

THE • INTERGALACTIC • BEETS • PROJECT

Heart Beets

POT OF
GOLD

*Has the pupil become
the master?*



DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SHARE THIS ZINE!

Calling all Audionauts! Since the intergalactic ban on music, perpetrated by everyone's favorite bureaucrat, Lord Prosect, the infinite void has been eerily silent. In the before times, known as Before Music (or BM), music was distributed freely and fairly and pressed onto wax for everyone to spin. These tasty beats were thought lost forever after the attacks on July 6th, 5000 by Lord Prosect and his minions. Every radio station from the Andromeda to the Zymolytic Galaxy was assaulted, and cassettes, records, and CDs were disintegrated. If not for the brave Audionauts out there who smuggled what they could, the thumping rhythms and trilling arpeggios of the universe's greatest musicians might have been lost forever.

Before that attack, The Intergalactic Beets Project (then known as *The Intergalactic Beats Project* before the ban on the word "beat") was a major distributor of the music lost that day. After our headquarters was decimated, only two agents remained in operation.

We are those agents.

It has been millennia since the sounds of our artists have been heard, but every day we discover and decode the lost music that fueled generations to shake their hips and bang their heads. This Zine will track our progress as we travel through space and time to restore our entire catalog.

We need your help.

Our methods are unconventional, which means we lack the resources of the former IBP. We rely solely on your tips and scouting reports to track down everything lost in the fires and everything that has been secretly made since. If you are out there and your tasty beats need a home, send us a secure signal so that we may help distribute your music freely and fairly. We run the risk

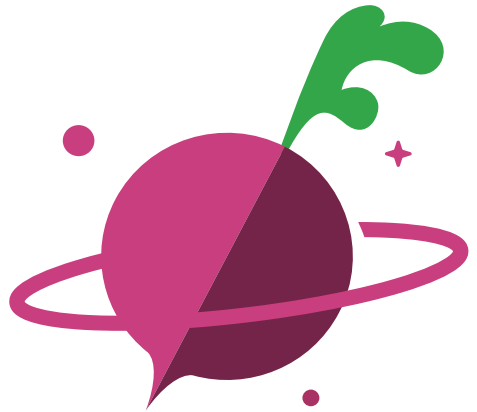
every single day that we will be discovered and imprisoned, or worse...

Visit our telecommunications hub at **INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM** and sign up to receive our monthly Zine, listen to our entire decoded discography, and join the fight against Lord Prosect. Together, we can bring an end to his tyrannical rule and restore music to the ears of all creatures in the universe.

In the words of our Neptunian supporters:



F3rix & Gyllene



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WHAT IS THE IBP?

THE INTERGALACTIC BEETS PROJECT seeks out and decodes the tastiest beats in the universe, presses them to vinyl, and distributes them for all creatures to listen to. From 2021 until the year 5000, the IBP made a name for itself by making music free, easy to collect, and worth waiting for. After Lord Prosect banned all music on July 6th, 5000, it became our mission to save every last beat in the universe, rebuild our catalog, and make sure that the past is never forgotten.

The IBP does this as a free service, however, we encourage all Audionauts to support our mission in other ways: by purchasing merch from our Shop, signing up for our email newsletter, or by reading this very Zine! We have begun to repress our collection to vinyl and we hope that you'll stop by our telecommunications hub and pick up a copy.

Due to the constant threat of Lord Prosect, we take great caution in encrypting every communication, every item in our Shop, and every beat of every song. We have thwarted his silver hand and we will continue to do so for millennia to come.

Welcome aboard!

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INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM

DECODE CORNER

While beats, songs, and even whole albums have been recovered by the IBP, sometimes things slip through the cracks. Incomplete histories or tracklists can haunt a collector for millennia. Our **Decode Corner** feature attempts to fill in the gaps as we decode messages and ancient texts, revealing more about our catalog than any normal creature needs to know.



ORIGINAL DATABASE ENTRY

The seas boiled and the sun disappeared over the horizon for the last time. It was the end of days. The rabid fanatics who backed Blobby Fisher and those who swore allegiance to Squidword had clashed in an epic battle that threatened to upend their home planets. That is, until the release of their collaborative crossover that brought peace where none had ever existed.

