

This story is set in the Dawn of Victory 2289 Universe, of which info can be found at this [Dawn Of Victory Wiki](#).

Chapter One: Unity Station

“Alpha Centauri lies at the center of inhabited space.”

This is a simple fact that everyone knows- and yet the weight of this cannot sink in unless you visit the starports of Harmony- Alpha Centauri's- and by extension the United Centauri Republic's- only world. Sure, you can read that it is with one world alone that the UCR is the ninth-most populous of nations. That 43.5% of all cross-cluster trade flows through Alpha Centauri. That in theory, the UCR could disable the economy of all humanity.

But come to the starports of the Unity Station, and see for yourself.

Such were my thoughts as the shuttle made a grinding halt, expecting the five-star starport I had been told of, knowing it was most popular of Harmony's spaceports, and still somewhat sick from the ride in the shuttle aboard the glorified carbon nanofiber cable called a space elevator. Offworld- for the first time in my life. My parents had done it before- hard not to when they are CEO and Madam of an interstellar corporation. They never let me though, citing danger. Overprotective in an era of exploration and progress.

The hydraulic gates opened, me and the many others briskly strolling into the starport, lugging bags behind us. The sudden burst of light irritated my eyes- but walk I had to, lest be stomped to death by the several dozen behind me.

Lights. Some white, some yellow, some neon signs.

The cold air was filtered, dry, touched with the faint metallic tang of station plating. A floor of smoothly paved marble, smooth white ceiling, and no such thing as a wall- just utility shops, less useful shops, information counters from wall to ceiling. People from every corner of the Orion Arm, perhaps ten thousand in what I could see alone, from the Sea of Clouds to the Far Orinoco. This was the commercial sector- far from where I intended to be. The freezing air that has never known a temperature above 25 degrees celsius did little to ease my spirits as I looked around to find any signs labelled Arrival, Departure, or telling of what direction any starport terminals were. From ten meters afar and lo- someone who looked Chinese in descent, and his clothing in the fashion of “efficient yet colorful” that was trending in the Soviet Union.

And thus I cried out in Soviet Chinese, for my mother hailed from there before her marriage to the economy mastermind that I call father- “To where is Terminal VII?”

(Author's Note: Since the separation of China- north of the Yangtze into the Soviet Union as a SSR, south of the Yangtze as a “junior partner” to Japan- in the 1940s and 1950s, the ensuing

cultural and linguistic estrangement has long seemed deemed reunification impossible- even amongst the stars. Nowadays, there are two different tongues of Mandarin- Soviet Chinese and Sphere Chinese- the former having the retroflex consonants and nasality of the way Chinese was spoken in the Huabei Plains, and the latter sounding lighter and more efficient, with contractions being considered formal grammar- Mandarin Chinese with snippets of the Dialects of Southern China, from Wu to Hokkien to Cantonese.)

“Oh, keeo walking straight for a few kilometers. Neither fast or comfortable. I highly recommend taking the transit shuttle.” At this the man gestured to what looked like an indoor train station, where two dozen of varied age and appearances were calmly waiting for an indoor shuttle metro.

I rushed over as the shuttle rushed in, and squeezed myself in. Most in the shuttle were using digital devices, and it was easy by what device they were using to tell what their business was. I found brief respite in being squeezed by some family of passengers into a particularly comfortable jacket that was of pastel colors and featured pictures of adorable kittens. It was only when I turned around and found said jacket belonged to a Asian girl who looked my age- eighteen- and relatively cute, I decided that elsewhere was also brilliant, for I was shy. I pulled in my suitcase- brown, stuffed, a number attached on a tag to call in case it was lost- and it struck hers by accident- which in contrast to her looks was plain black and had no design. I hastily apologised and suddenly felt the carriage was even colder than before, though my cheeks felt warm, and thus I lost no opportunity in warming my hands on my face before realising I looked idiotic doing it, and stopped, shuffling away whilst screaming curses in my inner psyche.

