

Coming up: **Phases**, a short-story anthology in the world of Moonbase Theta, Out. But first, a word from our corporate overlords. Stay tuned!

Welcome to **Phases**: a short story anthology following the events of Moonbase Theta, Out.

Story 2: Cas and Pol

Narrated by Cass McPhee

After the first couple of days, they weren't allowed in Roger's work cubicle anymore. He'd laugh when he saw them, give them enough pets that they were momentarily satisfied; but then he'd shoo them out and roll the door shut "so he could hear himself talk." They made sure he could still hear them in the hallway, too – but that was only fun for a few minutes before some sound or smell or passerby pulled them away on another adventure.

There were supposed to be rules; at Doctor Ringling's insistence doorways Not To Be Crossed at the entrance to each laboratory, and posters were put up about proper hygiene. Which most people ignored; as Medic Pacey was known to mention loudly at mealtimes, most of the crew had bigger problems with cleanliness than Cas or Pol. (Though there was also talk of bias, considering how often the girls could be found sleeping under zir desk while ze wrote in the infirmary.)

Still, the Moonbase adjusted quickly to their new canine overlords. The same rocket that brought them was stocked with pallets of kibble (and Elio had brought extras of their favourite toys – even a certain long-lost piggy); Zhong set up a pad in the garden where they could do their business and it would be absorbed and treated; and even Ashwini, who feigned indifference, always had treats in the pocket of zir robe when they'd barrel into the observatory mid-mad-scientist-rant.

They loved Jaxon, of course. He tried not to wince at the barking, and he baked the treats that would be waiting in Ashwini's pockets. When it was too much, he had a stool at the back of the old lab where he could sit and sing to himself.

There were definitely more visitors from the other Bases after Cas and Pol arrived. Val practically moved in – her excuse was that Theta was closer to the supply stash locations she needed to inventory anyway, but since most of that work was being done remotely by bots, it felt a little hollow.

Doctor Semaan shored up another stretch of lava tube and built the girls a kennel and run so they could play on their own. They enjoyed visiting the surface – both had come with their own spacesuits, fabricated from Russian blueprints found in Jabal Hamzah – but they whined at being kept on a lead, and Alex refused to let them run outside without one. Cas and Pol were too much sometimes – let's be honest about that – but they were well-loved and well cared for, and no one really complained.

Except Alex, a little. "*Meu Amado*, you've got to stop lending them out so much. There are days I don't even get to see them," he complained one evening in the supply closet that had become their shared quarters. "We went through so much to get to you, we deserve more family time."

The girls whined a little to match his tone, filling the doorway completely from side to side. Roger sighed. "Sure, of course. But I mean, they can't sleep in here. And we deserve a little private time too." He was still standing near them, with his hand on the door, swinging it back and forth a little. "Remember private time? There's still a lot of catching up to do."

Alex laughed. "Remember my *heart*. We're taking it slow on private time." But he sat up and gave Cas and Pol good pets for a moment, then leaned in towards them. "I know your dad's being silly, but we're going to let him win this one. You go find your friends for a while, okay?"

Cas looked a little bit offended; but Pol licked Alex's hand and nudged her sister out the door. They trotted away down the hall, toenails clicking against the floor, collars jangling. Roger watched them for a minute; he wasn't allowed back to the room until he'd made sure they were okay. By the time he slipped inside, they were around the corner headed to the top level.

Voices echoed from inside the observatory while they were still turning the corner. "There's nothing in your suitcase. You're not packing any clothes?" The dogs ran to the door when they heard Jaxon's voice.

Ashwini laughed. "Where we're going, we don't need clothes. Why, Castor, Pollux; what a welcome distraction!" Ze patted zir pockets absently. "Go to Jaxon, he'll be your supplier today."

Jaxon gave the girls pets and crooned quietly, "Where we don't need clothes ... where we don't need clothes ..." but then he straightened up. "Maybe not for *your* family, but you'll need clothes for mine. We leave in thirty-five minutes." Cas barked once, surprised at the unexpected sternness in his voice, but stopped when Jaxon winced.

Ashwini noticed as well, and softened. "Right away, love; all my best waistcoats and cravats. Nothing's too good for the in-laws. If you could arrange a distraction for certain parties in the room with a tendency towards shedding?" Ze laughed again, obviously feeling in fine form. "Doctor Ringling, I promise I'm not referring to you."