The seas boiled and the sun disappeared over the horizon for the last time. *It was the end of days.*

The rabid fanatics who backed underwater beatmaker Blobby Fisher and those who swore allegiance to deep-sea melody wizard Squidword had clashed in an epic battle that threatened to upend both their home planets. It may be common knowledge that all undersea creatures (whether they prefer H₂O or LH₂) share a common experience, and believe it entitles them to certain monolithic traits; however, what we did not understand was that the Squidword-backed group believed that Blobby should have never crawled out of the sea and the Fisher Fanatics swore it made their idol stronger. The invasion took control of both

land and sea (air was spared), and culminated in the Battle of Humboldt Bay.

As the two armies clambered over the sand dunes and rinsed the salted sea off their scaly skin, they raised their weapons in anger...only to be suddenly serenaded by one-hundred-foot-tall amplifiers and the familiar warmth of Blobby Fisher. From the rafters parachuted Squidword, a synthesizer guitar hybrid in his clutches.

They had joined forces to stop the senseless violence and unite two fan bases who, at the end of the day, still shared one thing in common: they all called the sea their home. *Psychro/Cepha* became an absolute monster of a hit album and proved to be the crossover/collaboration that both sides had been pining for. Peace had been restored, and beats, once, more, permeated the depths.

SIDE A

1. Shake On It?
2. I Like The Way You Swim
3. Mi Casa
4. Night Of The Tentacles

SIDE B

1. Major Leagues
2. Borealis
3. Boneless Treatise
4. If I Only Had A Brain



Scan me to listen!

POT OF GOLD

*Has the pupil become the master?
But what if the master never even
knew she existed?*

NEW BEAR CITY. 2021.

She was working as a waitress at the Buzzworthy Café in Madison Heights, one of the more northern, more isolated neighborhoods of NBC. She would arrive before 5 AM, before the sun had had its own cup of coffee, and would set up the stools, wipe down the tables, and brew the first round of pots for the day. It wouldn't be long until the chaos of hundreds of customers swung through the cute, bell-laden door.

Fancy orders and strange combinations buzzed through the register: an iced, honey twist; a blueberry muffin from Hi Bear Nation; a decaf with sixteen shots of espresso. Each one netted her another few Space Bucks in her tip jar but no one really paid attention to her. They just dropped the extra change in a hive-shaped bucket and grumbled their way to the underground railway station.

Her first break would not come until 12 PM, and by that time the pizza parlor across the street, Chianello's, was already pumping with excitement. Through the blur of hungry patrons, dressed in an oversized, pepperoni and green pepper slice costume, was none other than Pizza Bear. With his ratty and squeaky bike waddling down the street towards 10th Avenue, pizza boxes stacked nearly over his head, the future beatmaker passed the smudged windows of the Buzzworthy Café.

Every day, for two years, she had watched the resilient bear bust his furry butt up and down the city, delivering piping hot pies to salivating customers. And for two years, she had attempted to summon the courage to talk to him.



She would never admit what changed that fateful day.

As she entered the tiny footprint of Chianello's, the stench of yeast and mozzarella clogging her nostrils, she kindly asked for Pizza Bear's whereabouts.

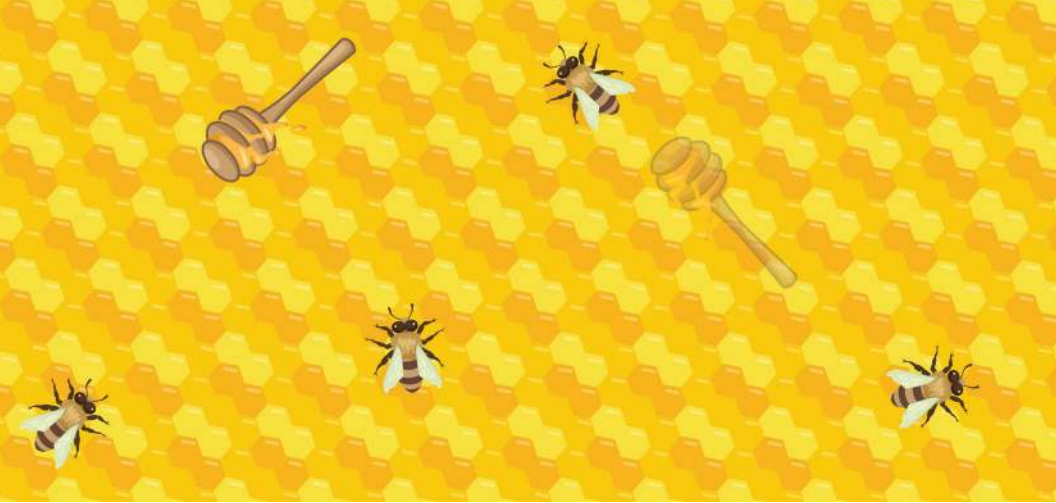
"He quit. This morning."