With phone at low battery and laptop stuffed deep in suitcase, I had no choice but to resign myself to staring out the window of the shuttle, watching what went on outside. Commercial, F&B, then a library, before we finally reached Terminal I. The next stop would be Terminal V, so I decided to stay on. About two-thirds of the people left, and suddenly returned an emptiness of refrigerated air and open seats. I found a seat by the window and say, finding the cushions on it plump and comfortable. It was then that the girl from earlier came over, and I took a good chance to apologise:

“Sorry for knocking into you,” I awkwardly murmured, “and the suitcase.”

“It’s fine,” she replied, barely above a whisper.

“Thanks.” I said, for there was not much to say, and went back to staring out the window once more, counting the terminals.

Eventually we reached Terminal V, and I got off, noticing the girl got off as well. Noting that I knew her simply as “the girl”, I wondered if I should ask of her name, then remembered there was no point of it. I then tried to justify it, before realising I was trying to justify asking a name because I simply just wanted to. Thus I had to convince myself to return to reason, and commanding my eyes to look around, using “She’s gone now” as a viable excuse to end the

matter, but instead found her very much not gone, walking in the same direction several meters in front, staring at her phone as she walked.

Soon we reached Terminal VII, and I got off.

A wide hall, ten meters in height and floor of pure marble- the latter long a fixture of my vision by now. The only sound was the constant mutterings and whispers from the hundreds sitting in the room, ranged from typing and blissfully unaware to about to punch the waiter to a pulp for not putting sugar in the drinks from the mini-cafe at the far side of the hall. Eight information counters in the front, and hundreds of chairs, as well as a few potted plants dotted around- not unlike a hospital's waiting room. Two large screens took up most of the wall, informing people regarding the flights. I noticed a Vega flight was cancelled due to safety reasons.

I rummaged for my ticket in my pocket, only to find it missing. No matter. I also had the digital copy I could use to get the physical ticket.

Thus I went to the eighth counter with the sign above saying "Sanctuary Spacelines Ticket Restoration." It had little people- just a tired old woman sitting there, humming to herself.

"Ticket restoration please?" I politely asked.

"Digital copy?" came the monotone reply.

I whipped out my phone to give it to her, only to find it completely dead.

"My phone's out of battery."

"Shoo then," replied the old woman, returning to her humming.

"Hey," came a gentle feminine voice behind me- oddly familiar.

I turned around to the girl from just now.

"Do you have a portable charger? Just for a moment," I asked.

"Mhm," she replied, and without thinking handed it to me.

Plugging it in, I was finally able to show the digital copy to the old woman.

"Hmm," decided the old woman, and entered some particulars into the keyboard in front of her. A printer to her side spat out a single ticket. She took it and gave it to me.

"Shoo then," the old woman said, then as though remembering something, assumed a artificially polite tone, and said the slogan: "Sanctuary Spacelines wishes you a safe-"

"Thanks, thanks," I grumbled, and walked off, though the girl followed me. She shyly asked for the charger back. I handed it to her, and our fingers brushed against each other. The girl hid her face, and asked for my name.

"Zheng Ying Qian." I replied, "Thanks for the charger." At this, I pulled out my wallet and took out a 5 Centauri Dollar note.

"It's fine," she replied, refusing the money, "What's your flight?"

"To Sirius, then Procyon, then all the way to-" I checked my ticket- "Ageno..Agenoria. Then Vesta and Juno. I'm taking a gap year before university in Britannia."

"Oh.. same. Are your flights also under Sanctuary Spacelines?"

"Of course. Why do you think I could get a ticket restoration? Other companies don't have this type of service, you know. Not when you're already at the spaceport anyway."

"That's... lucky!" she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Uh, thanks?" I responded, unsure of how to reply to something that was either a confirmation of liking or a thinly veiled sarcastic insult.

"W-would you like to- or perhaps you could- uh-"

"Sure," I replied before she could stop stuttering.

"Okay, right this way then," she replied, "I'm Huang Caiwei, by the way."

"Oh, you're Chinese too?" I asked, as I realised she had been intending to ask me to sit with her.

"Yeah," she said, "My parents migrated from the RoC."

"What's Sphere China like, then?" I asked.

