

In the Shadows of Hemera

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The young girl marched quietly through the Baikonur Museum of Kosmonautic History with her school group. The wiggling mass of students paced the large halls, listening distractedly to the barely audible chirpings of the audio tour-guide, stopping only long enough to say they'd seen each piece of history. A tall woman in an authoritative suit at the front of the line motioned the children into the theater, but never noticed the lone young girl, tucked into an alcove at the end of the hall, examining the floating spheres above a small display.

She stood, staring at the complex weave of floating rocks, the Pluto planetary system, held in the air by the same gravitational anomaly which kept man from exploring the system for so long. Her gaze fell to the screen beneath the hovering planetoids, with a slowly revolving crest, prominently labeled “МИССИЯ ГОРИЗОНА”, above an empty visitor's log. She stared at the display for a second, then waved her ID card across the screen. The letters within the logo changed, becoming “HORIZON MISSION”. She pressed her finger against the first line of text on the display, and a voice quietly filtered down from the clear dome above her.

“Twenty-three October, Two Thousand Forty-Six, Nine-o-four AM UTC. I'm Commander Jim Hill, native of the former Phoenix Territory, and I'm the captain and pilot for the Horizon mission mission to Pluto. Just as soon as this ship gets off the ground, I'm going to be making the longest solo flight in human history, a twelve year journey from Earth to the Pluto system. My job is to watch over the mission, do some maintenance tasks on the reactor now and again, and eventually, pilot the Horizon orbiter into a tiny little gravitational equilibrium between Pluto and Charon. They can't find it from Earth, so they send me. If all that goes to plan and I accomplish my mission, I'll land on Pluto's moon, Charon, and become the first man to walk on a celestial body outside of Mars. If I can pull all that off, the mission is complete, and I'll die up there as a very happy man... I hope.

Control has just informed me that the hatch is sealed, and I've had my last breath of natural Earth air. I've never thought about it, but in the fall, Siberia's not half bad. Not half warm, but not half bad. I suppose that's why they put the launch and training complex all the way out here, get me used to the cold here, that way they don't have to waste precious energy to keep me warm and toasty on the way there. I keep thinking that the shrinks at the ISA must

want me to go crazy up here, just so they can watch, put it in some textbook somewhere... Why else would they make me record these logs? Well, Doctor Miller, no offense, but I think I'll try and disappoint you. I hope these logs will be interesting to somebody in the future, regardless. Twelve years is a long time, though... Horizon acknowledging. All systems go for launch. Goodbye Earth. ”

The message cut off, and the girl stared at the display, at the picture of the short, weathered man, brown-eyed with sparse patches of brown hair, wrinkled far beyond his years, climbing into a small metal hatch on the Horizon Capsule. She scrolled down through the list of logs and selected another, and the old pilot's voice started up again.

“July Eighteenth, Twenty-forty-eight. I've just passed inside the orbit of Venus, preparing to slingshot off of its gravity. Just a few minutes ago, I passed by Hemera Station... well, what remains of it, just like the Engineers swore I would. Part of me... well, part of me hoped it would have burned up by now. It looks like the main Habitation unit took a meteorite to the hull, but aside from that, it's just like when we left. It's still hanging there in space. Just hanging. It's a graveyard. Thirty-five people. Tianna, Rex, John, Ross. They're all still up there. Still there...

Yeah. Well, in a few hours, I'll be around Venus' orbit and on my way to my rendezvous with Deimos Station. All levels are normal, and I'm alright. I'll... I'll report when there's something to report.”

The girl glanced over at the closed theater door, then slid into the alcove again. She selected another entry from the list, and the astronaut's voice came back to life.

“November... I think it's the seventeenth, twenty fifty. Truthfully, time has started to blend together, and the last four years have been pretty long. I spend most of my time in my cot, trying to sleep, but it's not that easy. When I'm not, I'm either doing things to keep the ship running, or watching old movies and reading old books. The World Archives sent me up here with a visualpad that has nearly every movie and book in their collection, so I'm never wanting for entertainment. I recently made the mistake of opening up the Russian literature section. Somehow, reading about characters dying cold and lonely isn't particularly uplifting, given my situation. I've just taken on supplies, water and my final set of Oxygen scrubbers at

Deimos Station. It should be enough to get me within an hour of Charon. I suppose an empty stomach won't really bother me too much at that point. Of course, nobody told me that Jan would be taking care of the station when I stopped in. Jan Kern, the last human I'll ever see, just perfect. Running down his clock on Deimos Station, doing his damned materials experiments, no doubt. Doctor Miller, these logs better not get out into the public before that fucker is dead. He looks so healthy, though. He was the only survivor of the Hemera Station flare... well, the only one that got away completely safe. Lucky bastard, falling asleep in his shielded lab during the flare. He looks so healthy..."

