It disappointed me to think that people were cool enough to talk about sex but not suicide? Was the one term not reflective of the other? To me it looked like only a very cellophane-like thin sheet separated the two. If you could understand a person in one, you'd know him in another. I'd always assumed I'd keep Luke on my watch and save him from himself. Nonetheless, the reasons of guilt and over fixation with life and death transfigured into blame and hatred for myself and him over time.

Luke was one of the fragile few who believed life was only liveable if it had some deeper meaning. How often than not, are we actually engaged with such a debacle?

There were grim days after his death when I felt darkness soldered inside me, curling up like a parasite, draining my will to live. Sustenance through the wild memories that we made together in our early years would frequent me in my dreams and wake. I'd spend an ungodly amount of time trying to figure out what went wrong.

When the news was first broken to me, I was sitting in the lab brooding over the sadness of the universe - the collapse of massive stars, the supernova that finally left an

impressionistic black hole. Something about the dying stars had left me feeling tenderly melancholic. Mr. Bradley called out my name, something about his diction and sad deliverance gave a subtle darkness to the atmosphere.

How're you doing? He asked. I looked at him shocked, *I'm fine Sir.*

You might wanna see the counsellor after the lecture ends.

I walked towards the counsellor's office, wondering what it was about now.

We've seen that you're in a delicate state, but we need you to know you'll get through this, said Miss Melissa in her artificially effervescent and honeyed dialect. I stared at her quizzically until she spoke again. *I'm sorry to break it to you but Luke is dead.*

I continued to look unfazed and unblinking, waiting for her dismissal and denial of the news. But she didn't. She held out her hand in a weak sympathy while I refused to feel my thoughts and feelings that were beginning to churn somewhere inside my soul. A million thoughts rushed through my head and I wanted to scream at her but no voice came out of me.

Rains lashed heavily. I trudged my way back to the apartment, not caring to waterproof my bag with a raincoat. I passed by the cafeteria that used to be our favourite hanging out place. For a moment, I had an urge to walk in, as if by doing so, I'd be able to run into Luke and everything would be okay - like the mere act of existing in a favourite spot would somehow erase the bleak truth. The gardens were torrential in a mud

sagged puddle. I turned the key and stood at the entrance soaking the doormat with the water dripping off myself. I couldn't feel anything. I didn't have any fainting fits over the realisation of the loss. The news hadn't yet sunk in its deeply disturbing gravels yet.

Luke. I called out in hesitation, my voice distant and foreign to my own ears. For a split second I expected him to answer with a gruff *Hmm?*

Hey! I'm back. I continued while starting to shiver at the anticipated silence.

Nobody warns you of the uneventful turns in life. Hopes and feelings are nevertheless enough of a reason to make you see through the end. I lay in my bed, decaying through impassiveness, sweltering in tears and acidic thoughts. I was immobilised and unwilling to go to college. I had started to believe that one of these days he would come back and upon not finding me, he'd return. There was an achieved sense of loss in addition to the earlier fragmentation. If I fell asleep at all, I would rumble into an endless fusion of unexplainable emotions. For the first time I stepped out of the apartment, I was blinded by the sheer brightness of the world, the apathy with which the universe continued its discourse without slowing down for my grief. I started staying back after classes to slide through the adjoining woods by the night. No sane person would have ever dared to walk through those birches at night, but I riddled my way through them, escaping to feel something - anything at all.

It's easier to sympathise with the pain of others than to feel your own. My sister used to say. I often took her words to be a

melodramatic grant. A shared living had made me bitter towards the only people that I had blood relations with. But now all of her statements started to come back to me.

Depression is not just a malady of heart, it's an obtrusive mark to live through the curse of life.

I never took her words to mean anything serious until they started to form a serious affliction upon my dampened heart after Luke's loss.

Soon enough I became a lumbering presence in my own home, ghosting in and out, living in an ordinance of strong absences. At times it felt like I was exiled until Luke took me in and we cherished together the hopes of making love and life last.

After the second greatest tragedy that ruined me, I emerged as a person who could keep up a neutral forefront. I was one of the lucky few whose career choice was not a fate dictated by the government or whimsical fantasies of the society. I transcribed every thought and emotion to increase my mental occupancy. The rest of the hours were devoted to rigorous calculations and algorithmic studies to make conclusive achievements. I wasn't surprised when my name made it through the list of a selected few for the space journey. I had seen it coming for months. Amidst a battalion of cheers and applause and farewell parties, I found myself detached. Like I was watching my own life happen to me from a different frame of reference, like it was stuck at a monologue of dialogues of a really slow movie, cast in black and white, irredeemable of any possible excitement or sense

of achievement. I carried within myself a tincture of a strong sadness, willowing through the vanity.

I nursed the space dream through the entirety of my life. I remember reading Bobby Katz's "If I could be an astronaut" when I was five years old and instantly pointing out to my bemused father that this is what I wanted to be and when he asked why? I'd said "I wanna see the fishes fly and trees talk on a different planet."

There's nothing wrong with a gullible imagination that gives you some kind of hope but the sad truth is I really thought that far away from the callous madness of the capitalistic world ruled and ruined by terrorism and perverted media, there lay a world so entropically perfect and thriving with idealism that I could reach it out with my bare hands and wash away all the earthly sins that humans carried upon their fevered soul. But nobody had warned me about this sepulchred warp of space and time, an elongated stretch so tenuous indeed that it felt like a "forever" and all the innovations that our team had been looking forward to turned into a reluctance hoarded by quick but wrong assumptions. Even though safety measures were seldom forfeited, the rising incidents of "float offs" (as we called it at that time) kept increasing. A float off was a space analogy of suicide - when an astronaut or a space scientist or engineer became too tired fixating over the multitude of data that yielded no pattern or anomaly and became evenly frustrated would just sneak off the spacecraft and float amidst meteor debris, breaking of the umbilical oxygen wires veined across his space suit and resigned off the hubris. The watch guards (the people who did the mechanical and electronic repairs

and also kept nuclear fuels from detonating) were always on surveillance to prevent such outrageous acts but the number just skyrocketed and suicides became a statistical probability occurring in odd numbers on even days.

One long hour, I recalled a memory : a ten year old me playing with my sister in the garden of our summer house, touching the mimosa to see it's leaves would curl up shyly, giggling and waiting some more for them to unwrap so that we could touch it again. It was a happy memory. I also remember swinging by the metal bars, soaring higher and higher until my eyes could catch up with a distant horizon where the sea and the skies merged into a gigantic oneness and the only way for you to tell the separation was upon spotting ships that looked more like a dream caught up in an artist's memory. Except that all these vivid memories were not imagined but felt as sharp as if the time had never passed through them and I was somewhere frozen in the delicacy of a beautiful moment. It was memories like these that became the pillars of endurance in an infinite vacuum.

This sob story of an infinite space started not when the world started going bad and the leaders started plotting ugly wars for power but when I became aware of these events. The world was on the verge of something, brimming with technological changes and paranoid absurdity. Everything you thought, felt, desired was either controlled or observed and closely followed. I used to catch hints of such Orwellian things growing up but often thought that replacements were far fetched and most of the media news were just cheap strategies to catch attention. I believe my generation grew up with a shuttered violence, struggling to break free of this

panopticon disquiet. The first realisation occurred when I walked in on Luke with a girl in our apartment, talking over in hushed whispers of a sexual innuendo. I was shocked. But when they caught me looking, instead of offering an explanation or apologising, Luke walked over to me and said with a tone of dismissive disapproval that our relationship was over. I was over-stimulated to have spoken anything. I just gaped at him in horror and disgust before walking out. We didn't talk for three months and he dated this hurtfully beautiful blonde, thick in the right places and he fell into a brightening disposition all of a sudden. My friends (a countable few) would often jokingly point out how much better he'd started to be. I remember he broke into a couple of comedy shows with excellent punch lines and intelligent sarcasm. His entire personality shifted until he became a stranger to me. I'd often catch a glimpse of him, kissing his new girlfriends on the grounds and sharing food like a doting forever couple in the cafeteria.

Do you ever wonder what life would've been like if you hadn't taken a certain decision at a certain period in time? I spent the rest of my life trying to escape this one train of torturing thought: "had I not broken his heart, he'd still be alive." But then I didn't know how it was possible for me to not have broken his heart when my own was shred into billion little pieces.

Luke's death had sparked a pretence of charitable sympathies, a wave of inevitable sadness. And I rightly call it a pretence because none of it translated to anything or aided my cause. The police and the detectives chased me around, shoving up a series of questionnaires exploiting my days with tormenting

haunts. Life became a series of undefined explanations engulfing sordidness.

Arguments bring no ally, yet here I was explaining myself, every thing that I did or did not do. I'm surprised by the languidness with which my own family aided me, the already distant parents kept drifting further away, acting like they had already suffered enough of me like I was an ailment disrupting their petty lives. What's worse than suicide is people looking up causes for why someone might have done it. They stir up all kinds of maybes. What's worse still is that none of those maybes are ever TRUE. That's what happened once Luke's family had run out of plausible reasons for his act. Their maybes shifted to our relationship that disfigured his habits of sharing everything with his Mom. Nobody questioned his other ex and she was bludgeoned with fake tears and sympathies and consolations even though she never really had feelings for Luke. I went to over a hundred therapy sessions hoping to make some sense out of my life. But even though my therapist validated every single intrusive thought I was still struggling to come to a decent closure. Life wasn't a fiction that could fall into stages of - introduction, conflict and conclusion.

My life's a sadness derivative and what's the point if everything comes at a cost of deprivation, a lack so intense that I can not forgive myself for having desired anything at all.

I would pause at the epitaph of the strangers' graves whilst I visited Luke's. I'd let my fingers stroll over the etched words falling into sentences that could make sense only to the dead. I was so envious at their transfer into a newer life while we

were entrapped in an emblematic void, suffering their absence and shuffling through the shared memories.

Past always looks better in the present, especially when the person associated with it is gone. In a jiffy of a tragic flashback life with him looks wholesome, a dream reared with perfection. I could've gone on wanting to live and love him forever even if I was bored. My heart was sustaining itself on a threadbare of some melancholic hope and once it was gone I was left sinking into complete darkness and the saddest part of it was that I had started to get comfortable in it. Depression is a cure for ambition - an assured compromise for settling. Once I dismantled into this discomposure, I started questioning everything again and mind you it wasn't just a bout of teenage nihilism this time - it was rather putrid and serious.

Earlier, at the time of my graduation ceremony, I was troubled at the sight of strange looking onlookers - the uninvited gentlemen, lurking in the corner of the back stage, whispering amongst themselves as our names were being called upon. These people didn't look like students or faculty or family. It was weird because my institute had maintained it's reputation of political aversion throughout - we were the only known ally that didn't fall to the ruling class prey. We were rather individualistic and strong in our decision making. The students were a rarified sought after gentle class with a mind of their own. Nobody questioned our stances and nobody disturbed our decisions or tried to re-configure our beliefs as long as we stayed apolitical.

But the presence of these men - was an atrocious glimpse into the future. Who were they? What did they want? Were

we the next conversion target? Was ours the last batch that had escaped the prison of thought control?

I felt uncanny at this collective breach of our privacy and uninvited presence in our cohort.

Who are these people? I heard Sythia whispering.

Looks like an undercover investigation team of Luke's death. Christopher answered looking slyly in my direction.

Even though I had nothing to worry about, I felt a panic bubble in my veins running like a poisoned froth paralysing my thoughts. The flashbacks of repetitive interrogation made me sick.

No. They're not. Luke's mom is a committee member and they've withdrawn the case. Sythia said. *They say she found something better than keeping the case open.*

No, I don't think they have. Christopher spoke as if he knew what was going on, irking me with his falseness.

Sandra walked towards me, amiable and undeniably chirpy after two possible shots of vodka.

There you are. Heaven knows I've searched all the hallways and classrooms looking for you. She busted, handing over a glass of red wine to me.

Remember Luke's ex girlfriend, the one he cheated on you with? I rolled my eyes nonchalantly. I didn't want to gossip anymore. The least I could do was to not indulge in any rumours or realities post his death. Its not like I wanted to honour him or anything but I definitely did not want to subject myself to any more rumours.

She has dropped out. Sandra continued to offer, ignoring my discomfort at the topic of discussion.

So? I asked rather rudely.

Bruh! Like don't you wanna know why?

Nope. I said, lowering my gaze at the red wine reflecting the ballroom lights, feeling light headed already. *I don't care anymore.*

Well his mom found a note stating an abusive relationship between those two and she's filed a complaint.

I looked at Sandra, unbelieving every byte of this sudden disclosure.

Abusive? He wasn't abusive at all. I've spent over four years with him. He was neither imposing nor forceful. In fact he was the gentlest creature I've known. I advocated vehemently.

Ummm, yeah he wasn't the villain, he was the victim. Sandra said. *His mom says that she used to bully him for expensive stuff and additional pocket expenses, throwing tantrums when he refused.*

Have you ever tried to kill yourself?

Honestly, I have never known how to answer that question. I find it a little hard to believe that there are people that go on about their petty lives, feeling unbroken, deprived of any sensitivity. I stare at the form in front of me: a ridiculous fifteen pages long file asking excruciatingly boring questions about mental health. As the earth inched closer to its destruction, those few left tried to make the best of their lives. Gratefulness can't be preached, it's felt. Mass hysteria and incurable diseases had become so common that it was

nearly impossible to find people who were completely healthy. My employment with the space agency called for stringent requirements of perfect emotional health. They called it the space inspectors - a role I had whole heartedly detested. I'd wanted to be an explorer but didn't have the needed funds for training. Inspectors were supposed to detect anomalies in outer space and report alien sightings.

It's been seven days since Sam and I were put in separate cells. The thought that maybe I wasn't worried enough seemed to bother me a lot. Did it mean I didn't love him as much as he did? I know love can't be compared like that, but growing up I was so used to being told to keep my feelings to myself that I had almost become a mechanized ghost, a vacuous ghoul of a feeling that nobody really noticed.

Did I mind any of that?

Not really.

But what seemed to aggravate the dispute was that maybe I wasn't feeling the right set of emotions under the given circumstances.

I focused on the screen in front of me: a set of seemingly never ending questions with check boxes. This was a mandatory mental health check up, more like a purge scheme wherein the space holocaust was performed if you were deemed suicidal. Everyone that I knew had found the questionnaire redundant. Everybody who had an IQ score enough to land them a space exploration mission definitely had enough brains to cheat through silly questions relying on obsolete psychological testing methods. They never fixed anybody's mental health but could only ever absolve the HR

department back on earth, watching our every move and filling in excel sheets to see if we were really cost effective for the amount of food and resources we were consuming. The first ever spaceship to be sent over to Proxima Centauri was a gigantic one with nine storeys and hosted over nine thousand people, a thousand in each storey. Its structure was so divine that even the Gods would have envied the engineers and the architects that perfected this milestone within the span of a decade. The revolution along its axis was done to match against the landing on the binary star system and withstand extreme erosions and heats caused due to fluctuating weather patterns and its vicinity to the Sun. For a long time, physicists and scientists all over the world had argued over the near impossibility and absurdity of the mission and would suggest potholes based on relativity and laws of physics that had governed the science for so long. But there was always more to what met the eye. The speed of travel was always a problem and with movies like interstellar, people were already discarding the fictitious hypothesis that intangible feelings like love could provide for traveling beyond space and into time. But the feat was achieved successfully when a nearby star exploded, creating massive magnetic fields and making propulsion of our great venture to be a success. The first crowd was meant to go and set up the space camp on the binary stars. They were assigned roles, designed meticulously to match their skills and interests. The data and display that the scientists obtained back on earth would then be used to make further plans. So far, we had been successful in sending around seven hundred spaceships and ours was the one with the brightest crew onboard. We had proudly qualified the entrance test and our thesis

defence before the NASA scientists had earned us the privilege to take the mission further.

I stared at the statement again “*Have you ever tried to kill yourself?*” The check box next to it vacant and uncaring, called for my immediate urge to respond honestly. I flinched at my hesitation to lie and move on to the next question. Why could I not just fake it like I had always done. Every normal person questions his/her existence at least once in his life; and if that was the general case, there was no need for me to be this scared to tell the truth. The other part of me reprimanded my dull honesty with *What if they deem me unfit for further travel and send me back to the engineering department* where I can spend the rest of my days doing iterations of mathematical design of the spaceships and make it as cost effective and optimised as possible. Nothing scared me more than the fatigue of monotony, the scale of labour that one had to do to make efforts into the same task. Everyday. This was precisely why I had hated the idea of marrying and being a trophy housewife. The stagnation of domesticity and comfort of a family would seemingly bore me to death and as much as I loved Sam now, I could never think of marrying him right after landing. I wanted to hold enough achievements and research publications to be able to draw some worth out of my living.

I gauged at every word separately. *Have. You. Ever. Tried. To. Kill. Yourself?* It started to sound like poetry - an unabridged version of the larger truth that was inevitable.

I counted the number of times that I had wished for my life to end. Not the life per se but just the pain. I inadvertently thought about Luke’s suicide and the days that had followed.

The only way for me to have made up for his absence was to ascertain that every thought of mine was infiltrated by his imaginary presence, with made up memories and could-have-beens. For the longest time I couldn't bring myself to suffer, to accept that life is forlorn without him. If I did that I would have to deal with the fact that he was no longer a part of me, that I had one day woken up to an excruciatingly difficult decision, that I had fallen out of love. When love is gone, a rust takes up its rightful space, the sadness brews over the smiles, calling off severity, ridiculing the intensity of hurt. Anger occupies almost every gesture. Hate erodes the insides almost every day as you become less of a person and more of an absence-a self least known to self.

Almost everything that happened within the hollow premises of promises is now gone, the sadness shakes what's left of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Most days I would wake up with an aching desire to die, to suffocate, to run away from the way my heart and body felt.

I couldn't help but live an imagined life - a longing to wrap illusion with what's not even remotely real. Sometimes I would look at pretty houses and sunset beaches and satisfy myself with his imaginary presence. I often wondered if staring long enough into the spaces and crevices of darkness would magically conjure him up in my physical proximity. What hurt me the most was the remainder of his reminder, a faded certainty.

I looked out of the cylindrical glass, meant to serve as a monitoring window and break us out of the boredom of staring at our screens all day. I was even now tempted to break out of the ship and hurl myself away. I wasn't just

moving away from his memories but also crossing across roughly 4.4 light years.

I crossed the checkbox.

If yes, how many times?

I glared furiously at the audacity of the question. The utter meaninglessness. The insensitive detachment of their curator. I ticked the checkbox with zero honesty and submitted the sheet online for the review. If anybody failed the test, a smaller spaceship would be sent to deliver them back to the earth where they would mostly be employed in dull jobs or prepared until they got better. The rumours said that space agency did not have enough resources to mobilise the failed crew back, so they would just take them on a detour and leave them to die amidst space debris. If that was the case, why wouldn't they let suicidal people just float off? Why create a facade? While I never knew an answer to such questions, Sam often adhered to the belief that such a large number of float offs would lead people to believe that our space agency is doing something to ruin the mental health of otherwise absolutely normal genius people.

It was a mid-summer noon, sometime before the dusk. The sunlight lathered carelessly through the green leaves. Luke caressed my hair, holding my waist with the other. I was drawn to his lips, kissing gently, teasing his earlobes with my other hand. He pulled my hair back and kissed my neck as I burst into a giggling fit. Your kiss reminds me of alphonso mangoes I said laughing as he tickled me harder. I would often burst into imageries caught up on a lover's high.

I woke up shivering. The same dream had kept recurring ever since I boarded this mission. It was hard to tell whether it was just a dream or the memory had happened to me at some point in my life. Like every time, I woke up with a guilt, as if I had been caught cheating and carried impressions of his kisses. Sometimes I caught Sam looking at me when I was subconsciously replaying Luke's memories in my head and I would feel so flustered with embarrassment. I had often assured him that I was over his death and that there was nothing left to implore. Sam was one of the good guys, the go-back-home-to husbands that wait with open arms and irrefutable love. The idea used to scare me. The hopefulness of love used to scare me. What if I was incapable of living up to his expectations. What if I just needed him to make me feel less lonely. Wasn't love synonymous with selfishness? What made my situation more averse was that I had not yet learnt how to get over the paranoia and distrust of my own surroundings. Only if life could offer complications in form of mathematical equations, I could perhaps think about getting out of it by solving it for the unknown variables.

