

Caught Adrift

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The Earth is dying.

With the wars endless and pollution out of hand, humanity's neglect has dwindled us to near extinction. Mere *thousands*.

In a frenzy, we evacuated what was left of us on a ship that NASA had prepared for us called the Ark. This ship had all the resources we have left, with several smaller ships accompanying the Ark that held them. That's how we escaped our own downfall. That's what brought us to the only thing that hasn't yet been tainted by our hands.

Space.

"Captain Rook, please report to Sector Eight: Entrance to the Raven."

As soon as that announcement goes off from my radio, I'm on my feet. Stumbling to his bed, I slam my hands against my partner's back. "Kel! Kel, get up."

When he doesn't wake, I shove him off, causing him to fall with a loud *thunk*.

"KELSEY!"

I see his arm reach over the cot, pulling himself up. There's dark circles under his eyes.

"Yes?"

"The probe has returned to the Ark..."

There's only the briefest moment of shock on his face before we're rushing around our room in a panic. I'm fumbling with my gear while Kelsey shoves random things into my bag.

With shaking hands, I fail to fasten up my spacesuit one too many times.

“Kelsey... Help me... Please.”

He does without hesitation, falling into our usual routine for what could be the last time.

But then, he suddenly pauses, his hands resting gently against my arms. “Rook, am I a bad person for wishing that the planet isn't safe? For the probe to say ‘no’?”

“Kel, please...”

His grip tightens against my suit's sleeves. “We're fine here, aren't we? There's so few of us left.”

“But that's just it, my dear. We need to be revived. And to do that, we need another planet similar enough to Earth.” I take a deep breath, “Now please help me...”

He sighs after a moment and resumes helping me gear up.

Because of that, I'm ready in minutes, and we're sprinting down the halls to Sector Eight without another word.

My crew is already there waiting, pacing or whispering anxiously to each other, only stopping when they take notice of my arrival.

I nod to my second-in-command; Nyx.

“Any word?”

They let out a long breath, their arms crossed, “No, Captain, unfortunately not. They're still discussing. However, given how long they're all taking, I think it's safe to say that it's habitable.”

Immediately, Kelsey whips around to face me.

“*Rook...*”

He's scared. So many things could go wrong with this mission... But we don't exactly have a choice though, do we?

I give him a small, nervous smile, “We'll be okay...” I pause, “I'll be okay.”

His fingers lace between mine as he looks up, terror beginning to show in his face, “*I don't think I can do this, Rook.*”

Quickly, I press my free hand over his heart, feeling it speed up

rapidly. “Breathe. We’ll get through this. We always do. We survived the evacuation and lived on this boring ship for a few years. Think of it... We can finally get out.”

Doing his best to regulate his breathing, he rests his head on my shoulder.

“As soon as you arrive, we’ll get married...” I smile at the thought.

Kel laughs, “We’ll be the first... The husbands of Kepler 452-b.”

I shake my head, still smiling, “Dearest, that makes it sound like we’ll be married to the planet...”

I join his awkward laugh just as the higher-ups storm out from the Raven.

Kelsey and I break apart as we all stand at attention, listening to every word they might say.

The main leader of the Ark looks at us all, “Kepler 452-b is habitable.”

There’s a mix of gasps of shock and sighs of relief. Finally, after three years spent in the void, there’s a place to land.

Our leader clasps her hands together, turning to speak to me, “Captain Rook, you will stay here with me for a little longer.” She waves her hand dismissively to the other higher-ups, signaling for them to leave before they even get the chance to say anything.

“You seven, board the Raven and prepare to leave”, she commands the rest of my crew. “Nyx, go ahead and get ready to start the warp bubble.”

Nyx dips their head and leads the rest of the crew into the Raven.

Silence fills the halls for a minute before the Ark leader launches into my next orders.

“Our probe has found the best possible place for us to inhabit and begin reviving humanity. It’s provided a beacon to guide you, the Raven will be alerted when it’s in sight. There, you will land and begin

your preparation for the Ark. You have the equivalent of Kepler 452-b's year to do *all* of this." She claps my arm before turning away, "The Ark is counting on you, Captain."

I inhale quickly and nod as she leaves. Straight to the point.

Kelsey wraps his arms around my midriff, hastily pulling me close. "Three hundred and eighty five days, Rook... Three hundred and eighty five days without you."

"And three hundred and eighty five days I will wait for you," I whisper, draping my arms around his shoulders.

My heart drops as his breathing begins to hitch. Then we're suddenly a trainwreck. He lets out a sob as I bury my face into my arm, barely breathing as we lock together. This is where we part ways and neither of us can bear it.

Gasping, his grip tightens, "I love you, Rook..."

I tilt my head against the side of his. "I love you too," I mumble, barely able to get my words out as tears stream down my face. "I promise it'll be okay."

He pulls back, arms still around me, "Promise?"

Squeezing my eyes shut, I touch my forehead to his own, "Promise."

"Promise, promise?"