The display popped up with an image of a young, blond astronaut shaking hands with the Commander. She stared at the two men, and then at the small commemorative sign, floating in the cabin just above the Commander's clenched fist. The girl gazed at his acrid grin for a moment more, then started the next entry.

"November twenty-something, twenty-fifty. All systems are functioning fine. I... I've not been sleeping much. Seeing Jan, well, it brought back a lot of memories. Hemera Station was a great idea, really. I mean, it was close enough to the sun to not need extra heating, and the solar power was free. Besides, they wanted a team to look at Venus. We made incredible advances there, I mean, the ion drive on Horizons wouldn't be here if it weren't for work done there... and we'd never have Palladium Core technology if it weren't for Tianna's experiments there. I was on the design team. The engineers had a great design for it. It was safe. It was completely safe... I guess I still don't know why the solar shield failed..."

... well, in two weeks, I'll be in the asteroid belt. Once I'm past Ceres' orbit, I'll be further from Earth than any human has gone before. Aside from the bunch of Swedes they've got on Ceres now, I'm humanity's ambassador to the rest of the Universe. Kinda scary, isn't it?"

The young girl smiled at the commander's picture on the screen, showing the man, with only a small patch of brown hair left, floating upside-down in what must've been the habitat. He gave a thumbs up, holding a picture of a pristine school in his other hand. The monitor blinked to a picture of a girl, not much older than she was, upside-down on a playground, holding a picture of the Horizons Capsule, mimicking the commander. The label at the bottom of the screen read "Interspace Transmission-Pal program with Новомирная Горизоническая Академия, Baikonur, Kazakhstan". The young girl glanced at her watch, then scrolled further

down and started another entry.

“June... uhhh... well, just June, twenty-fifty-five... I've just had myself a little party... It was nice, I took a packet of Banana Cream Pie Nutri-Paste from the second supply module before I launched it, and had some apple juice... I had the juice taped to the heater for a month, but it never quite fermented... So much for hard cider, I guess... Doctor Miller, I hope you're happy, not letting me take a packet of Champagne... So yeah, my party. I'm dead now, actually. Well, not physically, but I'm now officially guaranteed to die in three years, and no force in the universe can stop it, unless that force brings some spare O2 scrubber filters and a miracle cure. I calculated it a few months back, actually, and figured out that as of now, if I got the idea to turn this thing around and head home, I couldn't get back to another station or colony before the scrubbers failed and I ran out of air... actually, it's all kind of moot... Doctor Miller and the damned engineers never installed a “turn around” button, at least not that I can use.

So yeah, everybody always complains about dying, but I'm now dead, and it's not that bad, really, so I had a party to celebrate. Nobody charges for champagne in a crashing airliner, right? Hell, I think I'll see if there are any of those bad Zombie movies on this visuapad. That'd cap it off real nice...”

The girl stared, seemingly unsure whether to laugh or cry, at a picture of the Commander, strapped to his bunk, with a technical manual folded into a little party-hat on his now bald head. His trademark thumbs-up was still there, although seemingly hollow. She clicked through the other pictures from the entry quickly, shuddering quietly as she flipped by the picture of the young boy in a party hat, sitting in his classroom and giving a thumbs up. She started another entry, and leaned her head back against the cold metal wall.

“April twenty-fifty-six. I'm not sleeping much... err... at all... I sit in my bunk, and I watch old movies, or read old books. I just try not to stare out at the stars. I saw the sun... the other day. I can still tell it's the sun, that's good. I've been thinking a lot about why I chose to do this, actually. People on Earth are probably thinking I'm a nutjob... well, they're right. I volunteered to die alone in space. If that's not crazy, what is? I keep telling myself that it beats dying alone in a hospital bed on Earth, somewhere, from the radiation... I still can't believe I'm alive... I was in my space suit when the flare hit, switching out a capacitor board on the hull.

One centimeter of radiastop fabric and it still got me... like getting hit by a wave of searing heat that never quite passes you by. I got it easy, too... everybody in the habitat... the galley... I got my share of gamma rays, but they got the worst storm the universe can muster, straight through them. Ross and John were in a docking collar, so they went quick. Rex never woke up from his nap, along with everybody else. Tianna took a while longer, I still remember seeing Jan through the viewport into his cushy shielded lab, holding her, dying, in his fucking arms, while I'm floating around outside, bobbing in the solar wind, nursing a pair of sunburned lungs... “

The recording ended with a crack in the Commander's voice. The girl let her head sag down, resting against the display. A picture of Hemera Station appeared on the screen, hanging quietly above the yellow planet. She raised her head slowly, and the picture changed, showing the Memorial statue in Sao Paulo, 35 people standing on a cliff, looking off forever into the sun. She slowly brought her hand up and pulled up a new entry.