The blackness outside the cylindrical window consummated my attention. As far as I could see, I couldn't see at anything all - reflecting the interiors of my heart. There was nothing much to do through the day. All I had to do was monitor parameters for changes in radiation. As our spacecraft neared the magnetic field, we were to encounter the most turbulent weather. And sometimes the unpredictability called for constant changes. Usually the alarms automated and called attention to the upsets and we were able to curb the situations way before it went out of the hands. Sam barged in through the partition, smiling. *Hey, you are being*

transferred to the manoeuvring station. The results of the last test came out fine.

I looked at him surprised. So the trick had worked? I was finally escaping the routine here.

When? I asked keeping the shock out of my voice.

What happened? You don't seem excited about it?

No. I was more or less expecting it.

You must be really smart to keep up with this. I stopped caring sometime back. Honestly I feel this journey has really exhausted me. I just wanna go back on earth to my family. Seek my parents' blessings and start a new life. Sam confessed.

His sudden disinterest surprised me. How could he give up on something so vital?

What would you do on Earth? Its a dying planet. Resources are fast depleting. People are set to kill each other. Wars are inevitable. There is nothing much to do back there.

Yeah, exactly. There isn't much to do at all. I just want a slow life now. I was born there, might just as well die there. Resources aren't exactly going to exhaust in the next two generations. I think I will let my grandkids decide for themselves. Our mission is just so abstracted. Do we really think that all this navigation through space work? Come on be honest with yourself. Do you really think that Proxima Centauri is our next best hope? We were born on the earth and we can never escape its gravitation that has nurtured us in the form of love. Everywhere else is a lie. The universe was not designed to continue on some grandeur pattern. It is just as random as it can get. Why is it worth your time to waste all your youth chasing a distant dream?

I gaped at him uncomprehendingly, like he was a stranger, speaking to me in a foreign language. I looked at him, fighting back tears. Luke would have never said that. He would have loved this unordinary ordinance just as much as I did.

Sam looked back with pity etched in his expressions. I almost imagined him mouthing , “Really?” As if he could hear my thoughts.

I am gonna go back to earth Jess. If you want you can come with me, I can not force you because I don't think I have a right to. And as much as I have known you, dragging you back would only command your hatred for myself. But I will be waiting for you. Please don't be late.

I was both surprised as well as angry at his decision to ditch a mission as critical as ours and quit like a loser. I spent the next few days in a quandary, working out logic, discretion and emotion to figure out whether to follow his lead or continue solo.

The day of Sam's departure came in a jiffy and as much as I had prepared myself for the final goodbye, I was not able to say it. I watched my crew-mates call on me as they bid adieu to the ones being sent back. I just sat back in my cabin, continuing my training for the manoeuvring. My instructor was a man in his late sixties who was working as a volunteer and was deemed expendable since he had already lost his wife and children in an accident years ago. He would take efforts to teach me beyond what was necessary and I had begun to seek refuge in him like a fatherly figure that my own guardians had once failed to deliver.

I lay at the bottom of the ocean, the water seeped through my nose, mouth and skin into my lungs. I could feel my throat burn. When life comes to an abrupt end, you are often left unprepared even though you might have wished for it to happen every waking moment when you were alive. I was gasping for air as I woke up from the nightmare. My entire body was flooded in sweat and I could hear alarms blaring in a distance. It took me quite a couple of seconds to realise the emergency light flashing overhead. I checked the comms for messages. The system check displayed no error. I wondered if it was just a false alarm to check for preparedness. I was still recovering from the PTSD of the nightmare that had just translated into much more of a tangible tragedy waiting to reveal its darkness.

I floated my way out of the station to the gravity room and was surprised to find it empty. It was the most critical department working on force balancing and without the aid of the same we would not be able to launch ourselves on the binary stars. All the screens had blacked out completely and the alarm continued to ring.

Olive. Olive. What is happening? Wheres everybody? We are losing the mission guys.

I screamed at top of my lungs, my fingers fumbled through the transistors, trying to fix the issue. It was just a trip, and the moment I fixed the error, screens came back to a flashing life. The analysers started giving real time updates for all the interstellar dust again. Sythia entered in the control room after some time and asked nonchalantly *Hey manager wassup?*

Could you care enough to explain your absence? I asked, suppressing my radioactive rage. Where the fuck is everyone? Do you realise we could have exploded? I continued angrily.

What? She gave a quizzical expression.

The screens and comms were out. I was screaming and nobody bothered to answer.

There has been some misunderstanding. It was Troy's shift. He was supposed to be the one in charge.

I haven't seen him here in hours.

This cant be possible he's not someone who will act unprofessionally. I will call him at once. He needs to explain.

Troy had floated off just minutes before I had barged into the control panel and had I cared enough to notice the crack in the channel, I would have been able to save him. I sat in morbid frenzy, unable to forgive myself for yet another tragedy.

If his mental health was this deteriorated he should have been sent back yesterday with the rest of the crew. Why was he promoted? Sythia talked out loud. *This doesn't make any sense because he is the best brains we had onboard. He was the one that carried the light in the darkness. Something doesn't fit Jess. Something is off.* Sythia searched my face for the answers.

Was it possible that Troy was doing exactly what I had been upto? Living a dream while holding the reality - too fragile and susceptible to blunders all at once. We as a cohort of selected geniuses had pooled in hours of intellect and rigorous simulations to pro-create the landing and dwarfed

the mission so that it could be accomplished within five years instead of twenty-five.

It's been a month according to my earth bound lunar calendar ever since the tragedy of Troy happened. Every waking minute has passed with so much dread and discomfort. The new control room and a new department has definitely broken off the previous monotony but it's not enough to keep me interested. I have discovered in this short duration that there isn't much that I can do to renovate technicalities with my out-of-the-box thinking. Most days I just sit with mundane ordeals, fixating over Hohmann transfer orbits, the minimum delta V required, and if the idealistic landing conditions happen to deteriorate then plausible means of navigation, strategies for nearest exit and how to keep the spacecraft from exploding. While the mathematical calculations are extremely helpful in keeping my mind absorbed they nevertheless fail to occupy me like the *other deviant* thoughts. Sam has sent a couple of long emails ever since his touchdown (which was miraculously faster than I could have ever imagined, the space bullet that carried him and the other crew mates was a Japanese model, known to exploit relativistic velocities. At some point it was believed that they would be faster than portals which remained undiscovered until now but had every astrophysicist's close attention.) I had not been able to revert to any of his responses, partially because I was still mad at him for this abandonment as well as his dauntless misdemeanour to believe that I would follow his footsteps and give up on my years of hard work. Sam had also carefully attested folders comprising endless images from my favourite

Italian cafes, the woods behind our college, my childhood home, his new home, his parents, him celebrating easter with his cousins. It felt surreal, like he had traveled to an entirely new landscape - A fairy tale world that I no longer believed to be true. Such little yet so much time had elapsed since. I was obsessing over one of the school ground pictures that he had sent. The maple leaves adorned the boring asphalt in a bohemian silk shade. Right underneath the biggest tree was the cafe - Señor, the place with the most luscious muffins and tarts. So many summers had passed in its premise with an untainted naivety. This was where I had asked Luke out. I had meant to surprise him with a bouquet of orchids and handwritten letters but I couldn't find the nerve to give him the same. The orchids paled under my windowsill while the handwritten letters must still be somewhere amongst my journals. I zoomed into the image until it pixelated, staring at the slant Señor with an archaic note. After a while I couldn't stand to look at the picture. Out of hundreds of pictures that I had received from Sam, I was obsessing over the wrong one for a very wrong reason. I wondered if I will ever get to a point in my life where I will not be affected with Luke's tragedy. I was upholding myself in the deepest conviction and a dreadful shame. Every time that I thought of him with such a burning ache, I felt like I was cheating not just on Sam but myself, my future and the possibilities that lay ahead. Living like this felt like a lie. But even the reality was relativistically enraptured over space typhoons and human errors. Even if I wanted to I could never share myself with Sam to convey in any form that I was not over Luke yet. Not because it would portray me as a bitch but simply because it felt wrong to share my hurts with a

person that I had been dating for such a short time. I wasn't sure if Sam would be interested in knowing and his complete ignorance would make me feel like a fool. Ever since my childhood I had found it hard to talk about my own feelings without invalidating them first. I always felt that whatever I was feeling or going through was so wrong. Human emotions are so extremely complex, I am glad I could find respite through maths, numbers and astrophysics and could just overlook the intricacies of my own feelings with so much ease.

The space HR (believe me its way worse than one can imagine) had fondly called "depression as an acute skewness from assignment of tasks" and was taking strict measures to avoid manpower and operational losses. They sent their psychiatric manuals, mental health checklists and well being space meditation videos with a fanatic diligence. As if life could be fitted within some checkboxes and textbook definitions of well being and disorders. I would never be able to comprehend the dilution of the breadth of "mental health" to such labeled definitions. Yet every single time I found myself lying through their statistics to defeat my own depression, thriving with ambition to move through the darks until I was really done.

Space journeys are explosively isolating - not just intellectually and emotionally but spatially as well. There are times when I miss the gentle chaos that earth had to offer back home. I miss the the colours and contours of the skies, the way the forest breeze fills in the space, even the stretches of asphalt laden through the cityscapes, the night life in the NYC, romanticism and intellectual huddling in the bars, the

aching contrast against wilderness of country roads. All of these things gave me such a nostalgic rush. If I could just magically portal across devices, I would gallop right through and back. Sam used to call me every once in a while; I was surprised that our spatial distance was still offering us a marvellously seamless communication. I could hear at the backdrop the horns and noises of the vehicles, the nonchalant laughter of the people and families and it made me sick with envy and longing. I have always wanted to not have kids because I was sure that my body will never be able to create a life and even if it does, I would be a very detached mother (like my own) to the child and I found the thought deeply disturbing. Sam and I always had differences on the topic, we would argue over it and he would always conclude saying that I would change my mind after getting married. This is what I absolutely hated about him, his utter precision over predictions. I hated his assertion and male dominance over the subjects which in his viewpoint were completely harmless and only “human”.

Who doesn't want a family Jess. He would ask with such a simplistic curiosity.

Having a family doesn't reduce to the necessity of making babies even though I completely enjoy the process that leads to it. You and I are a family too. I would say in my defence.

Previous missions to the Proxima Centauri had been completely confidential and up until we landed we would never quite know how much work in re-establishing the human population had been done. Sam would never fail to call out on the uncertainties and re-assert every time that we talked that I was on a lost mission and I should come back

while I was able to. The uncertainty did prickle my heart. I hated the “not knowing” even though that is the natural discourse of life. Human beings have always wanted to have an utmost control over their lives, they even created religion to attest meaning to an otherwise meaningless life. It is because of this figurative control that mankind has sought its ambitions across centuries. It was vexing to think that NASA was on such a confidential mission that it would not even disclose the figures and procedures of the previous landings even to the next crews in line. We were in a complete blind and were working in silos without having an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the previous failures. We did not even know how many missions had been accomplished and what was the current status of the colonisation. Previously, a similar Mars colonisation mission had been a complete failure. It was noted that even though the Martian surface had excellent proximity to the life supporting compositions, yet it was impossible to start afresh since the weather conditions could be so temperamental at times that it was not feasible to sustain or create buildings and machinery that could harbour humans and other precious flora and fauna. As the days progressed, I grew increasingly stressed, in a very non depressing kind of way. I felt a nervous excitement keeping me up for hours at stretch. As the distance between Proxima Centauri and our spaceship reduced, it was possible to study the weather patterns and changes in a better way. There was a total of 1500 people aboard, support staff, engineers, HR teams, multi-billionaires, software and tech giants and the likes with the age category falling in range of 22 to 55. My team was the best ever, I grew closer to each and every one, Sythia and Olive specially. We would play

cards in off shifts, and I was notoriously famous for never losing. I loved the quite gamble that came with so much ease. The things that we put up for stake were often humble belongings like “I will plant a tree on the Proxima Centauri and name it after you and take care of it until the end of time”, “You can have this pendant that I have been keeping since my grad”, “I will pawn off this diary with the best comic shorts”. With our routine shifting from intense work to no work for several hours, it was hard to keep up with the natural pace of life.

With only eighteen hours left for our landing, my hear set itself in an accelerated pace and my mind that had been functioning on no sleep and continuous monitoring felt dizzy and deprived. If the magnetic field and gravitational pull led to any abrupt turbulence, we may need to delay our landing significantly. Even though it would not reduce our resources on board but we may have to hibernate a close to 1000 people to make the oxygen cylinders last longer. The plan was to land and then create more on the surface. Sam had sent me a long un-understandable voice note and an email a few hours ago. Most of the words were censored and the write up was blurred. I could only read “*I know it sounds fanatic but Baby please come back. I miss you and the mission is not ****8*****8880—00*****88**8*****000—0*. If you come back we can marry right away and I promise you that life will be more promising on earth than you could possibly imagine. We do not need to have children, we will lead a life that you plan on. I can even quit my own job and take care of the domestic chores. I met your mother two days ago and she has also exhibited skepticism over this mission specially after the latest news that said *****8*****8888*8800000—0000—. I hope you change*

your mind before its too late. Love you now and always” I had tried several encryption bypassing techniques to decipher the text and audio note but had not been able to come up with any thing that could help my case. I had re-read between the lines and spaces and zeroes and eights and asterisks, trying to attest my own meaning.

Do you think that NASA is re-writing our messages? I asked Olive when I had exhausted myself in finding a way to decode it.

Yes of course yes. My Professor had sent me some research findings from the previous landings and I had received it in asterisks and zeroes only. I even wrote to the HR team asking to explain, and they had handed me over the NASA policy and NDA thing as if that would help. Olive said.

I showed her my email and audio notes and she shrugged *You could just ask him to write again and tell him to not be as explicit. You can do that with text messages. I couldn't get my data though.*

We could almost see the surface of Proxima Centauri. The clouds floated in a dream like transcendence, inviting us to their sand blue rhythm. The photonic brightness nearly blinded me after ages of night time views. Olive had tried to explore the composition of these gaseous clouds. Proxima Centauri had been the most promising and explained that it was as hospitable as the earth. The red dwarf star that it revolved around was however known to strip off the stable atmosphere and simulation results were so scattered that it was inconclusive to be able to identify any sort of a correlation between the parameters. The UV radiations from the star would however resulting in photolysis of water thus

producing colossal amounts of oxygen. Data from JWST in the previous decades had been a boon and we knew for sure that Proxima Centauri was not like other anoxic planets or star body systems that sci-fi authors had fantasised over. However not being able to forecast the weather at the time of landing was a source of looming danger and we were thoroughly committed to offer the best from our expertise to overcome the unpredictability with as much control and capability as possible.

There is a major issue that needs our immediate attention. Sythia and Ram announced. The clouds have traces of unidentified elements and we are not sure how it would interact with our space ship upon passing through and I do not think that we can afford to lose time and energy in sending a probe to see if it filters its way through. If we are at least confident that the previous landings were able to pass without having any decomposing interaction with the unknown element, we should be good. This is entirely your call to make. Ram's statements left me perplexed.

How much time until we encounter the first layer? I ask

Approximately 2 hours or so. Also, we are expecting a slight deviance in the expected weather conditions. The storms may erupt exactly when we are in the middle of these cloud layers. Sythia spoke, showing her modelling results.

How about we shed the launch vehicle first and monitor it for its interaction as well as the turbulence. We need to be cautious against flare up and ionic interactions between this trace element. Run me through the molecular studies of this element in the meanwhile. Let us keep a delta of at least forty minutes between the

launch vehicle and our space ship and that way we will neither lose time nor collide with the space typhoon.

The launch vehicle had rummaged freely through the layers as if in a controlled free fall. The metallic surface had been unscathed and the turbulence was not of much impact either. I gave orders to plummet the space ship through as I gained confidence. The element was exhibiting properties intermediate between nano fibres and uranium. With a very short half life and its luminescence was rapidly changing depending upon the red shifts from the dwarf star. However its concentration was neither significant nor interactive in nature with the surrounding atmosphere.

Nearly four hours later, the clouds had cleared and we could witness the brights and what lay across our eyesight was a benevolently panoramic vista that almost looked like a well crafted CGI. I thought I was dreaming. No matter whatever I had imagined, I was definitely not prepared for the beauty and the bounty of the trees, yes trees. All of them were uniform in shape, size and distance, and through their perfectly symmetrical branches and leaves fluttered fireflies like creatures, emitting a neon phosphorescence. We let our spaceship hover for a clear landing, we could not find a rocky surface to tether ourselves to so we did the next best thing - landing on the surface of the water. The launch vehicle sent earlier had been able to make a decent descent and we replicated the conditions on the spaceship and stepped out. The gravity was different from the earth and it took us sometime to get adjusted. It was a spectacular sight - a linear stream of astronauts and engineers and human beings stepping into the waters, nearly floating on the surface like

Jesus, blending the silver spacesuits in a sharp contrast like tiny dew dots against the bright red horizons. If God, did exist, it was definitely evident in this moment of scientific perfection. I felt so elated, I could die. I could die happy. I was overjoyed. Not only had we made a successful launch but the surface was promising with trees and water and oxygen. I could breathe without my cylinder and I could see the outlines of sunset with its prismatic contours. If it wasn't for frequent gasps of my crew mates and their constant appreciation of the moment, I would have dismissed the sight as another one of my highly overactive dreams. But then who says that space walking is not similar to dream walking.

Sythia touched the water, it was cold and somewhat more viscous than imagined.

You shouldn't experiment like that. I scolded her. *We have advanced techniques to do all the probing.*

I know, but its always better with a human touch.

I stared at her in disbelief. *Maybe you're just depressed and you refuse to acknowledge it. What if the liquid was poisonous?*

Everyone is. And I would have loved to be the scapegoat. Besides I did do a quick chemical analysis of the sample before checking. She winked at me.

I loved her courage and quick judgement skills. Sythia had also been my room mate for a very short period right after graduation until recruitment as an astronaut. We had different verticals and fields but miraculously ended up in the same space. The probability of which never ceases to

amaze me. As a student, I had always found her to be intimidating and opposite of what I was. But then as we grew to know each other, I realised we had more similarities than differences. She knew Luke really well. She would often reprimand him if he was not on his best behaviour as my boyfriend. She had unfortunately witnessed me tear myself over him twice - once when he had cheated and again when he had killed himself. Suicide was such a high frequency occurrence in our campus those days that faculties and investigators had almost started to normalise it and neutralised all effort saying "Oh another sad soul", "Cursed and broken generation".

Something is very odd. Ram walked in my direction, nervously twitching through his notes, his glasses perched over the tip of his nose. He pressed the side of the frame of his spectacles and ran through some calculations in his eye and said *The GPS tracker has been unable to locate any of the previous spaceships. It covers a very wide range. I feel we have launched at the polar opposite end.*

That shouldn't be a problem, right? At least we are not in the perpetually dark zone? I questioned.

Yeah, we are lucky that way but then I do not understand why the other space ships did not scuttle here and start the establishment in this part? Something is amiss for sure. I think I will power up the quadcopters and send them over right away. We need to identify the civilisation hotspots as soon as possible. What if this zone is a red alert and our communications can not reach to the other zones? Ram walked away in a hurry.