I cup Kel's face with shaking hands and press my lips against his. The touch is a tidal wave of emotions. It's warm. It's fear and longing and loneliness and comfort. It's a reckless vow.

Too soon, we pull back.

"Promise, promise..."

For a few minutes longer, we stand there embraced and staring into each other's eyes, our heartbreak shown clearly.

Finally, I step back, letting my arms fall to my sides. "Time to go..."

"I know..." he mutters, although shaking his head.

Hesitantly, I turn away and approach the door leading to the

Raven. It suddenly feels unreal, our separation too soon. Never have we been able to be separated. Not like this. It feels like this will be the death of me. The death of us. *Why did it have to be me?*

Before I can enter, I'm abruptly yanked back and twirled around. Kelsey has me in a desperate hold once more. "*I love you so much...*"

Devastation claws relentlessly at my heart. Merciless. "I love you too, Kel... Forever and always."

"Forever and always." He lets me go, waving his last goodbye. "I'll see you there."

Smiling sadly, I step backward through the entrance, the glass door shutting with a quiet click. I press my hand against the cold glass.

Forgive me, I mouth to him, but he fails to see.

He's crying again.

At that, I hastily turn away from him, walking in the opposite direction before it will be impossible to leave my love behind.

The crew of the Raven welcomes me back. No one questions my elongated absence, however Nyx has a pitying frown on their face.

I shove my emotions down and clap for full attention as I stride towards the front of the ship. "Alright, listen up! The Ark is counting on us to make sure there's a home waiting for them. We're gonna make that happen as best we can." I place my hands on the front of the control panel's desk. "We'll detach the Raven from the Ark and set out. We'll only be drifting for today so I have time to calculate the Alcubierre Drive coding. Meanwhile I'll have you all make sure we're fully prepared to set out." I stand straight and turn to face my crew. "Nyx will be in charge of the ship while I calculate this so we can arrive on our expected time."

One of our crewmates, Atlas, raises his hand, tilting his head as he does so, "Captain, what *is* our ETA?"

While Nyx begins the process of detaching our ship, I gesture to one of the screens behind me. I don't expect them all to understand, as they have not gone through my training, so I attempt to give a quick explanation.

"With our FTL tech we've developed over the years, it should be a mere twenty days. Sounds impossible, right? As you know, we've been on the Ark for three years. During that time we've been using the Alcubierre Drive to head towards our targeted planet. What you *didn't* know is that we've been advancing our Faster Than Light travel over the course of those three years without break. Nonstop since our evacuation, we have been working towards our future. With this tech, we can go above and beyond our original FTL travel time." I beam with pride, "From the distance we've already traveled from Earth, this trip will be quick. By the time we arrive we have three hundred and *sixty five* days on Kepler 452-b, our usual year."

The ship shifts with a loud whirring sound, successfully disconnecting from the Ark. I feel my heart pound. This is it.

Clapping again, I send them off, "I trust you all to make this work and complete our mission. I hope you can say the same for me. With that said, let's get started!"

After relentless amounts of work and barely enough rest to function, those twenty days finally come to an end. The probe's beacon reached our sights roughly one week in before it began to flicker. The beacon's shift briefly caused panic, yet excitement over our destination closing in.

We fall into our practiced routine. Gearing up and preparing our entry to our new world.

Nyx claps me on the back while we wrap up, "Are you ready, Captain?"

"No."

They laugh despite their own nervousness, “We’ll get the hang of it eventually.”

Atlas nods, agreeing, “It’ll be rough the first few days, I’m sure. We don’t properly know what we’re doing until we get there, right?” He grins, “But we’ll be humanity’s heroes, yeah?”

Nyx rolls their eyes, but I laugh, “Yeah, sure.”

Atlas pumps his fist, “Yes! Let’s get a move on then.”

We all make our way to the ship’s exit, having finished our prep work. Now that we’re all here and ready to go, Nyx and I nod to each other before I allow the door to open and lower into a ramp.

Suddenly, our sights are filled with an abundance of greenery.
It isn’t supposed to be like this.

Confused murmurs erupt from my crew as I step off the ramp, carefully lowering myself onto the ground. Safe... I look back and wave them over, “We’re good.”

Nyx is by my side in an instant.

Atlas had trailed close behind them, only to wander around the perimeter, scouting for the probe.

Three of our crewmates begin to unload the Raven despite the confusion of what we’ve been met with, while the other two crouch down in unison, inspecting the green-filled ground.

One looks back up at me, concerned, “Captain. This life is from Earth... Perhaps straight from one of the Ark’s greenhouses.”

I lean down beside her, joining her inspection, “Perhaps there were seeds latched onto the probe, whether that was on purpose or not...”

Atlas returns, frowning, “Speaking of, I don’t see it anywhere. Weren’t we supposed to land beside it?”

“Yes, but it shifted, remember? Let’s head to our main point. Leave the supplies here, I want to get there quickly.”

As we make our way there, we're met with even more shocking sights...

