

Chapter 1

“We’re *God’s hand-picked favorites* on this here planet, I reckon.”

“Useless ray of goddamn sunshine.”

0 Hours Until Judgement.

We’ll fix this together.

The world was burning.

Or at least. Whatever counted as his world right now.

It was all flashing lights and the horrible rumble of the Tulpar as it careened into the side of an asteroid. Just like he’d planned it.

Well.

Plan was a bad word.

Jimmy didn’t think he’d planned anything up to this point.

It’d always been his problem.

Act, act, act. Go, go, go.

Never think.

Never stop.

That was Curly’s job.

But Curly was – and Jimmy was pretty damn sure of it – gone now. Absorbed by heaving masses of insulating foam. And it was all his fault. But *he* could fix this, surely –

What would he say to Daisuke? He didn’t *really* need to worry about him - the kid would believe just about anything if you put enough authority behind it.

Swansea? He wasn’t as easily fooled, but Jimmy wasn’t sure if he gave enough fucks to question him. So he’d probably be fine there.

The pit in his stomach yawned.

There was someone he was forgetting.

Someone important.

Well. Clearly not important enough if he'd forgotten about them.

And it wasn't like he had the luxury of spending time to *remember*, either. Curly's gargled screams from just beyond the cockpit door reminded him of that. Of what really mattered at the moment.

He could pull him out. Whatever was left of him.

He could cry over his lost friend.

That could be convincing.

For now.

So that's what he'd do.

His crewmates' footsteps grew closer as he tore open the cockpit door - mustering up all the fake heroism he could from the recesses of his gut.

And reached into the cockpit.

Chapter 2

Curly didn't even have the goddamn decency to die.

Jimmy had yanked him out of the masses of white foam only to discover he was *alive* – skin red, peeling, half melted, and almost every strand of curly blond hair singed off of his head. But alive. And Anya was *keeping* him alive.

Somehow.

With Oxy and a prayer, it seemed like.

Swansea had sent him (as if *he* was captain, or something) to go find her. Before they opened up the hold.

Said even she couldn't make things worse.

Jimmy would bet his measly paycheck from Pony Express that she probably could.

But, it wasn't worth arguing with a bunch of lunatics in the middle of space, so *Captain* Jimmy did as he was told.

Maybe she'd find something in the hold that could make her useful, anyway.

Music bounced down the metal hallways of the Tulpar as he drew closer to the Medical Room, Anya seeming about ready to collapse in on herself at any moment.

More so as he approached. Arms wrapped tighter around her abdomen, and eyes widened slightly as he strode into the room. Her lips made a tight line for a moment, before she looked out the door - away from him - popped them, and started to speak, "He doesn't want to keep still anymore."

"What about the painkillers?"

They'd gotten the *good* stuff, after all. Oxycodone. Extended release, or some shit.

"He– It just hurts him so much. I can't stand the noise."

Jimmy couldn't suppress a roll of his eyes, "...You *did* make it through nursing school, right?"

She didn't answer.

Great. Just perfect.

Did he have to do *everything* around here? Was he the only competent one on this ship?

Probably.

“Pony Express sure does know how to cut corners, if nothing else,” He sniped, eyeing down Anya and waiting for a response. No getting out of it this time.

It jumped away from his previous statement, but at least she spoke again. At *least*.

“Also, well... uhm. I was hoping you could help me with Captain—”

Captain. Captain, captain, captain.

Yeah, leave the guy with no limbs, no voice, and one eye to be the *Captain*.

“Curly.”

His jaw was tight, even as he spoke. He could feel it. How his teeth just missed grinding together.

How Anya stared at him with some degree of *fear*.

“Right, sorry—” The apology came quickly, “W-With *Curly’s* medication-?”

Jimmy sighed, “People have to be *worth* their titles. Don’t you think, *Nurse Anya*?”

“Y-Yeah. Forget I asked. I-”

“Shut up. I’ll take care of it.”

And shut up she did.

She swallowed and backed away from him just a touch as he turned on his heel to snatch up a bottle of Oxycodone. Yeah. Extended release. 10 mg.

Gods, looking down at him was even worse the closer he got.

Curly’s face - if he could even *call* it a face at this point - stared up at him, his one exposed watery blue eye fixated, unblinking, on Jimmy’s face.

Not that he *could* blink, anyway.

Considering Jimmy would be scraping his eyelids off the cockpit floor when the Tulpar finally got back to Earth.

If the Tulpar ever got back to Earth.

The poor fucker was wheezing as he got closer, and for a moment, Jimmy thought he could see Curly try to sink lower onto the uncomfortable stretcher he laid on. His mouth gaped open and shut with his wheezing breaths - fervent gasps for air as his co-pilot shook one of the pills out of the orange bottle.

“Hold still, yeah? I don’t like this any more than you do,” Jimmy attempted a nicety as he leaned over, “But you know what they say - pain is how we know we’re still living.”

A little yelp came from behind him.

Anya.

Covering her ears, her whole body trembling.

“I-I can’t bear to listen...”

She turned, bolted out of the room.

“Excuse me, sorry!”

Jimmy watched after her for a moment, before the door slammed shut and he was left alone with his *captain*. A roll of his eyes as he started to turn his attention back to Curly, but something caught his eye as he looked down.

A safe.

Well. More of a box.

Stowed underneath Curly’s stretcher.

He knew that box.

He’d *wanted* that box.

And he knew what was inside.

Dropping Curly’s Oxycodone back into the bottle and screwing back on the lid – forgetting the asinine task their *so-called nurse* had assigned him – he crouched down and pulled out the box. Pony Express’ safety protocol.

Oh, it was tantalizing.

He could fix this.

In two very different ways.

Curly’s breathing picked up as his exposed, lidless eye locked onto Jimmy and his newfound prize, a horrible moan emerging from his gaping mouth.

“What’s wrong, Captain?”

Wheezing. Like a chewed up dog toy with a punctured squeaker.

Anya was right – Curly really *didn’t* want to sit still. He was attempting to move, trying to roll his scarred body onto his side so he could get a better look. Or Jimmy assumed, at least. And that was fine. He’d get a front row seat to the show his co-pilot was about to put on.

He’d get to see the grand solution to all their problems.

The safe needed a code, he found.

But he knew where to find it.

“Watch that for me, would you?” He asked his *captain*, before snorting in derision, “Not like you can do much else with it.”

So much for niceties.

He only received a few more groans in reply, sounds just barely managing to choke themselves out of Curly’s charred throat.

He’d be fine for a few minutes while he got what he needed.

Anya didn’t even see him slip out of Medical, making his way to the right, through the hall and down the stairs – following the curve of the Tulpar all the way back to the ruined cockpit.

Each door that he had to pass through felt like it was trying to stop him.

Are you sure?

Yes, I’m sure. I have to fix this.

*Are you **absolutely** sure?*

Yes. I have to take responsibility.

Just as he’d expected, foam and flashing red lights greeted him inside - finally opening the last judgemental asshole of a door.

He didn’t even think - just moved over to the locker, one of the few things spared in the wreck, and pried it open with some elbow grease. And there it was. At the bottom.

DANGER!

Pony Express Protection Kit™

Captain Access Only. Code Scanner Required.

The purple-ish light of the Scanner ignited as he shined it towards the black box on the warning label, three green numbers appearing under the light. **157.**

He could remember that.

157.

It was just a walk back to Medical away, now.

157.

The halls seemed to watch him. Eyes locked onto him as he made his way back up the stairs. Blue eyes.

157.

He knew who they belonged to. He didn't give a shit. What did Curly want him to do? Waste a perfectly good bullet on *him*?

157.

He'd crashed the ship, after all.

157.

He caused all this.

157.

This wasn't *his* fault – he was just a victim. Like Daisuke. Like Swansea .

157.

Maybe if everyone else here had just done their damn jobs, maybe he wouldn't have gotten here. Maybe they'd still be on their way home. Maybe they'd be moving on with their lives.

157.

But no.

157.

Anya just had to squeal. Curly just *had* to know.

157.

This wasn't his fault.

157.

It couldn't be.

157.

The eyes followed him all the way back into Medical as he slammed the gun safe down on Anya's desk, only then noticing Curly collapsed on the floor. Fucker had rolled himself right off his stretcher. Fantastic.

157.

He'd done it to himself. He could live with it.

157.

The metal rollers, engraved with numbers, flicked under his fingers until they came to the correct code. The locks of the safe popped.

Jimmy opened up the lid, much to Curly's distress, apparently – given the co-pilot could only assume that he was trying to *scream* at the moment.

But it seemed so far away. And it wasn't *his* fault.

It wasn't *his* problem.

Not anymore.

"You jealous, *Captain?*"

Jimmy pulled out the slightly dusty handgun from the safe, inserting the magazine and pulling back the slide with a loud *snap*.

"I'm gonna fix this. All on my own. No more of this *together* bullshit. Look where that got us. Look where that got *you*," Jimmy snarled, before taking a few breaths, and sitting his ass down on the floor, his back against Anya's desk.

"So I'm gonna do you all a fuckin' favor."

Before he could even think about it, Jimmy put the pistol to his head –

And the last thing he heard was Curly finally managing to scream.

Chapter 3

“What the fuck-?”

Daisuke’s head popped up from his work as he heard a loud *bang* and... what sounded like *screaming* coming from upstairs.

“Yo, Swan—” He yelled over to his boss - head mechanic Swansea, “You hear that?”

“Kid, I’ve got my head damn near buried in foam and light fixtures right now - I can’t hear *shit*,” Swansea sniped back, before pulling himself down to look over at his intern, “What were you sayin’ now?”

Daisuke stood up, fidgeting with the rings around his fingers as he looked towards the door, “I think I heard yelling from upstairs - think we should check it out?”

A sigh.

A long groan.

“Fuck me.”

Swansea hauled himself down from his ladder and cracked his back, before rolling his eyes and grabbing the axe, “Just in case. Lead the way - and if this turns out to be *nothin’* because you just *thought* you heard somethin’--”

“It wasn’t nothing, I swear it! I know I just hear shit sometimes but I swear to fuck this was real.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep yappin’. You’ll be needin’ a shovel by the time you’re done.”

“Wouldn’t do me any good in *space* would it?”

“Knowing you? You’d figure out a way to make it work.”

The two made their way up the stairs – Daisuke making it up to the main floor with a bit more pep in his step than his boss to find Anya just down the hall from Medical. Eyes wide. Holding herself around her stomach.

“Any-?” Daisuke approached slowly, “What... What happened? Look like you’ve seen a ghost or somethin’-”

“It’s— It’s Jimmy. He...” Anya couldn’t continue for a moment, Daisuke picking up that she was *humming* very softly, “He found where we kept the gun safe – found the code with that scanner he’d picked up from the cockpit – and—”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Swansea caught the back half of her recollection, already moving past the nurse and his intern towards Medical, “I swear to god—”

Daisuke followed behind, Anya cautiously trailing him, as Swansea shoved open the medical room door.

God, there was so much blood.

Daisuke felt nauseous just from the smell, recoiling from the room the minute the door opened.

Once he could finally look back, he took in the full sight of the room: the Medbay. Captain Curly was on the floor, moaning and whining on the cold tile as tears streamed from his exposed eye. And Jimmy –

Jimmy was sitting against Anya's desk, a handgun still clenched in his grip. He barely had what Daisuke could consider a face anymore - no more nose, no more upper lip, and barely a right eye to speak of. His tongue lolled limply out of the yawning crevice that remained of his mouth, and the only other things Daisuke could recognize in gory wreckage were his few remaining teeth.

He couldn't help but stare – like watching in horror at a spectacular wreck on the highway.

But at least Swansea was moving.

The mechanic first moved to put Curly back on the stretcher, and asked him a simple question, "Did that jackass actually give you your meds, or did he pussy out of it?"

Curly shook his head stiffly.

No.

"Alright then," Swansea breathed, stepping around the mutilated corpse of their co-pilot to retrieve the Oxycodone - holding up the bottle for Curly, "This shit?"

Curly nodded his head, just as stiff.

Yes.

"Cool."

He shook out one of the pills, the Captain letting his mouth fall open for Swansea as he approached.

"I'll be as gentle as I can, alright? Not gonna be easy, though."

A little groan.

Okay.

With a somewhat precise movement, and a few moments, Swansea had Curly swallowing the Oxy – or at least, getting the medication down his gullet *somehow*.

Once that was over with, and Curly was lying quietly on the stretcher again, the mechanic turned to Anya and Daisuke, "...Well, shit."

"Yeah, no kidding. Understatement of the *decade*, man," Daisuke gagged.

Anya just nodded in agreement, still humming to herself.

"But, we're gonna buck up and we're gonna get it together, alright? The both of you. We need to find help, and we need to get back to Earth. That's what we need to be worried about," Swansea replied, surprisingly calm for the whole situation around them, before pointing to Curly, "So we can get *him* what he needs," A point to Jimmy, "And throw *this* son of a bitch into the ocean."

"Can't argue with that," Anya replied, giving a nervous laugh, "...Can we at least... move him out of *here*, though? Clean up a bit?"

She paused, thinking - before adding on.

"I... I don't think Curly wants to keep looking at him."

"I wouldn't either, to be *so* real," Daisuke, as if to prove his point, had finally torn his gaze away from the faceless corpse, rubbing his eyes, "But- yeah. Shit. Should we go find out what's in the hold too, maybe? There's gotta be *somethin'* in there, right?"

Swansea sighed, bending down to pick up the Code Scanner from Jimmy's cold hand and tossing it to Daisuke, "Sure, why the fuck not. I'll join you two down there in a sec - but I'm gonna clean up the gaping asshole that's been left on your floor first, *Nurse*."

There was no malice in him emphasizing her title, she found - just a bit of annoyance at having to clean.

But the way he looked over her - he had to know *something*, surely.

She appreciated it, either way.

"...Thank you, Swansea," Anya managed a very brief smile, "You don't have to do that."

"Sure, I don't *have* to," Swansea carefully removed the handgun out of Jimmy's other hand, ejecting the magazine and stowing both in the safe before hauling up the sorry corpse, "But I also like this rust bucket *not* smelling like dead people. We've got enough of that with him around."

He nodded back towards Curly, who managed a wheezing sort of sound that Daisuke and Anya could only presume was him trying to *laugh*. In some weird way.

Close enough.

"He's not dead yet-!" Daisuke called back as he and Anya made their way out of the Medbay, "He feels happy!"

“Boy, how the fuck do you know Monty Python-?!”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

yeehaw y'all get two chapters today

“So whaddya think we’ll find in there?”

Daisuke found filling the silence wasn’t exactly Anya’s strong suit as they waited outside the Cargo Hold for Swansea – but that was perfectly fine, considering the act was basically second nature to him.

“Maybe it’ll be tech or somethin’?” He continued on, Anya not yet joining in on his musings, “Seems like the kind of thing you would ship through space.”

“Medicine, maybe,” The Nurse replied practically, “Something that could help keep us safe here a little longer. Hoping it’s *some* sort of supplies, at least.”

Daisuke pouted, “That’s no fun, though – have *some* imagination about it.”

“Sorry, I’m not exactly the... creative type,” Anya actually managed a small laugh, “I’ll leave that to you, I think.”

“Boooo. Lame.”

Their musings about what was inside the Hold were interrupted soon after, however, by the third set of footsteps coming down the stairs – Swansea, wiping sweat from his brow as he chucked a trash bag off to the side and fixed both of them with a steely glare.

“You haven’t opened the fuckin’ thing yet?”

“We were waiting for you–” Daisuke started, scratching the back of his head nervously with the hand not occupied by the Code Scanner.

A half-hearted roll of his eyes, “It’s not high school, kid - you don’t need my permission to do what you’ve gotta do.”

“Man, I know *that*, ” Daisuke whined, the *pinnacle* of maturity, “I just– I dunno. This is different, you feel me?”

Anya backed him up, “He’s got a point, Swansea. This is normally... very much prohibited. If we’re going to do it, we should all do it together.”

“Remind me to send that last sentence to Hobby Lobby or Homegoods when we get back to Earth, alright? They can stick on a sign or somethin’,” Swansea joked, “All the suburban moms can hang it up in their livin’ rooms.”