We could not establish any contact with the other spaceships and civilisations even after hours of traversing. Our space probes and quadcopter had surveyed the entire length and breadth of the planet but had not been able to find a single living soul. We were either deserted or betrayed or something extremely dangerous was brewing and NASA was doing a good job keeping the secret from us. I kept thinking about Sam's warning and what the missing sentences could mean. Nevertheless, we set out to build our own civilisation on a planet 4.4 light years away from home. All the homesickness that I had been feeling in the past couple of days had completely disappeared as I was constantly thinking about the exciting ventures that needed my immediate attention. Sam had sent several emails asking if I was still alive, if I was doing fine, if I would ever come back, if I would now want to find someone new now that he was gone. He sounded like a hopeless romantic in a few of his texts, convening the best of his poetic musings to tempt me back. I was mad at him though, for abandoning me and the mission. No matter what, I would never have done the same thing. I would've continued for love. This is what we had agreed upon, we were in this together from the very start. In fact Sam was the one that had introduced me to the idea of living someplace else, building from scratch, perfecting everything. He was the one who had encouraged me and sold me this scientific absurdity and then he gave up on everything too soon. I called him a few times to ask what he meant in his encrypted emails but every time he just evaded the topic and said I would know if I decided to come back, I still had time and he would be very sorry if anything were to happen to me.

The foundations of the new civilisation mimicked those of Mohen-jo-daro not just to honour their architectural perfection but also it would perfectly coordinate with the latest advancements in technologies. We were still exploring the weather conditions and if needed, we could withstand storms and extreme pressure conditions by switching into remote mode which upon activation would enclose everything safely. The grid patterns of street layouts and gilded monuments with a citadel were the similar highlights. What was different however was the granaries and central bath, instead ours had a library and fuel reservoirs with uranium for nuclear fission. Wind turbines and solar panels were set up as we did not intend on repeating the industrial mistakes that had led to the Earth's doom. The engineers kept constructing until perfection. All the feats were achieved within thirty days as per the Earth's calendar. The dates and time were yet to be configured to Proxima Centauri's rotation and revolution. We had acclimatised ourselves faster than our expectations. The community was becoming cohesive as more people volunteered to do work beyond their comfort zones and expertise. It was like the entire civility was working with a common aim like a single celled organism.

I woke up to the same dream of Luke kissing me and I just couldn't take it any more. I called Sam and he surprisingly answered on a short notice as if he had been waiting for me.

Hey I needed a closure. Could you tell me why did you abandon me?

Wow. What's this about now? His voice sounded strained with stress and sleep.

You know what this is about Sam. You very well know what's been happening. You ditched me on a mission that was your dream too and then you just keep hoping for me to come back. I'm getting weary of all these lies - as if everything is normal between us. Like I could just walk back to you one day and everything would be perfect and normal. I don't even wanna marry you Sam. I have been using you to get out of my head. The truth is you've read me wrong like always. I can not force fit myself into your bundle of expectations. I am sorry but you can't custom design me into a girlfriend of your liking. I sobbed into the transmitter, desperately trying to control my voice that just gave my sadness away.

Calm down Jess. Please breathe. His voice was annoyingly soothing and I instantly regretted having a breakdown like this. I knew he wouldn't understand. I was well versed with his thoughts and emotions. *I guess this is a break up? But I would humbly urge you to re-think. Do you really want this?* He continued speaking.

I did not hint at a breakup. In fact that was the last thing I wanted. All I desired at the moment was his comforting presence, a hug, a smile, a "Everything's gonna be ok". I stared at the distant red horizons out of my window, the sun looked artificial, like an oil painting. I was still not used to the new nature on the new planet. Everything seemed like some "fake plastic world" escaped out of that Radiohead song. Sam's voice felt sans emotion. I couldn't speak for several minutes and continued crying embarrassingly.

Jess, please stop crying. I can't see you like this. Sam spoke.

I always thought that my traumatic childhood followed by my bouts of anhedonia after Luke's cheating and suicide

nothing would make me hate life more. But the truth was I was devastatingly broken again, shattered to the core of my soul. I disconnected the call and then crawled up inside my blanket, shivering and unable to breathe. It kind of hurts when your love betrays you like this. I might have been the most cynical person to live but I had feelings too and it was kind of tough to reconcile the reality of the occurrence. I was raised up to believe that my achievements would amount to nothing unless someone was constantly validating them or if there was a constant importance attested to whatever I was doing. With this breakup I was in shambles once again. My entire moral compass was disfigured and I found myself guilty, deprived and victimised all at the same time. I continued to have the same set of nightmare with Luke in it however there was an unwelcome addition, by the end of the dream I would pull Luke closer to myself and when I tried to grab onto him harder, he would transfigure into Sam and I would stare mortified, unable to understand this morphism. My therapist had been extremely un-helpful and tried to summarise my dream as some Freudian coping mechanism by saying “You have always grieved for Luke. Sam was just a way for you to overcome that loss and as a result you would continue to project your *could have beens* and *happily everafters* that you wanted with Luke onto your desires with Sam.” What my therapist said could have been true but at the moment I didn’t need more guilt and already condemned myself for thinking that I could put all my traumas behind and start afresh like in movies.

There really is no new starts for broken people like me and now I had dragged Sam into all of this. He was innocent and undeserving of this tragic drama. All he had ever done was

care for me, keep my feelings at the highest pedestal while I was repetitively and obsessively thinking about Luke whenever I feel the most depressed. I knew it was unfair to blame all miseries on one focal point but it can only be prudent if you have lived through enough life and all your thoughts and memories are centred around one person. He felt like the universal constant to all my musings. No matter what I thought, or how I kept myself distracted, he somehow found a way to trickle through my thoughts and Sam would just blur into the backdrop.

Olive, Ram, Sythia and I would sit under the pink skies full of the brighter stars, sipping vodka and picking the best ever country music, trying to keep up with our earthly selves. It was indeed weird to be sitting in a new civilisation, embarking into the first stages of revival of our species. The celestial time was so abrupt and fast that I felt old yet un-aged. The mission had brutally exhausted and matured our vision.

I would really love to go back home. Ram said.

I would rather have my home be brought here, instead. Olive would say.

I would rather be here than anywhere else. I would say.

The conversations had started to be short, mostly filled in by liquor and boredom and cigarette smoke. With the gravitational field adjusted to imitate earth's, we were able to walk normally and dress normally. Even with the atmosphere being an exact replica of that of the earth, something was odd and it was quite hard to point it out. The days were short and it was always bright, with only luminosity varying by slight degrees throughout the day. Communication with

our team back on earth had not been very promising as they refused to back us up on our queries and refused to say anything about sending additional resources and help. The HR department was eerily quiet and had not been taking mental health checks any more. Even the technical department was not running simulations to help us create training models for predictions. Ram had come up with extremely unnerving theories that “We were soon going to be infested by some alien plague like the people before us or some extremely unaccounted space anomaly would wipe us out.” It was becoming impossible to stay encouraged. Our first mission post landing was to establish coordination to pool in resources and efforts to colonise Proxima Centauri and the failure to do so had discouraged further developments and resulted in feelings of mass alienation. We could self sustain for a year or so and the strategy needed an urgent revision to go beyond that. Ram and his team was planning to take ISRO’s backup and bring in the required agents and materials.

Dear Jess,

I know you do not wish to hear from me anymore but I am really concerned about you. Besides, its really hard to give up on the idea of “us”. I hope you understand what its done to me. I am devastated beyond repair and hope. Please come back. I know we can fix this.

Love, Sam.

Sam had been persistently sending messages asking for a chance to fix the relationship. I would be lying if I said I was not tempted. But whenever I thought about our relationship,

I felt an aching shame, a distrust, an emotional crisis, a lacunae, an absence of real love and laughter. I believed I would break his heart if I went back. I was filled with constant remorse and hatred and memories of Luke. I hated the fact that I was still grieving Luke more than my breakup with Sam. I hated that if in any part of the universe, it were at all possible to be back with Luke, I would forgive him and go back. I hated that I had let my real self die when he did. I hated that I changed as a person. I hated that I had refused to believe in some other man because Luke had impregnated me with mistrust. I hated that I was unforgiving to myself and to the world around me. I hated that I had soaked up my life with astronomical numbers just so that I could overlook the enormity of my unresolved emotions. Preachers say that grief is dealt in stages and once you've passed them all, you can find solace and strength again. It wasn't the case with me. For me, grief never developed in stages and was largely non-linear.

It was too good to be true - the life on this exoplanet was more than perfect. We had crafted ancient brilliance with a scientific marvel and the days were finally becoming more coherent. They say "all good thing end" and the fate put its control over our mission and tore it apart. One day, Olive ran into my cabin bursting *We are observing a typhoon of magnitude 145knots and is just a few miles away from our residence. Our buildings and foundations are not strong enough to sustain this. The fortification is only half way complete and I don't think we can get past this.*

Red alert was immediately declared and the residents were cautioned to take shelter indoors.

I think we need to evacuate because this typhoon is building in magnitude as its approaching us. Sythia expressed her anxiety.

There's no possible way for us to do that because even if let's say we are able to get everybody aboard in an hour, we will need at least four hours to cross the first atmospheric layer and the turbulence would be so strong that we would not be able to make it out without self destructing the spaceship and ourselves. Ram says.

Can we use the miniature vehicles? I enquire the team with hope.

We have twenty working and seven models under testing and collectively they can carry two thousand and five hundred people. What do we do about the others? Olive says with hesitation.

We need to evacuate as many people as we can right now and then try to get rest of the others inside the spaceship and hide it under the bunker, I am assuming that the bunker depth won't fully accommodate our ship but we can manage to fill in a few hundreds for safety and leave the top-most floors vacant in case they get destroyed. This seems like the only plausible way out. I suggest.

ISRO is on its way for the backup resources, our vehicles can survive for 20 days in space after which ISRO spaceship should take all of those crew members back on earth. This project is the biggest failure. Now it makes sense why the government reports and NASA files maintained high confidentiality. Nobody survives this planet. Ram says in an angry tone.

Lets get to work quick. Olivia and Sythia run to the control rooms to deliver the message for emergency evacuation.

Ram and his team lines up the 2300 people that will be mounting the 25 working space vehicles along with fuels and

resources to make them last for a few weeks. Until ISRO comes to their aid they would be floating in isolation with no possible means of communication. The contact with ISRO can only be established once the spacecraft is in the radio visibility. There was an unrest following this selection of which set of people would leave in the vehicles and who would stay back inside the bunkered spaceship. A lot of crewmates raised ethical concerns over the priority order. The space HR had intervened and set age as the criterion for immediacy. The ones that had to stay back were the people under the age of forty. Who's life carries more relevance and deserves to be saved was not just a question of ethical dilemma but also how humanity would persist under the effects of an ultimate morbid chaos. I did not make the choice and was largely relieved with this decision. Those left behind shielded themselves inside the space ship and barricaded it behind the high walls. It reminded me of the gated colonies of the rich with the only difference being that here we were the incarcerated slaves left to rot at the mercy of a ruthless nature. The typhoon was exponentially rising in magnitude and Ram had significantly under estimated the devastating effect of this rising calamity. When it first hit, the barricades flew around like glass splinters moving in a very fast velocity under a helical force. It sent vibrations that could be easily mapped on a Richter scale similar to an earthquake. Sythia and Olive looked around in confusion, terror writ large on their faces. Ram's expressions mirrored theirs. I shuddered, thinking of Sam and his peaceful life on earth and for the first time in years I regretted following my mind. All the beautiful memories came rushing to me like a huge wave, crashing against the shore, bursting like a

sapphire fire. I clutched the end of the window grail when the walls began to shake.

Take cover under the beds. Ram shrieked.

I began to shudder as I could feel the panic bubbling through my neck. I was frozen in place as if in a sleep apnea but the nightmare was very much real this time. I looked at Olive helplessly. I needed someone to move me out of this situation physically. I wasn't so much scared of dying but of leaving wordlessly. I hadn't even apologised to Sam and given him a second chance at the love restoration.

Ram pushed me under the bed *I got you* he spoke softly as he realised what was happening. *You need to pull yourself together Jess. We need you here with us. Just breathe.*

I looked around the room, tears brimming in my eyes. Everything started to swim around in a tragic blur as the spaceship started imploding. The regret of following my head over my heart followed once again. The mission had failed. All that I was living for was a lie. The HR department was not filtering out the resilient geniuses but the depressed intellectuals that were too broken to be given a chance to consume the earth's waning resources. We were the ones that had cheated through the mental health tests to lie to ourselves and the world that "we were fine, nothing was ever wrong" and when this lie had become too large to bear, we were being punished and exterminated in a new way.

Can't help falling in love by the Elvis Presley was blaring through the speakers. Luke's face was turned towards the sink as he stood rinsing the dishes. He hummed the lyrics along. His long curly hair falling over his slender face. I

stood in the room, sleep deprived and anxious, looking for something to divert my mind off things. I had done almost everything in my power to distract myself from the harsh reality that he had cheated on me and no matter however much I try defending his actions from myself, I just could not do it. We were forced into living together in the same apartment until the lease agreement expired. I had almost exhausted myself trying to find ways to forgive him and keep loving him but somethings just can't be compromised over. I stared into the blank spaces and frequently zoned out. Most of my days were passing by going through the motion in relentlessly depressing pursuits. It was for the first time in my life that I had faced an academic decline. I found it impossible to focus on anything for more than two minutes. My thoughts were in a perpetual pendulum-like motion of either being black or constantly thinking about the whys of why he had cheated on me. I had confronted him and initially he made it seem like I was at fault for having discovered it but at later stages when he saw me cry and suffer he apologised a million times over, repeating "Its me, its not you. I am a terrible person. I was not looking for anything serious with that girl and she just happened to me. I was so ashamed of myself that I could not even bear to tell it to you. I cannot stand losing you Jess. But I know I have already lost you. But I am trying to save you from myself and someday you will understand it all."

I had cried, refused to sleep and eat and socialise. Luke had stopped hanging out with his girls but I was constantly insecure with feelings of "why was I not enough for him".

Its surprising how the most hated, darkest period of your lives end up forming the core of your memories. I would have never imagined that as I would lay dying, I would be revisiting these memories in random order instead of the events that made my life happier. I was sure that all these flashes were a result of me being dead and my mind replaying through its last few minutes of my life's memories. It was shattering to not be able to feel my body anymore and the worst memories kept repeating themselves in a shuffle. I could almost hear my therapist say, "Told you, unresolved trauma will always resurface when you would not like it to."

Its ridiculous how people looking for closures actually find it too. Its funny that at some point people accept the grief just as it is and stop being haunted by it. They move on. I always envied such normal people with a normal lifestyle and normal set of feelings and more than anything an ability to cope with the loss and trauma. I always froze in the past. I over-entertained every set of my thought, dismantled every feeling, restructured them again and again.

Typhoon subsided after what felt like a hundred Earth hours. I was paralysed by the rumbling and destruction, my left hand was brutally injured with metal flints buried deep into the shoulder. I looked around me to try and make sense of the immediate surroundings. I remembered Ram standing next to me before I lost consciousness, I recalled dying but I couldn't see even a trace of our spaceship or fellow crew-mates. Blood trickled down my hands and neck as I sat whimpering in pain, unable to scream or move. The uncanny lighttrays hit sharply across the rocks and the scene looked resplendent with a barren loneliness, silence weighed with

immense sadness. I dragged my body in the shade of a nearby rock. I remember thinking, "If nobody survived, I would die soon too. Nobody knows of this calamity and there are very low chances that the crew that was sent back on earth would try out our radio communication signals so soon." I began losing hope but felt extremely serene. Like I was conscious of the last remnants of my life oozing out with the blood and my mind swaying in an ethereal, ecstatic peace. I sat and wondered if I regretted not listening to Sam and returning when I had a chance to, if I regretted not saying my last goodbye to the family, if I regretted not apologising to my father for being a distant and emotionally turbulent daughter? As all these thoughts floated across my head I began to feel uncontrollably sad. Year of pent up melancholy started to vent out in forms of tears. The dust laden horizon looked back with an apathetic fury. I heard some sort of rattling sound in distance followed by a screeching scream *Help*. I stood up with a nearby rock as my support and started limping towards the direction of the voice. It was Olive. She lay buried under a huge metal sheath and only her upper body was visible. I removed the sheath using a nearby rectangular rod as a fulcrum. To my utmost horror, several corpses lay under the sheath, their spacesuits crumpled like a piece of paper, their faces contorted and flesh plunged out of the helmet in an unidentifiable manner.

Olive's left leg was amputated and she was losing a lot of blood. I tried tying it up using the elastic belt around my spacesuit.

You are gonna be ok. My voice sounded feeble with this hollow promise as Olive stared back blankly.

From a few metres of our standing, the ground started to shake and cylinders about ten feet high erupted from the ground, sending ripples through the surface. The top of the cylinders rotated like a bottle cap revealing a rectangular opening. A human (yes a human) figurine walked out. I was overjoyed. *Is this where the previous crews disappeared?*

Several such structures surfaced in the vicinity, and humans followed around. But they did not seem to pay attention to us or the corpses or the metal sheath blocking a huge area. They had some sort of detectors in their hand and they scurried across the ground, trying to locate something. Some of them had huge pouches filled with the sand like powder.

Hey. Hello. Please? Excuse Me. I screamed at top of my lungs. The woman in the closest cylinder looked up at me in absolute wonder. She adjusted her glasses and scribbled something in her notes and then continued to ignore us. *Hey! Which mission landing are you?* I continued to hurl my question in her direction despite her disinterest. She looked up again, baffled. I limped towards her, dragging Olive with me against my waist.

We just survived a disaster. My crew-mates are missing I need help. We need medical attention as early as possible. She continued to stare wordless. I gestured towards my injured hand and Olive's legs to make her understand. Her eyes followed my finger and returned to my face with a quizzical expression. *What is wrong with her?* I thought to myself. *Am I not audible?* I asked Olive. *Yes you are,* she replied feebly.

I explained the situation once again inching closer to her this time. She nodded in understanding. She looked behind her at another standing in the opposite corner and they exchanged looks. The man walked in our direction, his gaze intent upon us. The man signalled us to follow him into one of the cylinders and the woman came along as well.

The rectangular opening led to a narrow passageway by the end of which was an advanced room that served the purpose of an underground lift. The man entered some digits and then typed something on his phone-like device and turned the screen in our direction, it read, *Do you have an ID?* I nodded in negation and Olive imitated my confusion. He again signalled us to step into the elevator. Even though I felt weirded out by the whole situation I could do nothing. I handed out the astronaut ID card from one of my zipped pockets in the back of the spacesuit and handed it to this man. He looked at it with interest and typed *Not this one.*

We arrived in a temperature controlled room that looked like some sort of a dispensary except that there was no waft of medicinal odour that usually greets you in medical facilities. The floors were reflectively clean and there were no display or sign boards or SOP posters. They asked us to wait and went on to call yet another man dressed up in bright pink raincoat like costume. The huge mask covered his small face and his disproportionately large spectacles made him look like some character from Alice in Wonderland. He gaped at us before shaking his head and showing us his screen which read “*Apologies for our lack of audio communications. Please wait, my staff will attend to you shortly.*”

Are we not allowed to speak? Olive enquired. *Considering I am almost dead with an amputated leg, the least you could tell us is how long should we wait for the procedural formalities?*

The doctor looked at me as if urging me to calm her down.

She's right. I supported Olive. She has sustained life threatening injuries, you mustn't delay. There are more crew mates out there and we would like to retrieve them immediately.

The doctor gave me a thumbs up and disappeared into one of the walls. I stared at Olive whose expression reflected disbelief.

Are we hallucinating? Who are these dumb creatures?

Within a few minutes a doctor reappeared, followed by a few other staff members. Two of the attendants took Olive away and the other three along with the doctor set to examine my wounds. They had everything that they needed on the shelves and seemed to work in a hive like fashion. Doctor applied some sort of a powder on my arm that immediately stopped the bleeding and then poured some clear liquid to clean the wounds. The pain dissipated very quickly. I was given some pills and water.

The doctor smiled, showing his screen yet again "Procedure completed."

Olive re-appeared a few minutes later. She seemed healthier than before, as if the injuries had never happened. There was no trace of limp in her walk.

Who are these people? I asked her.

I think Gods. Because the way that metal sheath was dug into my flesh only some really powerful God could have fixed me so fast. Olive exaggerated her gratitude.