She wasn't angry. She wasn't even upset. She had missed her opportunity; a lesson, she assured herself, that she could learn from. That night, as she sat on her fire escape and sipped honey-drenched tea, she looked up into the starless night (due to the heavy light and air pollution) and wondered what could have been. A shooting star suddenly tumbled across the sky, twinkling brightly as it followed the curvature of the planet.

She wished more than anything to have a single moment with Pizza Bear. *Just to say hello.* She retreated to her den that night and hummed a melody which she played along to on her keyboard. She marked down the harmony in her notebook and crawled into bed.

The next day, it was all over the news. Pizza Bear had dropped the year's biggest album seemingly out of nowhere. Newspapers were going crazy, Madison Heights was already rolling out the red carpet. *But how had this happened?* She never knew anything about his musical talents, let alone that he was dropping an album. *The album.*

Pizza Bear would return to NBC and Chianello's occasionally, but no one knew where he kept his home, and no one seemed to be able to track him down. Determined to meet him, one way or another, she got to work.



Declining shifts at the Buzzworthy Café, she worked tirelessly for almost ten years, honing her craft and recording in her bedroom for hours at a time. She witnessed the disastrous release of *Sleepy Bear*, the return of *Regularly Scheduled Bear*, the massive hits that were *Average Bear* and *Circus Bear*. As the former pizza delivery bear hurtled further and further into superstardom, she was abandoned in the massive crater left behind.

However, on November 1st, the artist known as Honey Bear will finally unleash her debut album, *Queen Bee*. Pizza Bear, our friend, you should start looking over your shoulder.

Melding the smooth vibes of New Bear City with the earnestness of its new star beat-maker, *Queen Bee* is at once a reminder of the harshness of the city, but also its timeless beauty. If *30 Minutes Or Less* was an ode to slumming it on the streets, *Queen Bee* was a love letter to rising above its clatter.

The Intergalactic Beets Project is proud to have both of these artists among our celebrated discography, but the meeting of these two powerhouse bears has yet to be announced. However, we don't yet know if Honey Bear will have time in her busy schedule to meet her biggest fan...



QUEEN BEE



Scan me to listen!

SIDE A

1. Queen Bee
2. Hot Honey
3. Bee Yourself
4. Hive Mind

SIDE B

1. Drone City Takeover
2. Black & Gold
3. Comb On Over
4. Buzz/Bomb

BEAT OF THE MONTH

NITROGEN DIOXIDE WAS THE CHEMICAL of choice for most sub-adults in the planet cluster known as the Ethereal Platform Animus. Technically legal, it could be easily obtained during the production of fertilizer. If heated properly, the reddish-brown gas would employ hallucinatory properties on anyone who ingested it.

Growing up on the smallest planet in the EPA cluster, the members of Catalytic were more than familiar with the temporary toxic properties of the byproduct. Like most their age, they too had dabbled in its effects but were turned off by the devilish dreams and haunting sounds that the gas triggered.

Determined not to pass judgment on those who were forced to toil in fertilizer factories, and in return had become addicted to the gas, they decided to document their descent into the temporary high. While, unfortunately, the incapacitating feeling of the gas made them partially immobile, it was the nightmares that proceeded their return to reality that became the basis of *Catalytics*.

Both beautifully haunting and uncomfortably positive, the album was a rollercoaster ride through each of the four members' brains at high speeds. Never one to mix politics and pleasure, they refrained from making a broader statement on the record, instead, allowing the music to showcase the intensity of nitrogen dioxide. The listener was allowed to make up their own minds.