"I thought you'd forgotten I was here." Cas and Pol had noticed the other scientist, but gave him a wide berth; he was responsible for chastising them if they attempted to enter the forbidden laboratories. Instead, they crossed back and forth before Jaxon as he did his best to walk towards the doorway.

"Come on, girls. We'll find treats in the kitchen. Kris, make sure he packs socks." The dogs followed him out of the room, while Dr. Ringling was sputtering that it wasn't his job and he needed to have documents approved before ... something bad happened, whatever it was, they were too far away by that time to hear.

Cas and Pol followed Jaxon back down the ramp and around; past the door to the newer lab space, which had smells that were interesting and terrible all at once and it was so unfair they couldn't go inside; past the Comms cubicle which was closed and quiet; and past the door that was keeping them from Roger and Alex, which was closed but *not* as quiet. They did scratch and whine a little, but not enough that they didn't catch back up with Jaxon.

"Food to be done, done, done ... oh, people in the kitchen. Hi, Elena. Hi – " that was as far as Jaxon got before the doggos saw who else was there, and it was Elio, and Elio was so important that they forgot about being careful and trying not to bark! They also forgot about not jumping up on furniture, and not knocking dishes off the counter, and for a moment Pol forgot that Elio's lap was not big enough for a

significant amount of dog, especially when a similar amount of dog was forgetting the same thing from the other side. And they forgot to say hi to Elena for a full five minutes, but she forgave them and even shared bits of her sweet potato muffin.

Jaxon had retreated to the garden during the barking, but when things calmed down he returned and even found another muffin for the girls to split. “Zhong says the rocket is ready,” he mentioned. “Twenty minutes.” He then turned away to empty the dishwasher, placing each spoon and knife quietly in their drawer and humming to himself.

Elena threw the muffin wrapper across the small space at the waste bin. “Goal!” [she cheered.] “It’s been nice, but I’m ready to go home.” [She sobered.] “And then *home* home, after catching up with the NAC. It’s too bad I’ll miss Nima, you’ll have to give them a squeeze on my behalf.” Unconsciously, she petted the closest of the girls – Cas, though Elena couldn’t really tell them apart.

“I will, they’ll be sorry to miss you.” Elio had hands on both Cas *and* Pol, ever since they’d settled in between the stools, and for a moment her left hand covered Elena’s. “Ahnung will be sorry, too.”

“Ahnung knows where to find me,” Elena replied with a grin. “When she’s ready to take a break, my garden will be waiting.” She looked over at the back of Jaxon’s head. “After some time, of course. There’s some other catching up when I get to Zhengzhou. Lots of stories to share.” She slid her stool out and stood up. “Reminds me, I should say a few goodbyes. See you at the airlock in a few.”

“Sixteen minutes,” Jaxon noted as Elena slid past him. He finished programming the oven for the overnight baking and disappeared again into the garden. Elio let go of the dogs for a moment so she could drink her tea, and they whined quietly.

“It’s okay, girls,” Elio whispered to them, giving them both comforting head scratches. “Everything is okay. I got you here; I got you home. You’re with your dads now on the Moon! I’ll miss you, but I’m so glad you’re where you belong.” Pol nuzzled in against Elio’s side. Cas licked her hand.

A moment later, they heard Alex’s voice down the hallway – out of his room again for one of Elena’s goodbyes – and they were both suddenly in motion, scampering out the door and down the hall. It was a bit abrupt for Elio, but she smiled and finished her tea while a fresh chorus of barking echoed through the Moonbase.

[END NOTES]

Thank you for listening to Phases: a Moonbase Theta, Out short story anthology. Written by D.J. Sylvis. Read, produced, and edited by Cass McPhee. Our theme music is Star, by Ramp - check them out at Ramp dash Music dot net. Our cover art is by Peter Chiykowski.

For more audio fiction from the creators of Moonbase Theta, Out, check out Waiting for October, a queer supernatural audio drama series about monster stories and the deep human needs they fulfill. Find it on your podcast app of choice, or visit Monkeyman Productions dot com to learn more.

And, as always, keep watching the moon.

