There's that moment of almost *alien* unfamiliarity that occurs when you're suddenly awoken from a deep sleep. As your brain starts processing a tidal wave of sensory information that crashes against the black of unconsciousness, and you try to make sense of it.

It was the turbulence that woke her, a sharp jostling that thumped Anika's temple against the passenger side window that she'd been slumped against for the past hour. A vista opened up before her bleary eyes; the arctic desert of Ellesmere Island stretched out below her, as far as she could see. Rocky and barren, spotted with patches of crusty snow. It was dark when they left the airfield, but now the morning sun was casting everything in a golden hue. The twin props of the Cessna C750 were droning so oppressively that she hardly even realized they were there, until her friend Jackobe saw she'd awoken and mouthed something she couldn't hear. He gestured to her lap, and she saw the noise-canceling headphones and microphone she'd discarded so she could sleep.

She pulled them over her ears, adjusted the boom on the mic, and the intense drone of the prop engines were replaced by a hiss. "What is it," she asked in her gravelly voice, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Oh, nothing man, I was just saying good morning!" The man laughed, voice only slightly dulled by the microphone. Anika never could figure out why Jackobe was so chipper all the time. His penchant for colorful if ratty attire, his long hair and scruffy beard, the aviators he chose to wear *entirely unironically.* She couldn't quite make up her mind about him. She played at being annoyed by his cheerful attitude, and he played at chiding her grumpiness, but she'd been flying with and getting drops from Jackobe for years now, and they'd both more or less decided they enjoyed each other's company. In small doses, at least.

"Just tell me we're almost there," she grumbled.

"Almost! Got a clean tailwind and clear skies! Even you couldn't complain about a beautiful morning like this, just look at my sky!" He drummed his hands on the dash and grinned at her.

His sky, she thought, *as if he owned it.* She turned toward the window so he wouldn't see the smirk.

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The clock read 11:40 when the wheels touched down on the small dirt runway, surrounded by patches of crusty snow, that the research outpost Polaris 9 kept clear. The outpost itself was just a few domes connected by tubes, all white and made up of geometric triangles, broken only by antennas and wind turbines. The outpost was the only thing of interest as far as the eye could see, apart from some low featureless mountains, and the Hazen Lake that the outpost was nestled against - though even that was frozen over and nondescript. There
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were no trees this far up north, just moss, lichen, and creeping shrubs growing out of the permafrost. It felt like another world. A cold, rocky world. The outpost might as well be on Mars.

"Home sweet home," Anika said over the mic as the plane rolled to a stop and the props started to stutter to as they slowed in the frigid air.

"Home's where the heart is, babe," she heard Jackobe say, and when she looked at him, he was pointing up toward the sky with a knowing grin and his eyebrows raised high over his sunglasses.

"Seriously Jackobe," she said as she unbuckled and ducked her head to make her way back into the fuselage, "Go frag yourself." Jackobe just laughed.

Anika threw the side door open on the small prop plane and started sorting through the half-palettes of wrapped boxes that completely filled the small cargo space. Double checking nothing had been damaged in the turbulence. It was all supplies for the outpost; food and other necessities, some fuel for the generator.

Normally Bos would just be meeting Jackobe here to receive the shipment, but once in awhile she needed to return to the civilized world. To see a proper doctor, as a middle-aged orc needs to do from time to time. To source some supplies for the outpost's logistics manager. To see her kids.

Well. She went home to see her kids once, at least. In six years. *Six years,* she thought with a wince. At some point, procrastination becomes outright abandonment, doesn't it? A pang of guilt washed over her, but Anika didn't have time to dwell. It's funny how often that excuse has let her avoid thinking too hard about her family back in Detroit. They're… difficult to think about.

Six years since she took this gig, serving as an outfitter and area expert for the outpost. Four years as an understudy to a bear of a man named Briggs. And ever since he went missing (probably fell through some ice somewhere, everyone figures), two years on her own. The lab geeks up here aren't stupid, but the environment and the animals can be hazardous up in the arctic circle, and it's best to have someone knowledgeable leading the geeks when they need to do a field expedition. It was also on her to track, locate, report on, trap, kill, tag, or tranquilize specimens required by the scientists. Of which there were many.

It was a good job, all in all. It was quiet up here, not much need to talk to folk. She could rely on herself for the most part. Send most of her paychecks back home for her husband and kids. The occasional trideo message apologizing for missing birthdays. Always heartfelt, always sincere, always a promise that she'll try to be in touch more. Always the best of intentions. Always a lie.

As Anika and Jackobe pulled the last of the pallets off the plane, she could see two figures trudging through the snow toward the air strip, from the outpost. All bundled up in puffy bright red arctic outfits, the Polaris 9 logo on their breast. Somewhere behind them, a heavy-duty forklift was slowly rolling on treads toward the Cessna, kicking up chunks of crusty snow, its orange safety light flashing.

“Mrs. Bos,” one of them greeted, steam on his breath. Anika was surprised when she recognized it as the voice of the outpost lead scientist, Dr. Mazur. He was walking alongside the logistics manager, Sal Peters, who had a vaguely unnerving look of quiet dismay on his face. The doctor never came out here to meet her like this. “I have some bad news, and I wanted to tell you in person. It’s best if we talk in private.”

“What’s this all about?” Anika asked, a feeling of dread starting to creep into her stomach like a pit.

“Ahh, it’s really best if we talk in private,” the doctor repeated.

Sal wouldn’t even look at her, but she heard him mumble something like an apology. The doctor raised his eyebrows at Jackobe, who was hanging back and fiddling with the cargo, trying to appear like he wasn’t listening to this whole exchange. “Sir? Sir, I have to ask that you delay your take-off. We, ahh, have a passenger who will be needing a ride back. We’ve already forwarded the appropriate payment to your account.”

“Always happy to have company,” Jackobe said with a smile that, for once, looked uncertain.

“Mrs. Bos? This way please.” The doctor motioned for Anika to start walking.

Anika didn’t say anything, she just grabbed her kit bag, slung it over her shoulder, and started trudging through the dirt and packed snow, toward the outpost.

That was the day Anika Bos was fired.