“...Wouldn’t that include your wife, boss?” Daisuke asked.

“Sure would. God love her, but if she buys another fuckin’ inspirational sign, I’m breaking sobriety.”

It was enough to make the three of them laugh - taken off guard by the mechanic’s declaration, and the incredibly unserious condition that would have to be met for it to happen. If Pony Express hadn’t already made him break his sober streak, Anya reckoned, and perhaps Daisuke would’ve too, if he’d been there long enough – then nothing would.

The intern turned on the Code Scanner after some fiddling with buttons, the purple light first shining on the floor before Daisuke turned it up to shine over the empty black box on the wall where the code was hidden from them.

4157.

The doors to the Cargo Hold slid open as Swansea punched in the code, Daisuke reading it out loud to him before turning off the Code Scanner. A preliminary peek inside before they entered revealed nothing special: just a *lot* of cardboard boxes and pallets. Typical. Normal.

It wasn’t until Swansea opened up one of the boxes using his keys (Daisuke grinning at the little swan keychain that marked them as belonging to the mechanic) that they began to panic. Just a little bit.

Because what was a trip on a Pony Express ship without a little panic?

“I swear to God—”

“Mouthwash?!”

Anya’s voice quavered in disbelief as the three gathered around the open box to see what was inside.

Just as she’d said: mouthwash.

So many bottles of mouthwash.

“Un-fucking-believable.”

“There’s no way that’s all we have in here, maybe it’s just the one box!” Daisuke tried to hold out hope, but his optimism was quickly shot in the face as Swansea opened another box and there was, surprise surprise, just more mouthwash.

All they were shipping was fucking mouthwash.

Perfect.

Just *perfect*.

“There’s gotta be an ocean of this stuff in here! This room looks freakin’ endless!” The intern continued as the three crew members kept opening more boxes, hoping that they were just unlucky – only to be faced with more and more Dragonbreath X Mouthwash: All Day Fire Fresh.

At least their dentists would be happy when they got back, Daisuke mused to himself.

“A whole goddamn year, and *this* is all we’ve been hauling?” Swansea sat back, not bothering to dull his keys splitting open more packing tape, “Five people, all this time – for fuckin’ *mouthwash*?”

Anya was inspecting the back of one of the bottles, brow furrowed as she read the label, “The sugar content probably offsets any potential as a disinfectant...”

“How much ethanol are in those suckers?” Swansea raised an eyebrow.

The nurse blinked owlishly at the mechanic, before turning her gaze back to the bottle, “...Fourteen percent?”

Some neurons connected in her brain, and she immediately added on:

“If you’re thinking of doing what I *think* you are—”

Daisuke looked between the two - his boss and their nervous nurse in a tense stare-off, before asking, “Uh... what?”

“She thinks I’m gonna chug it, kiddo. Ethanol gets you boozed up,” Swansea sighed, before grimacing at the thought, “Debated it. Honestly. But someone’s gotta be in charge here. Obviously isn’t the Captain. Obviously isn’t Bullets For Brains. I’m not leaving *you* in charge,” He pointed at the intern, who feigned insult at the remark, “And *you*—” He pointed at Anya.

A beat of silence as he thought.

“...Nah, you just need to focus on the Captain. Keeping him alive’s a job enough.”

“Right... of course.”

“So what *now*?” Daisuke groaned, “We’re stuck in space, and all we’ve got is freakin’ *mouthwash*!”

“It’ll be an interesting story, though, right?” Anya tried to reflect the young man’s optimism back at him, “The three of us surviving in space on nothing but Pony Express food and Dragonfire Mouthwash.”

“*True*.”

Swansea looked around, before starting towards the Cargo Hold doors, back out into the hall, “Well, when you two are done yapping about headlines - we need to figure out *some way* to get someone over here. Another ship or somethin’.”

“Curly would... probably know something. If he could speak,” Anya mused.

“Worth a shot, isn’t it?” Daisuke tried, “I’m sure there’s *some way* we can get answers out of him.”

“Knock yourself out,” Swansea hummed, “Just gimme the Code Scanner before you do, so I can make sure there’s no hidden shit when I check out the Cockpit, yeah?”

In one hand, he accepted the Code Scanner from Daisuke, and picked up the trash bag he’d discarded earlier - walking the short distance to make a pit stop at Utility, “Oh, and by the way, Nurse?”

Anya and Daisuke watched, waiting for him to continue.

“Your lab smells like sunshine and rainbows now.”

Chapter 5

“So did you have... a *plan* for this, or-?”

Anya had to ask as Daisuke crouched down next to their Captain, earning a curious look from the scarred and bandaged man before him.

“Of course I have a *plan*, ” Daisuke rolled his eyes, before grinning, “It’s kind of *dumb*, but—”

He then turned to Curly, asking, “So, Cap - yes or no— You know morse code?”

A nod.

“*Morse code?*” Anya looked down in disbelief at the intern, “How do *you* know morse code?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Teacher said I talked with my friends too much in class, so we just. Learned morse code to talk to each other without... talking. Tapping pencils, or our fingers. Easy peasy.”

Yeah. Easy peasy. Like just *learning* Morse Code was the most obvious solution in the world.

Daisuke continued on, “Cool though, Cap, so uh— you mind tappin’ one of your... arms? Or something? We’ve got some questions.”

Another nod.

To Anya, it seemed the most *awake* the Captain had been in a while.

Not bad.

“*Siiiick-*” The intern’s grin only seemed to widen, “Let’s get to it then— So, uh. Guess we should *start* by telling you we opened the hold.”

And so Curly began. [Tapping out a message](#) with what remained of his right arm.

It took a while, but eventually Daisuke had the whole thing translated, and he snorted, “Only just?” He read out for Anya, “Said he would’ve done it a while ago.”

“Well, we’re not you, Captain. Fortunately or otherwise,” The Nurse replied, looking away from Curly.

“Yeahhhh, we’re kind of... rule followers, I guess. Not Swan, though - that dude’s off rooting through the cockpit I think. Speaking OF-” Daisuke jumped into his next question, “Anything in there that could... I dunno, connect us to another ship or something?”

[Another message.](#)

“A radio?” Daisuke asked, earning a nod from Curly, “Yeah, though - hope the foam didn’t eat it. Might be fucked otherwise.”

“Don’t say that,” Anya sighed tensely.

“Oop– okay–”

“Maybe Swansea’s found it already, though,” The nurse continued, still not looking at their Captain, “You two can fix it, maybe – even if it did get damaged.”

“Yeah, probs,” Daisuke’s eyes got wide, “Can’t be *that* much different from fixing up my jank-ass Gameboy, right?”

More tapping. [Curly was talking again.](#)

“*Wow,*” The intern laughed after taking a second to find out what their Captain was saying, “Thanks, man. Appreciate it.”

“What’d he say?”

“*It can. Don’t worry.*”

“Promising. Guess you’d better go find Swansea then,” Anya raised an eyebrow, “...I’d... better stay here. Look after the Captain. You know.”

“Yeah, sure thing– We’ll be back in no time!”

With that, Daisuke ran off in a flash – eager as always – leaving Anya behind with the Captain.

Curly stared at her, unblinking, before she looked down at him finally and felt like she could see... *tears* welling up.

It was probably nothing.

Probably just the fact that he couldn’t blink.

Nothing else.

Nothing at all.

She wiped them away, gave him a few of the Tulpar’s remaining eye drops, and set about organizing her lab.

Swansea had been right.

Her lab *did* smell quite nice.

It was just a bit easier to not gag this time.

Just a bit.

Chapter 6

“Swaaaaaanseaaaaaa!”

Daisuke yelled down the long hall towards the cockpit, thrilled at how far his voice carried down the metal halls of the ship.

“Are you downnnnn hereeeee?”

“No, I fuckin’ vanished,” He heard the bitching reply as he got closer, “Get in here—”

The intern did as he was told, entering the cockpit through the already open doors and getting his first real look at the place.

A disaster, as he might’ve expected.

Sealant foam covered almost every inch of the cockpit, thick white blobs obscuring any view they might’ve had at the many screens glowing an ominous red on the far wall. Small pieces of the sealant littered the floor – which brought his attention to Swansea, very slowly chipping away at parts of it after long moments of deliberation between each movement.

And Daisuke could understand why – the foam was the only thing standing between them and the cold abyss of space, after all.

“Sup?” The intern greeted him, watching his latest mining effort before it came to an abrupt halt.

“Us, somehow,” Swansea replied, wiping his brow, “You manage to get anything out of the Captain?”

“Oh, yeah, actually – there should be a radio in here somewhere. Might be broke, but we might be able to fix it.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah – told me in Morse Code. Just tapped his arms n’ stuff,” Daisuke explained, “And before you ask - yeah, I know Morse Code. Me n’ my friends used in school to get around ‘no talking’ rules.”

A brief hum of acknowledgement, maybe even a slight *grin* from Swansea, “Huh. Never woulda thought. Good for you, kiddo.”

It was like a dopamine hit straight to his brain - Daisuke grinning wide as he began to look around for anything that resembled a radio, “Just hoping this thing didn’t get eaten by... all this, y’know?”

“If it did—” Swansea joined the search, figuring two sets of eyes were better than just the one, even if his were probably worse than the kid’s, “We could try n’ chip it out - as long as it

won't send us flying through space like fuckin' flesh comets."

"Terrible thought! Thanks, boss!"

"You'll get used to it - surprised you haven't already."

The two continued like that for a bit, lightening the somewhat oppressive mood of the cockpit with jabs back and forth at each other. A verbal sparring match under the red glow of the emergency lights.

It was almost *fun*, in a way.

A nice distraction from impending doom, in any case.

At least until Daisuke spotted something amongst the many glowing screens, and he remembered why they were actually here.

"Holy shit—" He choked out, breathless, "Swansea— I think it's actually still here—!"

A few numbers flashed sporadically on the screen, but it was clear what it was *trying* to be, at least - a radio.

Scraping away some of the extra foam, they found the screen and all the knobs mostly intact. *Mostly*, anyway.

But no matter how broken it was, it was still the most wonderful thing they'd seen in a few months.

"Holy shit," were the only words that came out of Daisuke for a long moment, watching and waiting for Swansea next to him to say something.

Eventually he did, deciding that the foam they'd peeled away was about as safe as it was gonna get without getting them vacuumed into space, and staring in just a touch of disbelief, "...Well, I'll be damned. It's in one piece. That's somethin', at least."

"Doesn't seem to be—" Daisuke fiddled with a few of the knobs, squinting as he tried to listen, "—Picking anything up though."

"Is it set to the right frequency?"

"I dunno, probably. Cap probably had it right."

"...Do you know what the right frequency is?"

"He didn't tell me."

The mechanic looked over his intern's shoulder, before moving him out of the way, "We'll focus on the physical pieces of it first, then. That's our wheelhouse, don't you think?"

Daisuke nodded - that's what he was here for, after all.

“Great,” Swansea nodded back towards the cockpit door, “Go get our tools, errand boy. We're gonna be here a while.”

The younger man just grinned as he moved out of the room, “You got it, man.”

“That's 'sir' to you, pipsqueak.”

“You got it, *sir*. ”

Close enough. Swansea would take it.

Sitting and waiting for him in that cockpit, though, the mechanic felt something gnawing - deep in his gut. The kid deserved better than this. Than to be stuck with a crowd of fuckups in the middle of nowhere in space. Digging his still soft fingers into sealant foam trying to scrape a chance of survival out of nothing.

No callouses just yet.

The kid had barely lived and now he was on the precipice of dying.

Well. They had food for a few months yet - especially with the jackass gone.

And their air supply would last far beyond that.

Maybe they'd be alright.

Maybe.

But as he sat there, those thousand some thoughts running through his mind, Swansea started to debate if he *should've* drunk that mouthwash.

Because then maybe he wouldn't be sitting here thinking about some kid he'd just met like an idiot.

Chapter 7

The Utility Room wasn't far - just down the hall through the billion doors that led into the Cockpit and around the bend.

As Daisuke finally shoved his way inside Swansea's makeshift bootcamp room, he looked around, trying to spot where their toolkit had gotten off to. It couldn't have gone far, after all. It wasn't like they'd brought it out for anything else recently - so it was sure to still be here.

He started to move around the room, rooting around for what they needed, something caught his eye.

Not the three, foamed covered Cryopods — he'd gotten used to those already.

The fourth one.

The only one that'd been spared from the crash.

There was something... inside.

Odd.

Daisuke thought they were saving it. Or leaving it empty indefinitely, because they were totally gonna get rescued and not be stuck on this ship forever.

Abandoning his mission for tools to fix the radio briefly, he decided to take a peek inside — only to quickly regret it once he processed what he saw.

Jimmy.

Or, what was left of him.

Someone had shoved him in the pod just as he'd been - sans his face, but now with the addition of shiny ice crystals forming on his body.

Daisuke recoiled from the pod, eyes wide as he covered his mouth with his hands. No screaming. There'd been enough of that already. He had to keep this job. He had to keep it together.

Not that anyone could hear him scream anyway, given he was in space—

Bad joke. Really bad joke, holy shit, he hated it.

He spotted the toolkit in his frenzy, finally, and left the utility room behind — slamming the door just a bit too hard behind him. *Shit.*

Stop acting weird, his mind screamed, you're gonna get us in trouble!

Daisuke took a deep breath. And then walked back, as *normally* as he could, to the cockpit.

Swansea was still there waiting for him through the annoying gauntlet of doors, hunched over by the semi-busted radio.

They could fix it.

They had to, after all.

“Back already?” The mechanic hummed as he approached.

“Can’t get rid of me forever, y’know,” Daisuke shot back with an easy grin on his face, despite the effort it took to produce it, “And it’s not like this was hard to find. We kind of just... left it out.”

Swansea just chuckled, “Yeah, alright – hand it over.”

He held out his hand in expectation, but... Daisuke couldn’t bring himself to hand it over. Not yet, anyway.

“Can you answer something for me first, though?”

“I’m not answering riddles so we can get rescued, kiddo - hand over the tools—”

“What’s with Jimmy’s body hangin’ out in the Cryopod?”

The question stopped Swansea dead in his tracks, before his outstretched hand moved to his face and he sighed. Deeply.

“Shit. Yeah. I shoulda figured you’d see him,” He finally responded after a long moment of deliberation to himself, “I stuck him in there just because – well, where the hell else are we gonna keep him? Anya nearly hurled getting close to him, and I’m not having the bastard stink up the place even in *death*, so– in the freezer he goes.”

Daisuke thought for a moment, before handing over the toolbag, finally, “...Yeah, that makes sense. Sorry, it just... it freakin’ jumpscared me, y’know? I look over and– aaa! Faceless Jimmy! You feel me?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Swansea rolled his eyes with a grin, “Now quit your yappin’ and pay attention so we can fix this shit and go home.”

“Yes, *sir*,” Daisuke laughed, trying his best to put the sight of their former co-pilot out of his mind as they started to sort through the wires and circuits of the radio. Swansea explained, with a usual amount of grouching and complaining, the entire process – eventually directing the young intern towards a damaged wire towards the back.

The power wire, he informed, damaged by the impact or the foam - one of the two.

And now *he* was going to fix it.

“You sure you want *me* to do it–?” Daisuke looked over at his boss skeptically, “I mean, you should probably do it since... pretty important, y’know?”

“I’m sittin’ right here,” Swansea raised an eyebrow, “Just don’t be a jittery little wuss like you usually are, and you’ll be just fine.”

He guessed that was fair – it wasn’t like Swansea was going to just ditch him to let him figure it out all by himself, after all.

He could do this. He could make Swansea - and the rest of the crew - proud.

Picking up their tools at Swansea’s instruction, Daisuke prepared to fix some wires.

And maybe help bring them home.

It couldn’t be *that* much different from a jank-ass Gameboy, after all.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Just poppin in here to say ty all so much for reading so far!! Means the world to know people enjoy my funny little au haha <3

Shoutout to @psybexm - this wouldn't have happened without your Stellar beta reading and grammar policing /aff LMAO

“They’ve been down there a while.”

Anya didn’t know who she was talking to.