These people are behaving rather strangely for previous landers. They haven't mentioned a word of acknowledgement. Seeing from their expressions I don't even think they realise that we are fellow crew mates or something. I continued my afterthoughts until the man who had initially led us re-appeared.

I apologise for not being able to audio communicate, our frequencies were turned down for the sake of energy preservation. He spoke with a mechanical baritone like someone was converting his thoughts into an audio chat. It felt rather absurd and maybe because I was sleep deprived, I felt hungover and like Alice down the rabbit hole.

May I please know your IDs and home planet? He asked, his eyes looking piercingly vacuous like he was doing some sort of a laser detection through my head.

I am Jessica and this is my crew mate Olive. We arrived from Earth almost three months ago. We have been stranded here after our spaceship broke down in the typhoon. Some of my crew mates are still stuck out there. I am afraid they might be injured just like us and I request you to assist me in finding them. I replied

Earth? His eyes widened in surprise. We are surprised you folks are still being sent over despite so many deaths. We heard that your planet was in peril and they kept sending spaceships to try and build a civilisation here but we strongly warned them that this is a suicide mission. How come you guys are so adamantly self destructive?

The winter Sun found its way through the bedroom window. Sheets of integral calculus fluttered around as a strong pre-

Christmas cold and cookie fragrance laden wind gushed in. Luke smiled at me, “*Do you need me to shut the windows?*”

No I answered yawning.

Did you finish reading for tomorrow’s test?

Nope.

He rose up from his desk and carried himself in a swift motion over mine. He began massaging my back. I giggled, watching the sunset spread its colours on his face, making him glow like the Sun God himself.

Let me worship you with my kisses and love. I spoke, looking into his deep honey coloured eyes.

I need you to stay Jess. It is cold and dark sometimes. And I am really sorry I was not very honest with you. But please stay.

Yet another one of those benevolent deprivations. I woke up with an acute awareness that I had been dreaming again. Yet it felt so real. I could still smell his mild fragrance and a gentle brush of his lips against mine. I struggled to fall asleep again even though I desperately wanted to continue dreaming.

What happens now? Olive asks over the brunch next day. *I have been thinking that we should try and contact Earthlings and tell them about this discovery and become immortals for life.*

Be practical Olive. I nod in disapproval. *It turns out they have known all along that this was a suicide mission. Not a single ship has survived before us. Not a single human has contacted to deliver any feed on this planet. We will be a hated anomaly given that NASA wanted us to perish.*

Cause and Effect

Proxima Centauri has been a boon - It has offered me life in ways I can't explain or be grateful enough for. The weather is torturous when at its worst but feels like heaven when at its best. It offered me companionships and I realised how starved I had been without their nourishment. The best part however was that I could communicate wordlessly, like a data transfer from my brain to another. I did not need a whole lot of audible complexities and speeches and voice modulations and emotional emphasis anymore. I could just think and transfer the messages across. I was becoming more of a human by becoming lesser of one. This entire species of human-like creatures (or Simulants as we called them) was unimaginably advanced in the way they had created and survived on this planet. When the weather was liveable, the stimulants would camp on its surface and celebrate like it

was some kind of a festival. At the times of typhoon (accuracy of prediction being 100%) they would seek shelter within the surface. The entire surface would open up, revealing the amazing life within. So far, my crew had survived almost three typhoons like this. Olive and Ram had surprisingly gained quite a fan following amongst the simulants. These two guys would often work in the hi-tech laboratories trying to find ways to save earth in the day and party at the ethereal beaches by night.

Only if I had known that Proxima Centauri would bestow me with a conundrum that would not only change my life but would also force me to be the in-charge of saving a million lives back home, I would have maybe quit my journey and gone back with Sam instead.

It was a full moon party at the beach. Bioluminescent planktons glittered as the waves crashed against the surface. The glitter rose and fell in harmony across the ocean waters making you trip. Life was so full of potential on the best days that it was nothing less than being in Paradise. The music reverberated across the domed artificial sky, the voices ricocheted across, creating the best rhythmic beats. I felt happy for the first time in my life. Simulants scurried around, dancing and swaying to the beats, raising their flasks in the air, smiling and nodding. I was getting high for the first time after so long, the world seemed a brighter place as if rinsed off all its melancholy, rising from the ashes of sadness. Ram came towards me saying, "You have got to... need to... try this thing. It is the best dose I have ever had in my life. And when I say best, trust me its better than the dope they give during Ayahuasca rituals or those pills Ibiza."

He handed me small emerald coloured pill. The disco lights broke off in a tender bokeh across its belly like surface, glistening like a golden dew. I rubbed it between my fingers, the cold membrane curved under my touch, squishing and threatening to explode. “What is this?” I asked in awe.

“They call it the mango crush, it is a psychedelic that they use to make euphoria last for several hours. Several Proxima hours not earth hours.” He grinned.

I popped it in my mouth, rinsing it with the whiskey. The pill burst into a sharp citrusy flavour whose after taste was ridiculously similar to that of alphonso mangoes I once had in India. The effects kicked in as soon as the it reached my throat, leaving a burning tang in my mouth. I had never been this reckless in experimenting with drugs. But the assurance that I was doing it outside Earth and would be taken care of if anything went wrong made me bold enough.

One of my favourite songs blared over the speakers hitting me up with a nostalgic ecstasy.

I'll give you space

A brief intermission

Whatever it takes

I'll go the distance

It felt like I could float off and reach our fake moon and eat it up. I imagined it tasting like limestone and sugar, the powdery marble like texture rubbing against my palette. Without my glasses on, the lights seemed to drizzle against a dark backdrop like an oil painting.

I found myself in Luke's funeral, the cathedral was crowded with masses clad in black. The mourning whispers and the sound of crying made me sick. I felt as if I was watching my own life from the vantage of a third person. I was so caught up with my life, desperately busying myself so that I could get over him that I forgot to check in on him. I felt responsible for this turn of events.

"Jess please don't leave me. I deserve to be a better person for us." He had pleaded a few months after I had caught him cheating. I gave him an extremely cold dismissal. Reaching out to my friends to step in and take my side, I had completely blocked him out of my life. Yet when I discovered that he was dead, I was not only devastated in ways I could never express but I also felt extremely guilt ridden and infuriated. He had done this on purpose to exact a revenge on me to teach me that people die when you leave them alone for too long. I felt absolute hatred for myself at the lack of empathy and emotional servitude for my former boyfriend.

Everything seemed to follow in a slow black and white animated visual. I was grieving and needed saving from my own self. I looked around and the black masses seemed to aggravate the misery further. A few people cast judgemental stares, accusing me of my stance. Yet the sadness I felt was nothing as compared to their false judgements. I saw Luke lying in the coffin, his body cold and blue with the whites of his eyes rolled over. The sight would haunt me for days to come. This was not the Luke I remembered or had fallen in love with. He lay there lifeless, his corpse sucking out the life in me. I wanted to break down in sobs and wail loudly. I wanted to scream my head off - "This isn't fair." One side of his skull was almost sunken in, red and blue veins protruding like a web, sketching over his jawline. They had told me that Luke had over dosed in his bathroom and fallen face first in the bathtub. It was the drugs that

had proved to be fatal and not the injury. As much as I was horrified at the sight of him, I could not take my eyes off his face, and I mumbled prayers, begging the Gods to make him live and breathe again. All the rituals after death are for the living - to console them. But the void the sifts inside your soul can not be filled with prayers of peace or eulogies. My hand turned into a fist, crumpling the piece of paper that contained his eulogy. When we had started dating initially, he had made me write one for him and he wanted it read out so that he could navigate through my feelings for him. Whenever I thought of this incident in retrospect it made me angry. It was unfair that he had not only deprived me of happiness but he himself would never feel the pain of losing someone.

I don't remember anything else for the days that followed. I kept drowning in the deluge of his memories. The fondness with which he caressed my hair, the forehead kisses, the strong pillar of love,...I wanted to forgive him and myself but no matter how hard I tried at letting go, it just would not happen. I would have minutes in a day where I felt I was doing well then all of a sudden all the memories would come crashing down. When I could not drive my thoughts away, I started to accept their affectation. I stopped fighting memories and feelings. I decided to surrender and succumb. I could not even comprehend the very basic equations taught in the class and everything stopped making sense. I started to imagine Luke living in a paradise wherein he was learning physics from the scratch as the usual laws did not apply in this new space.

I was barely going through the motions and time buried its shield, running in a slow motion. I wanted minutes to speed up and take me to the moment of my death. As much as we had advanced scientifically, it was still not possible to define the precise reason and nature of our origin. We could not save people from life threatening

diseases or bring them back to life like Frankenstein or predict the exact date and reason when someone was bound to die. Sciences were still horribly limited.

We had found means to connect to people on earth and send our data back home. The signals were not seamless but we could record and receive videos to allow us to communicate with friends and families. Sam had sent a Timelapse of him working in the engineering department of some spaceship building facility and then going back home to cook and do dishes. He had attached a note which read: *Dear Jess, I wanted to share a snippet of my living with you. The days are extremely uneventful and full of a callous isolation. My work is extremely repetitive and solving multiple iterations of the same thing is mentally taxing. When I come back home, loneliness engulfs me. I work overtime and on weekends as well just so that I can get past my thoughts and emotional exhaustion. I know you will say that I have no rights to complain when I chose this life for myself. I should not sit in the safe confines of my home and ridicule those who have been courageous enough to venture out in the space. I am really sorry for making you feel abandoned specially after I was the one who was convinced of the promise of our space ventures. I know that you think it was extremely cowardly to turn my back and return home when things became demanding. Maybe that is how I have been dealing with our relationship as well. A lot was going on in my head while I was with you. I was constantly fatigued with the low chances of us reaching our destination, not to mention the sheer aimlessness that I was enduring at that time. I wish I had been more honest with you in describing these overwhelming feelings. Not a single day passes without me thinking about how I should have done this differently. I miss you Jess and I hope you return to me at the earliest.*

It were moments like these that made my heart weak. I was no God when it came to committing mistakes. I had always done my share of sins and asked for an atonement and received it too. But when it came to forgiving, I always lacked the patience and sympathy. Life had been a complete mess ever since Luke's demise and it was Sam who had pulled me out of the throes of misery. I can still recall vividly the day Sam had walked into my doleful existence and turned things around. My grades had suffered in the last semester of the college but owing to my internships and otherwise impeccable record and publications, I had received an offer to work with NASA. I was still under the shadow of Luke's death, grappling with depression and guilt when I met Sam as a fellow team mate who were working on the next mission to Proxima Centauri. Ours was expected to be the last try as all the previous missions had born no fruit and the government was not left with any more resources to endow us with. All the multi-billionaires had already entreated into a decision of cutting off the failed mission and were instead planning on building underground bunkers or funnels as they called them then. So, the responsibility of making things work lay upon our shoulders and we had to make sure that the simulations gave us an exact replica of the situations that we may encounter. Sam had come in as an anchor and given me all the emotional support. We used to hangout in local breweries and bars after our shifts ended and talked at length about Art, cinema and literature. It was during these conversations that I had become aware of his intellectual and emotional depth. I started finding comfort in his constant company and had begun to smile at his jokes. I can not remember if I fell for him but I admit I had developed a

strong attachment towards him. He would often drop by at my apartment and would cook and clean despite my constant denials. It was just a few weeks before the launch of our spaceship that he asked me to meet him at Nocturne - a rooftop bar just a few miles from my apartment. To my surprise he had arranged for a special reservation, decorating the sitting area with flowers and shimmering stars. He had already hinted his feelings of affection towards me and his seriousness for the same and it was there that he proposed, asking me to be his girlfriend. I thought he was just throwing away a birthday dine and I did not see this coming. I accepted but I never got to talk about my real feelings until then. I had mostly avoided talking about my past because it was difficult to lay out my feelings for someone I had barely known. But Sam was aware of the sadness and was receptive if I ever wanted to talk about it. I had tried to give ourselves a new start and wanted to build things with a strong foundation of love and trust. Sam was the perfect boyfriend that anyone could ask for - He understood my thoughts, moods, needs as if reading through me all the time. He was blessed with not only good looks and brains but also exceptional cooking skills. My mom who hardly ever approved of anyone had met him once and labelled him as a “keeper”. Days started to look better again, pristine almost bathed in dappled sunlight as if the Gods had decided to let go of the fury and bless me with a steady and comfortable existence for a while. I was starting to feel more like myself for once in an entire lifetime until now. I still had my moments of restlessness and denial but it often came in waves and I was no longer constantly drowning in the dirge like before. Ambition was gaining pace and I had finally

recovered my potential of working a job that I was in love with. I did not feel depressed if I was mentally occupied and my will to die had subsided. Even on my worst days, I could muster up the courage to not breakdown or tear apart over things beyond my control. Sam had introduced me to his family shortly after we started dating and for the first time I felt like I could get adopted with his folks in manners I had always longed for. Sam's was often brimming with an optimism far beyond my forbearance but my threshold increased gradually when I began giving weight to his thoughts. Sam was nothing like me or the guys I had been with before him. The simple hack of not falling for my type had finally seemed to work in my favour. I will admit that I was often envious of his happy upbringing without any pressure or chaos. Everything was starting to fall in its place right before the mission started. I was patient and calm but there was still a tiny voice in my head that was warning me against some lurking darkness. I misconstrued this as a negative reinforcement I had learnt from my traumatic experiences previously and decided to ignore the gut feeling for once.

It took us roughly 4.25 years to gather the information and send it back on earth. I had studied relativity and its effects and had watched ample sci-fi movies to help me educate about the lurking damages of the same. Yet experiencing it myself felt so odd. I could clearly see how Sam had aged ever since he went back in earth. I felt the same sense of care and responsibility towards him that I did before but the aching realisation that I may not be able to make it back in time gnawed at my bones. I could understand the sadness behind the snippets of his life that he shared with me. It was similar

to dealing with Rip Van Winkle or the ghosts that you knew would haunt you in the most heart-breaking fashion. I could not help but think about how life would have been different if I had accompanied Sam instead of landing on Proxima Centauri. Images of a small apartment with a garden blooming with petunias and rhododendrons flashed across my mind. Blurry picture of two small kids giggling and playing with a football in that neat little garden followed up next. I could see the distinct outline of Sam's hand on my waist and the firm assurance of his presence comforting me filled my eyes with tears. But something felt wrong in this extremely domesticated imagination. I could not point my finger to what it was but the wholesome image still felt wrong. In no timeline would this dream become true. The earth was on the brink of destruction. Clouds of carbon and sulphur flapped their deathly span across its atmosphere. The water bodies were fading into deserts and the oceans were rising to down the residential towns. Most of the cities had become a ghost town and people were harnessing resources and shelter through underground bunker reserves. The first to be tormented by the misery were those who were poor while the ones belonging to upper echelons were still able to extract luxuries and excess of everything. Countries were at war against each other and now the geo-political issues were no longer pertaining to just oil but everything else as well. Whenever negotiations failed, countries with more power plundered and looted the ones with lesser military capabilities.

The handful of crew mates that had survived the landing on Proxima were engaged in building a spacecraft to be sent back home. The monocoque fuselage was ready and the load

testing was in process when Ram came to me with his apprehensions.

Jess even though the stimulants are helping us with everything but my gut feeling says that we lack crucial knowledge that we need to journey back home.

What knowledge?

The calculations of speed are coming out to be way too unrealistic and I feel that even if we encounter a meteor drift, we can still hurl back in less than 4.25 years.

We spent the next few weeks working on the calculations but the final results were still the same. Simulants who were on board with this mission had shown willingness to travel back with us and study earth's living conditions from thereon. Simulants had never shown any particular curiosity towards the Earth prior to this because they felt that continued arrival of spacecrafts and their destruction was an indication that the conditions were hostile and the probability of survival was extremely low.

In the days outside the facility, we spoke about things we would do and food we would eat upon our arrival. The entropy results for exceeding our stay in space travel were coming up to be favourable unless we were hit by some unexpected deviation.

Simulants had originated and evolved from a single cell. Unlike the unicellular organisms on earth, Simulants carried intelligence and consciousness. No one knew of their sources or how they had come into existence other than the factors that had made Proxima's environment hospitable for their survival. Simulants had been carrying energy and

information from earth for the past two decades and they were aware that the planet was in peril. Regardless of their advanced technology and scientific temperament they lacked any urge or moral attachment to help the planet out of its shambles. According to our standards, they were a very discreet and isolated species, capable of their own survival. They had no emotions of their own but they could borrow forms and memories to resemble those on earth. Most of them lived upto 500 years or more and in their exceedingly long lifespan, they experimented with different careers, choices, life partners and all that brought them peace and pleasure. Simulants could devolve to their original form when faced with crisis and stay in hibernation if met with drastic temperatures and unsustainable environments.

Ram and Sythia had often resorted to calling them Humanoids because they acted like programmed algorithms instead of acting on their own accord. They had replicated oceans, sun, moon, rivers, grasslands, mountains and other landscapes seeking inspiration from earth. But there were no animals much to our surprise. Nobody had wanted to add diversity to the fauna and it was very sad to sometimes walk through their simulated forests and not coming across any animals.

But cats are cute. You must add them to your next replication list. Olive had once pleaded to a stimulant she had become friends with. Simulant had just ignored her desires saying, adding other animals would be a fatality and their results would be catastrophic.

The night sky was studded with stars. The distant horizon glittered with a meteor shower. The winds howled in a

frightening manner, adding an air of warning and threat. The scintillations of the unknown trace element that we had seen earlier turned out to be the reason why Proxima's interior environment was kept intact and was not undergoing implosion. Simulants called these elements as red dots. The properties of red dots were not identical to any of the element that we were versed with. These were believed to be formed by a nuclear reaction when Helium flare hit the mineral rich soil of Proxima, and several elements reacted to release and form new unknown compounds. The thermodynamics of this universe provided for the stability of this new matter. These trace elements were non-reactive most of the times but could definitely change into some other destructive substances when exposed to a change in environment. At night, we could see these red dots creating patterns almost like aurora borealis back home, except they changed colours very frequently because of their rapid changes in energy states. Ram and I were just exiting the facility when a stimulant came running towards us, his face looked serious. He tried to warn us against the launch of spaceship that was scheduled for the next week. He argued that the atmospheric concentration of red dots was currently at its peak and it could damage our reaction control engines. Red dots could diffuse through the layers and create a series of uncontrolled chain reaction. Ram was not willing to give this second thought.

We know that the current trial can fail but if we wait for the concentration levels to go down, we would lose precious time and it would take us more than 40 years to reach back. This is a calculated risk that needs to be taken for the sake of saving our planet.

Next typhoon hit was predicted to be a few weeks away, so Olive, Ram and I decided to travel around to locate other sources of safety and information to look out for clues that could be missing yet. Simulants had extremely fashionable vehicle, almost shaped like torpedoes and they would glide over the rocky terrain with so much ease that it almost felt like you were on the ocean and not land. These vehicles were inter-convertibles and could snorkel in the water as well as take off in the air by making use of their special air mode feature. Manoeuvring them was quite simple and was almost similar to that of a remote-controlled machine or a drone. We were flying at a low altitude to scan the surface for any anomalies.

You know the biggest problem of our times is that our generation doesn't want to live any more. Olive shed her saturnine in the backseat of the vehicle. We have felt so entitled to the routine and resources that we did not even realise that our faults have cemented the earth into a gas chamber.

It is not just our fault Olive, the former generations took decisions that have led to the drastic adversaries. Ram spoke.

Yet we are the ones who bear the brunt of blame and responsibility to fix everything. Why cant I just act like my age? I just want to be 23 year old girl, fresh out of the uni, spending away her big girl money in Las Vegas or Paris. Olive spoke with gloom.

I was doing exactly the same when my Dad washed me with guilt and I had to switch my careers back to space and technology. I knew it was his cheap manipulation tactics to get me out of my comfort zone, but c'mon man! No body sends their only child on a mission this dangerous. Ram said.

I had chosen this life at NASA so I often forgot that most of my cremates had been forced into this and what was passion for me was a punishment for them.