“Four hundred twenty five days left. Neptune is beautiful...peaceful.. serene... blue, with gigantic white rings, turbulent, gray and blue, mixing... So I'm the first person to see these storms with my naked eye. I guess it's worth it. I jettisoned the third supply module today... I guess I'm feeling a bit better now... I'm almost there, I won't be able to see them for another year, but I'm closer to my purpose now... kinda sad, isn't it? My purpose is to babysit a large, self-sufficient chunk of metal, then to perform the most complex parking job in human history... after that, it's all a bonus. They weren't even going to have me land, originally. They were going to send the probe down to the surface of Charon, then just leave me in the habitat in orbit. I remember the day I asked to land, they stopped letting me in the design meetings after that... I'll never forget the look on Vern's face, he was the head engineer. I suggested they give me a seat on the probe for the landing, that I could go EVA and then strap myself to the side of it, landing with it.. he just stared at me and then proceeded to explain to me exactly how dangerous it would be, then I leaned over, looked him right in the eye with a straight face, and asked him if that meant I might die. He never bothered explaining the danger of things again...”

A chuckle escaped from the girl, the smile offsetting her serious expression. Ducking around the corner again, she gazed at the still-sealed theater, then quickly turned back to the

display. Coming to the final page of logs, she clicked the first one, and the Commander's voice descended once again from above.

“Four days... I.. I really haven't slept at all, they keep waking me up... I can see it, if the glare is just right, It really is just another dirty snowball, but it's losing all these satellites, gravitational anomaly, sure, that's well and good, but this is my life here, at least, what's left of it, what part of the four days I have, all sacrificed to get a huge chunk of instruments into some orbit, it probably won't affect anything but the lives of some engineers sitting in front of some panels somewhere, staring at the pretty flashing fucking lights, just floating, watching me die, floating, floating, staring back at the sun, not even caring that it's just a distant glimmer, back towards the initial path, that's it, just a glimmer, a distant memory, the star that gave Earth life and took mine away, just a point of light on some sensor, just a point . Computers are lucky. They just do their job and then shut down, not thinking, not waiting, not staring back at what they've lost. They don't get lonely out here.”

A picture of Jim popped up on the screen. With bags under his eyes and disheveled hair, he stared into the camera with a strange intensity, the capsule littered with wrappers and paper. She stared into his eyes, burning with a strange fury, and then looked over at the theater, showing signs of activity once more. She scrolled down and called up the penultimate entry. She waited quietly for his voice to descend from above once more.

“Control, this is Horizons. We're nearing orbital insertion now, tee-minus twenty minutes. I've slept, finally, and it's time to do my work. To do my duty. I'll do my best, I really will. I won't fuck this up, I swear. I've done my time for that..... and... I now have exactly five hours and fifty seven minutes of oxygen left. That means that by the time this signal reaches Earth, I'll be dead... Look, I'm sorry, I don't want to find out what people think. I don't want to know, I don't care. I need to say this for myself, not for you, not for Frank, not for Jan. For me... The world should know, but I don't want to be able to hear it when they do... Tianna, I'm sorry. Look, I was working on the shield panel on Hemera Station when the flare hit... the logs all say I was switching out the main Capacitor Board for the heating system when it hit, but that's bullshit, I just wrote that in there, they were dead, who was going to say otherwise... Look, the night before the flare hit, I was working on the shield motor. It was just a routine thing, I was switching out the aut positioning circuits, nothing complicated, but I had been up

for a while, like, a long while, like twenty-two hours. I was almost done rewiring the new board, and then I saw Tianna through the Galley window, she was getting ready to sleep, and I wanted to go to bed too, I was so tired, but I didn't at first, I tried to finish it up and bring the solar shield back online, so it would track the sun like it should have, and I was working and working, and finally... well, I saw Tianna was in bed, and I wanted to talk with her before she fell asleep, she'd told me that she might be considering leaving the station with the next shipment, that she wanted to end her experiments, and I wanted to try and talk her out of it, so I just closed the door to the motor panel and left to go inside. It was the stupidest fucking thing I've ever done, just leaving the shield offline, it could have stopped the flare, the motor would've moved the panel so it shaded the station, just like it had every other time, but no, stupid fucking Jim Hill had to go inside and leave it there, dead, protecting nothing, thinking "Oh, a flare could NEVER hit before I finish working on it", but no, I get inside, and she's asleep, and just laying there, and I can't wake her up, so I just floated around, floating, not sleeping, just there, watching the shield get out of alignment, but like an idiot, I just floated, "I'll get some sleep first...". The alarm woke me up, one of the satellites noticed a sunspot, but it didn't seem too big, so I didn't tell anybody so they wouldn't think I was stupid, so I just got suited up and went out there, I wanted to fix it, but then the mounting holes on the board cracked.. and... I'm sorry Tianna, I'm sorry Rex, I'm sorry Ross..."