Certainly not the Captain - it wasn’t like he could talk back. He just stared at her, his eye constantly watering, unblinking, and the sound of his raspy breaths filled the empty spaces between her words spoken to no one.

Maybe they were to the Captain – or at least, the man that was left underneath the scarred skin and slightly crusty bandages. She felt bad in a way - she couldn’t even change them as frequently as she wanted to. They were running short, and he required so many. Unhygienic, sure. But it wasn’t like she really had a choice. Pony Express never really prepared them for the task of caring for a limbless burn victim for months on end.

Pony Express didn’t even prepare them for *normal* medical emergencies.

“Do you think they’ll be able to fix it? The radio?”

A very stiff nod from the Captain, his eye still fixated on her.

He almost seemed to debate trying to tap out a message to her, before remembering that she couldn’t understand Morse. He fidgeted a bit, shuffling on the little bed he laid on.

He moaned.

God, it was awful.

Anya could feel the tears welling up as she listened to it, fingers digging into her horribly made blue Pony Express uniform. The feeling that filled her was one she despised – Curly couldn’t help it. He couldn’t help the fact that he had pain worse than she could ever imagine ripping through his body at all hours, only kept at bay by 10mg of extended release Oxycodone. And it wasn’t like she could just leave him *alone*.

But it’d be over soon.

She hoped.

“Sorry. I can’t understand... Morse. You know,” Anya apologized for no reason, “We can’t even talk to each other. You just have to listen to me ramble to myself. Probably not all that fun, if I’m honest.”

There was another gap of silence between them, before she briefly turned to look at the Captain – noticing that he was pointing at her desk. Her expression betrayed her confusion, before she made her way over to her desk - still covered in old psychological evaluations, pens, and a random assortment of medical supplies that she’d yanked out to try and keep Curly alive longer.

As her hand approached a pen, she heard him grunt – approval, maybe? She picked it up and held up the pen in his direction, earning a nod back. Yes.

Presuming he wanted *paper* as well, though not sure what he’d *do* with it, she placed the paper down next to him and clicked open the pen.

His mouth gaped open, just as it would for medication.

She yelped, moving back just a little bit before asking, “...You want the pen? In your mouth?”

Curly nodded.

“...The tip pointing *out*, presumably.”

Another nod. A slight roll of the Captain’s eye.

Obviously, Anya.

“Alright–” The nurse extended the pen towards Curly’s mouth, letting go once his teeth clamped down on the writing utensil.

It took some effort, some shifting around, but Curly was eventually laying on his side, pointing the pen down towards the sheet of paper. With some maneuvering, he actually managed to write, and a message soon formed in somewhat blocky letters on the page.

I saw it.

“Saw... what?”

Anya knew what he meant, but figured she’d asked anyway. If only to see if the twisting in her gut was right.

Some more slow writing.

Dead pixel.

Right in front of me.

Couldn't ignore.

So she'd been right.

It was hard to ignore the dead pixel when it made up the whole of the picture, wasn't it?

Sorry.

So sorry.

"Captain— It's... it's fine."

It wasn't, and Anya knew it wasn't.

It was *far* from fine. A clump of cells grew into a child inside of her.

His child.

Half person, half a gouged out, burnt out mess. A flickering pixel hanging on for dear life on a dying screen.

She hated it.

And she hated that she hated it.

But she *hated* it.

"It... it's not your fault."

Could've done something.

"Not without Pony Express making our lives more miserable."

Curly just underlined his previous statement.

His eye was watering again.

It wasn't dry - Anya had put drops in it not that long ago.

No. He was *crying*.

Anya had been restraining her sniffles and tears up until this point, but finally let a few fall, sobs clawing their way out of her throat. He could've done something. To hell with Pony Express. She couldn't even bear to look at him for a long moment, letting all the tears she'd held back so *he* didn't explode and do something worse with that gun than he had.

She thought she'd hidden it better.

But maybe it was better that he was gone, now.

They didn't have to tiptoe around his temper.

“You... you think we’re going to get back to Earth, though? Maybe?” She finally asked, trying to give herself just a glimmer of hope. Some distant thought that this nightmare might eventually end.

The pen scratched against the paper.

Yes. Daisuke and Swansea are smart.

“...Thank you, Captain.”

Scratch scratch.

Curly is fine.

“I’ll probably keep the habit for a while, though. Old habits and everything. You know.”

Curly just nodded, finally dropping the pen out of his mouth and taking a few deep breaths – only to groan when it rolled off the bed and onto the cold tile floor.

“...Did you have more you wanted to write?”

A brief moment where the Captain didn’t move, before nodding.

When Anya returned the pen to him, and he positioned it properly once more, he scribbled a bit:

Needed to breathe.

“That’s okay. Can’t fault you for that.”

ID card. Check the locker.

Her ID card. She’d always wondered where it’d gone. It went missing sometime after she’d spoken to Curly–

In the cockpit.

The cockpit locker. Only two people could’ve put it there.

She got up from where she was crouched by Curly, and bolted out of the medical bay. Unprofessional? Sure.

It was just an ID card after all.

The last she heard from Curly was the pen hitting the cold floor again, and the Captain groaning in dismay.

Chapter 9

“Now light that sucker up and see what it does, teenybopper.”

Swansea and Daisuke had spent the better part of a couple *hours* trying to repair the cockpit’s radio, Daisuke fumbling with wires and components before Swansea, predictably, finally got fed up with him being a clumsy twit and stepped in to show him how it was done. But now it was the intern’s turn again.

“Should work. At least for a little bit.”

“You’re sure?”

“Pretty damn sure.”

“...You’re *sure* you’re sure?”

“Well, now that you’ve asked *that*— for fuck’s sake, turn it on, ya dipshit!”

“Alright, alright, I’m doin’ it!”

Just as he was actually about to do it, however, the doors to the cockpit opened up – revealing their disheveled Nurse, who immediately flung open the one metal locker that had been spared the foam.

“Hello to you too, Nurse,” Swansea greeted her, “Can we help ya? Or did Cap finally kick the bucket?”

“Neither – he started writing, and he said—” Anya explained breathlessly, before pulling something out of the locker, “...He was right.”

“What is it?” Daisuke walked away from the radio for a moment, peeking over to see what was in Anya’s hands, “...Your ID card? What’s *that* doin’ in here?”

Anya’s lips formed a thin line as she tucked the card away into her shirt pocket, her eyes shut as she thought. There was a long moment before she nodded to herself and spoke, without opening her eyes, “...I’m going to tell you both something, and it’s not going to leave this room. Okay?”

“Whatever you need to tell us! We’re all ears!” Daisuke tried to be optimistic for a brief moment, before he was quickly shown that it wasn’t making Anya feel any better this time.

Swansea hummed, “Whatever you need to say.”

“...Our co-pilot. He...” She swallowed, before changing direction, “...Do either of you remember when I mentioned that the sleeping quarters don’t have locks on the doors?”

The pause that followed was made only slightly less agonizing by the hum of the equipment around them.

The ominous red lighting from the emergency screens felt appropriate at the moment.

“There’s no freakin’ way he—” Daisuke stared with wide eyes at the far wall, before falling quiet, “...Did he?”

Anya just nodded.

Swansea was deadly quiet - a still sea before a rough storm. There was something in the way his jaw set, his hands clenched into white knuckled fists.

Something that wanted to take a hard swing.

But it wouldn’t help, because the thing that it wanted to swing at was already beaten into a faceless pulp.

“For fuck’s sake. I fuckin’ knew he pulled some shit,” He finally let out through gritted teeth, before he seemed to realize something and he looked at Anya, his expression quickly falling back into neutrality, “I’m not mad at you, Anya. Let’s make that perfectly fuckin’ clear. I’m not mad at you, I’m mad at that faceless son of a bitch that I shoved in the Cryopod-”

“You *what?!?*”

“Yeah he— didn’t want him stinking up the place,” Daisuke hastily explained, before heeding a sharp look from his boss and heading back towards the radio to finally turn it on.

“...Did you guys get it to work?” Anya asked, thinking any topic of conversation was better than the one they’d almost dived into.

“We’re gonna see. Stick around, won’t ya?” Swansea beckoned her, and the two crowded around Daisuke to watch and wait as he flipped a few switches.

And they waited some more.

Together.

In the middle of nowhere.

The moment lasted entirely too long after Daisuke finished turning one of the knobs – the number of a station flickering onto the cracked screen. Static crackled through the air, the three remaining members of the Tulpar’s crew hoping that just this once, someone would hear their screams in space.

The radio squealed as it searched for something - some *one* to connect to - the static filling the air before it broke.

A voice.

A human voice.

“Tulpar, Haizum: requesting status update. Over.”

The Haizum – another one of Pony Express’ ships.

There was a scramble to find the microphone for the damn thing – Anya managing to snatch up the headset and speak to the other ship, “Haizum – this is Tulpar–” She paused for a second, trying to keep herself from stammering, before taking a deep breath and carrying on, “Made a crash landing. An asteroid. Over.”

“Tulpar, Haizum: moving towards your position on the radar. Over.”

“Haizum, Tulpar,” Anya caught on to the rhythm quickly, “There’s five of us on board. Four living. Over.”

“Tulpar, Haizum: how— l-ong wi-ll your supplies— l-ast? Over.”

Static was beginning to break up the other captain's words, Swansea reaching over to try and keep the radio working as long as he could.

“Haizum, Tulpar,” Anya spoke faster to try and beat the fading connection, “Years of O2 left - a few months of rations.”

“Tulpar, Hai—zum: only a- fe-w d—ays o-ut from you—r position–”

They didn’t even get to close out before the radio died.

“Shit.”

Swansea swore to himself as he finally gave up on the damn thing, before it hit him, “...Fuck, we have rescue comin’.”

“We’re gonna get rescued!” Daisuke repeated, springing to his feet, “Holy shit!”

Anya blinked a few times, expression not quite the one of someone who believed what had just happened yet, “...Yeah. I think we are. In a few days, anyway.”

A smile lit up her face - not a wide, beaming thing like Daisuke’s. But soft. The first genuine smile either of them had seen on her face in a good long while. And now they knew why.

“...Should we go tell Curly?” Daisuke then suggested, still beaming wide and bouncing on his toes, “I’m gonna go tell him-!”

Without waiting for their response, the young intern ran off in a hurry towards the Medbay, leaving Swansea and Anya in the too quiet Cockpit.

“...So he-?” Swansea asked slowly, broaching the topic with a tentative touch.

“Yeah.”

Anya's response was short, but it was enough.

"...I'm sorry, Anya. Wish I coulda done more."

"You aren't the Captain, I didn't expect you to," The Nurse remarked, just a touch bitterly, before shaking her head, "I just..."

A deep breath. In and out.

"When we get on the Haizum – can you tell them about... him? Handle everything with the Cryopod? I... I don't think I can. I can handle the Captain and all, but..."

Swansea nodded decisively as her voice trailed off, "Can do."

Anya thought for a second, obviously trying to conjure up another request, before asking, "And *please* don't tell anyone but their Nurse and Daisuke – because I know he's gonna ask what took you so long – but... I'm pregnant, Swansea. I need–"

"Got it. Done. You'll get everything you need once we're off this tin can and on their ship."

There was a silent appreciation for a moment that Anya didn't need to explain any further – that their Mechanic was simply buckling down and helping her out without asking any questions. Without her having to go into gritty detail or say all the uncomfortable parts and words that didn't seem to want to come out of her mouth out loud.

"...Thanks, Swansea."

"Don't mention it."

Maybe the next few days wouldn't be so bad after all.

Chapter 10

They weren't, really.

Daisuke had eagerly gone off to tell Curly about their impending rescue, and Anya came back to their horrifically scarred Captain looking more excited to be alive than she'd seen him since they'd yanked him out of the foam. She had to wonder what the Haizum crew would think when they saw one of Pony Express' finest captains like this, but the thought was quickly pushed out of their mind. Surely, they expected at least *one* of them to look bad after a full on crash. They'd buzzed about the Tulpar, trying to collect what they could of their things (Daisuke feeling ahead of the curve and gloating about his little sleeping bag setup in the common area the whole time), and preparing Curly for the trip ahead.

Swansea had managed to get the radio working once more on their final day aboard the Pony Express' worst ship – connecting with the Haizum again and confirming that they were, *in fact*, on the way. Only a few hours out, when they'd connected.

So it would be any minute now, by Anya's estimation.

“What do you think they'll be like?” Daisuke asked, “Will they be cool, like us?”

“I'm not sure that's their primary objective, sport,” Swansea sniped back at him, offering a sly grin, “Pretty sure they're just tryin' to get back to Earth like we were.”

“They can at least *try* to be cool while doing it.”

“I guarantee they're a hundred times cooler than you think you are without even tryin'.”

“WOW. I can't believe you. Betraying me like this.”

The intern flopped over dramatically on his sleeping bag.

“Are you hearing this, Anya? This *slander*?”

Anya gave him a sheepish look, “I dunno that I would call it *slander*...”

“WOW.”

There was laughter from the other two as Daisuke groaned in dismay, before they heard... something outside. A few pounds on the door leading into the lounge.

“IS ANYONE IN THERE?”

Daisuke sat bolt upright as the voice echoed through the room from behind the door - the three crew members stopping dead in their tracks and staring in disbelief.

They'd all known, logically, that someone was coming for them.

But to hear it.

Hear *another living human being*.

It was strange in the best way possible.

Daisuke was the first to come to his senses, booking it for the door with Anya hot on his tail, and coming mere seconds away from trying to rip the thing open with his bare hands before the sensors kicked in and they slid open.

People.

Two of them, in Pony Express uniforms.

“Holy shit, you guys are real,” were the first words out of the intern’s mouth, followed by a laugh to himself.

Anya just shook her head, “Sorry, he’s... a little excited. I can’t blame him, but still.”

The first waved a hand casually, before they offered it to Anya to shake, “Zan Lin – Pilot of the Haizum. Nice to meet you. You must be the one I spoke to the *first* time on the radio.”

“Anya. I’m... the nurse here,” She took Zan’s offer, shaking their hand, before nodding, “That’s right – I have someone we need to get moved to your ship right away, if you don’t mind. It’s our Captain - he’s in bad shape. *Really* bad shape.”

“Curly?” Zan raised an eyebrow, “...How much should I prepare myself?”

“A lot. A *lot*. ”

“Shit. Glad I brought him, then,” Zan pointed to their companion, “Brennan Gallagher. *Our* Nurse. Figured we might need him, but I didn’t figure it’d be as bad as I’m imagining with the look on your face.”

Anya just nodded, “Yeah – you’ll... definitely be needed. I’ll say that much.”

“No time to waste, then,” Brennan rolled up his sleeves, “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

“Right on,” Zan shot him a finger gun, before looking towards Daisuke, “You just gonna keep staring or do you have a name?”

The intern blinked, shook his head, before grinning wide, “Yeah – shoot, sorry. All wrapped up in the whole ‘rescue’ thing, y’know? Feels wild. I’m Daisuke - I’m just an intern. Work with Swansea, our Mechanic. Grouchy lookin’ guy over there.”

He pointed back towards the man himself, earning a few snickers from the Pilot and the Nurse before Zan nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I can see it. That’s definitely a mechanic alright. Might be able to knock some sense into our guy.”

“Let’s go find their Pilot, though - make sure he gets on board safe,” Brennan then urged a bit, looking a touch nervous about the whole situation.

“Right, right, of course—”

With that, Anya led the two towards the Medbay, Daisuke bringing up the rear just to see what would happen next as his curiosity took over any desire to help Swansea with whatever he was up to at the moment.

“Sweet Jesus Christ—” were the first words out of Brennan’s mouth as they entered.

Promising.

“It was the foam. Burned his whole body by the time we managed to pull him out of the Cockpit,” Anya explained with a frown on her face.

Brennan looked over Curly, hands not yet moving to *touch* anything, “You had to amputate all four of his limbs?”

“That’s right. I... couldn’t save them, with what I had.”

“...What *did* you have? What did Pony Express provide you with?” Brennan then asked her, almost seeming *amazed*, “No offense meant to you, Captain, but... it’s incredible that you’re still alive.”

“I had IVs for maybe... twenty days, tops. Did some reading - figured out how often to change them out and gave him pain medication that way. Had to start giving him pills once I ran out.”