Not only did *Catalytics*' success bolster the band, but it brought renewed attention to the epidemic that was threatening their home. Legislation helped, piracy did not. Eventually, Catalytic was forced to abandon the production facility planet under the threat of annihilation, the album a reminder of the time they had lost in the nitrogen haze.



CATALYTICS

SIDE A

1. Redox Reaction
2. Stoichiometric

SIDE B

1. Feecal
2. Liquid Monolith



Scan me to listen!

FRIENDS OF INTERGALACTIC BEETS

THRU THE CLOUDS OF SMOKE



JJS News World Services reviews

Thru the Clouds of Smoke LP (TAH-002)

The second vinyl release by Twice As High Records has somehow come out *third*, but this seems to be no real issue at the moment.

The offering consists of 10 different songs from 10 artists, and the record itself is handsomely adorned with several inserts and an attractive visual presentation. A psychedelic journey from paranoia and back-and-forth to recovery, with stops thru punk, funk, sludge, classic rock, and downtempo brilliance!

1. **JUXTA** - I Fear The Robots
2. **PSIONIC TREMORS** - Darned
3. **WINKANDWOOL** - Silver Lining (The Billy Korg Remix)
4. **TRENTON LUNDY** - Rawness
5. **MYSTERIOSO** - Down Annerton Pit
6. **GERONTIUS** - Lockdown
7. **SICK SHARK** - Groovy Train
8. **DOUBLE EAGLE** - Whatchu Gonna Do About It? (Feat. TRL Intro)
9. **ALONEWOLF** - Catch the Breeze
10. **BLACK EYE BUTTERFLY** - I'm Right On

PURCHASE THIS ALBUM ON VINYL OR DIGITALLY

doubleeagle.bandcamp.com

STREAM THIS ALBUM & MORE!

soundcloud.com/tah-records

STORY TIME

WE HAVE FORGED THE FIERY WINGS

On November 15th, former Earth-born refugees The Cosmonauts will finally release their follow-up to their debut **Quality Particle**, entitled **And Our Efforts Were Rewarded**. The title was borrowed, with permission, from a short story they unearthed which captured the intensity of the testing they endured under the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' Space Program. We are proud to present this short story, in its entirety, after many years of searching.

The reverberations of the incoming howl threshed the narrow passageway, its length a minimal advantage in tempering the crest. A loose, pine shutter slapped the exposed brick maddeningly, keeping a syncopated rhythm. Somewhere, in the darkness between the two avenues, she huddled, her head buried in the suffocating stench of stagnant pools. Droplets scurried between her follicles, each minute disturbance throttling the roots, the sensation mimicking a wave of unsupervised pinpricks.

A screech drew her from her minimal curtain, an equally squalid feline's adventurousness tipping a garbage can onto the cobblestone. It departed, unwilling to sacrifice another moment of discomfort. The spoils, of victory and week's old refuse, invited her to the accident. A wax paper bundle held a particularly inviting scent, a fragrance of sweet bread, lemon even.

Fangs, and the invisible drip of saliva, buried any hope of sustenance. The wild beast of chocolate and licorice had stomped his way into her field of vision, his lip reared, his upper gums swollen and throbbing. No recourse but to acquiesce to the larger predator and live to starve another day. He refused to shake off the pounding storm, the pick of the litter his to decide.

The splash of an incoming direct hit littered the alleyway's entrance with muck, a pair of yellow headlights casting a terrifying shadow across the uneven walls. The tan passenger door *slammed*, a lantern added to the mix, stunning her pupils until they shrunk. Her bladder released, unnoticeable to the stomping dress shoes. Corded hemp surrounded her frightened pose, the net

flipped as the hunter called to his comrades in victory. She spun madly into the web, her rival already galloping towards the opposite end of the corridor, his long legs able to carry him infinitely into the darkness.

The leather seat provided a towel, a cotton shawl to soak up the crust of the forgotten hovel. Her captor steadied her as the two-wheel-drive skidded into the oncoming lane, the wheel jerked ferociously. They argued politely as the driver lamented the construction of the metropolis' grid. She was assured with a tap to the head, a palm presented, the perfect platform for a morsel of cheese. Sniffing the offering, she twisted her head from the placebo to the earnest, hazel eyes. A nod of his cleft chin preceded her own acknowledgment, the salted rind a satisfying reward. The *thumping* wipers continued the annoying harmony of the hammering shutters until an outpost blasted the windshield with suspicious and aggravating light.

