

In the predawn hours of the morning, Lu gently rocked her crying son in her arms. All the parenting books said Milo was too old to still be sleeping in her room. But any attempts otherwise were met with wailing, and with no one to help, Lu had given up.

Milo kept crying, until, exasperated, she let out a sharp admonishment. The boy stopped, watery eyes staring up at her. Lu felt guilt wash over her – she didn't want to raise her son in fear of his own mother. She sighed as she gently put Milo back in his bed. It was Saturday, but she still had to go in to work – everyone with enough clearance would be in the NASA control center today, watching the landing of Charon and its payload of Martian rocks.

The streets of Chinatown were well awake by the time Lu stepped out of the door to her flat, Milo slung across her chest. The air was thick with the scent of fish from the market, and the streets ran sticky with the vendors' murky runoff. Careful to keep her pressed shoes clean, she walked to the makeshift padlet behind her building and unlocked her rusted bike.

Milo's daycare, if you could call it that, was run out of the home of an elderly Vietnamese lady everyone called Auntie Le, who spent her days taking care of Milo and a few other children in the area.

"I may have to work late today," Lu said, hesitating. "In that case, can you keep Milo overnight again?"

Auntie Le took the boy into her wrinkled, yet sturdy arms. She hummed something in Vietnamese to him, her eyes softening with a maternal love Lu couldn't help but envy. Then, her gaze lifted to meet Lu's, and while the warmth hadn't left, there was obvious disapproval in her eyes.

“A mother should find more time to spend with her son,” she said, in broken Mandarin.

The heat of shame flushed Lu's cheeks. Auntie Le's words were like stones, heavy with a truth she didn't want to face; Milo spent more time with Le than with her these days. Finally, she managed a nod.

“Of course, Auntie. Forget what I said, I'll be back tonight to pick him up.” Resolved, she promised to leave work on time tonight.

With one arm still cradling Milo, Le took Lu's hand. Her skin was soft despite the years.

“Years from now, when your son is grown, you will wish you had spent more time with him.”

Lu leaned down to give Milo a tender kiss on his forehead. Then, cheeks still red, she walked back to her bike, shoes clicking against the unevenly placed stones.

The transition from Chinatown to the heart of the city was abrupt. Ramshackle townhouses with cucumber patches in overgrown front yards gave way to gleaming glass corporate buildings. She knew most of her colleagues lived around here, in the monolithic skyscrapers that made up the city's skyline. Her job paid her enough to live here too, but Lu preferred the rundown Chinatown – it reminded her of Guangzhou, where she'd grown up.

Lu locked her bike a block away from NASA. Of course, some days the families chattering in Mandarin outside her window didn't comfort her but rather felt like a mirror reflecting her inauthenticity – like she was pretending to belong to a world she had left behind. Le's admonishment had been the perfect reminder of that.

A subtle shift of energy greeted Lu when she stepped into the control center – a brief pause as gazes flickered towards her.

"Beatrice, fill me in," she said to the young physicist who scurried to her side.

"Charon is on track for atmospheric entry in about 14 orbits," Beatrice replied, her British accent clipped and polished. "Marten's team is investigating some predicted minor collisions with debris in the lower atmosphere."

Lu nodded, making her way over to one of the computer stations and entering her credentials into the monitor.

"How was your morning?" she asked the young woman politely. As Beatrice chatted, Lu pulled up flight trajectories. After seven long months of travel through deep space, Charon was almost home.

Just as Lu was about to comment something, a deeper quiet descended on the room – Harper had walked in.

"Good morning, Sir," Beatrice greeted, veering away from Lu to brief the mission director. Lu caught Harper's glance lingering momentarily on her. Strange. She hadn't expected him to enter the control room until the final hours of the landing. She shook it off, but her thoughts unwillingly pivoted to Milo – she'd forgotten to ask Le how he was getting along with the other children.

Lu was broken out of her thoughts by a light tap on her shoulder. She looked up to see Beatrice back at her side.

"Harper wants you in the meeting room," she said, tersely.

“What for?” Lu asked.

“Not sure, but all the team leads are being called.”

Lu frowned, but pushed in her chair and made her way up the steps to the meeting room above the control center.

In the room, Harper cleared his throat. “I have news. Charon is on trajectory for a glancing collision with S29-I, a large piece of space debris we've been monitoring, in about 16 hours.”

“Damage to the payload?” Stevie, one of the senior physicists, asked.