“What’ve you been giving him?”

“Oxycodone - 10 milligrams. This—” She grabbed the bottle from her desk and handed it to the fellow Nurse, who looked it over.

A quick inspection of Curly’s throat after asking for permission as best as the Captain could give it, before Brennan had to ask, “His throat is completely burnt. How has he been swallowing them?”

“We’ve had to... help. Physically help him swallow it. He still *can*, kind of, but it’s not easy. Painful, too, I imagine, but... no other way to keep him comfortable.”

“Right,” Another few moments as Brennan continued his inspection, “You’ve kept his eye moist, since the eyelid was taken out by the burns - what’d you use for that?”

“Just the drops Pony Express put in the first aid kit,” Anya offered up the kit soon after, “Was actually close to running out before we got in contact with you all.”

Both Zan and Brennan looked through the first aid kit, rummaging around for a moment before the nurse’s expression betrayed just how absolutely appalled he was, “They gave you *nothing*- compared to what we got, anyway.”

“Supplies went quick, especially with the extra person,” Anya admitted, Daisuke looking just a touch sheepish at her words, making her tack on, “It’s not your fault. It’s Pony Express’ for sending you with us.”

“I know, it’s just—” The Intern mumbled, “I feel bad, y’know? Especially since most of the supplies probs went to *my* dumb ass - ‘least before Cap got... y’know.”

Zan hummed, “I did think that was strange when you said you had five. Crews are only supposed to be four at a time unless there’s advance notice *way* ahead of time. That’s how many Cryopods they give everyone in their Utility Rooms. They didn’t give you another to accommodate him?”

Both Anya and Daisuke shook their heads.

“And only one survived the foam,” Daisuke explained, “Me n’ Swansea debated trying to dig out the other three, but he figured they weren’t worth getting sucked into space for.”

“Smart guy,” Zan quipped, “I knew Pony Express hated us - didn’t know they hated us *that* much, though. Or maybe just you all in particular.”

They then turned to Curly, crouching down to be at eye level with him, “Hey Cap – Pilot Lin from the Haizum. Sound familiar?”

Curly’s remaining eye widened briefly, before he made an attempt at nodding.

“Cool, cool,” The other Captain grinned, “We’re getting you off this tin can and onto our ship. We’re headed back to Earth, same as you. We can fix you up a bit better - get you on an IV or two-” They glanced at Brennan, who nodded in agreement, before continuing, “Before they put you back together for good on Earth. Sound good to you?”

Another stiff nod from the Captain of the Tulpar.

Followed by a [few taps of his stumpy right arm.](#)

“Better... talking?” Zan asked, before connecting the dots, “You guys don’t have a better way for him to communicate?”

“I mean, he started writing with a pen in his mouth so I could talk to him, but it’s not... great, yet,” Anya thought out loud, “And it was only by freak chance that Daisuke knew Morse so we could talk to him in the first place.”

“We’ll figure something out on the Haizum,” Zan stood up, slapping their knees as they did, before turning to Brennan, “You- get him out of here and onto our ship. Get him hooked up in the Medbay.”

Brennan agreed immediately - moving quickly to get Curly out of the Tulpar’s medical room as Zan then turned to its two crew members.

“And you two - let’s go find your other two members and get out of here,” They started walking, leading the way down the stairs towards the Cockpit, “You said one of ‘em’s

dead?”

“Yeah man,” Daisuke responded, already noting that Anya was clamming up, “I think, uh... being in space really got to him. I dunno, though.”

It was an easier explanation than the one they would surely get later.

But it worked for now.

As they made their way down the metal hallways, they again came upon the open cargo hold, Zan’s eyes getting wide at the sight, “You guys cracked it open? Damn – what’d they have you... shipping...?”

They looked down at their feet as they walked in to investigate, noting the countless open cardboard boxes of mouthwash.

“That’s... it?” They asked, “Mouthwash?”

“As far as we figured out, yeah,” Daisuke continued, “Didn’t think we needed to open any more boxes after the first like... twenty.”

Zan stared incredulously at the two of them for a moment, before turning that stare towards the seemingly endless cargo hold and taking a deep breath, “Shit, if I didn’t know PE any better, I’d say they were pulling the *worst* prank on all of you. But... yeah I can totally believe they’d have a crew of five hauling nothing but fuckin’ mouthwash through space. Probably some wholesaler dipshit who ordered all of it.”

“Are you *serious*?” Daisuke groaned, “They just do stuff like this all the time?”

“Who knows? They don’t really let us talk to each other outside of necessary communications. Or rescues, like the one we’re doin’ right now. But given how they tend to be on the reg - I’d bet you a dollar you guys aren’t the first to have a stupid load like this.”

“*Great.*”

“We should go find Swansea,” Anya then directed them, “See where he’s gone off to.”

“Utility, probs,” Daisuke shrugged his shoulders, “If nowhere else. Probably grabbing all our stuff to bring over. Probably wanted *me* to help him out before I ran off with you and the new guys.”

The nurse narrowed her eyes at him, “Seriously?” She started out of the cargo hold with a deep sigh, “We’re going to help him. Let’s go.”

“*Fiiiiine.*”

“Such enthusiasm!” Zan laughed, following along as Anya led them towards Utility.

It was indeed there that they found Swansea, opening up the last Cryopod and hoisting out the slightly frosty and still faceless corpse of their former co-pilot. He hefted Jimmy out of

his resting place by grabbing him underneath his arms, before noticing the group and dropping him unceremoniously on the floor.

“Oh no,” He remarked, his tone flat and unsympathetic, before he half-heartedly moved to haul the bastard up, “Anyways– Can I help you?”

“We, uh, actually came to see *you*, boss,” Daisuke explained, trying not to stare at the gaping hole where Jimmy’s face once was.

“Why didn’t you say so? You mean you *didn’t* come to talk to our *dashing* co-pilot?” The mechanic’s words dripped with sarcasm - even more so than usual, “I’m sure you’d get a lotta good info outta him.”

Zan licked their lips nervously, before giving a strained grin, “Not a fan of the guy, huh?”

“What gave it away?” Swansea shot back, before giving them a sharp look, “And before you ask: I didn’t do this to him. Did it his damn self.”

“Gotcha.”

There was still a slightly shaken quality to the pilot’s voice, but neither Daisuke nor Anya could blame them. Swansea’s nonchalance in the face of the surreal had certainly shaken them once or twice. His casual acceptance of any weird happenings had simply become a fact of his personality ever since they’d boarded the Tulpar.

“This is our dead guy - didn’t know if you could tell,” The mechanic continued, “Was our co-pilot, Jimmy. Popped himself not long after the ship crashed. Used the ‘Personal Protection Weapon’. Real nice of Pony Express to give us *that* but not medical equipment for the Captain, huh?”

“How’d the *co-pilot* get the Personal Protection Weapon, though?” Zan’s brow furrowed, “That *should* only be accessible to the Captain, as the only one who can use the code scanner.”

“Well, if you haven’t noticed, *genius* – our Captain is kind of out of commission at the moment. So Jawless Jimbo over here decided to snatch up that scanner for himself and fire up. Not like Curly was gonna stop him.”

Swansea gave them a long stare, before asking, “Any other dumb questions, or can we get out of here?”

Zan seemed to think for a moment, looking over the corpse in Swansea’s grasp, before shaking their head, “All my other dumb questions can wait ‘til you’re all settled on the Haizum. We’ll put him in one of our pods – don’t anticipate needing ‘em anytime soon. Pretty smooth sailing back to Earth from here.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” The mechanic hauled the faceless Jimmy up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, pointing with the axe in his other hand, “Lead the way.”

“Someone got your Code Scanner? Just in case.”

“Over on the table - snag it, will ya?” Swansea turned to his intern, who nodded and grabbed it off their worktable, briefly flicking it on and off to make sure it worked.

With that in their hands, there wasn’t much left for them on the Tulpar.

Just each other.

And a whole lot of mouthwash.

“...You guys want any of the mouthwash from the hold?” Daisuke asked half jokingly, earning a laugh out of his companions.

“I’m good, thanks for askin’. Tryin’ to cut back, actually,” Swansea huffed, “I’ll leave you n’ the Nurse to split it, if you’re dyin’ to.”

“Not particularly. All yours, Daisuke,” Anya snickered, “I’ve got my own mouthwash.”

“Alright – I was only gonna take some if you guys were. Forget it. If they want it that bad, they can come and fish it out from here,” The intern waved a hand, “All two millions bottles of it or whatever.”

“Sounds like a drinkin’ song, doesn’t it?” Their mechanic joked, “Two millions bottles of mouthwash on the wall?”

“A *really long* drinking song,” Daisuke agreed.

“Long enough to last us ‘til we get back to Earth, you think?”

“Maybe. Only one way to find out, I guess.”

“Better get singin’ then, sport.”

“Why me?! You made it up-!”

Chapter 11

The Haizum was like goddamn paradise compared to the Tulpar.

It was similarly laid out, which made finding everything fairly easy for the displaced crew, but the whole ship was... *new*, it seemed. As if the rest of Pony Express' meager budget had gone into making this ship seem as nice as possible.

The PR Ship, really.

The one they put on the cover of magazines or something.

The metal hallways weren't crusted with pockets of rust, or covered in greasy fingerprints. The buttons for doors and machines weren't worn beyond reading, and the lights didn't flicker overhead like they were about to go out at any moment.

The sleeping quarters still didn't have locks, but it wasn't like they'd been so optimistic to think that Pony Express would improve anything *important* on a newer ship.

Zan was kind enough to show them around - giving them the run-down on their temporary new home and introducing them to the rest of the crew:

They'd already met Brennan, of course, who was busy tending to Curly in the Medbay when they found him. Their Captain was certainly more comfortable on this ship than on the Tulpar, Pony Express at least seeing it worthwhile to give the Haizum nice medical equipment. Instead of an IV, they noticed - the Captain had a tube inserted into his nostril, and for once, he seemed to be quite peacefully asleep.

A nasogastric tube, Brennan told them - giving him both food and medication. And easier than trying to find a salvageable piece of skin to put an IV in at the moment.

And *far* easier than having to give him pills by mouth.

None of them could disagree.

And Anya seemed to visibly relax when Brennan explained the whole thing, before asking the Tulpar's Nurse to return - he could show her how it all worked, and ask her a few questions.

The agreement was somewhat hesitant, but it was still agreement, and Anya's eyes actually seemed to sparkle a bit at the idea of learning more. She had things she wanted to ask him, anyway. Related to medicine, perhaps, but in a different way.

Daisuke wondered how much she already knew from those cinder block adjacent books of hers that she'd brought along in a well-loved backpack, anyway.

All study materials from her eight attempts at Med School, she'd told him one late night under the glow of the moonlit window screen - but hey, ninth time's the charm, right? And they'd both laughed until they woke up Swansea and he told them to keep it down or he'd send them *both* to Med School - as practice patients for students - when they got back to Earth.

They'd kept laughing, of course.

But quietly.

Brennan also showed them the new way that the Captain could communicate – a tablet device hooked up to a stand on the side of the bed. It tracked his eye movement, the Nurse told them, putting together words to make sentences and allowing Curly to speak more easily than he had been through writing or tapping out codes.

But there'd be none of that for now - at least while the Captain slept.

Zan moved them out of the Medbay soon after, eager to show them the rest of the Haizum and its crew - and Brennan itching to check over the Captain and ensure he was healing correctly with all the work he'd done since they'd boarded.

They still had the mechanic and the co-pilot to meet, too.

Daisuke had to wonder what the mechanic would be like. Maybe they'd be like Swansea?

...No, he didn't think he could handle *two* of Swansea.

Two of him would be fun, though.

...Then again, Swansea probably couldn't handle two of *him*.

Even exchange, he supposed.

It wasn't that hard to guess where Utility was on the Haizum - the room sitting right near the Cockpit just like it had on the Tulpar. *Standard template for all the ships*, the intern supposed, *keep everything uniform* .

Thankfully, they didn't have to venture into the Cockpit to find any of the remaining crew members - the two that the group presumed were the co-pilot and mechanic, given the lack of other options aboard the ship, were both gathered in the Utility Room, heads turning towards the door as they entered.

“Look alive, you lunatics - we rescued what's left of the Tulpar's crew. They'll be staying with us until we get back to Earth,” Zan explained to the both of them, their co-pilot being the one to respond first.

“I know we'd seen you on the radar - caught your radio signal. Glad we pulled you all out of there, though,” She extended a copper colored hand and flashed a bright smile, “Anita Kaur. Co-pilot.”

Daisuke was the one to take her hand after his boss shoved him forward so he could make a good first impression, “Daisuke Juarez – I’m just the intern. Work with this guy as my boss,” He jabbed a thumb at Swansea, “Not even sure I’m supposed to be here, to be honest.”

“Oh come on, Pony Express wouldn’t,” The final unknown person spoke up – the Haizum’s mechanic, no doubt – before squinting at Daisuke, “Kid’s probably just a nepo baby. You look soft enough - how much your parents pay to get you here, kid?”

“I’m twenty-two,” Daisuke scowled, not helping his point at all, “I just graduated college, man. I’m not a kid – and my parents didn’t pay *anything* for me to be here.”

“Uh-huh. We’ll see about that.”

“That’s Garrett Belanger,” Zan’s eyes narrowed at the mechanic, “Our mechanic. Don’t let him get under your skin, alright?”

“Oh, relax. I’m just jokin’ around with the kid.”

“Sure you are. *Joking.*”

“Fuckin’ hell, not this again–”

Swansea scoffed, putting a hand on his intern’s shoulder, “He’s got thicker skin than you think, smartass. He’s dealt with *me* this whole time - and I’m pretty sure I’m a hell of a lot worse than you. So keep your trap shut about *my* Intern, and we won’t have problems. Capiisce?”

“Roger that, old man. I’ll be as unfunny as possible when *you’re* around.”

Swansea just gave the other mechanic a frigid glare, Anya shifting uncomfortably behind him and Daisuke at the electric tension between the two.

“Well, now that you’ve met everyone,” Zan shifted the conversation away, pointedly trying not to look at Garrett, “I showed you all where the sleeping quarters are – they *should* have locks on them. Had to put ‘em on ourselves, but they should work.”

Anya raised an eyebrow, “So even on the new ships, they didn’t bother to put locks...?”

“Nope. You’d think they’d figure with how many times it gets suggested that they’d listen eventually, but we all know how *great* the Express is at listening.”

“Maybe to *you* guys,” Garrett sniped.

“Polle isn’t gonna fuck you if you keep lickin’ their boots, you know that, right?” Swansea retorted, “They’ll throw you a middle finger and a pink slip just the same as the rest of us.”

The other mechanic just rolled his eyes, “I’m *just. Saying.* Not tryin’ to fuck the cartoon horse. You projecting, buddy?”

There were no more words exchanged between the two as Anya and Daisuke quickly shoved a white knuckled Swansea out of the room after he dropped Jimmy's faceless corpse on the floor of the Utility Room and caused the Haizum's co-pilot to scream - leaving the large portion of their hosting crew behind them.

As they walked back through the Haizum, Anya sighed, "Great start, crew. We've been here for less than a day and already we're starting fights."

"I didn't start shit," Swansea huffed, "Little sucker decided to swing at our stupid ray of sunshine here and you know I don't stand for that shit."

"Yeah, I know – but *still*. Some decorum, maybe? Haven't we heard enough about being attracted to cartoon horses from... the other guy?"

"...Right. Fine. Sorry 'bout that. Best analogy I could think of in the moment, though."

Anya just nodded, "It's alright. You weren't... *wrong*, I guess."

"Yeah," Daisuke agreed, "Why was he trying to suck up to Pony Express so bad? Even *I* didn't try *that* hard when I was interviewing."

"Think it's gonna make 'em rich or some shit," Swansea shoved open the door to the Medbay, "That some greased up fuckhead in a suit is gonna look down on 'em with the grace of God and a firm handshake and just give 'em a cushy job and a million bucks."

He snorted with derision.

"Don't work like that."

"...Yeah. Obviously."