Then why did you guys not go back when you had the chance to? I ask.

Because there is not going anything back to Jess. Honestly, the planet that I have been calling home for the last 23 years is dying and I would never want to witness the mass destruction up close. I know it sounds hypocritical to my whims but I am assured that staying back up and doing whatever least we can do is a far better decision than going back and watching things spiral out of control.

Well I did not want to turn back like a coward and reach empty handed to be ridiculed by my Dad. Also they were going to force the quitters into doing boring engineering works for building underground tunnels. Why should I serve rich when all my life I have despised them whole heartedly. Ram spoke.

I was under the impression that your Dad owned 50% stakes in Highball Haven (another private space agency) so that kind of makes you rich, isn't it? Olive smiled quizzically.

Oh yeah, that. Exactly why I hate the rich. Trust me no one knows it better than I do as to how insensitive and greedy they are. Trust me I am different. I have fought for my Dad's attention all my life only to win his approval and show him that life can be lived with virtues too.

The surface was laden with rocks, sparkling in the intense daylight. Their texture seemed smooth from a bird's eye with the colours ranging from deep purple to iron red and copper green probably because of mineral enrichments and complex

compound formation. Olive and I clicked pictures while Ram drove the vehicle close to them.

Do you reckon we should collect souvenirs for back home? He asked.

I am not gonna be home bound at all. Olive spoke and I nodded in affirmation.

So, you guys will choose to stay here? Why did you never say anything at all. The way that you were committed to the spaceship making I thought you were in it. Ram asked with a hint of disapproval in his voice.

I do not have anything to go back to Ram. I feel y family has moved on without me and Sam will probably have found a new wife by the time I reach back. I shrugged in response.

I cant go back precisely because I can not live everyday with a guilt of what we have done to our planet. I would rather stay here for as long as possible and call Proxima my home. At least I will be under a delusion that this. Is what paradise looks like and my afterlife is a bliss. Also, how can I ever forget that NASA never wanted us to live. The government also knew that this was a suicide mission. Wasn't it conspiratorial on their parts to subject the best brains to succumb like this so that population can be controlled and those that would be left would not rebel but only bow to the whims of those in power?

We dismounted to inspect the rocks up close. We were gathering information when Proxima's surface flared up with an intense luminosity. Ram was a few meters away and he looked at me "Do you think its just the normal magnetic activity?"

"Doesn't look like it.." I had barely finished my sentence when the alarms for typhoon warning blared up.

“Hurry, lets move”. Ram screamed as he rushed and signalled in the direction of our vehicle.

“Where is olive?” I shouted above the noise.

We looked around in alarm. Red dots were rising around us in a threatening motion.

“Olive” We screamed our lungs out.

“Jess let us mount the vehicle and look over in that direction.” Ram pointed. “She had gone there the last that I saw.”

The nearest opening to get underground was 2 miles from our current location and time was running against us.

The vehicle hovered above at the expected location and our eyes searched for her. We could see the typhoon circling towards us when we spotted her lying frozen in panic.

“Olive. Please hurry up. Get up. You got this.” I screamed.

She looked at me with terror in her eyes. Her lips mouthed “Save me”. I was about to hop out when Ram locked the shields and turned around with typhoon chasing around our heels.

“Wait...Olive....” I could not finish my sentence when the vehicle hurled itself in the opening and the typhoon grazed over us.

I had seen death up close for a third time now. My heart was still racing when I felt hot tears streaming down my eyes. “Olive. We got to save her”. I lurched towards the door when he held my arm back. “You can not Jess. Its too late”

Olive's demise had unsettled the atmosphere. Simulants that worked with her were horrified and I could not keep myself from carrying yet another baggage of guilt. Ram and had said over and over again that it wasn't our fault and we had tried our best to bring her back but it was difficult to wipe it off my conscience nonetheless. As a result of this unfortunate turn of events, Ram had decide to expedite the home-going process. He believed that curses were unfolding because we weren't meant to be here and we were disturbing the natural order of things. Ram and I were going over Olive's things in order to cremate those since we had not been able to find any piece of her body for the ritual.

"She was an atheist, right? Why do we even have to do it? Its like disrespecting her." Ram had spoken.

"These rituals are never for the dead but for the living. To help them reduce the pain and make them believe in the concept of peace and eternity." I answered.

Spaceship was ready to be launched back home and Ram had tried to talk me into changing my mind. I was still grappling with my own melancholy to address logic instead of emotions so I declined his offer and wished him luck. The place of launch was a few miles away from where we were residing. I didn't have the energy to see them off so I wished them luck and crawled back under my blankets.

I didn't realise that I had fallen asleep when suddenly the alarm in my space watch started giving warning signals. I sat up in a shock, my heart racing. Upon logging into my computer I realised that Ram's spaceship was under some manoeuvring and high temperature risks. As I ran out, one

of the stimulants cut me off in my tracks saying the spaceship had failed. It had been reduced to ashes by the flare up caused my a high concentration of the red dots. No body had survived. Stimulants were not used to the idea of death. They found it hard to comprehend that people stopped being alive and their existence was wiped off just like that. I had to send a message back home, stating out condolences and root cause analysis of this tragic accident. In the days that followed, I felt extremely lonely and depressed. The thought had not hit me before but now it felt like I was stranded and had no one around who could lift me out of this rabbit hole.

The stimulants who were aboard on Ram's mission had survived (or reincarnated as they called it). Whenever a stimulant died, only its body was destroyed but the single cell that had caused it into existence would be unscathed. This single cell would then be used in evolution of a new life. This cell itself contained all the memories and intelligence and after regaining a new body, the stimulant would be back like it was never dead in the first place. But for us humans, death was the end. There was no rising from the ashes or getting restored in a new body like some software being installed in a new hardware device.

Maybe what made life so precious to us on Earth was the sheer fragility of it. The fact that every moment was fleeting and time was irreversible and you were mortal made us fall in love with every single moment. I can not even imagine what I would have done if I was suddenly bestowed with immortality? It would be more of a curse than a boon. To live and just live without an end... Wouldn't that be

meaningless and exhausting? I would be bored out of my brains and would become more cynical and nihilistic for sure.

However much I had aspired to be like other people - to find hope in times of despair, search for light when in dark, be positive even when your world was falling apart (quite literally), I had been unable to be anyone else but me.

I remember that once my high school teacher had said that depression is not real. People who call themselves depressed are selfish and narcissistic. She had strengthened her claim further by highlighting several research papers that said that depressed people's write-ups often comprise of an over usage of words like - "I", "Me", "Myself". They live inside their heads and only think about themselves and if they were social, they would not suffer so much. This breakdown had angered me and I felt suffocated and stifled by the over-optimism of others. Maybe depression did make me selfish because I was mostly concentrating on surviving and not socialising but what people never really understand is that those undergoing this state are not even capable of reaching out. Your emotions feel like a weight you have to carry by yourself. Your head constantly oscillates between being unnervingly quiet or being over-stimulated at all times.

I had not realised but being occupied in spaceship making had successfully kept my mind occupied, it had provided a sense of purpose, however temporary that may have been. After the crash, I felt even more isolated and responsible. We had also lost all the data that was supposed to reach earth with them. There was no possible way to gather all the information again and reach back in time.

Simulants had been extremely supportive even though they were not able to comprehend emotions the way that we did. Death was still a foreign concept to them and several of them had suggested reincarnation innocently. It was heartbreaking to see their reaction when they realised that death meant an end to existence and there was no reversing the situation.

I was watching the launch of the spaceship from the recordings and how the red dots had flared up and reacted with the elements that caused an uncontrolled nuclear reaction, leading to combustion and explosion that reduced the space ship as well the crew mates to ashes with a few seconds. Simulants were reduced to indestructible single cells with their DNA and consciousness intact. The other stimulants who recovered the seeds had carried them to their hospital facilities and incubated and brought them back to life. I could not help thinking that if it was possible to bring back the daed like that, I would have loved to bring Luke back. I was not sure if I would have forgiven him but I would have surely spoken to him like a friend. Maybe I just needed a chance to tell him that I knew what melancholy feels like. I just wanted to hold his hand and tell him it would be alright. I wanted something to take away my self-hatred and guilt. But at this point, so many things and decisions had spiralled beyond my control that it left me feeling helpless and useless.

I decided to go back to our abandoned facility to make a note of the resources and information that was left. Several of the stimulants had offered to help again. Even those working in the field of microbiology and medicines had already started their research to try genetic alteration and

make my body like theirs. We were exploring all the possible ways to try and reach back to earth.

I was at an event that simulants had organised to commemorate ten thousand years of evolution. They spoke about their biological history, the gradual change into the human-like form that we see today. Earth, being their nearest neighbour had inspired them to take a human form. Their mathematics and literature was significantly different than what we as human beings were used to. There was no capitalism or politics and everybody worked as per their own morals and conscience. There were no crimes or violence. Proxima Centauri was indeed the heaven that was described in so many religious scriptures. But it hadn't taken a death for us to reach here, just loads of calculus and trial and errors.

The smell of cookies and chocolates wafted in the air, the rosy interiors gave everything an aesthetically pleasing impression. I was talking to one of the simulants when my eyes came across Luke. I froze as I recognised his face. I was too shocked to have a happy reaction. The stimulant I was speaking to turned around in the direction of my gaze and gestured Luke to join us.

Hi. Luke spoke. I am....

Luke. I gasped before he could even finish his sentence.

No. I am Viktor but sure. If thats what he was called. Luke it is. And he winked, extending his right hand.

His hand felt warm and soft just as the way I remembered and his voice was exactly the same as well. I must have had a baffled expression because Viktor started explaining - *You see*

I never really thought I would ever come across anyone who knew this Earth guy - Luke. A while ago, one of our seeds had needed evolution when one of our seniors walked in with this guy's personality and memories and conscience. I was then coded with his genes and everything and here I am. He smiled. Not that I had a lot of control then in deciding to be someone else, but if I wanted to I could always change my form to something different and be someone else but you see, this guy is quite handsome and a lot of girls up here like it this way. He winked again.

What do you mean, you borrowed from him? I asked, unable to believe my eyes.

You see there was like a really rich lady on earth, probably his Mother or something and she had sent in her dead son's DNA and strands of consciousness that contained his memories in one of the ships. Now the ship was destroyed within minutes after it had landed here but the DNA and consciousness had survived. One of our teams on patrol discovered them embedded in the rocks and thought it an interesting experiment to pass it on to one of their own seeds and see what happens. He explained.

So, how what happened? I asked, my eyes lingered on his face as I looked for signs of my Luke inside him.

The memories compartmentalised inside my "brain" as you call it. He spoke pointing at his head. And then there were empty pockets/ compartments where I could create my own memories in my lifetime but I would also always have his. He looked at me with a little concern as if he had suddenly scanned Luke's memories. It left me wondering if I had survived in any of his memories. If I was significant enough in his life that he

had created me in his head even as he had separated from me.

Luke put his hand around my waist, drawing me closer to himself and hugged me. *This feels nice.* He mumbled with his mouth near my ear. *I am sorry but this feels right.* He continued with his fingers caressing my hair. *I know.* I whispered with my head leaning on his palm.

Parts of him have longed for you Jess. You smell exactly like what his memory holds. I have been looking for this scent and this face all my life. He said as he held me closer.

He walked me home later that night. I was struggling to fight my tears.

He was sorry for what he had done to you. Viktor spoke. *He always wanted to repent and make it up to you. The girls that he dated after you held no significance in his life. He was just trying to make you envious to wanna go back to him.*

Shut up now. I nearly screamed. *I have suffered enough already. I don't want any more guilt in my direction. Why did you do it though?* I enquired.

*Oh. Umm....Do you want me to say it in third person or first? This bit is a little scary. I reeder the feeling of dying and all....*His voice trailed.

I am sorry. Whatever is convenient for you. I am so sorry I do not wish to impose my sadness on you. If you do not want to tell, you should not have to. I am sorry again, Viktor. I said.

Let us save it for another day Jess, I only just met you. I wanna know you better. He smiled kindly with his eyes twinkling as he said my name.

He held my hand in his as we walked, caressing my palm with his thumb as he did so, just the way that Luke used to. I smiled to myself.

Please say my name again. I like the sound of it when it comes from you. I requested.

Jess. Jess. Jessica. He repeated. *Is that right?*

I nodded.

Luke dropped me home and promised to call me later. I sat in my bed, contemplating all that had happened. It made sense now that Luke's mom was upto something all along. But I could still not understand the futility of the action. What was the point in sending her son's DNA and memories in the outer space gif there was no hint that we would discover new life. Was it meant as some sort of a funeral arrangement? I was elated at the prospect of having discovered Luke on some planet in a different timeline but I still felt guilty. Wasn't this all that I had been waiting for all this time? Tears streamed down my cheeks and my breath grew rapid. Why does everything beautiful and desirous find you at a cross-roads of sin? Why when I finally had what I needed, did I still feel so empty and hypocritical. I hadn't figured out how to tell Sam of my latest encounter and the more I thought about it, the more it felt wrong. The night was dark outside my window. Eerie quietness rose around like a disquieting blanket of shame and sin. My eyes inadvertently traced the steady outlines of the mountains

outside my window. Their surface glowing with red dots, giving in an eternal continuum. I couldn't help drawing a parallel of the scene beyond with my own life. Things had ventured beyond life and death to something of a higher permanence.

Luke or Viktor as he liked being addressed took me for a hike. He said he wanted to show me some of the best parts of his world and there were locations that he thought I would like. Viktor had a completely different disposition as compared to Luke. Except for shared memories, Viktor did turn out to behave differently. He was more amicable and outgoing.

You know Jess, it always felt like I was on a borrowed identity. I used to have all these dreams and conversations that I knew I would never have. His memories on a loop...It felt nice to have a kaleidoscope into someone else's life but it can be tiring at times. I have no use for these, you know? But I have still felt connected to his lore. I was sort of waiting for you to show up. After every space ship crash, I would go with the resurrecting team to see if I could find remains of the passengers, hoping that if I ever saw yours, I would know.

But how would you know it was me? I asked.

I do not know, I just thought intuition would guide me to you. I just wanted to see what love looked like. What even drives a person to do things that this gentleman did? Though I must admit that his actions are unpardonable but I have his thoughts and feelings inside of me, and I can only assure you that they are not all bad.

I knew what Viktor was saying was true. Luke was a good person, the kind who would stop to help a blind man cross

the road, or the kind who would adopt an injured stray animal and help them live again. It was this juxtaposition in his behaviour and actions that I was still not okay with. What was he thinking when he decided to cheat on me? I was always scared that he would one day lose interest in me and want to break up, but what he did was so off-putting. I knew what it was like on the receiving end of such betrayals. The way that I had tormented myself for days....why was I not good enough? And his insincerely innocent response "Its not you Jess, its me..." Yet, none of it ever made any sense. Now I know a lot people forgive and forget but I had harboured such extreme hatred and envy that I had started to feel responsible for his suicide. Only if I had let him down slow....Or forgiven him....Or stayed a friend when he needed....

Some stimulants call this the origin of the red dot storms. Viktor spoke, pointing to a funnel shaped sand structure almost two floors below us. They are still studying specimens from here to understand what these red dots are made of and what causes Proxima's surface to flare up. So far we haven't discovered any pattern for the same. But as you know, regardless of whether or not we see a pattern, there is one.

*Maybe there isn't a pattern. Maybe its just entropy. The second law of thermodynamics as we define it back on earth....*I trailed off.

What does it mean?

It states that natural processes are irreversible and that energy tends to disperse.

He gave me a quizzical expression. *Whatever that means... you should help us figure this out. You see red dots are eating up the*

surface and they will start to enter the surface if we do not do something to contain them.

We spent rest of the way understanding scientific nuances of our respective worlds. I told him that we call Proxima Centauri a star and the sun is the source of light for us on Earth and we do not live inside the surface but rather on it. I told him how we had used astrophysics and mathematics to reach up here and that our planet was dying and we needed help.

So you're saying you came up here in search of favourable conditions for life? You wanted to see if Proxima was habitable to humans?

Yes.

But that sounds so messed up. You destroyed your own planet and now want to destroy ours?

No Luke...Sorry Viktor. No. We are not here to destroy your planet, we did not even know that you guys inhabited this place. We had been carrying research for several years and Proxima's environment was conducive and very much similar to that of our own. There are billions of lives that will perish if we do not seek for an alternative.

I see.

Viktor went quiet as if internalising and weighing all the odds. His pensive face reminded me of how Luke would grow still when he was brooding over some physics problem and sit in that stone-like pose until he had his Eureka moment. Maybe I shouldn't live so much in the past but then who was I without the weight of these beautiful memories?

Jess what is this place that you guys used to hangout for coffee?

Señora?

Yes. Yes. I really wanna taste the coffee there. Could you take me back with you?

I don't know Viktor. I haven't decided on going back yet.

He immediately stuck a saturnine pose, *Oh no worries.*

But I can make you better coffee. I offered.

His eyes lit up as he said *Yes please.*

As we reached the summit, the copper like surface gleamed below us. As far as our eyes could reach, we saw an expanse of red sand, spreading like an infinite ocean floor. The rounded mountains gave an illusion of coloured waves and distant lights rose from the grounds like a welcoming spotlight.

It was green... the trek you guys had been on. Viktor spoke. I was reminded of the little excursion that I had planned with Luke. After an extremely long bout of viral fever, I had suddenly overcome by an urge to see more of the earth in case I was dying. It had taken us over five hours to reach the top and the sunrise view was absolutely breathtaking. The clouds spread like a sheath of cotton blanket below us and the golden Sundays made the cloud inversion look ethereal. Viktor had triggered this beautiful memory and I couldn't help but smile.

Oh yeah, that. It was beautiful.

I know. How lucky. I thought this view would make you happy too even though its nothing as compared. Viktor spoke.

Oh don't be silly. It is so much prettier in its own ways. You can not compare an apple with an orange.

If you say so.

Viktor looked at me with fondness and I averted my gaze in shyness.

I got us a speaker. He spoke, pulling out a small square shaped object from his pocket. It contains his favourite music. It was very difficult to replicate all these audio notes from my brain and then put these in a box. I am to even sure if I have done the job accurately. Perhaps you can help me out and let me know what improvisations need to be made. He said as he handed over the speaker. Red button is for play and green one is for skipping the song. He explained.

I hit the red button and Jeff Buckley's *Lover, You Should've Come Over* started to play:

Looking out the door I see the rain

Fall upon the funeral mourners

...

Parading in a wake of sad relations

As their shoes fill up with water

...

This was indeed Luke's favourite song and he always used to joke saying, "This should be played at my funeral and free wine should be given to all. I would not want anyone to cry."

None of this was taken care of when he died. I felt I had no say in the arrangement of his funeral rituals because I was

the one who had left. I couldn't just show up, begging for atonement. The truth is that despite being aware of the fragile nature of life, no one is prepared for the death. Neither the living nor the dead. His grief-struck family didn't know what to do. No body is ever prepared to handle the logistics of death. It doesn't feel right to put the dead in the ground when you go back to your bed. I never believed in life after death... But what if there was one? Wasn't the idea even more tormenting than anything else? What if you spent an eternity being alone?

Lonely is the room, the bed is made

The open window lets the rain in

...

Burning in the corner is the only one who dreams

He had you with him

...

Viktor held my hand softly as I let out the pent up grief. "It's okay" he whispered.

That day we did not encounter any intense red dot reaction or an unannounced typhoon. We walked back when the luminosity reduced and the bright red rocks turned into a deeper shade of burgundy. Orchid like flowers swayed at a distance. Light musk laden breeze ruffled our hair. I was feeling a lot peaceful after the hike. The whole experience had been therapeutic and I was grateful to Viktor for making me do this.

If you could be anyone who would you wanna be? Viktor asked and I was instantly reminded of the same conversation that I had with Luke.

I don't know. Maybe you lover? Your domesticated wife? I had answered playfully with Luke's head in my lap.

No. C'mon. Be serious. I can't even imagine you being a housewife. He had spoken.