Jim's speech dissolved into sobbing, echoing in the dark hall. The young girl, laid down on the ground, next to the display, staring at the corner, a tear in her eye. Soon, Jim's sobbing ceased.

"... I've got ten minutes left. I'm sorry I never told anybody, I didn't mean to hurt anybody, but I killed them all, just being an idiot... Look, for all you historians looking back at me and wondering why that idiot sealed himself in a capsule for twelve years, there it is, that's why I'm here. I already got the death sentence, a fatal shot of radiation to the heart, floating out there, May Thirteenth, twenty fourty two. I got my punishment, right there, right then, no mercy. I don't care if this all gets out, in fact, I want it to, I'm no hero, I'm no "Commander", I'm just the idiot who killed thirty-five people by trying to take a nap. They keep saying that I'll get some statue at the school in Kazakhstan, well, I'll make it easy for them. Dig a thirty-five foot pit, sink a statue of me holding a candle, and bury it again. That's all the recognition I deserve... I'm sorry Earth. I'm sorry Jan. I'm sorry kids. I'm not the hero you're looking for. I

just want to turn this whole fucked up situation into a happy ending, somehow. All I can really do is park this damned capsule, and then I have an appointment with the great cosmic boatman, to take me across the river. ”

The girl stared, quietly, at the base of the pedestal, her cheeks still wet, and her jaw hanging out in sore shock. She glanced up at the hovering spheres, and then her head fell down to her knees again. The final message played, the grainy voice streaming down.

“This is the last testament of Jim Hill. Well, first off, control, I've parked the Horizons Satellite. It's stable, that little point of equilibrium was actually there, it's just there, floating, stable, tranquil. It's amazing, really, I can see the reflection on the capsule, even from here, my landing site, on Charon. The habitat is clear, and I made some course changes such that in approximately thirty-four days, it will impact on the planet, maybe that'll give you all something interesting to watch from the Satellite. Uhh, the lander is fine, and the experiments are proceeding normally. Some good news, it looks like Charon isn't just a dead rock after all... I'm... well, I'm standing on what looks like a frozen river, and the probe confirms it's water. Lots of it, judging by what I saw on the landing. Proof that coincidence exists in space, Charon, the boatman, has a river. Also... you may want to send some physicists up here, there are these round rocks that... well, they push you away. They just kind of float, a few inches off the surface, and you can never quite grab them. I don't know what it is, and... well... heh... I can't get it close enough to the spectrometer to find out. I've never seen anything like this. If it's a new element, I'd like to request it be named Hemerium, or something like that, after the station. I hope the geologists will like these pictures, they'll be getting back to you soon. I've got fifteen minutes of air left in my suit, and I'm wandering around on the surface. The sun should be rising soon. The stars are beautiful here, bright and powerful, all the familiar constellations, just like home, I guess. Six billion miles away, and Orion is just the same, just like at home in the desert... Jan, I'm sorry. I hope your experiments are good, and I hope you already got that Nobel you were going for. Wherever I am by the end of the day, I'll let Tianna know you're still coming for her. The horizon is lightening a little. Vern, thanks again for arranging the landing, this is incredible. I'm walking across the river now, there's a comfortable looking group of rocks on the other side. Oh, I wish everybody could see this before they go, the Milky Way is hanging above me, bright as day, just floating in the sky... I've crossed over, and the river, the lander, it's all behind me now. Control, I think I'm going to sit back and watch

the sun rise, then take a long needed nap. This is my last transmission. Thank you everybody... oh my God, it's beautiful..."

The transmission ended, and the young girl stood up quietly, and punched a few words into the terminal. The theater doors swung open, and the girl's classmates streamed into the hall. She grabbed her backpack off the floor, and started walking back towards the group. The teacher quickly corralled the chattering mass of students, and then led them on towards the next exhibit. The girl started talking to her friends again as they walked out, but then stopped at the doorway, and stared back at the exhibit. The small console in the alcove stood, blinking quietly. The Horizon mission crest rotated slowly on the screen once again, floating above a single entry in the visitor's log: "Abigail J. Hill – Pheonix Territory, USA".