She quivered and tucked her head, unraveling once the antiseptic fluorescents had settled into a minimal *buzz*. The steel table was frigid, yet she sat obediently, enduring the familiar sting. A white-robed sentient mumbled into the tiled observation room, his task to ferry a cart from her view, a bloodied cloth draped over the failed experiment. The hunched henchman was replaced by the swinging doorway, the hazel eyes returning, a new set of blue to his left, their mouths shrouded. Bulky rubber gloves produced more cheese, much to her delight. He rubbed the tip of her nose playfully, her belly immediately exposed for further affection.

Kudryavka they called her.

He took note of the outline of her ribcage, the eerie brown coloring that ran down from her neck. Dry flakes were brushed away from the folds of her hindquarters. He lifted her gently and transported her to a plastic bassinet. Her weight tickled the pressure plate, dragging the needle between *five* and *six*. The blue-eyed recorded the number before she was escorted through the double doors. This late in the evening accounted for a lack of bodies, a lack of inquisitive eyes. She was able to discern the destination long before the hard right and the thrusting forearm against the window.

Her prison was to be several units above the tile, the frantic screaming of other specimens birthing a tremor across the two dozen cells. Varying, drastic sizes of both breed and confinement served as a preview of either bad behavior or inevitability. She was given a pleasant view, enough room to turn around, a bowl of sediment-free water. She lapped immediately from the shallow dish as the bars were shut and the lock ensured.

His hazel eyes were called away momentarily with a single command: *Vladimir*. He chatted with his compatriot, comparing handwritten notations with a sensitive document hidden in a manilla folder. A pat to her snout retired the pair for the evening, the lights doused. She took to her belly, her tail unsettlingly still. The cobbled alleyway seethed in her memory; the chance of escape had been lost.

The irritating glare of the overhead illumination insisted she rise, the unlocking of her cage pumping vigor into her stiffened limbs. Vladimir cupped her across his arms, the hallway traversed for some time, a photographic identification card presented at each chokepoint. The terminal had been pressurized, the bulkhead gasping before they entered. A spherical housing rested in the center of the nearly blank room, a bird's nest of wiring descending from the ceiling and connecting with the crown. The front hatch opened with the help of a switcher sequence from an adjacent electronics cart. A fellow white-robed assistant *thwacked* the snout of the seated specimen, his displeasure

executed with a guttural, fearful bark, his limbs swinging maniacally. A leash was successfully connected, and the poor boy was practically dragged past her, his performance continuing until the bulky door was shut.

She was placed onto a burlap chair, a wedge of cheese to appease her. The material had been soaked with urine, but this detail went unnoticed as leather straps bullied her against the backing. Silence tempered her resolve as Vladimir disappeared. A board of dials, switches, and gauges had been fashioned out of plastic, their effectiveness tied explicitly to imagination.

Given little time to contemplate the use of the pod, she was rattled with a disheartening detonation. The rush of air and debris did not harm her, it was the trickery of mounted speakers, but the tyranny forced her to curl. She did not object as metal sheared against metal, the concerned voices of crewmen screaming under the flames. This experiment went on for some time, the clatter of an inferno licking at the exterior, surrounding her in a hellish wasteland. A vision port drew her head, and her tail, the bright joy of Vladimir's face plastered against the glass.

Back to the cell block, a new cage conscripted, her bowl exchanged for a sipper bottle mounted to the bars. A tray was extracted from the base and a clear gel was excised from a rolled, aluminum tube with much distress. The spiraled offering was slipped through the barricade, her trust in him implicit. She devoured the paste, the flavor fueling a savory memory of beef, its dissolving action easy to swallow. Finished, she lapped at the metal bead of her water retrieval system, delivering a satisfying cleanse. Her tenement had been downsized, to turn would be an exercise in patience and ingenuity. She settled for a straightforward pose and observed Vladimir as he exited, the day's pressure paused. The cobbled alleyway seethed in her memory; the chance of escape had been lost, yet the prospect might have proved foolish.