Overgrown pathways, barren farmland, crumbling structures, buildings... *Human* buildings. All of this... Manmade.

We stand, utterly horrified, in the middle of a town. Everything is abandoned. It's so quiet... So lonely... So *impossibly human*.

Resting untainted on a cubic structure is the probe, still trying to send out its flickering beacon. Even that is falling apart.

Nyx trots forward while I'm frozen in shock. "What the hell... *What the hell.*"

Panic aches in my chest, "What does the structure say?" It's getting hard to breathe. "*Nyx, what does it say.*"

"'In memory of the Crew of the Raven, who gave their lives to reach our new home.' Captain..." They whisper, "Captain, it's a memorial for us."

I'm going to vomit. I can barely even hear Atlas begin to hyperventilate.

"What the *fuck?*" He shouts.

Nyx's horrified voice sounds again, "Captain, come here."

I shake my head, beginning to keel over, "I can't... I can't... I messed up, Nyx..."

"*Now.*"

One of our crewmates gives me a gentle push forward, causing me to stumble up beside them. I try to see what's in their hand but my vision is starting to go blurry...

"Captain, it's addressed to you... I think... I think it could be from Kelsey..."

I shake my head again, frantic. I don't believe this.

They shove what seems to be a log book into my hands, "Please read it."

I take a step back, "No. It's not from him... He's back home... He's on the Ark... He's waiting for *us.*"

“Rook, please, it could explain everything. It was safely in the memorial.”

I look down, tears dropping onto the cover. “Please... Please.” I’m unable to tell if they leave or not, but I don’t care...

I carefully flip it open, not wanting to tear the pages. *How can it be so old?* Through teary eyes, I begin to read...

"I already miss you. When that door shut behind you, when you had turned away, when I was left alone in that empty hall. It felt like my world was ending.

I lie awake, our sleeping hours nowhere near the end, wishing selfishly that you'd come back... That maybe something will go wrong.

I miss you, I miss you, I miss you."

"Twenty days have passed. You should be on Kepler 452-b by now. I hope you're safe and working hard. We're all looking forward to seeing what you will accomplish.

The Ark's leader says you'll be fine. I know that already. You promised we'll be okay, and I'll believe you, forever and always."

"It's lonely without you, Rook. I miss you so much."

“I miss you too...” I whisper, running my fingers along the torn out pages that come next. “What happened? Please tell me what happened...” I don’t understand. I don’t understand *anything*.

After the series of ripped pages comes to an end, I continue taking in his handwriting...

"It's been three hundred and eighty five days without you. The Ark is hours away from Kepler 452-b. I'm so excited to see you again! Everyone is. The higher-ups are in a frenzy, getting everyone prepared to depart from the Ark.

I hope you'll want to read these when I get home.

I love you, Rook."

"WHY AREN'T YOU HERE WHY AREN'T YOU HERE WITH ME WHAT HAPPENED WHERE ARE YOU PLEASE COME BACK PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE I CAN'T DO THIS WITHOUT YOU, ROOK."

I choke out a gut wrenching sob. It's only been twenty days. Where did I go wrong? How long has it been for him?
I can't continue this... I can't...

"No one is here. There is NOTHING.

Please don't be dead.

You can't be. Maybe the Raven just got lost or you were delayed or the coding was wrong or something. ANYTHING but your death.

I can't go on without you..."

I find more torn pages, more violently done than the last. Over half the journal is gone, leaving me at the end...

"Years have passed without you. Years I have waited, and years I will continue to do so. Until you come back home.

The former leader of the Ark said that something had most likely gone wrong with your FTL coding. Or perhaps the Drive itself had failed. But we don't know for sure... Maybe you'll get here one day. I'll wait for you as promised."

The last page's writing is barely readable, like he wrote with old shaking hands...

"A lifetime has passed without you, my love. But it's all coming to an end now.

I love you."

No.

No, no, no, no, no, NO.

My knees hit the floor, the book falling from my hands. Slamming my forehead against the ground, I *scream*.

I scream and scream and scream. I scream until my voice is hoarse, until it feels like my lungs will tear. Until I'm gasping, until I can't breathe, until I throw up, until my crew comes running back to my side.

Nyx jerks me up by my vomit covered arm, making me look at them. "*Captain.*"

I shake my head, my vision fading with panic, "THEY'RE DEAD, THEY'RE ALL GONE. I MESSED UP, NYX. I MESSED UP. I KILLED THEM." *I feel like I'm going to die.* "I killed him. He's gone... I wasn't here for him, Nyx... I killed them all."

They grip my shoulder tightly, "No you didn't. What happened, why are they all gone?"

“I messed up. I messed up the Alcubierre drive.” I look them in the eye as best I can, “*It probably took us centuries to get here.*” They let me go.

No one can say anything to that.

The crew of the Raven looks around, the sudden silence unsettling. The smallest breeze rushes through this ghost of a town, stirring up ashes and dust. No one survived this planet. Anything could have gone wrong.

Everything had gone wrong.

By my hand, humanity lost.