It was the peak of our relationship when and I was in my happy girl era. I wanted to give him the world, be his world...kind of a thing. I felt living would only make sense if it was with him.

A tree maybe? I answered Viktor's question. *Or a cat perhaps. Its a tough call.*

Huh? Why? What changed? He asked, his tone conveying a tinge of sad disappointment.

Tree because I could be a provider and be wise. Cat because they are moody. I smiled.

You have changed a lot Jess. I wonder if transience does that to humans?

Everyone and everything changes Viktor.

No. Not for us. Not until there is a consensus. Not until you have been through a lot of years. We are immortal. We can hardly change.

You always do. In a quasi-static manner though. The change is slow that you do not believe its happening. I spoke.

What would you do if you were an immortal? He asked again.

I don't know Vik. It sounds so boring to be honest. I would just wanna die maybe?

Wow. Didn't see that coming.

I had slept peacefully that night. Even though I was aware that Viktor was not Luke, I still felt at peace beside him. It was as if everything would fall in its place if I kept holding his hand. I had forced Sam's thoughts out of my head. I knew I couldn't be selfish and put tis on hold forever and I still had to look for a way back home but I wanted to shun my responsibilities for as long as I could.

Days felt brighter again, as if the years of torment was being lifted from my soul. I was beginning to fall in love with the crystal blue skies (the indoor ceilings that replicated Earth) and the Salming noise of the shorelines was beginning to attune me to the nature's rhythm. I was not sulking anymore but showed up for social gatherings. It was easier to make a cross-fire conversation when you didn't have to use words for it but could simply think your thought and they would be translated and transmitted to the other person. But time and again Viktor and I would have a verbal exchange regardless. He figured I really loved the familiarity in the sound of his voice. He also told me that he was learning to play music so that he could impress me at a scale to which I had replied "just be you".

Viktor taught me several things about their world - ranging from culture and literature to the basics of water prediction which mostly relied on intuition. It was fun to hear him talk and explain things. He would often ask me questions on

Luke's memories and avoided discussing the shameful parts of the same.

Do you wanna go for a swim? He asked.

Umm...like right now?

Yeah. Its a really beautiful lake just a few miles from here and the shade of water is pink like that salt lake in Australia. Its rich in electrolytes and it says to have healing power for your mind. We go there annually to restore happy hormones every once in a while.

What? I asked baffled. *What do you guys need happy hormones for?*

It offers a sense of clarity you know. Thats how we decide when to continue the occupation or if a change is required. If we hit saturation of our talent in a particular field, we change it immediately. That's how balance and progress is restored.

I agreed and we rented one of those inter-convertible vehicles again. The corrugated red stones blurred past the window, giving an illusion of those fast moving arts. Viktor was surprisingly good at driving and he kept teaching me how to manoeuvre and change the form when required. He also told me about a special sports contest where in the best simulates from all over Proxima would come and exhibit their racing and coordination skills.

You wouldn't believe but I am a champ. Title holder for the last 4 seasons. His face beamed as he told me.

Wow. So I am sitting with a celebrity, is it? I put my fingers in his hair coyly. *This is fun* I teased him as his face became red like a cherry blossom.

Stop it, you're making me blush. He screamed.

Could you please sign me an autograph Sir? I handed him my handkerchief and that special astronaut pen that I had carried from earth.

He looked at me with surprise as he took the pen and wrote something on my handkerchief in their language.

What does it mean?

It means, I will always hold you. He replied, his eyes focused on the path in front.

The pink lake was fairly crowded when we reached, it was a welcome change of scene - witnessing so many people, enjoying their day. The periphery of the lake was outlined with fern like plants and the sand was unnaturally white. Some of the stimulants had laid down blankets and were meditating by the side.

I am so sorry, I completely forgot that it would be a little crowded. Viktor said. *How irresponsible of me to forget that crowds are overwhelming for you. I swear in my excitement to show you the best of places, it just slipped my mind....*

Shhshhh... I held his hands in mind. *Its perfect. I love it.*

The water was cold - not chilled but the right kind of cold. I shivered as I entered the lake. The density was over one and I realised that I did not even have to put efforts to swim. I was floating naturally - somewhat like dead sea - except that this water did not have salt concentration and the lake was artificially designed in a way to increase buoyancy.

You should witness it during winter blooms. It's crazy. Viktor spoke.

How?

There is snow in place of sand, the waters aren't frozen. On the contrary, they're hot. People do ice-skating along the edges and participate in ice-house making competitions.

That sounds like quite a sight. I say as I try to picture his words. So when is this winter bloom thing?

Ahh! Now that should be equal to 2.5 Earth years here. He said. If you're still here, I promise I'll bring you again.

We did a speed boating kind of a thing later that day. Viktor was surprisingly an amazing craftsman. He created a boat and fit it with the convertible's spare. Battery and we ventured ahead in the waters, cruising at a high speed. The sound and the feeling of the wind in my hair made me cheerful.

Later that night, as I crawled in my bed, I felt a little homesick for earth. I remembered the first time Dad had taken me and my sister for boating. We were six and eight respectively. He made us wear a life guard as we sailed on the placid pond, picking lotuses, dipping our fingers in the water to be touched by fishes and we giggled as their slimy scales slithered against our skin. Dad had shown us a lot of wildflowers and taught us about their specific medicinal utility. It was wholesome memories like this that kept me tethered to the idea of home and earth. In retrospect, such feelings were not tarnished by any selfishness or butchered by abandonment issues or tainted by Earth becoming a dying

planet. So much had happened in my lifetime that I was still processing the turn of events. Dad had not tried to contact me ever since I had started on this mission, perhaps because of our last fight in which I had recklessly blamed him for our sadness. I felt awful for saying such acidic things. I whimpered as all the bittersweet memories came rushing to me. I had no means to stop or change them. I tried taking my sleeping pills but they didn't work either.

I was woken up by the jarring sound of the doorbell and periodic knocks on the door. I grumpily rose out of the bed to see who the visitor was.

Wow, you've been sleeping. I was worried when you didn't answer my calls and texts. Viktor spoke as I let him in.

I had trouble sleeping last night and without meaning to, I overslept. I answered yawning.

Let me fix you some coffee in that case. Viktor said as he hurried towards the kitchen counter. *Can you tell me where the coffee mugs are?*

You know food is still such a foreign concept to me. Viktor said. *We derive most of our energy from the radiations and food is just a luxury to exercise our palettes and have something for whiling away the time.*

Really? I asked surprised. *I always thought you guys had body design similar to ours.*

Yeah well, we did seek inspiration from you but we can survive on solar radiations alone. The intensity of the same had undoubtedly reduced over the last few years because of this red dot built up. But yeah...

Viktor and I watched constellations that night. I was able to trace out many new ones that were definitely not visible from the Earth. Viktor had a nice story behind every star pattern and I was very impressed by his story telling and the use of anthropomorphism.

Do you think its eccentric to have so many stellar folklores? He asked when I smiled at one of his legends.

Yeah. And you do sound like a child with your rock solid belief in them.

Really? Well at least we're not childish enough to invent Gods, huh? We don't even believe in big-bang.

Say all that you want against the Gods, I am an atheist. But I will not hear you contradict our big bang theory.

First of all what is an atheist? Second of all big bang is bullshit. He scoffed.

Atheist is someone who doesn't believe in the existence of God and they have all sorts of other theories about the origin of life. Also, there isn't a better theory in this world that can explain the origin of universe than big-bang.

We believe in something similar to what you call eternal inflation - the fact that there our infinite bubbles or universes out there makes us a lot likely to be found than lost.

We discussed a lot of theories that night and I felt more alive than I had in years. I felt the same chin-like curiosity piquing the way it had done all those years ago that had ultimately ensured my fate with NASA.

Viktor said goodbye after a few hours and as I slept, I dreamt of cotton candy clouds and rivers made of sugar cane juice and castles made of chocolates. I saw fishes flying and trees talking and I kept wondering if I had finally found myself in Baby Katz's world. I ran my fingers over faucets dripping chocolate shakes and mountains laden with ice-cream. An apple tree gave me some wise advice about saving earth which I couldn't remember upon waking up. The skies were radiant with colourful stars and they smiled when you made an eye contact with them.

I felt content when I woke up. As I tied my hair in a bun to dress up for the day, I was feeling internally determined to fix a way for saving m planet. I stared out of the window, the red surface looked desolate and the sudden fluctuating flare up signalled the arrival of typhoon on the surface. The winds howled like in a Shakespearean play, conveying foreboding messages and omens. The skies looked grey and weary. The glass windows rattled as the storm arrived. I rushed to seal my house shut. The sirens wailed in distance and the home speakers narrated the warning messages' asking stimulants to stay inside.

Time is uni-directional. It is uni-directional. It can't move backwards and yet I was perennially stuck in the past, visiting nostalgia like and old-time friend.

"Dear Jess,

I have been meaning to apologise for the way I acted last week. It was my fault and I do not wish to let this burden you anymore than it has already. I want to tell you how much I love you, I wanna prove it to you because my actions have betrayed both of our hearts.

Even a thousand apologies can't pardon me. But I would like to atone for what I have done. I wish to start over. My life is in your hands and I am trusting you with it.

Please save me.

Yours,

Luke”

Science says you can not read in your dreams but here I was disproving them. Luke handed over a letter to my Mom and asked her to give it to me. I caught my reflection in the window, I was wearing the red and black striped sweater with a high waist jeans. It was the same pair of clothes that had been my favourite since high school. I felt extremely emotional and I wanted to go hug him but I decided against it because even in my dreams I had to satiate my ego even though I knew the consequences, I tried to feel an immunity against it. I read the contents of the letter and started to cry. I wanted to run after him but he had disappeared. The letter that I had in my hand, began to dissolve into thin air as well, leaving behind a soft powdery trace like butterfly's wings do when touched. I was 4.25 light years away from Earth and yet my ghosts had followed me here. I woke up drenched in tears and sweat.

Please come over. I had begged Viktor between sobs and extreme agony.

He arrived within a few minutes, “Is everything Ok?” I ran to hug him. His voice sounded like a lullaby. “Hey, it is alright Jess. I am here. Its gonna be Ok.” He repeated over and over as he caressed my hair.

“I am supposed to be moving on Viktor. Its been over 7 years now. I am supposed to be doing better. I am supposed to have a closure and I am supposed to forgive him and myself. Yet every single day I grieve what could have been. I dream of the lost potentials. Its a hell of the possibilities that I let go of. And I am burning in melancholy. I am being haunted. Please tell me you love me just one more time. I am lovesick.” I sobbed.

“Jess. Let’s talk about it. Escaping won’t always help. If you ever turn to go back, I can’t follow you to help you be yourself but while we are here I want to bring you all the peace that I possibly can.”

Silence followed and then he spoke again after a long pause.

“Would it help if I told you that you were on his mind when he killed himself? He wished to rest his head on your shoulders and look into your eyes for one long time. He was scared. He didn’t wish to do it. He was sad Jess. He had been sad for a very long time and he didn’t want you as an audience of his bouts of depression. He knew watching someone you love dying everyday wouldn’t be easy. He didn’t know how to distance himself. He got with all those girls to feel more alive only to realise that no girl could make him feel the way that he had done with you. But with all the things he had done he didn’t think he deserved you.”

I looked at Viktor, tears streaming down my face. “Its okay. I forgive you.”

I cried out all my grief that day. I didn’t want to feel burdened anymore. The weight of all these feelings had intensified over years and I was becoming less of me and

more of somebody else. I know we can. Neither force ourselves to feel a certain way nor dictate the timeline of the grief. But I desperately wanted to get out of the mirth as soon as I could.

Viktor had decided to hang around like a good friend. He drove me to see the race as promised. The stadium was crowded all along the length of the race. I had not anticipated so many spectators. Huge screens were hanging in the air to display real-time results. The cheer leading and commentary and enthusiasm was quite commendable. It was like some very important but advanced version of F1. Simulants echoed their slogans in unison. Viktor had taken a very skilled and efficient head start and he maintained the lead the entire time. The stadium broke out chanting his name when he won. It was true, he was indeed a celebrity here. His eyes shone as he looked in my direction and bowed humbly. Simulants turned to look in the direction of his gaze. I wasn't used to the attention and turned away shyly.

"Would you like to go out on a date with me?" He asked later.

"I can go out to eat and drink with you but I wouldn't call it a date." I said politely.

"Yes ma'am." He said, making a heartbroken face.

"But do you have a wife or a girlfriend?" I asked.

"I was close to having one tonight." He laughed.

Viktor took me to his hometown in his inter-convertible. We flew over the red mountains laden with luminescent plants and it all seemed like a dream from long ago. He chatted about his happy days there.

“Viktor what about your childhood?” I asked.

“What about it?” He asked confused.

“You never told me what your childhood was like?”

“We have no childhood. We are just seeds as they call it here. We are put in some embryonic environment and we are put into a standard figurine and once our minds are activated, we can decide on the gender and looks. We can ever generate a new one if we do not like from the designs menu.”

“It is a lot of information to even comprehend. So you change forms whenever you get bored of them?”

“Not so casually Jess. Usually we do it when we have lived a significant no. of years in a particular phase and then I wanna lets say change my occupation or something.”

“So everyone can be anything they wanna be?”

“Not necessarily but everyone is allowed to try.”

“So you chose to be a racer?”

“Racer? Uh-No. I didn’t choose this. It chose me. And I don’t think I will ever wanna be anything else. This is my infinite passion. I am gonna love this for my forever.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Yeah. I do not get bored you see.” He winked.

“How do you guys reproduce?”

“So whenever the leaders or the policy makers as you guys call it, decide that the population of a place needs to be increased or we need more hands for a particular job, we create more seeds. Now this seed creation is strictly lab

bound. The knowledge of making new seed is confidential but yes, the new stimulants are synthetically made in labs. Als, no I do not know how the first seed was made. Some of us believe that our creation was owing to the conducive environment and we were air-borne or something like the germs back on earth. Hahaha.”

“So was it weird waking up with Luke’s mind? Why didn’t you change your form when you had the choice to?”

“I was fascinated and I wanted to try also separating memories from your conscience is a painful process and I wanted to live a life elsewhere without physically going there. Now I do agree that his memories do entail a lot of trauma and ache but it is also resplendent with such brilliance. Like its full of so many scientific facts, political stories, history, calculus, poetry, music, travel logs from another planet. How can I not be interested in this marvellous repository?”

“Yeah that makes sense, if given a chance I would also love to be someone else.”

“No you’re getting it wrong. I do not want to be Luke. I am me. I just wanna learn through him.”

“But isn’t it like being a burial ground for someone else’s mind?”

“Maybe I don’t know. But he doesn’t haunt me the way he does to you. Also, all these events in my head happened a long time ago and to someone else. Its like having a CD and DVD to your favourite film.”

“So when you have gone through all of his dreams, knowledge, memories, thoughts, feelings....would you want to pluck him out?”

“I have gone through all that was his Jess. I do not wanna pluck him out. He is a part of my existence now and I shall carry him within in a very non-homosexual way.” He grinned.

All's well that ends

The symptoms of withdrawal (of missing Luke) had started to wane. I wasn't always grieving now. I had still not responded to Sam's messages but I had played them at least a dozen times. Every time that I sat down to write or record a message for him, I didn't know what to say. I was aware that he was waiting for me but I couldn't shake the feeling of abandonment that had taken deep roots in my heart.

I had busied myself once again in trying to find a way out of Proxima. The last casualty had caused everyone to die and none of the humans could be revived because their bodies had exploded and there was no assemblage possible. The red dots had reacted with the metal sheath and wreaked havoc. So now it was mandatory to re-design the ship using a different material. I was working out new designs and carrying out reactive experiments to figure out a way to

insulate against the red dots. A few of the stimulants who had earlier worked on the project agreed on continuing.

Is it possible to increase acceleration so that the velocity is far greater than the escape velocity? Maybe if we reduce the minutes of interaction, we can lessen the damage. One of the stimulants called Klara had suggested.

Is it really about the reaction time or the concentration that had created a problem? The RCA previously revealed that that trace element that is the red dot had interacted with the surface instantaneously causing explosion. I said.

But is it possible that we are overlooking something else? Whenever we have accomplished the intra-stellar missions, we have always used the same material. But I will admit that the concentration and frequency of flare-ups have increased dramatically over the last few months. Another stimulant who called himself K-11 answered.

For now, I would like us to keep looking for material that renders the activity of red dots inert upon interaction. If we can not control the environment, lets try to reduce the damage. I said.

Several simulations and trials were conducted. A thousand samples were tested for interaction with red dots. So far, not element/compound had given favourable results. Almost all of them had varying degree of interactions. What baffled us the most was how does red dot prove to be so reactive upon coming in contact with solids? When it didn't cause any damage on reacting with elements present in free state. We isolated some of the atmospheric oxygen and took some crystalline oxygen and noted the difference in interactivity of both the samples and then repeated the arrangement for other gases and noble elements as well. All of them had

combusted upon interacting with the red dots with very short reaction times.

If the state of the matter is the problem, should we try to build a gaseous layer? K-11 suggested.

How would that even be possible? I wondered.

Viktor who had been quiet up till now quickly searched for a chalk and fervently began designing something on the board. *Let us say we create vacuum in the outermost layer, fill the middle layer with any of the gaseous substances like oxygen and the excess of the same can be used to fuel the journey or can be used for our consumption. But yeah thats how we can insulate against red-dots and we will not have to create a new material for ourselves.* His eyes sparkled as he suggested the simple way out.

That is to say if we can create vacuum with such colossal dimensions? It will be kind of difficult but it will work out. I nodded in agreement.

The days outside of the lab were recreational because of Viktor's insistence in showing me the heavenly sides of the heaven. We often went club hopping, popping pills and whiskey, transcending dimensions, feeling space and time collate and unwind again. I did not miss Luke now, and his name did not fall like a prayer every time I tried to say a name out loud. I also tried my best to not project Luke's image over Viktor though it was really hard to form a separation. But I felt extremely euphoric whenever I was around him. It was indeed like re-uniting with your lost love one in an afterlife. It was like Gods had excused themselves from the rage and decided to offer redemption to my aching soul. Even though I had been an atheist all my life, I felt my

sins were now atoned for and the life was finally taking the turn that it was supposed to take all the while ago.

So what do you think of this world? Viktor asked while tripping on drugs.

Its fusing together, putting oxygen in my dead soul. I answered, gazing at the distant disco lights flickering like candle light in wind. *Sometimes I feel this is all but a dream, and I will just wake up one day in my bio-cryogenic and realise that I have not yet reached here. Or maybe I have lost myself in a journey up here. All of this is but just a construct of a mind to keep me alive, the last few moments of ecstatic peace.*

Does it matter?

It does and it doesn't. It matters because reality is subjective so maybe my stress has no real significance. It doesn't matter if I am already dead.

Is it better than living? Better than all those exhilarating moments you spent sun-bathing with the love of your life back on earth?

*Do I sense a hint of envy? And yes, it is better than living. This dreaming is better than living....*I say as I sway away from Viktor and towards the dance floor. It has been ages Ince I have felt happy enough to dance like there's no tomorrow. What does it matter if all this is just a dream? What does it matter if I do not have a body but just a soul. I am here. I am experiencing this. I am still able to see, touch, taste, feel...What more should I crave for? I am unscathed from all the miseries even if it is not meant to be ever-lasting. What does it matter if the government had only sent us across to terminate the intelligent population? I am still here, living in

this moment, feeling all this music around me...I wasn't looking for permanence, even if I am drifting through transience, it is alright. I pinched myself to check. I could not resist smiling when Viktor caught me doing it.

So you do think this can possibly be a dream? Huh? He asked.

Maybe. I don't know. Had to check.

Do you think I am a lie then?

I don't know Luke. I have dreamt of you so much that I can barely separate dreams from reality sometimes.

Viktor looks at me with evident ache in his eyes as I realise my mistake.

It was a slip of tongue. I am so sorry.

How delusional of you to try and bring back the dead while killing the living. I expected better from you. He turned around and walked away, disappearing into the darkness beyond the lights. I stood gaping at his retreating figure, too frozen to move, unable to follow and lurch myself at his feet.