A second helping of nutrients was provided, her sense of duty lapping it into her throat. The others did not seem as convinced, swatting away the meager offering, jawing

with complaints and vengeful retorts.

He returned eventually, the chokepoints passed without suspicion. Today, a gas pedal cart was employed, the journey short, the complex opening into the bright tone of the forgotten sun. The relative warmth multiplied under Vladimir's care, but shadow and a tunnel of unexpected length swallowed them.

To a flat concrete wall and a pair of red-striped barriers, another inspection of his credentials allowing him to enter. A *clanking*, metal shutter folded upward on his command, revealing another crusted, burlap seat. An iron chest plate was fastened around her neck and belly until the bulk was flush. Strapped in fully now, cheese administered, he whispered something to her, but it was untranslatable, a liquid stew of feminine vowels and sharp consonants. The gateway closed and she wondered how long it would take for him to return.

An uninspired countdown began, a tremor seizing the curved walls of the capsule. The imitation instruments had been stripped, the vantage birthed through the same dusty vision port. The darkness of the shutter peeled laboriously, replaced with an unpleasant, pale green. The room spun, a wide glass window exposing Vladimir and his cohorts as they studied her. A second revolution brought her flush with her captors, but the ratcheting gears insisted she increase her speed and decrease her visibility. The molecules that huddled together, that absorbed and refracted the tiny perceptible wavelengths of color, stewed into an unidentifiable cocktail, each lap doubling the speed of the previous loop.

She was pinned to the burlap, her head rocketing to the side, unable to resist the pressure, the grinding iron persistence of oppression. She was without power, without the illusion of choice. Here, she was a specimen to the will of physics, and nothing but mercy could prevent her untimely demise. Time skewed, her obsession with studying the changes to sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch nullified. She closed her eyes and absorbed the punishment, never allowing resistance to spill past her curling

and flapping lips.

The never-ending sensation abated, the experiment a relative success. In the confusion of her release she was placed into a shrinking cage, the opportunity to turn removed, the ability to stand nixed. Her head spun with a throbbing magnetism as the lights were dimmed. The cobbled alleyway seethed in her memory; the chance of escape had been lost, yet the prospect might have proved foolish. The others howled for liberation, perhaps escape would have given her courage.

The protest did not dwindle. Sleep evaded her. Vladimir returned, a cadre at his flank, and she was selected, along with two others: *Mushka* and *Albina*, they had been designated.

Electric units were ignited, portions of their fur shaved down to the pink, fatty flesh. She skittered across the steel examination table as an unflattering needle prick invaded her vein. Just as the capsule had impeded her ability to resist, so did the soothing numbness of the injection.

As her head *slapped* the rigidity, she awoke in a panic, the operating room replaced with the satisfying squeak of leather. Vladimir ran his fingers over the peak of her head and down her neck. He had disrobed of his industrial medical sheen, his tweed jacket needing some tailoring to hug his gaunt frame. Her abdomen was swaddled in gauze, her legs sharing a similar pattern. A coil of multicolored wiring was looped and pinned, the excess disappearing underneath the blood-splotched dressing.

The limbs of canopied maple sprawled overhead, the dim morning casting frightening shadows across the dashboard. But she was comforted by his touch, her attempts to crawl across the bench seat annulled by her surgery's tingle. With much pomp, they strolled through the front door, the joyous cry of his children igniting her tail into an unplanned joy. She was set upon a shagged, ochre carpet as instructions were handed down. The young boy and his sister rubbed her lovingly, her tongue thanking them personally for their mercy. A blue, rubber ball was fetched, her retrieval

instinctual. She offered a playful bark, the first of its kind, and the sphere was bounced across the living room, *ponging* off the legs of dark oak furniture. Her height allowed her to duck and dive, the prize secured and redelivered. *Limonchik*, they repeated.

A woman met Vladimir's height, a concerned conversation in hushed tones exchanged between them. His hands assured her of safety and of success. His lips pecked her cheek and she allowed him his temporary boyishness.

Meals would be provided as part of the furlough, though not the clear beef-substitute. Instead, a dripping, moist morsel was ferried beneath the table. The steak had been slightly undercooked, the texture both charred and heavenly. A buttered roll came next, this from his daughter, his son forced to understand the rules more clearly when a brussels sprout was offered, but not devoured. She would not be superseding his mother's wishes for a healthy child.