Daisuke thought for a moment as they entered, Anya pulling Brennan aside to speak with him privately as the other two looked over their Captain, "...Did you really mean it when you said you think I've got thicker skin than I look like I do? I mean – cool if you did, but I get it if you just said it to get him off my case–"

"Kiddo, you wouldn't've *survived* bein' around me if you hadn't. Give yourself some credit," His boss replied bluntly before turning his stone hard gaze down to Curly, "Still sleepin', Cap? Can't blame ya. Probably the first time you've *gotten* to sleep since this bullshit went down. Comfortably, anyway."

The intern was only half listening to everything Swansea said after he complimented him - *him!* Of all people! Swansea was complimenting the Tulpar's resident dumbass - the court jester, as he was *pretty* sure Curly had called him once before they'd yanked him out of some sealant foam. But he was smart, apparently. Had thick skin - could take a punch. This, coming from *Swansea*. The toughest guy (to date, anyway) that Daisuke had ever met.

Save his dad, probably.

His dad.

What would his dad think when he got back?

His mom?

A million thoughts ran through his mind, but none of them mattered in an instant as the Captain groaned in his bed, sleepily moving his right arm up to rub at his exposed eye only to find a patch over it- eventually shoving it away from his eye (with some assistance from Swansea) and trying to focus on the world around him.

“He’s awake-!” Daisuke grinned, “Cap-! How’re you feeling, man-?”

“Give him a second, Jesus Christ,” Swansea teased, smacking his intern’s shoulder, “Yeah, I’ll wake you up at two in the morning and start askin’ *you* questions, and see how you feel.”

“Oops.”

For a brief moment, it almost seemed like Curly was going to try to speak normally - before he remembered his current predicament and turned his focus to the communication device Brennan had given him.

"Crew. Hi."

Much easier.

The robotic voice read out Curly’s words to them - though the Captain seemed to grimace at the sound of it. Were he able to properly do so.

“Somethin’ wrong with the voice, Capitano?” Swansea asked, spotting nothing immediately wrong with the tablet itself.

"Wrong accent."

That made sense - at least to them. Curly had always had a British accent when speaking to them before the crash. Which meant he was often the butt of Daisuke trying to harangue him into saying words like “Tuesday” or “water bottle”, just for his own amusement. But the robot voice coming out of the tablet sounded... distinctly American.

“Hang on, maybe there’s a way to change it-” Daisuke started to reach over, before asking the Captain, “You mind?”

A shake of his head.

Nope.

With permission granted, the intern reached over to turn the screen towards himself - navigating to the settings and finding where the pre-loaded voices were.

“Ooooh, there’s a couple in here. Want me to go through ‘em?”

A nod.

“Sick - ok. So, first one’s the one you’ve got – boo, hiss, boring, lame – that one’s the female version– you want me to test those, or can I just–?”

Curly shrugged.

Skip.

“I’ll skip ‘em,” Daisuke nodded, “Oh, they’re organized once you get past the defaults – sweet! There’s a couple in here though that are what you might want...”

He played each one for Curly - before they decided on one with the closest they were going to get to the Captain’s original accent (the Captain himself gave quite an *eager* nod when Daisuke chose the one he liked best) and the screen was turned back towards him.

Now he could speak properly to them.

“You should say Tuesday – just to make sure it’s the right accent and all. You know,” Daisuke suggested, grinning like a fool.

“I swear to God - you ever gonna let up about that?” Swansea griped, “It was funny the first time–”

“And it’s still funny now!”

Curly just rolled his eye.

And with a look, produced two words from his device:

"Tuesday."

"Happy?"

The cheer Daisuke gave was confirmation enough, as Swansea just sighed – world-weary and exhausted.

Once they were settled again, Daisuke having recovered from his excitement, Curly started forming sentences again: *"Thank you for helping me,"* he started, *"Didn't have to do that."*

“Hell no, we didn’t. Especially when you crashed the damn ship,” Swansea retorted, before he scowled and asked, “Why the fuck would you do that?”

"I didn't."

“...Fuck. You didn’t?” The mechanic’s eyes were wide.

"Jimmy did. Because of... Anya. I think. Saw him. Curled up in the Cockpit hallway."

"He left me in there."

"He heard me. I know he did. The bastard."

At the sound of her name, the Nurse turned her head from her conversation with Brennan – her expression confused at first, but quickly melting into concern when she saw her coworkers’ expressions, “...What happened?”

“...Jimmy crashed the ship. Because of– what you told us,” Swansea spat out, pacing the length of the Medbay, “Damn it- God fucking damn it-!”

Daisuke shrank back at the yelling from his boss, sliding down to sit on the cold linoleum floor at Curly’s bedside, “That’s... that’s so fucked up.”

“Even more deranged than what I thought he might do–” Anya covered her mouth with her hands, “That’s why I hid the gun– he found it anyway, but– *fuck*. ”

Curly could speak now.

But it didn’t seem like a blessing.

Only a curse.

Burdening them with the knowledge that their Co-Pilot had lied to them all, and they never would’ve known if they’d never left that ship. If their Captain had never spoken again.

Jimmy would’ve only faced punishment for one of his crimes, instead of *all* of them.

Swansea, in the midst of his rage, had a brief, flashing thought through the back of his brain.

He hoped Hell was hot.

And he hoped it was full of so many cartoon horses it made the bastard want to puke.

Chapter 12

Their first night on the Haizum was fitful.

None of them had slept well after their conversation with Curly, though Anya seemed to be doing *slightly* better than Daisuke and Swansea. At least by the time she returned to their shared Sleeping Quarters.

The three had decided to pile into one room - watch each other's backs despite the *general* trustworthiness of the crew whose ship they were on. It had made Anya feel better about the whole thing, anyhow. She and Swansea took the beds on either side of the room – Daisuke unrolled his sleeping bag and took the floor. It was like having a sleepover with his friends all over again, really. As long as he thought about it that way, it wasn't so bad.

"Nurse," Swansea greeted her with a curt nod before taking a long drink of coffee, forever grateful that this ship had a machine that *worked*, "What's the story?"

"Am I supposed to have one?" Anya quipped, smiling.

The Mechanic just shook his head, "Nah. You just get this look about you when you wanna say somethin', but you can't figure out how to say it. Or if you *should* say it. My kids do the same thing when they're tryin' to get somethin' out of me."

"Damn," She huffed, "I thought I had a better poker face than that. I guess I'll just... spit it out, then. It's good news, I promise."

Daisuke let out a sigh of relief as he saved his game and switched off his Gameboy, "I don't think I could take more *bad* news, man. C'mon – gimme something good!"

"Okay, okay!"

Anya laughed a bit, before satisfying Daisuke's curiosity and spilling her good news, "Because it'd be too late by the time we get back to Earth... Brennan agreed to give me an abortion here. It's risky, in the middle of nowhere in *space*, but... I don't want to risk waiting until the trip's over. It's worth it to me. And Brennan thinks he can do it with the medical supplies the Haizum has. Explained the whole thing to me."

"Good for you," Swansea nodded after swallowing a mouthful of Pony Express' cheap and bitter coffee, "Glad they've got the shit to do it with - seems like they actually kept this ship pretty topped up. Probably the ship they use for PR."

"Probably," Anya wouldn't argue with that, "But if being on their shiny PR ship means we get actual medical care – I won't complain too much. Not yet, at least."

"Yeahhhh, save it for the lawsuit," Daisuke snickered to himself, before explaining to his two coworkers who were waiting for one, "My mom's a lawyer. She's gonna be capital-P *pissed* when she hears about all the stuff PE's been doin' - She's gonna sue the *hell* out of them."

Swansea snorted, “Yeah, get ‘em now - while they’re basically bleeding money. Hope they don’t have any lawyers left.”

“She’ll figure it out - she’s smart like that,” Daisuke said in complete, almost naive faith - yet his coworkers couldn’t find it in themselves to shoot it down just yet. Not even Swansea.

“How long do we even have *left* on here, dude?” He asked Swansea, leaning his head back to let it rest against the side of his boss’ bed, “Hopefully not much longer. As much as I *love* hangin’ out with you guys.”

“Six months or so, Brennan said,” Anya answered, “Two hundred and thirty days, just about - now that we’re back on course. Heard it from Zan.”

There was a long drawn out groan from the intern.

“C’mon maaaaaaaaaaaaan.”

“You wanna try and make the ship go any faster?” Swansea joked, poking his student with his foot, “You wanna go find that bootlicker and see if we can mess with the engine?”

Another groan.

Longer, this time.

“I’d rather yeet myself out into space, dude.”

“Is ‘yeet’ *really* making a comeback?”

“Comeback? What? Nah, we made it up, dude. Get with the program.”

Swansea just stared at him for a few long moments, before putting his head in his free hand and sighing deeply, “You realize that’s slang from when *I* was *your* age, right? Maybe a bit younger? It was from a seven second video - kid throws a water bottle like... ‘This bitch empty - yeet’.”

“...Are you for real?”

“Yeah.”

Daisuke was quiet for a second, pulling out his phone to search for the truth to Swansea’s story on Pony Express’ shitty Wifi, before blinking a few times.

“Well shoot. Huh.”

He even pulled up the [video](#) Swansea mentioned, the Mechanic and Nurse peeking over his shoulders.

“Yep,” Swansea nodded, “That’s the one. Classic.”

“...That’s it?” Daisuke asked, trying to restrain a laugh yet his expression still colored with disbelief.

“Seven seconds – I told you. That’s all they got. None of this thirty seconds, one minute, two minutes crap. You had seven seconds to be funny as hell, and we *liked* it.”

“I... *kind* of remember that. The very end of it, anyway,” Anya recalled, “I came along right before TikTok got nuked in the States.”

“You missed all the good shit, then,” Swansea shrugged, before slapping a knee with his free hand and standing up, “Got all the brainrot that came afterwards. Got stuck with all that AI garbage. But enough of that shit.”

He pointed to Anya.

“You’ve got a procedure to get ready for.”

And then he pointed to Daisuke, “And you and I are gonna figure out some way to make ourselves useful here. Got it?”

“Do we *have* to?”

“It’ll make the time go quicker if you keep yourself busy. Now get up and put yourself together.”

“Yes, sir,” The younger man finally hauled himself up off the floor with a dejected sigh and a roll of his eyes.

Swansea gave the kid a less-than-gentle shove out of their Sleeping Quarters, “Listen, if I have to deal with that suckup son of a bitch, you have to suffer him with me, you hear?”

He then turned back to Anya as Daisuke finally shambled off to wash up and clean himself off, “And you. When’s your procedure?”

“In a couple days. Just to give me some time to talk with him about it. Prepare mentally, and all that.”

“Alright then. You need anything, you know where we are. And if you don’t, just listen. You’ll hear the teenybopper sooner or later – he’s loud enough on his own. Alright?”

Anya couldn’t stop the snort that escaped her, giving Swansea a full, genuine smile, “Alright. Thank you, Swansea. Really. It... It means a lot.”

“Sure thing. And if you need someone to help out with Cap—”

“I’ve got Brennan for that now – but thanks, anyway. I know you would. Not much we can do anyway, until we get back to Earth. He’s gonna need... so much surgery. More than we could ever give him here on a spaceship.”

“Fucker’s gonna have medical bills until the day he dies.”

“Not if Daisuke’s right, though. If we can sue them for... everything, and win. Get Pony Express to *pony up*.”

A sharp bark of a laugh emerged from Swansea.

“Nice.”

“Thanks. I really tried with that one.”

“Nice to see, Anya. Really.”

It was more than the joke, really. She knew it was. Even she could feel that she was more herself away from... him. Not perfect. But better. And that was enough.

“...Thanks, Swansea.”

Chapter 13

Daisuke could not think of a person he wanted to be around less than Garrett.

At the moment.

Maybe there was one guy worse — but he was currently... very dead. *Very*.

He'd tried – *really* tried – to get along with him, as he did with everyone. But it was no fun with him. The guy just kept finding problems with him, even more than Swansea ever did. And even Swansea himself was getting fed up with it. He never said anything aloud, but Daisuke could see it in the quiet eyerolls when the other Mechanic's back was turned. The barely audible scoffs when the other went on long tangents about the benefits Pony Express was going to give him once they were all back on Earth and let go.

Even Daisuke, inexperienced as he was, knew what a bunch of horse shit that was.

In a brief moment when Swansea had left to go to the bathroom, the two had been left alone together - and Garrett had started talking. Again.

Just trying to focus on something he'd been left to prepare for some regular maintenance later, Daisuke knew his Adderall-fueled focus was gonna snap any second with the other older Mechanic's voice in his ear.

"Never took a day off, you know that? When I was just on Earth fixin' up ships for PE," He almost seemed to brag, "That's the real way to work. Never want to let them down. You'll move up real quick that way, y'know."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mhm. Take it from me, kid. Was just like you once upon a time. Maybe a bit more ambition in me than you, but you'll grow into it. Hopefully."

Real charmer, this guy.

Daisuke knew that even *he* was better than this guy - clueless and overly optimistic as he tended to be.

"Neat."

"Don't sound so excited."

"Hard to sound excited about this place after... Everything, y'know?" Daisuke tried, "Look, man - I'm just trying to get back to Earth and put my life together for real. Cool that you like the job and all, but—"

He could feel the other's eyes in the back of his head.

That feeling of being *stared* at - he hated it. Made every inch of his skin start to crawl and clam up. Made his brain start to buzz uncomfortably, and made every muscle in his body start to tense.

And he didn't even need to look back.

"You know, if you actually put a little of yourself into your work, you'll get rewarded - companies don't just abandon their best workers. "

"Sure, man."

Garrett was behind him now - he could feel it. He could feel every hair on the back of his neck stand up straight.

"Is that how the old man taught you how to wire that?"

"...Yeah? Showed me on day one. Says he's been doing it like this forever."

"Hasn't caught up then – let me show you how it's *really* done."

The intern inched back in his seat, "...Nah, I'm good, man. He told me to do it like this—"

"Oh, c'mon. He'll be impressed that you did it a new way, don't you think? That I'm teaching you things? Besides – good to know multiple ways of doing things. Makes you more versatile."

He wasn't sure, honestly.

But he'd been told to try and learn *something* on this internship - and to try and get along with everyone. Make connections. *Network*, or something like that.

Smile and nod.

And it seemed like the first thing Garrett had said the entire time he'd been on the Haizum, so maybe, just *maybe* Daisuke would give it a try.

If only to get him off his back.

And make Swansea proud. Maybe. He hoped so.

"Alright – show me, then. I'm all ears."

"That's the spirit – knew you'd come around!"

Chapter 14

Brennan had come and found Swansea as he'd started back towards the Utility Room – he had just finished with Anya, and she'd asked to see him and Daisuke. Though antsy about leaving the Intern any longer, the Mechanic agreed to see her, and bring Daisuke around later once they'd finished their work.

Lord knew the kid needed to do some work, at least.

Or try to.

He really did try, didn't he?

“Hey,” Anya greeted him as Brennan led him into the Medbay, from a whole second bed as Curly slept in the one he'd been in since they arrived.

Who knew having two beds for medical care would've seemed like a luxury to him?

Not him, certainly.

“How's it goin'?” Swansea greeted her back with a nod of his head, “How'd you feel?”

“Better. So much better,” Anya smiled, and smiled wide, “I... I can't even describe it.”

“You don't have to - your face says it all, Nurse,” The mechanic couldn't help the small smile that crept onto his face, “Happy for ya. Really.”

He glanced around, before asking, “You need anything? Water? Food?” A huff, “A knuckle sandwich?”

“Trying to cut back on that last one, but thanks for offering,” Anya laughed, “Water would be nice, though. When you get the chance - I know you and Daisuke are busy and all.”

“Pfft- not busy enough to help you out, that's for sure. Especially hangin' around with that... Garrett sucker,” Swansea quipped, earning a mild look of sympathy from Brennan.

The Haizum's nurse jumped in to offer his own thoughts, “Yeah he's... tough to work with. Once you learn to just tune him out and do your own thing, though, he usually takes the hint. Usually. Unless he thinks he can get under your skin.”

“I think he's already given up on me with that,” Swansea raised an eyebrow, “Just hope he's not ripping on the kid too hard.”

“And even if he is – Daisuke can hold his own. You know him. He'll out sunshine the guy so much that he'll just leave him alone, probably.”