“None,” Harper said curtly. “But it is possible Charon’s entry point into the atmosphere will be altered by the interaction.”

Everyone in the room was silent, knowing this was why they had been called.

“We predict Charon will land off the coast of Northern Russia,” Harper said.

Groans echoed.

“Once it lands on their soil, it is no longer a U.S. spacecraft under international regulations,” Harper continued, ice blue eyes flashing. “Higher-ups refuse to consider negotiating for repossession of the payload. Not to mention the possibility the Russians label it an American attack.”

The room was silent, no one offering any suggestions.

“Are any manned missions in orbit near Charon?” one of the guys near her finally asked.

“A retrieval mission,” someone snickered. “You’ve been watching too many sci-fi movies.”

No one else spoke.

“I hope you all understand the severity – I will not have our team lose the payload of a two billion dollar mission and a decade of work” Harper said stonily.

“What about unmanned flights?” Lu asked, speaking up.

“Aura and CALIPSO are on orbits that might come close,” Rene, the engineering team lead, offered.

“Unmanned retrieval of the payload is impossible” someone else said dismissively.

“I meant unmanned missions on trajectories near S29-I,” Lu said.

The room grew quiet. Harper looked thoughtful. He pointed at the man who’d spoken before. “Rene, look into it right now.”

No one made a sound as Rene typed furiously at his laptop before looking up.

“CloudSat,” he said. “It’ll intercept S29-I within 10km in about 10 hours.”

The entire room seemed to turn to Lu, awaiting what she had to say.

“Then we use CloudSat’s adjusting boosters to change its trajectory,” Lu said. “We crash CloudSat into S29-I before it can hit Charon.”

There was a frenzy of outbursts at her statement.

“Are you crazy?” the man beside her asked. “That’s a 20-million dollar project.”

“The CSA will never approve it, even if NASA does,” someone added.

“The payload is more valuable,” Lu replied. “What are the Canadians going to do about it anyways? Embargo maple syrup sales?”

Louis, who she knew was a dual-citizen, gave her a small glare.

“Quiet,” Harper said. The meeting room fell silent.

“Marten, get your team to start calculating the trajectory changes for CloudSat if we follow Lu’s plan. See if it’s workable within the timeframe. Until then we will continue to consider other ideas.” he said, curtly ending the meeting.

As her colleagues dispersed, Lu caught Harper's eye.

"Don't let your personal feelings influence your decision, Harper. My approach is our best bet," Lu said.

Harper stared coldly back at her. "I keep my work and life separate. I know our options."

The silence dragged out into an uncomfortable tension. Finally, Lu sighed.

“Le called me a bad mother today,” she said. “I don’t spend enough time with Milo.”

Harper was quiet, looking over at her with something unreadable in his eyes. After a long pause, he spoke. “Maybe neither of us were meant to be parents.” Harper sounded almost guilty. “Work will always come first in our positions.”

The hours that followed seemed to blur. Marten’s calculations came back as she’d expected: Lu’s plan was their best bet if they wanted to ensure the payload landed on U.S. soil. Meetings with the engineers were followed by negotiations with the Canadians, their reluctance

giving way only when the stakes were spelled out. Finally, they grudgingly green-lit the operation.

By the time Lu stepped back into the control room that evening, the atmosphere was a palpable mix of tension and tiredness, the scent of stale coffee permeating the air. Harper was already there, standing like a sentinel at the central console as Marten inputted the new coordinates into CloudSat's guidance system.

For a moment, Harper hesitated, glancing at Lu as if seeking a final affirmation. She nodded, and he clicked something.

"New trajectory sent to CloudSat," Harper announced to the room, his voice tinged with the weight of the moment.

The room exhaled collectively, but nobody cheered. Time seemed to crawl by slower than ever, as the three blips on the big screen representing Charon, CloudSat, and S29-I moved around in an intricate dance. To Lu, each pixelated dot carried a weight of emotion and responsibility, like children entrusted to her care.

Just then, Lu's phone rang. The display showed it was a call from Le. The old woman rarely called her. She looked at the time. It was past 11pm, and she hadn't even realized, preoccupied as she was. Lu hesitated, her finger hovering over the screen. She looked up at the blips on the screen, almost touching. In another world, a better mother might have accepted the call and gone to pick up her son from daycare. But maybe Harper was right.

Lu pressed decline.

*Word Count: 1700*