No cage in the evening, replaced now with the cotton warmth of bed sheets, of a structured mattress. At the foot, she lay, snuggled between their restless legs, arched to avoid impinging the uncomfortable bunching of the embedded wiring. The steel prison seethed in her memory; the chance of escape had been lost, yet the prospect might have proved foolish. The others did not howl for liberation, for they had already achieved it. Escape would have given her courage, yet it grew in abundance here.

The pre-dawn stirred Vladimir, a shower taken to clear the previous day's stench. To the tan sedan, the passenger door opened, it was her choice to enter. Blue had yet to invade the sky, the moon still lumbering across its route, preparing to dip below the horizon. The drive was tedious, lacking many operational turns.

When the door finally opened and the unmistakable morning greeted her, she was confident in her leap. Down onto the asphalt, up the rickety airstair, and into the belly of the propellered conveyance. Mushka and Albina joined them shortly, their leashes tangled as they sniffed her, their bellies wrapped, their wiring loose but inconsequential.

The engines sputtered and they taxied successfully, gliding with ease and haste. The journey lacked excitement, however, the landing buttery smooth. To another four-wheeled vehicle, another corrugated tin roof. As the crew exited, she craned her neck toward the towering monstrosity. It pierced the sky, breathing thick sheets of billowing vapor. It barked at her, swaying majestically with the tepid breeze. Red scaffolding surrounded the beast, the stairwells choked with white-gloved and masked workers. She was offered no time to contemplate its purpose.

Mushka and Albina were taken to separate quarters; Vladimir reassured her with a bite of cheese. A brush crept over her fur, carefully clearing the remnants of trapped dirt and dry skin. An alcoholic solution was swabbed across the outer coat. Iodine was spilled onto a cotton ball and a pair of forceps painted her bare belly. Magnetic sensors *snapped* to the hidden receptors buried beneath the highlighted dermis. Her bandages were removed and designated as refuse before she was outfitted with a final polyester layer, her feet poking through the cuffs. A battery-powered receptacle was looped onto her back, the plastic buckle secured and tightened. Thorough testing of the equipment was performed, her vital signature displayed among fluttering gauges and analog screens.

The elevator's ascent was fraught with strange noises, groaning steel, unoiled hinges. The shutter was opened by an assistant, but Vladimir insisted he continue alone. The capsule door was pried with his free hand, the control seat clear of urine, and other debris. She was placed carefully on her hindquarters and fortified with the help of more leather. He had but one morsel of cheese to spare; she knew more would be procured, as it always had been.

He leaned forward for one final adjustment: a gentle kiss upon her snout. Before he could pull away, she returned the affection, licking his cheek briefly. His hazel-tint had been obscured by doubt, a salty sheen shivering, diluting his honesty. His hand trembled along the capsule's door frame,

the saline warriors jumping down his cheek and scurried into the forest of stubble, each minute disturbance throttling the roots, the sensation mimicking a wave of unsupervised pinpricks. She mewled, sensing a breakage in the familiar pattern.

Nothing further trickled between them. The chamber was shut, the mechanism wheel rotated until the fastening nut was flush. Vladimir peered through the vision port, the confused tilt of her head shoving him from the bittersweet voyage and toward his civic duty. The vise prevented her from leaping after him, the instrumentation before her alerting the invisible voices to her panic. No longer forged from plastic and colored with cheap paint, this was not a test of her resolve. The soothing voice of her comrade echoed in the confinement, the words unknowable, yet she did not resist their cadence.

As the sun rose, yawning its prickly rays above the flat, featureless vista, so did the rocket. Hell's bane shot forth from the rear, tattooing the ground with a black stain. The scaffolding shuffled backward apologetically, the retracting hoses *whipping* free of the shaft. With the pre-launch manual satisfied, the eruption signaled success. From the salted earth galloped the majestic spear, splitting the airwaves with its arrowhead, tearing the mist from the obfuscating clouds. Binoculars adjusted for height and distance, eventually incapable of locating the dot in the abyss.