The sun was setting across our small white porch. The birds returning to the nest, sung dulcet lullabies, wind whispering the gentle stories of a beautiful passing day. Dad was weeding out in the garden, his back shining a hue of golden as the sweat drizzled on his body. Mom was sitting on the stairs drinking coffee. My sister was chasing the house cat. Little did I realise that this moment would be my happiest memory in years to come - that this would be the only time when we would each gather like a family, collecting proses littered across our little worlds. I had never felt attention and affection starved until this moment because my parents were

happy and my sister was alive. No sadness had dawned yet, casting me the unlucky heir, inheriting decades of trauma and unresolved emotions.

“Let tinker bell rest a little Riya. She is pregnant.” Mom had shouted across at my sister.

“How do you know she’s pregnant?” Riya asked as she walked towards us.

“Because I have gone through the phase myself, I can tell.” Mom smiled.

“Can you imagine we would have more kittens to play with?” Riya giggled.

“Yeah more work for us.” Dad sighed.

“Can we go and get us some ice-creams?” I asked.

“That sounds like a great idea honey.” Riya said, keeping her hand on my shoulder.

“Please Mum?” Riya pleaded.

We hopped into the car and sped away into the city, Beatles playing over the speaker. Tinker bell snuck her head out of the window like most pets. Riya was telling me about a guy she had a crush on and Mom seemed to be dozing off in the front seat.

My childhood until this memory had not been murky at all. It was rather like those happy American families that are advertised across the nations and sold as a dream.

I felt a longing ache as the memories flashed. My head hurt like hell the next day. I hadn’t followed Viktor and asked for an apology and the whole idea of speaking with him now

gave me goosebumps. As I emptied the black coffee in my cup, the doorbell rang. It was Viktor. My heart froze. I opened the door and let him in. He seemed like his usual self, speaking non-stop about an upcoming championship and how he was going to be away for a while. He had baked me a large plum cake, extracting the recipe from Luke's memory.

Where did you get the plums from? Oh God I am gonna love it. Thanks. I said as I cut a slice from it.

Grew them in the labs. It takes like a couple of minutes for the process if we know what we want, we can get it.

Wow. Didn't know I would have my palette massaged so well. I said savouring the delicious cake.

Hey Viktor. I am really sorry about the last night. I spoke, with my eyes on the ground. I was too high and I know this is not an excuse but I am really sorry. It was so stupid of me. Just because you carry parts of him doesn't give me a right to overlook you as a person. I am so sorry his name inadvertently slipped out of my mouth and I hate myself so much for it. You deserve better.

Its fine Jess, I understand. To be honest I feel like I over-reacted too. It wasn't that big of a deal. Its fine. Viktor said, pulling me in a hug.

As hard as I tried to not Luke drift through my brain, I couldn't help noticing how similar Viktor's fragrance was. I pulled myself away.

So you leave tomorrow? I asked.

Yessir.

I wanted to share something with you Vik. I said as I pointed towards a tiny box containing all the messages from Sam. This box has my fiancée's messages from Earth and I have not been able to respond to any of them.

You have a fiancée? Viktor asked, picking up the box. *Can I play them?*

Yes. I said in a monosyllable with some reluctance.

I feel like I have lost my feelings for him because I can not overcome the fact that he abandoned me. I narrated.

Viktor played the recordings and spoke after a while, *Don't you think you need to give him some closure? He at least deserves to hear from you. The guy seems like a keeper. His love is so evident.*

I could sense some envy and anger in his voice as he spoke. I admired this human side of him. Despite being a stimulant he could barely keep his emotions concealed.

He looked at me longingly as if hearing my thoughts. *It hurts when you don't notice me. But then again, I understand all that you have been through. But Jess I do have feelings for you.* He confessed at last. *I do not expect them to be reciprocated and I promise they will never come in the way of our friendship and I will never over step the boundaries unless you ask me to.*

I stared at him wordlessly, unable to form sentences that could convey what I felt. But all that escaped my lips was, "Oh.Umm..."

"Its fine. Sshhh. Don't say anything. But can you help me pack for my very long journey?" He asked, diverting the topic.

"Oh yes. Sure." I said gladly.

Viktor's room was quite organised. All his clothes piled up according to the colour and texture. His suitcase lay open on the bed, exuding a fresh aroma of his perfumes.

I will keep handing you the pairs that I want take and you can arrange them in the suitcase.

I nodded. It took us longer than I had anticipated. I was just wondering why he hadn't asked me to come along when he said *I would have asked you to accompany me but given that your spaceship is the top most priority, I didn't expect you to. But if you wanna change your mind, you're more than welcome.*

Ummm...nah you're right. I do wanna get back on the project and I don't wanna waste any more time.

I got you this. He said as he handed over a wooden showpiece of the pink lake that we had been to. *I crafted it myself. A souvenir to make you remember me when you go back. To make you realise this wasn't just a dream. And I am as real as I can get.*

But this isn't a farewell Vik. I spoke, trying to resist crying. You will come back before I leave, right?

I don't know Jess. Its a long thing - its actually a series of championships. And there is some work that I need to take care of before I come back here.

I would love to see you again soon Vik. I spoke as I hugged him.

With Viktor gone, days had taken a gloomy and bored turn. Time had fallen into a long and restless routine - I used to wake up, have my coffee, read through the research materials, conduct multiple simulations, wreck my brains over trying to figure out the perfect design, mechanisms for the launch and come back to the apartment tired and frustrated.

It had been more than thirty days and everything seemed so dull and forced. I hadn't left my room even on the weekends. I did make some excellent simulate friends but I didn't have the energy or the inspiration to socialise after work hours. Every day and night was exactly the same.

I had decided against trying to contact Viktor just in case he was trying to create some distance between us. I could definitely not feel the same way for him as he did for me. Ever since Luke, I had stopped believing in the notion of love. It wasn't that I had issues moving on or trusting someone else, but in my head and heart I just couldn't replace him. I didn't want to allow someone else to take up his rightful place and put me back together in pieces. Now my generation did not believe in old school love and my therapist had warned me against depriving myself against possibility of happiness but I could never choose somebody the same way.

All my life I had been a great escapist, willing to disappear into worlds far beyond. But now that I was on Proxima Centauri, living a blissful "afterlife" kind of life, I couldn't help living in nostalgia. I missed the scent of salty sea breeze, alphonso mangoes, junipers of northern forests, childhood bedroom, my mother's bosom, petrichor. I missed the warmth of the sunlight tickling your skin after a long winter day, surfing on the waves, deep diving with sea anemones, reading Jane Austen in the porch with birds singing in the background, hiking through thickets to reach the most beautiful pinnacle. I was made up of all these memories that did not have anywhere else to go. I was the container that held all the precious things. My world as we know now was

burning. I was worried that I would have no home to return to. All the measures to establish utilitarianism had led to a realm of chaos and false and deviant sense of achievement. I cried as I reminisced upon all the happy times - the college days spent basking in glory and freedom of youth, the childhood spent like I was going to be forever six, the love life spent orbiting around the man I thought I would forever be happy with. I was the sole human survivor 4.25 light years away, living amongst aliens, far away from anyone who even knew my name. I had no one to go back to go back to and I had no one who could hold me here either.

Did you know that Saturn has not just rings but some sort of fairy people on it? One of the simulants asked me in a new moon party.

What? I asked, flabbergasted.

She took the glass of whiskey from my hands and poured some duty powder in the glass and stirred the contents with her sharp index finger.

You look sad on the inside, I bet you could use some happiness. She said, soul staring into my eyes as she licked her finger and handed me back the glass.

What is this? I enquired, smelling the other-worldly fragrance emanating from the drink.

Just trust me. I am not trynna poison you. There is no death here. She spoke in an extremely dulcet note, throwing back her perfectly straight long hair, revealing her ebony collarbones.

I wanted to correct her by telling that I was a mortal one but decided against it. If I could blend in just this once, I

wouldn't mind. I chugged the contents like my life depended on it.

Thats my girl. I heard her say as she slapped my back gently.

My name is Orion what is yours? She asked holding my hand in hers.

I am Jessica. I said as I saw everything disintegrating at a molecular level. It was too fast for hallucinations I thought to myself.

Let us get away from here Jessica. Let me show you the fair side of the Saturn. Allow me to show you the brighter side of the universe. Orion said as she dragged me across the hallway, chuckling like a nymph. I couldn't help but follow. My head felt jelly like and my arms felt fluid. I wanted to collate with the greater energy flow of the universe. I wanted to disassemble all the atoms and cells I was made up of and I wanted each of those particles to follow a different course of action. I wanted to break up in those infinite parts and be everything and everyone and live each one of those infinite possibilities.

Do you know what this is? Orion asked pointing at our earth bound spaceship facility. *This is a spaceship that they are building to send back to Earth which is almost five light years away from here. Can you believe that? Five fucking light years away.* She answered herself without waiting for me to respond. *They say they have aliens working in there. Human Beings.* She spoke as she sneaked into the facility. I suppressed the urge to tell her that I had the keys to the entrance and she was with an alien herself. But I wanted to see how the story unfolded so I decided to play along.

You know I wanted to be those flying space beings that travel to the stars and planets and all. What do you call them - those space travellers? She asked.

Astronaut? I spoke.

No. No. That's a human term. What do we call them here?

I don't know.

How do you not remember you silly girl? You're high. Aren't you? She giggled. *You know if I was ever traveling to earth, I would definitely do that Ayahuasca thingy.* She continued to speak. *Earthlings have nice dope all around. Lucky ducks.* She said, as she drank some more from a bottle she had carried along.

You want some? She asked offering me the bottle.

I took it from her gratefully. I felt I was sobering up and I was not ready to call it a night yet.

This is stardust. She explained. *It makes you shine.* She winked.

And happy. I added.

Yes. Happy. Very Happy. She nodded.

As I stared at her, she began to disappear into the night, forming a faint shimmering silhouette which slowly turned into a fully sparkling form. I could see dazzling light refracting and reflecting from her body. She looked like a Goddess.

Look at you. Her voice echoed.

I stared down at my hands as they began to disappear and were replaced by shimmering lights. I touched my fingers on my arms and pearls and shining dust rose up from the skin.

You are made of stars. Orion spoke as she embraced me. *We are not sad anymore.* I could notice a sighing melancholy in her voice.

Why were you sad before? You can be anything that you wanna be. I asked.

Eternity is boring my love. Specially if you keep losing and see no meaning in existence. She said, living a cigarette like thing to her lips.

I woke up to Viktor's voice calling out my name, "Jess. Jess. Jessica."

The sharp sunlight pierced my eyes and I squinted to look up at him, feeling disoriented.

Are you alright? What are you doing here? How long have you been here? He asked.

I don't know, I was at a party with Orion. She got me here. Where's she? I spoke looking around me. *Why didn't you tell me that you were coming?* I asked.

Well I wanted this to be a surprise and I went to your apartment and was told by the neighbours that you haven't been home since yesterday. Imagine the shock I received upon not finding you there...So, I rushed to the facility immediately and you weren't present in your facility either then I spotted you in this arena from across your hall's window. You scared the hell out of me.

I am sorry. I muttered trying to get back on my feet.

How was your championship? I asked.

I won.

I knew you would. I said pulling him in a tight embrace. What did you do after? Had fun? I asked.

Well, I was hoping you would text or something but you did not. I went and hid in my cave afterwards...Thinking that you only like me because I remind you of him. I will never be the man that you like because of who I am. I will never understand what mortality is like and you probably hate me because I also remind you of someone who broke your heart. He said.

Oh. No. Vik. Umm...I am so sorry if I ever made you feel that way. To be honest you are the reason I like it up here. Even though your world is so perfect and I can never complain about anything, its your company that has made me feel so much at peace. I can't erase the past neither can you. I do not project anymore Vik. I like you for you. I don't hate you at all. I answered. And I didn't text you because I didn't want to feel needy and come in your way. I explained.

Oh Jess. I would never think of you as needy. I was waiting on your texts so desperately that I couldn't even focus on the celebrations later. He said. I missed you. He admitted.

I missed you to Vik. I replied.

Who is this Orion? What was the party about?

A girl who made me try Saturn rings. It was a new moon party I suppose. I was bored so decided to hit it. Klara had sent me the invite.

Saturn Rings? You tried Saturn Rings? Tell me how does it feel? Are you still nauseated.

After a whiteout I literally thought I was floating around Saturn and I was made up of stardust. I do feel a bit drowsy still.

It is really hard to procure Saturn Rings. Lore says that Saturn Rings peddlers are so scanty that no one has ever met one for real. That explains why your Orion disappeared after giving you a good trip. She probably changes her names and stories as often as she meets new people. These peddlers often identify the individual that needs this drug on their own. It is an occupation here. You see we live for an eternity and we can't always be happy. This sort of re-adjusts our neurons.

I crashed at Viktor's home later, calling in sick for the work and logged into my computer thinking I could do some research while I waited for hangover to wane. I had received some message from Earth, I hurriedly opened my mailbox, wondering what it was about now. It happened to be a long feedback about our mission. The sender's details were not visible and the mail ID could not be traced back. The message stated that the government had decided to withdraw further funding of our mission and all the supporting ones as well. There would be no more spacecrafts coming to Proxima. They did not hope that there were any survivors left. The message also elaborated the current status of the Earth - the world was in a far worse place than when I had left it. The temperatures had soared by ten more degrees and polar caps had fast melted, flooding the countries, devastating the flora and fauna. The privileged had sought refuge in the underground bunkers and the poor had perished. Engineers and doctors across the globe were made to sign NDAs and made to swear loyalty to working for the government. The population had declined exponentially. The new generations were being harvested in bio reactors, hoping to save the humanity from dying.

I showed the message to Viktor with tears in my eyes. I sobbed as he read the letter.

There's still hope Jess. You can go back and try to save your friends. We will do all that we can to try and think of a way out. We can bring back your people here. Viktor said, trying to console me.

Thanks Viktor. But I don't know what I can do beyond this. I don't know if anyone I love and know would be alive by the time I reach. I wish I could just time travel instead of space travel. I spoke sadly.

I realised I had to write back to Sam. Days were numbered and the chances of me reaching back alive and in time were very low. I tried to imagine the agony of the ones who were alive and struggling. I regretted not reverting back in time. What if it was too late now? I had to do something fast.

Dear Sam,

I have been struggling to write back to you because I do not know what the right words are for expressing the grief that I have suffered. I am the sole survivor here, waiting and hoping to do something to alter our collective fate. The idea of spending my life with you in our little home back on earth seems like a distant imagination at the moment. But I would give anything to restore everything to normalcy. There is so much I wanna tell you right now. Proxima has aliens and I find myself more at home here than I have ever felt anywhere else. I am being helped and we are actively looking for solutions together.

Simulants (Proxima beings) use their own language and translation mechanisms and they have very different evolution process than us. Their world is not limited by mortality. I wonder what I would do if I ever had to go through the curse of living till eternity without the

people I have known and loved around me. I wish you were here and we were experiencing these tides together.

It is not just woes though, I have good days too. Proxima is indescribably beautiful. The sands, the beaches, the skies, the mountains, the artificial harvests indeed offer a bliss of some paradise.

I truly hope to see you when I come back. Wishing you the very best in life.

Give your family my love.

Yours truly,

Jessica

Viktor had taken me to a bio facility where Simulants were bred and evolved into. He explained the entire process stepwise.

This is the embryo culture where the cell is organically synthesised. Unlike human reproduction, ours is agender. We do not require any male or female eggs to begin with. We know what biological ingredients (if I may say so) are needed for the creation of the seed. Once the DNA fabric is created we take in all the other details of manufacturing. The raw data is input here in this machine. This comprises the age range (25-35), gender (mostly binary and sometimes some hermaphrodites as well), height and other physical appearances. The basic blueprint for all the seeds are more or less the same. Then we have a design menu which comprises a wide range of faces and structures that you can assign over to a particular seed. No two designs are ever the same so we do not have twins until someone specifically asks to look like someone. So after doing the genetic coding, we custom build from other modules, fulfilling the

requirements of strength, stamina, IQ, EQ, etc. So usually the seeds are designed as per the specifications and each seed has number assigned which must exactly match the ones from the appearance and other custom codes. But any simulant can always decide to create a new one. It doesn't mandate a legal guardianship but when a seed has a creator outside the facility, they can always reach out for patronage. Most of the simulants decide to login for creation if they want a friendship and they can always decide the emotional compatibility or they can opt for a custom-built partners that they can spend the lifetime with. Usually when friends and partners are chosen this way, they last till a literal forever.

I looked around the facility - the huge rising glass cylinders with evolution under process, computer screens displaying various parameters for process control, the organic culture undergoing some sort of biological reaction, and the continuous creation of life. I was convinced that Gods had not created us but some other hands had taken a systemic control to upgrade all the designs and destructions to build the universe. Everything must be based on an algorithmic pattern.

I have a suggestion to make Jess. Viktor spoke.

Yeah? I asked, still dazed from the sheer scientific brilliance.

Would you like to create a new simulant with me?

Would that like make us the parents or do you wanna help me fix you an ideal partner or something. I asked laughing.

Wow, I am lowkey offended. I do not need to create a partner. I am a very agreeable man and can find a partner without having to

design one. I just need to be a guardian with you. That way you will always have someone to come back for.

You know I am engaged, right?

I am not asking you to reproduce Jess. I am just requesting for a co-creation because it would be so cool.

Maybe some other time Viktor. I am not comfortable with the idea.

I never had a will to extend my bloodline even while I was on earth and the whole idea of forcing someone else into existence just to reduce my boredom sounded like such a sinful concept. Life was meaningless in an entirety and the whole farce of reproduction had kept us going for centuries and was also a reason for our selfishness. The whole capitalism had survived by feasting on this sense of belonging and ownership and control. Now that the world was on the brink of an end, was it really necessary to have gone through all the pain? Even with Sam I did not think I would have been entirely comfortable in raising and extending a family. Although I will admit that the idea was soothing and domestically blissful, having someone to call my own, having someone who was dependent on me would definitely make me feel important but given the circumstances of despair, it would be a horror to bring more life to such a dead world. I didn't think that I would be a good mother even though I was told differently by my friends but I definitely would not have the heart to raise a messed up child like my parents had done.

I was driven by the same urge even on Proxima. I would not want to have someone to call my own and then abandon them. I do not think I have a right to bring something to life

and force the curse of living on them. What if they hated life as much as I do, wouldn't they hate me always.

I wish I had more access to your thoughts. Viktor spoke, breaking my internal monologue.

Huh? Well you do hear them all the time.

Not all of them. Your thoughts are like an ice berg and I only get the tip. I wonder what are you always thinking of?

Just something sad and depressing.

Why so sad?

I don't know, honestly.

Hey, wouldn't it be cool if you walked me through your memories and I could just watch you grow? I would love to know you.

What?

There is a dream locating facility here. I know it sounds crazy but once you plug into it, you can literally have visuals of others' memories and dreams and imaginations, everything.

Wow. That is so cool.

If you don't consider it an invasion of privacy, I would really love to take you there.

What would you wanna see?

Its not under our control. They would give you some pill that will cause you hallucinations and your memories and conscious would be unlocked and then they will wire the display with your mind and I shall be able to see everything in my head. Like some weird USB transfer. He explained.

So you are telling that I would have absolutely no control over whatever I am letting you be a part of?

No ma'am. Neither you nor anyone else can control these projections. It will be raw and unfiltered. All of your dream sequences, imaginations, vulnerabilities, memories will be mine to explore.

How will you differentiate if they are real or made up?

I will ask you later.

Yes ma'am. I am a special case, you remember? I am the only simulacrum with the memories of a human. They do come up to me for research and studies and most of the times that they plug me in, I always project his memories and thoughts and whatnots inadvertently.

Uhh...umm...How does that feel?

I don't know really. It's always like tripping on acid. I am happy and I just let my thoughts flow and I do not try to form a shield.

That does sound really crazy. I would definitely love to give it a shot.