“God, I hope so. Make that dipshit look like a vampire.”

As if on a cue, the two heard Daisuke yelp – loudly – from downstairs. Through the vents. Still connected, as they had been on the Tulpar.

“Shit- I’m gonna– go check on him. Bring him up to see you,” He pointed to Brennan, “And you, if he was a dumbass.”

“Roger that.”

“See you soon, Swansea.”

The mechanic didn’t think he’d ever moved down the steps of a Pony Express freighter so fast as he did in that moment, single-mindedly focused on getting down to the Utility room. It was an easy route – he knew it like the back of his hand, given all of Pony Express’ Type-F Class C freighters tended to be pretty much identical.

But this one was too nice to be Class-C. Class-A, probably.

Had he worked on this one, he wondered, back on Earth, doing repairs in between hauls?

Potentially. They never bothered giving him names or numbers - just shoved ships in front of him and his crew and told them to get to work.

But he was snapped out of that by his white knuckled grip on the Utility door handle, brought back to his present mission. Daisuke. Right.

Yanking open the door, he found Garrett, rolling his eyes, and Daisuke – clutching his hand.

A burn.

Shit - he’d burned himself.

“Goddamnit, kid–” Swansea ignored the other mechanic to tend to his intern, “What the hell happened?”

“He got in over his head - wired something wrong and gave himself that sucker,” Garrett explained, “Tried cuttin’ corners to finish faster and be more efficient, I think he said. Thought you’d be impressed.”

Daisuke couldn’t even say his own piece over the searing pain from the burn on his palm, electric tingling traveling up his arm to his shoulder.

“...Fuck. Kid, really?” Swansea didn’t have much to go off of - and Daisuke had been bending backwards to try and make himself ‘helpful’ even on the Tulpar, so maybe for once the guy was worth trusting. At least for now, “C’mon. Medbay with you. Anya wants to see you, anyway.”

“C-Cool, man–” Daisuke managed to choke out, before Swansea hauled him off to the Medbay, Garrett watching them leave until he couldn’t see them outside the room anymore.

Chapter 15

“So... you and me, stuck in a Medbay together again.”

The irony of the whole thing wasn't lost on Anya – she and Curly seemed to be destined to never end up far from each other, apparently. At least, not since the crash. Leaning back in the Haizum's other medical bed, she glanced over at Curly, expression caught somewhere between tired and bored before it brightened as he glanced at the screen of his AAC device.

"Yeah. Exciting stuff, isn't it?"

“Totally. I love this. I can only imagine how fun it is being stuck here all the time.”

"Better than the Tulpar's Medbay. No offense."

“You won't hear me argue on that.”

There was a thick pause between them, before Curly spoke again.

"Happy for you."

“Thanks. Means a lot. Really.”

"I'm sorry I let it happen. But happy for you."

What could Anya say to that? What was there to say?

Because it certainly wasn't okay. Not okay at all. She couldn't even pretend that it was anymore, like she had back on the Tulpar. There were no more facades here - no more barriers between them.

“Brennan?”

The Nurse turned towards her as she called his name, and she continued on, “You mind leaving us for a sec? I just... want to talk to Curly. Privately.”

“That's fine - if anything happens, though—”

“Yeah, I'll yell. Promise.”

With that, Brennan disappeared out the door, and Anya took a deep breath.

“Why did you protect him?”

There was a long pause that made Anya dig her fingernails into the shitty hospital adjacent blanket over herself as Curly thought, before he finally put words together and tried to explain himself.

"He was my friend. Didn't want to believe it. Awful, I know, but—"

A pause.

Curly tried to blink, but nothing happened. Still no eyelids. A stump reached up to try and itch at his eye.

"Don't. I'll get you your drops—"

Anya started to move, before remembering her own predicament and settling back down, sighing deeply.

Already?

"Brennan-!"

The other Nurse was in the room in an instant, "What happened?"

"He just needs eye drops. Eye's itching and he tried to blink again."

"Oh, yeah, it has been just about long enough— hang on."

Brennan retrieved the bottle of drops, giving the Captain a few in his exposed and decidedly dry eye, before asking, "Better?"

A glance at the screen.

"Better. Thank you."

More words flashed across the screen as Anya fully believed he would stop.

"Just need a few more minutes, if you don't mind?"

"Yeah – you should be good now. It was my bad that I forgot about your eyedrops. Don't think you take meds again for a bit. Just holler if anything, alright?"

"Cheers. Will do."

It was one word - but it brought Anya back in front of a glowing screen, late at night. Staring at the top right corner of a window, looking for a dead pixel. Curly - as he had been - sat next to her, tired under the eyes and squinting as he scanned the screen.

Nope. Don't... see it.

In the back of my mind, it's always there.

Now I'll go bonkers looking for it.

Cheers.

She blinked a few times, coming back to herself and remembering where she was. The Medbay. On the Haizum. Going home. Right.

"Anya?"

Curly - as he was now - spoke to her, blue eye fixated on her as she noticed Brennan had left again. When had that happened-?

"Yeah- what's up?"

"Did you hear what I said? Finished my thought from earlier."

"Oh-" Anya rubbed at her eyes, bitterly thinking about how much she was showing off in front of the Captain, before carrying on, "No, I didn't, sorry. I was in my own little world."

"Been there. It's not a fun place, is it?"

"Not really, no."

There was a groan that emerged from Curly - halfway between that and a grunt. Some kind of noise of confirmation. And then his eye flicked back to the screen.

"I just said that: It was awful, yeah. But he was my friend. I didn't want to believe he'd do something like that."

"I get it, in a way, Captain, but at the same time-"

"I should've done something."

"...Yeah."

Silence fell heavy over them like it intended to smother them both. Put an end to their miserable little existences right here and now in the Medbay. But it never did. Just sat uncomfortably on top of them, waiting to be pushed off.

So Anya did. She hated every second of it, but she did it.

Because it really didn't seem like Curly was going to.

"...Did you know he'd be worse than what I was expecting?"

"No. Had no idea he'd go... that far."

"Crash the ship over it."

"And then-"

He couldn't form the rest of the sentence he wanted to make, but Anya got the meaning even without it.

“It’s why I hid the gun. I was terrified of what he would do. I thought he’d...”

"Hurt you? Kill you?"

A stiff nod was all she could muster.

Deep breaths.

I don’t think it ruins the illusion, though.

Anya’s mind wandered back to the night under the window screen - blond haired wonder boy Curly no longer next to her: replaced by the current version of their captain, the burned and stretching remains of his skin illuminated by the pale light of the fake moon.

It’s peaceful.

Maybe I’m just used to looking at the bigger picture.

Her hands twitched in her lap as she avoided his gaze. He wasn’t even looking at her, but she couldn’t stand to look at him. Not while she could feel what grew inside of her.

How many days of transport do we have left?

She came back before she got her answer.

Eight months, she remembered.

Roughly eight months, at that point.

Curly was staring at her, concerned, before he got his tablet to speak for him again.

"Are you okay?"

“No, not even a little. I keep...”

Her breath shuddered as she exhaled. Anya continued onwards, despite every nerve in her body telling her not to.

“I keep thinking about that one night, you know? Where I told you about the dead pixel.”

Curly was silent.

She kept going.

“You finally saw it, huh?”

"Right in front of me. Burned out for good pretty quick once I saw it, though."

“Always right when you finally spot it.”

"Yeah. Too late to do anything by then."

Too late. Always too late. Never on time. And Anya remembered the posters from the Tulpar. Talking about any complaints to HR earning them a cut to their paychecks. So much for caring about their employees. The thought made Anya sick – but not as sick as remembering that moment did.

“Why would you take my ID card?”

"Jimmy did."

“And you didn’t put it back.”

A pause.

Anya already knew what he was about to say.

"... You're right."

“...Were you scared of him too?” The nurse finally asked, “You said you’ve known him a long time – has he always been like that?”

For the most part, Curly started, trying to recount as much as he could:

"Always tried to boss his way around. Got too rough. Ended up making some shitty choices. Never to that extreme, though. Landed in jail for petty stuff, but never—"

“Did he bully you around, too, though?”

The Captain was quiet for a second – thinking, no doubt – before he looked back at the screen.

"Yeah, he did. And I just—"

A deep breath. Something between a snuffle and a wheeze.

"Let him do it. I wanted him to be my friend. Be better. Thought I could help him change for the better."

"Doesn't work like that I guess."

"It does when the person you're trying to help actually wants to change," Anya corrected, "...You're a good person, Curly. You are. I can't argue that. You've done so much for us as Captain."

"But I could've done more for you."

"...Yeah. I just feel like I got the short end of the stick because Jimmy was your friend. Is that fair?"

"Fair."

"Doesn't help that Pony Express hates complaints, though," She mused with a bitter laugh, "Would've made it so much worse for all of us."

"And what if he found out?"

"...Right. Yeah. That too."

She'd be lying if she told him she hadn't considered it at all - and thinking of his reaction when she'd simply told him about the consequences of his actions... she couldn't imagine how much worse he'd be. Not that Anya reckoned it could get much worse than him trying to pilot their ship into an asteroid for a botched murder-suicide and then shooting himself. That was bad enough as it was.

"...Curly?" Anya called the name, knowing from the grunt she got in return that she'd caught his attention, "Thank you. For saving us. Steering the ship out of the way."

"Any time. Would do it again if I had to."

"If there's anything I can do when we get back to Earth—"

He let Anya fill in the blanks at the end. She knew what he meant, and it made her thoughts begin to race again.

Where had this Curly been the whole time? She didn't know. But thinking about it like this wasn't going to make it any better – or change what Curly had done back on the Tulpar.

She'd meant to ask a few more questions, but quickly came to the conclusion that they just didn't matter anymore. Jimmy was dead. Curly was... alive, somehow. And apologizing. Knowing he should've done more, but without the means to properly make it up to her. And Anya was alive too, because of him. She no longer carried Jimmy's burden.

And that was enough.

For now, anyway.

"You should focus on yourself, first... but I'll keep the offer in mind. Thank you."

"Any time."

There was some level of thanks that they felt at their conversation ending, given not two seconds later, Brennan rushed in with Daisuke and Swansea in tow – the intern clutching his left hand. His red and blistering left hand.

“You wanted to see Daisuke?” Swansea asked Anya, “Well, figured maybe not like this, but I think this is the best you’re gettin’ for the moment.”

“What happened?” Anya asked, sitting forward suddenly and watching as Brennan started on trying to soothe Daisuke’s pain.

“We’re about to find out. Hang tight,” A look to Curly, “You too, Cap.”

"Cheers. Can do. Basically a pro by now."

That word again.

But for some reason, it didn’t send Anya back this time.

She stayed right where she was under the fluorescent lights of the Haizum’s Medbay.

And despite everything, that made her happy.

Chapter 16

“You said he did *what*?”

Swansea couldn't *wait* to be off this ship.

First it was arguing with the Haizum's mechanic about his strange taste in *boots*, and now his intern was telling him that the guy had tried to teach him something that got him electrocuted.

Fantastic.

“Yeah, he—” Daisuke winced as Brennan bandaged his hand, sharp pain traveling up his arm again, “He said he wanted to teach me a new way of wiring – it'd be more efficient, he said.”

The kid hung his head sadly, trying not to meet Swansea's gaze.

“I'm sorry. I... I really didn't mean to fuck up this time. I swear.”

There was something like understanding in the mechanic's eyes, looking over the kid somewhat softly. With less judgement than he'd entered with. He knew that look - he'd given it to his own mentor some decades ago, back in a car shop in Boston. When he was so sure restoring antique cars was going to be his life blood.

What a pipe dream.

“Is everything alright in here?”

A voice snuck up behind him – Zan, with Garrett trailing behind.

“Garrett told me the kid burned himself – you good over there?” They asked Daisuke, who just nodded in return. *Technically*, that wasn't incorrect, after all.

“You've gotta be more careful, kid - especially around wires like that. Otherwise, this is the shit that happens,” Garrett chimed in.

“Probably the most sensible thing you've ever said,” The pilot snorted, before cutting off an unnoticed protest from Swansea, “Could've been worse – but it doesn't seem too bad, at least. Just your hand, anyway?”

Another nod from Daisuke.

“Hey,” Zan gave his shoulder a friendly shake, “We're not tryin' to rag on you. Promise. Just tryin' to keep you safe, is all.”

A third nod, “...I know. Thanks.”

“You got it,” They turned back to Garrett, “*You* should keep a closer eye on him, though. When it’s just the two of you. Got it?”

A vague grunt of agreement from the mechanic.

Promising.

“Garrett.”

“Yeah, alright, fine.”

“Good. Back to work with you,” The pilot turned to Swansea first, “I’ll need you helping him once you’re done here, and you,” They pointed to his intern, “Just hang out for the day, alright?”

“Man, that’s three of us stuck in here now?” Daisuke whined, “Sorry, boss.”

Swansea just waved a hand casually as the Haizum’s pilot walked off, watching them leave before he turned his attention to his intern, “I’m gonna find out what the hell his deal is, alright? When it’s just me n’ him today. If he has some problem with you - I’m gonna root it out. Especially since he seems to be tellin’ half truths to his crew. Not technically wrong, but...”

“Not the whole story, either.”

“Bingo.”

Daisuke grinned half-heartedly - a strange sight, given that the kid always seemed to put his whole heart into just about everything - “Thanks, boss. For... not being mad, I guess. And going to bat for me with that guy. He’s weird. Like... ultra weird. Bad vibes all around. Just don’t know why.”

“No kiddin’,” The mechanic huffed, “But I’m gonna figure out what it is. Might be the smell of boots on his breath, but we’ll see. Probably doesn’t like that we back sass the dead horse company.”

“But why go for *me*, then? You’re the one always giving PE lip, anyway.”

“You’re easier to bother,” Swansea pointed out matter-of-factly, “Easier to get under your skin than it is with me. You also hate disappointin’ people, don’t you?”

Daisuke looked off to the side, sheepishly, “...Maybe.”

“Yeah. That’ll do it. Smelled it like blood in the water, I bet. Sharks are like that.”

“Hey, sharks are cool, man.”

“You get the point, though?”

“Yeah?”

“Good, that’s all I need. I’m sure sharks are great n’ all.”

“You ever touch one?”

“No, why the hell would I have?”

“Uh, aquariums, dude. Did your parents hate you or something?”

Swansea just groaned.

“They have the little touch pools, man! With the littler sharks! They feel like sandpaper!”

“I always heard sharks were smooth.”

“NO-!”

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

because you've been such good readers (lol): have TWO chapters today :]

Swansea had it figured out now. At least he thought so. It had been months since Daisuke returned to work - since he'd given himself quite the shock and scared the living hell out of all of them. And the mechanic believed he'd finally cracked the code.

Every time he'd mention some bad rap about the Express, or the higher ups, Daisuke would *mysteriously* get shocked or hurt or stuck somewhere once Swansea left the room. Pretty consistently, anyway. Wasn't like the Captain was listening though. Or the rest of the crew. They seemed blind to it.

Or immune.

Worn down.

And Swansea couldn't blame them.

...No, actually. He could.

He really could.

To ignore an intern like this – mindlessly patching him up while believing every word that came from the mouth of a guy they didn't even like...

It made his blood boil.

The apathy towards a measly intern made him seethe something fierce. So much for helping them, he supposed. But at least they were getting them home. At *least*.

Didn't mean he had to *like* them.

He very rarely left Daisuke alone with Garrett now - so thankfully any 'mishaps' were few and far between. But just common enough for Swansea to take notice. The look the other mechanic gave him was enough to prove his point to him, in his opinion - the shifty, *watch your back* sort of stare that bored through the back of his skull.

But he wouldn't get to him.

He refused to let him.

So Daisuke stayed by his side – and Swansea stayed by Daisuke's. Watching out for each other. They only pretended to like each other when Zan swung by and Daisuke pretended to be learning a *ton* from both of them, but then quickly moved away from Garrett once they were gone and there were no more facades to be had. No more pretending.

It was one of those such occasions, Zan stopping by to check on the crew, when Swansea asked, "Give it to me, Cap – how long 'til we hit Earth?"

"Phew- let's see. Not long now, if I remember right. About seventy nine days now?"