She was pinned to the burlap, her head rocketing to the side, unable to resist the pressure, the grinding iron persistence of oppression. She was without power, without the illusion of choice. Here, she was a specimen to the will of physics, and nothing, not even mercy, could prevent her untimely demise. Time skewed, her obsession with studying the changes to sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch nullified. She closed her eyes and absorbed the punishment, never allowing resistance to spill past her curling and flapping lips.

A metered alarm sounded, the dial crossing the *two hundred* threshold and edging dangerously close to its zenith. Her heart panicked, compressing in a sprinting

melody that failed to keep her anxiety grounded. From below, the burden of the undercarriage disappeared, the expended fuel tank jettisoned as the atmosphere shed itself. She shot forward, testing the resiliency of the *creaking* leather bands. Progressive momentum returned as the colorful, material world ceased. A thickened black pitch scoured the vision port, the foreseeable tinted with silver nonpareils, glinting and twirling to their own contentment.

Her head suddenly lurched, a malfunction above loosening the nosecone but refusing to release it fully, much to the chagrin of the chattering, static-filled voices. The jolt tipped the capsule momentarily, spinning her towards the lecturing glow of her home. She did not understand the purpose of the gentle marble, for it was too big to swallow and too small to focus upon. Vladimir's solemn notetaking was broadcast for her to consider, his methodical approach noting time and date. The dangerously high readouts had slowly begun to return to normal as she climbed curiously into the void of the pod. While still somewhat protected, she floated playfully, her arms testing the air, paddling to reset her focus.

The tour was unaccompanied by explanation, the ticking face of a clock nearly winding one and one-half times before the large landmass below reappeared. The successful rotation was rewarded with a *popping* chamber, the contents a temperate heaping of beef chow. She ate hungrily, pleased with herself for following the rules. Vladimir again recorded the necessary information, his peers repeating the accuracy. A new voice spoke gruffly, drawing attention to the rising mercury. The silver liquid bubbled sluggishly within a long, thin vial, approaching the yellow-shaded *thirty* with speed.

Another circuit completed, another reward of beef cubes slathered in a thick roux. *Thirty-five*. She panted uncontrollably, her tongue dry, her gums leaning from red to pink. Once more around her home, the nosecone *clicking* as Vladimir pounded his controls, demanding an infinite number of attempts. Metal pined for release, but the

hollow screeches of failure only frightened her, her ears rotating independently with each effort. The third completion birthed more food, but she hungered little. Her mouth was flush with white, her thirst unable to be successfully quenched.

Forty. Blood red. The cabin boiled, a haze now appearing across the vision port. Vladimir *pinged* the capsule, hoping to restart its vitality and strength. The sputtering return was met with frustrated sighs, the evidence *crackling* through the speakers.

Four times, now, the view gaining tedium. She could not reach the open tray, refusing, in part, to fill her belly more, to increase the uneasy gurgle of her intestines. The blue ball bled into the darkness, no longer perfectly spherical, but a wavering tide sucked to the deepest reaches. She holstered her tongue, her ability to temper her body heat stolen from her. She laid her head down onto the bucket of the seat as best she could, damning her restraints, her tail unsettlingly still. The instruments bled with condensation, the clear droplets slipping through the circuitry and wriggling down the face, detouring at the curvature of the glass-windowed gauges.

The cobbled alleyway seethed in her memory; the steel prison's stench reverberated in her nostrils. The chance of escape had been lost, yet the prospect might have proved foolish. Only the chosen did not howl for liberation, for they had already achieved it, the ability to grant it upon others newly forged, yet strangely dismissed. Escape would have given her courage, yet she refused to fight, to cower so plainly. The light at the end of the alleyway seemed like freedom, the glow of the Earth convincing her it flowered there.

The comfort of Vladimir's voice and the attention of his children held her at bay as she forced herself to drag her shriveling tongue across her lips. Her eyes danced carefully, finally settling on the vision port before ceasing their voluntary movement. Her pose was one of comfort, yet progress was all that would be extracted.

Vladimir and his team muttered their condolences, the recorded broadcast ending

with a harsh, over-modulating *clip*.

Heavenly light passed through the stained glass as she completed another circuit around the planet, her return to be unannounced, her homecoming to be marked with flame and wreckage. She was silent; as still and useless as the uncharted and unclaimed expanse.

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