The cold surface of the metallic ring touched my forehead and I remember thinking if I was doing the right thing by being vulnerable with someone I had barely known?

The drugs that had been given to fire up my memory patches were slow in taking effect. I was looking around at the room taking in the immaculate details with an awe. The shapes and shade of the sunlight that filtered through the roof as if falling through a sieve almost made me feel like I was in a church, kneeling for my confessions. The only comforting

thought was that after finishing mine, I would get an access to Viktor's as well.

The pills made me sleepy instead of high or conversational. And then after a while it happened. Like a strong gush of wind through your bedroom window leading the curtains, and the other contents to flap around.

I was three years old, looking an expanse of ice with my sister standing beside me. She was holding the dog's leash in her right hand and was holding a candy in another, saying, "If we get lost here, a blizzard would very easily kill us." I remember shuddering and holding dogs's collar to comfort myself. I was ten - bent over my study desk, explaining a sixth standard problem to my sister. The memories that had suppressed themselves over the years were coming up unfiltered, uncontrolled. I would have said I was hallucinating but I ma pretty sure it was more than that. It was like I was watching my won life out of my body like some kind of a rewind scene in a movie.

I was nine - rushing my pet cat to the vet, crying inconsolably. I was eleven - letting a boy who had crush on me bribe me with fake cigarettes to kiss me on the cheeks. I was twelve - looking out the window in the science class, tracing patterns across the altocumulus clouds and the teacher scolding me as I cry to the humiliation. I was fourteen - walking in to my sister's dead body after she had killed herself. I had immediately looked down at my hands and felt I was being consumed by something. I couldn't feel anything immediately and instead of a panic-stricken scream, a low mourn had escaped my mouth. I was thinking if I could just die immediately, I could bring my sister back. I was fifteen -

storming out of the house after my Mom had accused me of reading unnecessary fiction and calling my life a waste of their investment. I was sixteen - when I had my first panic attack after a meditation counsellor had asked us to recall a moment that we had dreaded the most. I was eighteen - stepping into my advanced mathematics class and my eyes fell on Luke's extravagant curls. He had his massive headphones on and was absorbed in finishing the pre-reads for the class. He looked up as I passed his seat and smiled at me. My heart skipped a beat and all those poetic descriptions regarding fluttering butterflies in the stomach felt like the truth. He had scooped me up in his strong arms after a party and asked for permission to kiss me. I was nineteen - we had our first ever argument and I had resorted to not speaking with him for two hours. We ended up making love the same night, forgetting all the reasons that had made us angry. I wanted to censor this memory but couldn't. As the years advanced, the memories became sharper. All these moments that I was made up of, made me feel like a container of emotions - the ones that I had been trying to ignore for so long. I was twenty - curled up in my bed for seven consecutive days, wishing death upon myself, only rising when the rattling door had made me feel that Luke had come back from the grave. I was twenty one - helping Sam prepare white sauce pasta. We were talking about the literary works in Hozier's lyrics. I was twenty-two - hearing the first news of a float-off and wondering if I had a similar fate in store? All the recent memories followed up like a giant wave. Just when I thought I was done, more memories followed in a random order this time.

You know you're the reason we never lived properly. You leached off our happiness and somehow you're still sad and angry all the time. My father had screamed angrily.

It should have been me not my sister then. I had thought to myself.

You know even forever would be too less of a time to spend with you. I am picturing a small boy with your eyes and smile and intelligence and maybe my curls. Luke was saying after our date night.

If you don't learn to stand up to the bullies, you'll have a very miserable life. Why dodo you wanna make it easier for the world to prey upon you. At least give them a tough fight. My sister had spoken after a girl had spread the word around that I had menstruated over the classroom chair.

I can explain Jess. I don't love her. Luke had tried to talk to me after two months.

Leave me alone. I had nearly screamed when my mom had rushed in the room to tell me I was admitted to my dream university. That was the only time I had seen her genuinely happy in years.

I wish I could hate you, but I can't. Please make me hate you. I was drunk crying in the toilet, thinking about Luke.

I feel that I have been sleepwalking through my life. I will wake up and not have any memory of it. I was telling Luke, with his head in my lap. Then let me give you the moments you'll never forget. He had spoken before passionately kissing me.

What? I had shouted when the professor announced that the class average for the formative assessment for our Physics

paper was at twenty eight percent. *I couldn't have done that badly.* I had whispered to Luke. *My dad will kill me if my scholarship get cancelled.* I had voiced out my concerns.

Will you just let me help you? You never listen Jess. Thats your problem and that's a big fucking problem. Sam had been annoyed after I told him I couldn't eat until I had worked out the kinematics for exceeding the required vectors that could shorten our journey to Proxima.

Drugs are not real. You are. Orion was chanting as I lay with my eyes closed on the facility premises. *You know the world doesn't have a necessary order and you just keep trying to find patterns and rules for everything. You scientists are so mad.* She had continued blowing up the smoke from her cigarette.

When are you gonna come back? The unsent text was sitting in the draft for Viktor's chat.

This is the happiest I have felt in a while. I wish you would stay. I had thought out loud on the hiking trail. Some of these memories were desires taking words.

I feel more at home here than I feel back on earth. I had said as I hugged Viktor. *You make me feel at home.*

After they unplugged the forehead bracelet, I still felt extremely spaced out. All the memories had felt so real, like they were still happening and all the time in between had just been an illusion. Viktor handed me a glass of water, I chugged it, cold and sweet. He avoided making an eye contact with me as he said, *My turn I guess?* And plugged the bracelet to himself. Before I could say anything he had already gulped down the pills and I was left wondering if he

was operating in envy? It was a while before the effects started to project his memories.

No. Luke you can not go play in the forest or anywhere near the Brooke, I need you within my eyesight and earshot. You get that? It was Luke's memory and her mother was assertively telling him to stay within the premises of their vacation house in some jungle.

Next memory was that of Luke being awarded a gold medal in some international physics competition at a tender age of ten.

You make me feel alive, Luke. You make me love my life. I have never felt this way before. Its like you have taken away all my sadness off me. It was me confessing my love to him while we lay in the open air theatre in our uni. I remembered this moment too and never thought that it would be one of his precious memories to hold onto. I felt a tear trickling down my cheeks.

Don't you have a girlfriend that you are madly in love with? It was the same blonde girl that he had cheated on with me who said this. *Yeah, but I am trying to focus on you right now so that I don't have to think about her.* He said as he turned her around.

No one dreams of being a doctor or a lawyer or anything

They dream of dealing on the dirty boulevard

Give me your hungry, your tired, your poor I'll piss 'em

That's what the statue of bigotry says

Lou Reed is playing over the stereo as Luke is bent over a piece of paper, writing something in his black diary that he

used to tell me was his personal poetry collection and he would often read out to me from it.

Next memory is of him drunk and playing poker with his homeboys and I hear him say, *I should make amends with Jessica. I was acting from darkness, she deserves an apology at least.*

Yeah man, you acted like a real piece of shit. The boy on his left had spoken.

Next memory was that of him putting a piece of paper in my bag but one of my friends had seen him do it and I had never found the letter. The grind had decided that it was important for us to stay in no-contact and she had torn the paper to pieces and told me later about the same.

I don't like that little blonde of yours. She is nothing but a gold-digger. What on earth even made you break-up with Jess. Will you ever do anything right in your life? It was Luke's Mom shouting at him. I had no idea that she liked me at all.

In the next memory he was six again and had fallen down the apple tree and twisted his ankle, writhing in pain as he shut his eyes and screamed, *I don't wanna die, I never wanna die.*

He was old again, getting his t shirt off as he stepped into the pool with a cigar lit between his lips, wearing sunglasses in night.

Your drugs are on the table inside. One of his boys had spoken as he swam.

Yeah, thanks man. Really appreciate. Luke answered.

Please don't make me look bad man. You told me this would be your last time before you sober up. You remember your promise, right? The boy spoke.

Yeah man, You got it.

Luke stepped out of the pool and headed towards the table and took a fistful of pills and beat them into a powder and poured them in his whiskey glass. He sat with the glass in the bath tub, swirling the contents and chugged them in. He rested his head against the marble and whimpered. *I'm so sorry. He whispered inaudibly. I shall never have to wake up in pain again.*

Luke's last few minutes of brain activity was entirely our collective ones - The time when we first met, our first kiss, our first date, the conversations we had about our future, us hugging, holding hands, hiking, running around together...*Hope in an alternate universe we are together, sipping beer in a tropical country, watching seagulls at a beach and you are telling me that I am forgiven and I do not have this aching soul anymore and I offer you my heart to eat.* He thinks in his last moments.

....*The champion this year is Viktor once again.* Viktor's memories start following immediately after Luke's. I stand watching the screen, unable to grapple with the grief. All of Viktor's memories are from around the time we met - the trek, the pink lake, the parties, cooking together, working in fact, the time that I had come to watch his race. There was no other person his memories but just a lot of moments that comprised of scenic drives, countryside vistas, waterfalls, beaches, rivers...Viktor was always alone in all of these

moments, smiling triumphantly to himself as he overcame the little athletic challenges that he posed for himself. His memories ended with the time he found me passed out on the facility premises and he panicked wondering I was dead.

I am so sorry that was so embarrassing. He spoke as he handed the metallic bracelet back.

No. It was very beautiful.

You don't have to say that Jess. I don't know how this happened? Usually its all just him. Theres never a vessel pouring out with my contents.

I am glad I caught a glimpse of everything that is beautiful to you. I spoke rubbing my hand on his arms. Thank you for making us do it. I continued.

Yeah well, that is the least I could do. I am aware of how much you miss him. Also, I had my own selfish motives - wanted to see what your life had been like. I wanted to see the world as you had seen it. Nothing is more beautiful than sharing the memories of those you love. I bet you will agree.

Yes. I nodded. So all these memories are random right?

Yeah, some of them are desires and some of them are dreams and you can never tell them apart when you watch them like this. They always change every time that you watch them but the ones that are core to your living always repeat. The others that is the thoughts, desires, dreams and fantasies keep changing.

So all the ones that I watched were not all real?

Mine were. But with Luke I can't tell since they weren't mine. But his last one is always the same. So I am hoping that one is not fabricated with some alternate.

It is said that time flies by quickly when you are surrounded by people you love that is why friends and families are important. I had been working on the project for going back home for almost six months and we had made tremendous progress. All the tests that we had conducted had made us aware of all the possibilities of failures and shortcomings. Layer of vacuum had been build around the spacecraft to make the surface inert and so far the demo results were showing success. Viktor would often drop by during lunch hours, talking endlessly about the outside world, humouring the Simulants working with me. I had started to look forward to his presence to brighten up my day. We used to break for lunch when he called in, and it was named "The Viktor Hours" in his favour. Sometimes he would also come up with really helpful insights that none of us had thought of previously.

Why don't you join us Vik? Klara had asked him once.

Oh me? Hell no. That isn't my rightful place to be in. What if I can't come back home? I love it here. I'd rather be the lover that pines after the lost one for a lifetime than follow them into some darkness. He spoke smiling, looking in my direction.

One night I had an elaborate dream, I was back on earth. The buildings stood dilapidated, all the important offices and colonies stood abandoned. Convenience stores were taken over by coyotes and hyenas. The atmosphere was covered by soot and red smog. Sirens blared without a source

in distance. There wasn't a living soul in sight. The roads were covered by dead bodies of children, their faces turned in horror. The air was filled with obnoxious gases, the water was murky with chemical effluents. Those who had managed to survive were walking around like zombies. Families had started to eat each other out. The living were on the brink of insanity. No hope was left to bring anything out of the shambles of desperation and pollution. Graveyards stood isolated, no living visited the dead ones anymore. The dustbins were being scoured by those who were affluent once.

Is this what you came back for? You have destroyed us. Look what you have done to us. Your projects deprived us of our wealth. You and you your hedonistic capitalism lurched us on invisible wars. You made us wait endlessly for things which were never going to be true. You know the resources that we wasted on you could have been used to feed our young. My babies would have still been alive if it wasn't for your failed project. What have you done? Look what you have done.

Several humans chanted as they looked at me angrily, walking towards me with absolute hatred.

I walk up drenched in perspiration, hyperventilating my way out of the nightmare. Viktor told me that I was stressed over the project and my guilt was manifesting through bad dreams. He expected me to have hopes even though there were high chances that I would be walking back home to corpses instead of tears of joy. I was envious of his lack of empathy - his perfect world and immortality would never make him understand what it would be like living in dread of the peril. He wanted me to stay back with him on the Proxima, *It would be fair if you abandoned them like they did to you. Nobody is*

hoping to have you back. Even Sam hasn't responded yet. Why do you want to go back to the people who value you so little? You do realise that they had sent you in space with hopes that you would die. How can you look past such blasphemy? You've been disposable to them. He had argued.

On a deeper reflection, I did weigh in the alternatives. I was pretty mad at the world but I couldn't shake off the burden of guilt and responsibility.

The final testing was to take place in a week, I was bound by feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. All my life I had just waited to escape the eternal sadness that clutched my heart. The meaninglessness of existence weighed down heavily upon my soul. Even though I could never name any trauma that had given me such a saturnine disposition, I was sure that there was genetic error in my code. I was born this way - sick and starving for happiness. Drugs had been an ally since an early age but their temporary affectation often led me craving for more. World was often clouded with a fog of sadness through my vantage. I had lost my ability to socialise and form meaningful and healthy connections with people. Grief had caved it way inside me and everything seemed hollow with all the conventions and lacked a depth that was needed for survival. All the people who had known me had often thrown words like, *Its just a phase. You've been through a lot. Things get better. You should try meditation. You should try positive journaling. Write down one thing that you are grateful for everyday and you will have so much changes.* No one understood that people who go through so much pain often do not think like the normal people. No yoga could quieten my thoughts, no amount of journaling could make me deviate

from the truth of the life. I tried running for sometime to stop spiralling into negativities. The endorphins helped me stay afloat for a while but before I knew it, I was always staring into abyss and with Project-Proxima I had fallen into that abyss. Now I know that abyss happened to be the void adorned with infinite stars and space dust - it was still marred with so much bleakness. Even being 4.25 light years away hadn't completely shielded me from who I was. My brain had convinced me that I didn't deserve happiness. I was sure that there was a higher power keeping a ledger of my laughs and would constantly weigh it with equal amounts of tears. A balance would have been okay but most of the days I was crying more than I was laughing. I wouldn't even know the cause of sadness when asked. I was either suicidal or working out the calculus to run away into an infinite space. I did have my good moments where I felt so alive, I thought would die but then all such memories always felt limited in hindsight. I never had the nerves to overlook the core of being alive. I was jealous of people who grew up in normal households and contended themselves with cheap entertainment, shallow thoughts, and booze. For me everything was a gateway into escapism ever since I was a child but nothing lasted. I always felt I lacked passion to continue one thing for long. Maybe it was the same thing that had kept me from being a complete addict because I would always get bored of whatever I was doing and always needed a way to get past the boredom. Life had offered me all the chances at dynamism as was possible. Now with Proxima, I finally had the chance to be the fig tree and try each one out. I could make Sylvia Plath happy if I stayed

back and leaned into every profession and passion I could possibly even dream of.

In order to rid me of my anxiety, Viktor asked me to accompany him on a meditative break. Despite my insistence that I shall be back on track after a few bouts of panic attack, he coerced me saying, *I want to show you a better way of dealing with emotions*. I couldn't stop thinking that it was perhaps the last time that I was travelling with him like this in his interconvertible. I couldn't stop feeling a farewell in my head like I had previously done on leaving high school and the university. Fleeting moments make you realise their beauty. The fact that you will never be in the same place ever again, living carefree, make you sentimental in an inexpressible way. I had always lied when people asked me my greatest strength - I used to say "adaptability". But the truth was that I was not okay with changes. Even though I wasn't a creature of habit or routine, I still despised changes. The idea of leaving behind a certain world and level of comfort and replace them with a new one was a difficult idea to cope with me. I believe that all my life I had said more goodbyes than hellos. It was never an easy task to do so. As we sped through the wilderness, red rocks and green thickets passed by us in a haze. Viktor was quiet throughout the journey, as if figuring out a way to say something right. When nothing worked, he turned on the speakers, playing Hozier. For the first time in a forever I wished the time to stand still which is quite contrary to the kind of a person that I am. I always wanted to live my life in a 2.5x speed, and if it were at all possible, I would have wanted to live the rest of my life in a week instead. That is how exhausted I felt. But today, I wanted the

quantum to fail us. I wanted to freeze all the minutes and hold them in a fist and never let them go. I did not want to make a decision, I didn't want to be responsible for lives other than mine. I just wanted to be a girl in her twenties, figuring how to burn more calories, what shade of nail paint to wear, the right season for thrifting, go on a girls trip and mix vodka with cranberry juice and complain about men. I didn't want to be an astronaut stranded amidst aliens feeling displaced. I didn't want to be a space traveller with the responsibility of saving earth. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to trade a fraction of this normal in exchange of anything good in my life. Its not like I wasn't grateful but I felt inadequate and isolated. I wanted to feel like anyone but me. I wished I could stop reprimanding and hating myself over things I did or did not do.

Viktor stopped at the entrance of a cave.

This is where I come, when I need a moment to myself. He said.

You mean to hide from the fame? I laughed.

You could say that Jess. Everyone has an urge to hide, I just give into it sometimes. This place helps me feel like myself. I can make my own choices and if anything ever goes wrong, I can always leave it behind and call it a hollow decision. If things go right, I call them a solid one. He smiled.

Then I hope this works for us again. I need something greater than me to tell me how to feel. I am too sad to make a decision right now. I spoke entering the cave.

I half expected bats to fly past us but soon realised that Proxima had no other species and it made me feel bolder. A

cold gust of wind greeted us however and the temperatures dropped, making our bodies feel the nice kind of cold. The atmosphere was saturated with a blissful peace. Viktor showed me hand made bench with pebbles gathered around it. *That's where you sit pensively.* He spoke, gesturing me to occupy it. I sat down, and he took a seat on the ground beside me. He lit a joint and inhaled sharply with his eyes shut. I wondered if Simulants also felt sadness the way we did. *It is sad Jess. More sad because we live an eternity with whatever hollowness we are cursed with.* He said as if hearing my thoughts. *You are lucky in a way because you do not have to be haunted for an infinite timeline.* He said passing me the joint.

We sat there for quite sometime, passing the drug back and forth, talking about connectedness and vastness of the universe. We roasted some marshmallows as the night sank in, and laughed as the cold beers hit our throat.

I may never have a chance to say this again Viktor, but you make me wanna stay back. If it wants for the obligations, I would have wanted to start a family with you. I would perish and let someone of your choice get my memories and consciousness. If it was possible I would wanna love you for you. I know it may feel like a lie but you have given me so much. I confessed as I lay my head on his shoulders.

Thank you Jess. You taught me how to love. Not that I ever expect it to be reciprocated given how providence has already set us in a motion to part. But I hope whatever decision you take, you never look back on it with a hint of doubt. He said holding me in his arms.

I sat in the spaceship with three other simulants, waiting for the launch. As I looked in the cameras, I could see Viktor waving frantically. I hadn't written a farewell note as I usually did because this time I felt that words couldn't justify the way I was feeling. I turned the pebble that I had taken as a keepsake from the cave, its smooth surface made me feel at peace. I couldn't resist thinking of a lifetime of bliss if I had instead chosen to stay back. Its not like anyone wanted me back home. Nobody cared enough if I lived or died. The Earth was probably reduced to selfishness and savagery. I didn't even know if by the time I reached back, I would have something to save. But still the thought of people who were alive made me want to risk my life and happiness. Its not a God complex that drove me beyond my temptations but a simple belief that you need to give back to the society. The countdown begun and all the memories that I had made here rushed through my head. My fingers shivered as I placed them on the "Go command" button. I wanted a theatrical rushing back into Victor's arms and succumb to his love. I wanted to live a little even if it was at an expense of a guilty conscience. But I sat frozen in my seat, waiting to churn through 4.25 years of excruciating silence and wait.