"Just about two and a half months, then," Swansea did the mental math, "Got it."

"You itchin' to get out of here, old man?" Garrett grinned at him, "We're having so much fun, though."

Swansea shrugged, "Sure we are. Doesn't mean I don't like solid ground under my feet, though. And I've got a family t' get back to, if you don't mind."

The slight edge to his tone made his point clear: *I've got a life beyond this.*

"Must be nice," Garrett simply replied in the presence of his captain, barely containing the venom that laced the words.

"It is - got a couple kids. Real smart, all of 'em," The proud dad inside of Swansea couldn't help but brag, "First two graduated college not that long ago – last one's comin' up this year. Would *like* to be home to see him graduate in May, if it's all the same."

"Shoot, how old are they?" Daisuke asked with wide eyes, completely invested in this, rather than anything else they could be talking about.

"Last one's just a bit younger than you," The mechanic recalled, "He turns twenty two in... December. Yeah. The seventeenth. My second turned twenty six back in July, and my first is almost fuckin' thirty. Turned twenty eight in March."

There was a brief pause, before Daisuke chimed in again, looking at his boss with a mischievous smile.

"You're old, boss."

"Thanks, kid. That really helps."

"Yeah, no prob!"

Zan shook their head, chuckling, "We'll be back in time for December - don't you worry. Everyone's getting home for Christmas – can't say the same about Thanksgiving, though."

"Our return date on the tin can was supposed to be the day after – you think we'll be close to that?" Swansea raised an eyebrow, "Maybe some of us can get leftovers."

“Eh. We’re off by a few days just because we had to divert to come rescue you all, so... the thirtieth would be my best guess for landing. At least, the way we’re going right now.”

“Damn. Maybe they’ll still be good.”

“I’ll cross my fingers for you,” Zan grinned, “As you were. Back to work, gentlemen.”

“You got it!” Daisuke called, waving as the Pilot left, “We’re on it, boss!”

The minute they left, though – all warmth in the room dissipated. Daisuke and Swansea moved to the other side of the room from Garrett, the other mechanic watching them with unyielding intensity, before returning to his own work. In a brief interlude where Daisuke left the room, leaving just Swansea and his fellow mechanic, the other began to speak.

“That’s a nice act you put on for the pilot.”

“Thanks, I’ve had some practice.”

“You always pretend to like higher ups and then shit talk them behind their backs?”

Swansea just rolled his eyes.

“Honestly,” Garrett continued, “Can see why you always got stuck on Class-C freighters – never tried to get anywhere.”

“Bud,” Swansea finally gave the other a glance, turning in his seat, “I was here for a fuckin’ paycheck to get my kids through school, keep a roof over their heads, and to put food on their table. I’m not gonna have you sit there thinkin’ you’re so high n’ mighty because they put you on the PR ship, alright? You’re getting laid off just the same as the rest of us.”

He turned back to his work, still feeling Garrett’s eyes drilling into his back.

“And if you don’t realize that now, it’s gonna hit ya like a damn freight train once we land.”

He finally felt the eyes peel off his back, and heard the other return to work before he spoke again.

“And keep your shitty little revenge schemes away from my intern. Got it? Corporate’s not gonna keep ya around just because you decided to have beef with a fuckin’ college kid.”

“It wasn’t me – it was him being a dumbass because *you* keep teaching him wrong. I don’t go near the kid with a ten foot pole.”

“The fuck you don’t. Quit lyin’.”

“Where do you get off calling me a liar, huh?” Garrett snapped, his chair squealing against the floor as he stood up, “You do this to every other mechanic you work with, or just me?”

“Just the ones that teach my interns how to wire in loops and set themselves on fire,” Swansea shot back, not bothering to give Garrett a second look, “So. Like I said. Keep your

damn self away from my intern.”

There was an electric tension between the two of them, though Swansea didn’t mind it all that much. He’d found, over the years, that simply ignoring the hopped up jackasses eventually meant they’d shut the fuck up. They’d get bored of him eventually.

And his findings were right again.

Garrett sat back down and got back to work.

Right as Daisuke walked back in the door, looking at his boss, “Yo– did I miss anything?”

“Nothing exciting – get over here.”

“Did I miss anything boring?”

Swansea thought for a moment.

“Nah. Still nothing.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

what about three chapters
what then :V

If the bastard was good at nothing else, he was at least good at knowing his place.

Or perhaps he just kept himself more hidden than usual. He almost seemed to be *avoiding* Swansea and Daisuke for the last two and a half months of the trip, the pair only seeing him in the Utility room on occasion when they were working together.

Not that they were *complaining* at all, really.

The peace and quiet – the ability for the intern to learn in peace – was a blessing they didn't wish to spoil.

But the true blessing, the real joy for them – was feeling the ship touch the ground.

Solid ground.

The whole ship shook as they touched down, before one final *thud* marked their return to Earth. Their return *home*.

Daisuke could hear cheers from all around the ship – even adding a few of his own before jumping up from his seat, grinning down at Swansea, “We’re back – holy shit, we’re back–!”

“Slow down, kid– Hang on a second!” His boss shouted as Daisuke bolted from the room, though any complaint that would have risen out of him was squandered by the kid’s infectious excitement. And who could blame him, really?

They’d been stuck in the cold vacuum of space with nothing but each other, their burned-alive captain, and a faceless lunatic for company for months. Oh, and then the crew who brought them home. But in his mind, they’d ceased to exist the minute they’d brushed off his intern in favor of believing the guy they didn’t even like.

Defending him, even.

Was he hypocritical to think that while going to bat for his own Captain? The one who’d paved over every misbehavior from his friend?

Wouldn’t be the first time he’d been a hypocrite.

So be it.

If being a hypocrite was the worst of his crimes, he'd have the comfiest seat in Hell.

He had to wonder what would be waiting for them once they disembarked – a crowd of reporters? Possibly. He could see it. Daisuke had predicted it, back when they first crashed: a whole host of TV shows and news articles written about their survival out in the far reaches of space.

Medical staff? He hoped so. The captain would need them, no doubt. Especially once they removed him from whatever Brennan had him hooked up to in the Medbay.

...Maybe he didn't want reporters out there. Snapping pictures of Curly. Pasting his burned and scarred face all over the Internet for the whole world to see.

Sure, he was used to it - the Internet had been like that for as long as he could remember, and tabloid magazines even longer, but...

God, was he having *hope*?

Optimism?

Fighting for something?

Breaking sobriety didn't seem like such a bad idea right about now.

Daisuke must've been rubbing off on him. Once he got some fresh air, he'd have his head back on straight. For certain.

He found the intern stuffing his belongings into the bag he'd brought along, trying to cram as much as he could into the full-to-bursting backpack before jamming the rest under his arms to carry out, "What're you waiting for-?" He beamed, "C'mon, get your stuff together – we've got solid ground to be on!"

"Will you give me *two seconds*-?" Swansea griped in return, starting to move to pack up, "You're just ahead because you booked it the second we touched Earth like a bat outta hell."

"Duh, why wouldn't I? I'm ready to get *out* of this joint, dude!"

"Makes two of us, then."

The door to their Sleeping Quarters creaked open slightly as Anya pushed it, Swansea not having bothered to close it behind him, "You two beat me here, huh?"

"Nah, we're figments of your imagination," Swansea sniped with a brief chuckle.

"*Very* funny," The nurse rolled her eyes as she smiled, before addressing both her crewmates, "On... the way out. I need you both to help with something."

Daisuke blinked owlishly, tilting his head to the side, "With what?"

“Getting Curly out of here. It’s... not going to be a fun task, but... I want to keep the press away from him, if they’re waiting out there. And I want to make sure he’s safe and *mostly* comfortable the whole time. Apparently there’s an ambulance out there waiting for him, we just need to *get* him there.”

“Always the challenge, isn’t it?” Swansea slammed a suitcase closed, before setting its wheels on the ground, “Yeah, that’s what I figured the case would be. We won’t go far.”

“Count on us, Nurse!” Daisuke’s optimism refused to be dampened, even as his boss nudged him with an elbow.

“If nothing else, we’ll offer him up as a sacrifice – he can keep ‘em distracted while we wheel the Capitano away.”

“What-?!”

“Sure thing - you mentioned wanting all the cool stories written, yeah? You can get ‘em written for us. You’ll kill it, champ.”

“...I can’t tell if you mean I’ll do it *well*, or if I’ll kill it as in... do it so badly the story totally dies.”

“You’ll figure it out, I’m sure.”

“We’re not sacrificing Daisuke to the press!” Anya butted in, “He’s staying right here with the both of us.”

A glance shared between the nurse and the intern.

“...Even if I would’ve wanted to a while ago because of your stupid luck in Sorry.”

“Aw c’mon, man!”

The kid really *did* have stupid luck when it came to board games. It was only during those quiet nights in the lounge, just the four of them (Jimmy always forwent game night, despite Curly’s insistence, in favor of fucking off and brooding by himself. Or whatever else he did. Usually after offering the Captain a middle finger. Either literally or figuratively.), that Swansea saw Anya *truly* mad. Their games typically went the same way – all would be equalized in the beginning, the game would start out *normal*.

And then all the luck would swing into Daisuke’s favor.

And Anya’s blood pressure would soar through the goddamn roof.

But maybe that stupid sense of luck would come in handy for other things, like the journey ahead.

Swansea just hoped it had rubbed off onto the rest of them, too.

As the crew of the Tulpar met the crew of the Haizum and Curly at the front bay of the ship, Captain Zan was there to greet them, “Finally made it, crew – ready to face the world?”

“Thrilled. Can’t wait,” Swansea decided to give them a final dry remark before he hopefully never saw them again.

“That’s the spirit,” They laughed, “C’mon. There’s a crew waiting for your captain outside – we let ground control know to have them ready on the way back.”

Pony Express? Doing *anything* remotely decent?

Color him surprised.

Swansea looked over at Zan, “What about Jawless Jimbo? We just leavin’ him in your Cryopod?”

“Garrett got him out - don’t worry about it.”

A brief shifting of weight on Garrett’s shoulders drew Swansea’s attention to the bag hefted over his shoulder – no doubt containing their faceless copilot.

“I’ll take him. He’s part of *our* crew, after all,” Swansea held out a hand, ready to take the Tulpar’s disfigured dead guy onto his own shoulder, “Wouldn’t want you luggin’ this guy around.”

“If you’re sure. Be my guest.”

Garrett unceremoniously dropped Jimmy’s wrapped up body onto the other mechanic’s shoulder - making Swansea grunt before he readjusted and got the bastard co-pilot into a less awkward position.

With the four of them together now – Curly under the watchful eye of Anya as she wheeled him out – and the crew of the Haizum filtering out, the crew of the Tulpar shared a look between themselves. What came next?

“You guys ready?” Daisuke finally broke the tension, as he often did.

“Definitely not,” Anya smiled nervously, “But I don’t think I’m going to get any more ready than I am.”

Swansea nodded, “Hear, hear. Let’s get this show on the road, kids.”

Curly glanced over at his tablet, attached to a stand on his gurney so he could continue to communicate with his crew as they moved:

"We're gonna need to add curse words to this thing soon, I think."

“Do you not have swears on there?” Daisuke’s eyes got wide.

"Nope."

“A cryin’ shame, Cap. We’ll fix that once we fix *you* up. Deal?”

"Deal. Thanks, Swansea."

“Here for you, pal.”

With that, the crew of the Tulpar, the Class C Freighter and mouthwash carrying machine, stepped back onto Earth to face the crowds. And whatever else awaited them from here on out.

Chapter 19

Getting to the hospital was a blur.

Reporters swarmed the two crews almost immediately – Daisuke, Swansea, and Anya surrounding their captain to try and prevent any pictures (Daisuke even going so far as to cover Curly's face with his pink overshirt) while the crew of the Haizum seemed to melt into the crowd.

Anya led the charge, moving single-mindedly towards where the emergency services had made themselves abundantly obvious to the Tulpar crew, while Swansea played guard dog for the other two.

Jimmy even came in handy, for once. The extra weight was good to have to swing around and block people with, the mechanic found.

The medical crew had the back ramp of the bus deployed for them when they got close, getting Curly rolled inside as quickly as they could – with the other three crew members following quickly inside behind him.

Not yet daring to remove his overshirt from Curly's face, Daisuke watched as they pulled away, leaving the reporters far behind them as sirens wailed in the air.

Once they were far enough away from the Haizum – from where they'd landed – the intern finally yanked his shirt back, dropping his bag onto a seat and taking a deep breath, “Holy *shit*.”

“Yeah. *Yeah*,” Anya nodded in agreement, “But we're here now. On Earth. And... headed to a hospital.”

With shaky hands, she pulled her phone out of her uniform pocket to glance at the map that came pre-installed on it. California. Mojave, to be exact. Right where they'd launched from. She looked up at Daisuke, “Do you know... kind of where we are? I think I remember that you're from California - from your file.”

“Uh, yeah. But I'm like... two hours from here. In LA. I don't think I've been out here before. Except for when we launched,” Daisuke hummed, looking around, “Looks kind of familiar, though.”

His eyes got wide.

“Shit, I gotta text my parents where we're headed – they can catch up with us–”

With that, he was immediately engrossed in his own phone, tapping away at the keyboard and shooting off several messages to his parents.

“Yeah, I guess I better text the wife and kids—” Swansea pulled out his phone to scroll through it, squinting at the screen, “I’m already *late*, and I know they were gonna try and meet me here this time. So God knows how long they’ve been waiting. Hopin’ someone told them we were getting delayed.”

“Probably,” Anya glanced at Swansea’s screen, “You don’t seem to have missed any calls, which is... promising?”

“I hope you’re right.”

Before Swansea even got the chance to open his messages, Daisuke was already getting a flood of replies, his phone not even allowed to finish one text message chime before the next would overlap it, followed by another, and another, ad nauseam.

“...Well shoot,” The intern blinked a few times before giving his crewmates the rundown, “Nearest hospital’s like twenty five minutes from here, so my parents are gonna meet us there. I’ll send you guys the address so you can spread it or whatever. To whoever you’ve got waiting.”

True to his word, a few seconds later, the address popped up in their group chat – the cooler one, anyway.

Daisuke had originally created one with all five of them, but when it became increasingly clear to both him and Swansea that Jimmy had “bad vibes” and “a negative aura”, Daisuke had created a second one that left out their rancid co-pilot.

He’d wanted to believe it was just a mismatch of personality at the time - that Jimmy was just incompatible with their crew, but now every little belief seemed like a glaring red flag to him. Should he have made more of a fuss about it? Who would’ve even listened to him, as an intern?

Not the crew of the Haizum. So certainly not anyone more important.

Anya felt a tap on her shoulder a few moments later, not having sent the address to anyone, which made both her and Daisuke to her side look up.

One of the paramedics tending to Curly.

“Do you have his medical records on hand? Did you bring them with you off the ship?”

A pause, “You *are* the Tulpar’s Nurse, right?”

“Yeah, that’s – that’s me,” Anya stumbled over her words for a moment before fumbling with her bag, eventually yanking out the records she’d preserved from the ship and handing them over, “That should be everyone. In case you want to check the rest of us over, too.”

“Perfect. It’s appreciated.”

Once again, the Tulpar crew was left to the growing silence, engrossed in locations and contacts and text messages before the bus screeched to a halt and came to a stop - the

hospital.

“Ready?” Swansea asked the other two, earning their nods in return as they gathered up their belongings.

Curly was moved out of the bus as they did so – quickly disappearing inside the pristine white building and away from his crewmates. None of them were surprised by the speed at which the medical team moved to get their captain inside - only curious as to where he would be taken, and what would become of *them* next.

They quickly found out, however – brought into rooms of their own to be poked and prodded and investigated for any injuries, while Jimmy’s body was quickly taken from Swansea. A literal and figurative weight off of his shoulders.

Daisuke was the first to emerge from his room – a little tired, and a touch underweight, the doctors had noted, but nothing solid meals and catching up on sleep couldn’t fix. The burn on his hand had healed nicely, and there was nothing even left for the doctors to see by the time they’d arrived back to Earth – and so he was free to go.

Swansea was much the time – exhausted and stressed, with his blood pressure being *somewhat* elevated, but nothing terribly *life threatening*. He’d had those problems before, he told them – he’d sleep, get back on a regular schedule, take his meds, and he’d be right as rain.

But Anya – Anya had explaining to do.

Far more than her crewmates.

When the two mechanics met in the hallway, waiting for their final teammate, Daisuke looked up at his boss, “...Do you think we should go help Anya?”

“With what? She’s a big girl, she can handle a hospital visit.”

“...Nah, with like... explaining. What happened. She asked *you* to tell the guy on the Haizum, didn’t she?”

“...Shit. You’re right,” Swansea sighed, “Let’s go check in at least. See how she’s doing.”

Her room wasn’t much further from theirs – no doubt wanting to keep them all somewhat close. Venturing only a bit down the hall landed them on a room labeled with the last name “Musume” - Anya.

Her voice came from inside as well:

*“I’m **telling** you, that’s why he crashed the ship! I had to have an abortion in fucking space because of him, and now you’re telling me it’s not even on my record?!”*

The words stopped her two coworkers in their tracks.

Well, shit.

Great.

Swansea knocked on the closed door, daring to try and enter in the middle of the heated conversation.

“Probably my crewmates,” Anya spat, “Go on. Let them in. They’ll tell you the truth.”

Neither Daisuke or Swansea had ever heard her so angry - not even during her fits of board game induced rage.

But let in they were, greeted by a tired doctor and a teary eyed and angry Anya, sitting with her arms wrapped around herself on the bed.

“What’s the issue?” Swansea immediately asked the doctor.

“She reported an abortion while aboard the Haizum, but the crew made no record of such an operation in their files—”

“Well, it fuckin’ happened. Me n’ him,” The mechanic jabbed a thumb at Daisuke, “Can both confirm it. And if you hunt down their Nurse, he can tell ya all about it. Don’t know *why* they didn’t bother writin’ it down, but sounds about right for Pony Express’ levels of incompetence.”

Daisuke nodded in agreement, making the doctor pinch his nose and sigh, “Right. Of course. Do you have the name of the nurse?”

“Brennan.... What’s his face?”

“Gallagher,” Anya offered dryly, slowly removing one of her arms from around her chest to wipe at her face with a sleeve - Daisuke moving to her side to offer comfort by leaning on her side.

“Brennan Gallagher. I’ll see what I can find out.”

And with that, the crew of the Tulpar was left alone, all three of them stuck together once again in Anya’s woefully dark hospital room.

“...Jesus, you want me to open a window or somethin’?” Swansea finally suggested, not waiting for an answer as he drew open the curtains of a window on the back wall, letting in some sunlight at least. Better than none.

“There we go. Now I can fuckin’ see.”

“...Thanks, Swansea,” Anya managed a chuckle, finally removing her other arm from her chest.

“Don’t mention it.”

“I just... don’t get it. Why they’d be so intent on causing problems for us after rescuing us. It doesn’t make any sense,” The nurse sighed, “Of course we’d end up rescued by Pony

Express' guard dogs. Just our luck, I guess."

"...I mean, hey," Daisuke tried, as always, to look on the bright side, "They got us back on Earth?"

A glance at his phone.

"And my parents should be here soon – we can start talking lawsuits maybe. And see how Cap is doing."

"I'd... yeah, I'd like that."

"Sounds like a plan to me, kiddo. My wife n' kids should be showin' up any minute now, anyway."

And soon it was.

For the first time in over a year, Daisuke embraced his parents.

Swansea felt the stinging words of his kids' half hearted and joking jabs towards him and laughed.

And Anya?

While none of her relatives had bothered to welcome her back to Earth – she'd gained a whole lot more of them under the rays of California sunshine beaming into the room.

And that was enough.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The tale of the survivors ends here.

Chapter Notes

aight since y'all have been so hyped about this fic it's heartwarming--

take the first ending!

but Someone Else will be getting his conclusion tomorrow :3c

Los Angeles had become the new home base for the crew of the Tulpar over the last couple months. Between the General Medical Center to keep tabs on their captain after he'd been transferred to their Burn Ward, to the Superior Court for the *numerous* lawsuits Daisuke's mother had launched almost immediately – they'd been kept plenty busy.

And so had their Captain – answering countless questions about their co-pilot and the crash and everything in between. On top of all the surgeries and therapy and, and, *and*–

But today they found themselves at the first of their two prime destinations at the moment - seeing their captain after what seemed like the five hundred millionth surgery he'd undergone since their return to Earth.

The last of his skin grafts, they'd been told. A tedious work in progress, but one that was hopefully worth it in the end.

They'd even started the process of transplanting hair follicles onto his scalp - once it was certain the skin covering his burned and scarred face and head wasn't going to be rejected by his body.

And now they got to see the results.

Or at least. How they looked at the moment.

Daisuke and Swansea had arrived somewhat early – leaving Anya to arrive at the last minute after she'd told them to go ahead. Studying for attempt number *nine* at medical school.

Ninth time was the charm, after all.

“Sorry, did I miss anything?” She asked as she caught her breath, yet still managed to smile at her former coworkers.

“Nah, we haven’t even seen him yet. Take a second, Nurse. Promise - it won’t kill ya.”

“Thanks. Glad I’ve got permission,” Despite the sass, Anya did pause for a moment, taking a few deep breaths as they waited.

Daisuke snickered, “You always need it around this guy, apparently. You’d think he was our Captain, if our real Cap wasn’t around.”

“*Hell* no. Absolutely not. That position’s cursed, I swear to God.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Anya laughed, before wondering out loud, “...What do you guys think they did with our *last* Captain?”

Not Curly, but Jimmy.

At least. He’d pretended to be a Captain for a little bit.

So it kind of counted.

“Heard his folks came to get what was left of him. They’re burying him next week back in Florida,” Swansea answered her dryly, “Why? You wanna go?”

“Not really, no.”

Anya looked down at her feet. The idea of him getting any sort of burial after what he’d done - any sort of *dignity* – it made her seethe.

But it wasn’t her decision at this point.

He had family, she supposed. And they deserved *something*.

She just hoped it wouldn’t hurt too bad when it came out in court that their dead faceless son was a monster.

“Can we... go do something that day? The four of us? I know I’m gonna be thinking about it, so maybe we can just... find something else to do. We’re all gonna be stuck here a while, anyway.”

Daisuke perked up, grinning, “Yeah for sure – I know a *bunch* of cool stuff around here that I’ve been thinking about showing you guys– it’ll be a blast!”

Both Anya and Daisuke looked at Swansea expectantly, and it only took a moment for the Mechanic to cave, rolling his eyes.

“Fuck, fine,” His tone was gruff but a smile was pulling at the corners of his mouth, “I’ll be your adult supervision.”

“Thaaaaanks, boss~!” Daisuke grinned impishly, “You’re gonna have fun, I swear.”

“Uh huh. Don’t push it.”

Daisuke didn’t argue with him further, but if he knew his former intern well enough – he’d be pushing his luck in two seconds flat, no question. But it was nothing he wasn’t used to, after all.

And if he was honest?

He was interested to see what the kid would pull out of his ass for the four of them to do.

And speaking of the fourth–

“Cap!”

There was Curly. With *actual* skin, wisps of blonde hair growing from his head, and a brighter smile than any of them had seen from him in months. Temporary prosthetic limbs allowed him to operate crutches and – for the first time since the crash – walk towards his crewmates. Daisuke’s face lit up as Curly approached, seeming fully ready to barrel directly into a hug, before stopping himself, looking to the accompanying nurse.

“...Can I?”

“That should be fine, yeah. Just... gentle. No snapping him in half.”

An exasperated groan came out of Curly – though there was no pain to be had in the sound anymore. Not that they could notice, anyway.

With permission, Daisuke wrapped his arms around the Captain, holding him *just* tight enough to where he didn’t feel like he was crushing the poor guy.

But tight enough to let him know it was real.

A little snuffle from his reconstructed nose. The crutches were let go, hanging from his forearms as Curly returned the gesture and wrapped his temporary prosthetic hands around Daisuke.

His eye was watering – Daisuke could feel tears dripping, dampening his bright shirt as Anya offered him a few pats on the shoulder and Swansea ruffled the few growing strands of hair on their Captain’s head.

“How do you feel, Cap?” Daisuke finally asked once Curly untangled himself and grabbed the handles of his crutches again.

“...B....ett...er?”

It took some effort, but Curly managed to choke out the one word – and it was all they needed to hear.

That was a step forward enough.

Everything else could come later.

“Sick!” Daisuke beamed, “You already know, but my mom is handling all the lawsuit bull, so we’re gonna be dealin’ with *that* for a bit – buuuut~! We were thinkin’ we’d go out and do somethin’ fun sometime soon. If you’re up for it, that is. I live around here, so I know *all* the cool spots we can go to.”

He didn’t try to force out anymore words, Curly simply offering the former Intern an eager nod as his blue eye twinkled in excitement. *Anything* to get out of this boring hospital.

“We’ll see if we can make it happen,” The nurse that had accompanied Curly out of his room spoke with a slight laugh.

“Hey, we’ll be here a while, so don’t rush anything,” Swansea huffed, leaning back against a wall.

“I didn’t take care of you for all those months just for you to get an infection on your grafted skin and die – so you better not rush it,” Anya joked, “Or I’ll... I’ll bring you back and kill you again.”

Daisuke and Swansea looked between the two after the laughter died down – Anya and the Captain – before Swansea suggested, “You want a sec, Anya?”

There was a moment of deliberation, before she nodded.

“Yeah. I think so.”

Once they were given some semblance of privacy, the Nurse and the Captain sat down – after Curly’s nurse brought him his tablet so he could speak to his former coworker.

“I’m trying med school again, you know,” Anya started off with, “Ninth time’s the charm, as Daisuke likes to put it.”

"You'll do great."

"I have complete faith in you."

“...Thanks. Someone has to.”

A deep sigh, a look over at Daisuke and Swansea.

“I... Curly, I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for what happened. Like... completely,” She finally let her thoughts tumble out of her, “But... I’m glad you didn’t die. I think I’m a little less mad at you now that we’re pretty sure you’re not going to. I would’ve been so mad to have spent all that time – just for you to get to a real hospital with *real* doctors and nurses and... die. You know?”

*"You **are** a real nurse."*

“Not really. Only by Pony Express’ standards. And those don’t mean anything anymore.”

"Real enough to keep... whatever the hell I was alive for months on end."

“...Yeah. True.”

"Give yourself more credit."

“Oh, it’s that easy? Why didn’t I think of that?” Anya laughed, before shaking her head, “No, I– I get it. I’m gonna try. Now that he’s gone. I just need some time, y’know?”

She stood up first, before helping Curly to his feet and swallowing, “...I mean it. I’m glad you’re here. Even if I’m still mad at you. Better you than him, anyway.”

"Thanks."

"Hope I can do better by you going forward."

“Let’s start with whatever Daisuke has planned, alright? Survive that, and *then* we can talk about healing our trauma together or something corny like that.”

"Survive is probably the right word, yeah."

"We’re pretty good at that, though, aren’t we?"

“I’d say so. If we can survive Pony Express and their god awful food - I think we can survive just about anything.”

That wasn’t what he meant. She knew it wasn’t.

But that’s what it was now. That’s all it was, and it was all it would ever have to be again.

At least until tomorrow - when the next round of reporters came knocking.

But that was a problem for then – after a real sunrise, outside of a real glass window.

With no dead pixels to be found.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The tale of the dead pixel ends here.

Chapter Notes

thank you all so, *so* much for the love you've given this fic. it's been truly heartwarming -- and i'm so glad i returned to posting fics on the archive. y'all are lovely <3

if i don't see you - good afternoon, good evening, and good night! *bows out*

Jimmy woke up in the dark.

It was almost peaceful.

No more blaring lights. No more alarms.

No more Tulpas. No more crew.

No more Anya.

He reveled in it, for a moment.

He'd actually fixed it. He'd done what he set out to do, and fixed it. All by himself. Curly even saw it – he could testify to that.

So if this was it – if this was his destiny? Eternal blackness with a pulsing calm around him? So be it. He could accept that. Better than–

Hey boss!

He knew that voice.

The lights turned on with a loud *clack*.

Polle. Standing atop a mountain of... *mouthwash*?

Was that all they'd been shipping? All they'd been hauling through space for a goddamn year? He'd never found out. Did the bastards open up the storage once he was gone? He wouldn't have put it past them, to be honest. It was their plan almost right from the beginning, to try and find supplies.

But if all there was was fucking mouthwash—

It's me!

The little horse statue was crawling through the metal railing between them after hopping down from their mountain of mouthwash – like some sort of demented cartoon character. Bright, round eyes looked up at him as bright white cartoonish gloved hands gripped rusty metal.

*Or what should I call **you**?*

They grinned, arms spread wide for a moment, before clasping them together and speaking more sarcastically.

“Old Man” ?

Seems a liiiittle above your pay grade ~ !

Polle rolled their eyes, bringing their hand up and moving their pointer finger around in a circle in front of them –

Given aaaaall this.

Their voice was broken. Like someone had recorded all the words they spoke separately and then stitched them together. Or chopped them up and tried to put the pieces back together. Either way, Jimmy recoiled at the sound, looking down at the mascot in disgust.

“Pony Express is dead,” He spat out, “And so are you. And so am I. This isn't –”

Polle pointed an accusatory finger at him, wagging it and placing their other hand on their hip as they got closer.

*I know what you thought of that **predicament** of yours.*

Their hands came to their cheeks, a woeful expression crossing their face, before falling into uncaring apathy and then quickly changing to a show of dramatics to emphasize the cartoon horse's words.

Poor you ~ ! Caged and misunderstood.

A chime emerged from them. They grabbed one of Jimmy's hands.

Polle says:

The only thing Jimmy heard after was the voice inside his own head – as if Polle had projected some sort of message inside.

“ **SORRY!** ”

But he had nothing to be sorry for.

Fear turned to rage turned back to fear as he yanked his hand away, “Shut ***up!***”

Gasping breaths emerged from him — in and out of his horrid system.

“I tried my best! I did! Maybe Curly did too. Maybe he was the better man. But who gives a fuck. We’re both *dead*.”

His voice raised to a shout, “***I took responsibility!***”

No, you didn’t, his deepest inner voice whispered, *No, you didn’t*.

“Curly...”

His whole body felt heavy. He *did* have something to be sorry for, didn’t he?

Crashing the ship.

Ruining Curly’s life.

Maybe he could start there, at least.

“Captain– I’m so sorry...”

His head fell into his hands as he felt the weight of his grief fall onto him, only exacerbated by the mocking tone of the horse mascot behind him:

*You **really** mean that, huh?*

“Yes– Yes, yes, **yes! I do!**” Jimmy felt hot tears streaming from his eyes as he bared his soul before the manifestation of a goddamn corporate entity, “I fucked up! But I can make it right – I *did* make it right! I’m gone now! And– And our worst moments don’t make us–”

Polle’s face broke into a cartoonishly happy smile.

Wait a minute!

Their expression turned to one of shock as their hands went palms out in front of them – trying to get their imagined audience to pause.

Hold on!

Finally, they turned back to Jimmy. Clasped their hands together as they formed finger guns to point at him, eyes looking up with some degree of *doubt*.

If all of that is true—

They stood up straight, raising a pointer finger in front of them and tucking their other rubberhose arm behind their back as they concluded:

*Why are you still so **concerned** with **him**?*

Polle was pointing at his abdomen.

Why was he still concerned with Curly?

Did he have something else to be sorry for?

He did, didn't he?

The thought made him freeze as his world seemed to melt around him – forming the common room of the Tulpar, and his outstretched arms now holding his burned and disfigured friend. His Captain.

Before him, sat three corpses:

Swansea, with a bullet through the middle of his forehead, slumped backwards.

Anya, bleeding dripping from her nose and mouth and eyes rolled back – glassy and unfocused.

And Daisuke, with a horrible gash down the middle of his face nearly splitting it in half.

And Curly? Curly was laughing.

Or trying to.

Jimmy would've preferred the darkness - the cold emptiness.

But no.

Now he had to

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.

And somehow that was so, *so* much worse.