"Oh, it's very urbanised. The people there are quite kind, albeit very business-minded. I've never actually gone before though- I've never done interstellar travel. What I know of Haiyang is from what my parents tell me," She spoke eloquently, a significant difference to the bashful shyness that had been there several moments ago.

(Author's Note: Haiyang (海阳) is a system on the rim of the Republic of China, a business powerhouse that links Sphere and Comintern. Trade between the CSSR and RoC flows between here. Was colonised mainly by Teochew populations that migrated from the Chaoshan

region of Guangdong, China on Earth. This is referenced by the name, meaning Ocean Sun, a historic name of Shantou, which was a prosperous metropolis in Chaoshan during the Terran Interregnum.)

“So I take you’re Teochew?” I inquired.

“Yes. You?” She said,

“Same.” I said, “My father was Diaspora- his side left China before the collapse of the Qing. My mother’s side fought against Japan when they occupied South China and eventually escaped to the north, settling in the Beiping area, which became the Chinese SSR’s capital.”

The next hour, we sat- waiting for our flights, talking about ourselves, listening to each other- the basic bits of social interaction, really. She quite enjoyed discussing politics, and we debated for a bit over the wars of Acadia and Vega.

“What are you going to Agenoria for?” I asked, “Juno or Vesta?”

“I don’t think anyone goes to Agenoria for anything other than those two, come think of it.” Caiwei realised, “Why?”

“Some go to Silvanus,” I pointed out, “but noone goes anywhere else, and for good reason. Either be arrested for no reason in Tetus and serve twenty years in a labor camp, or go to a Colonial Republic of nationalists who think of the Vega fascists as a ‘first example of the non-legacy nationalism that should be practiced in the Local Supercluster’. What do you think?”

“Well, in my opinion, Juno and Vesta were Sanctuary Worlds, which gives them a prestigious status as well as higher development.” Caiwei added simply, “I think you already covered it pretty well.”

“Where are you going to university to after this?”

“Oh, the UK, Caludon University of the Arts and Sciences. You?”

“Also the UK, but in Britannia instead. Aeterna College, majoring in Political Science, Economics and Philosophy next year.” Looking at her eyes wide in disbelief, I clarified: “As one major, not three. I’m not that intelligent.”

“Oh, I’m just majoring in Modern History- you know, since 2024-, and minoring in Pre-Modern History- you know, from 1900- for the fun of it. I want to be a teacher- which is why after that I’ll be doing a four-year at the teaching college.”

“Same! My family has a family business, so I will inherit ownership of it as CEO. Heard of Yutu Private Limited?”

“Isn’t that the company that supplies supermarkets all across the Solar Subcluster?”

“Yep. We own orchards, and those huge vertical gardens you see on the edge of megalopolises. Currently entering the artificial meat market.”

“Oh, my parents work as upper management at a moderately large firm. They work more than twelve hours a day, which means I hardly see them.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, at a loss of what to say next.

“Don’t be, please.” she implored, “It just makes me feel worse.”

Silence reigned supreme for the next minute, before she asked,

“Could we return to humanities?”

“Very well. Your opinion about...”

Chapter Two: Departure

After an hour or two...

“Attention, attention, Sanctuary Spacelines Flight 13497. First class boarding now.”

The screens flashed with the message as an automated-sounding voice blared it out.

“Two months to Agenoria,” I thought to myself, “Passing through eight systems. Jumps instant. Passing through systems not.”

“That’s my boarding. See you in an hour.” I remarked my farewell.

“Bye!” she replied cheerfully. I nodded in response.

With that, I walked down the corridor on the right labeled departure.

The next half-hour was a series of events monotonous at best. Queue, body scan, luggage scan, could we see your ticket please, all is in order thank you next, walk down an aisle, go through an airlock-

And finding myself, after such mechanical procedure, in the most beautiful thing I had seen in my life.

Sanctuary Spacelines had long been known for luxurious and yet fast cruises, but this was beyond luxurious.

This was glorious.

The crew stood to one side, all welcoming us. We had entered at the entrance- one of the meeting/dining halls- the largest, it seemed, for it was twice as large as a swimming pool. A light meal had been prepared- it was 9:30 PM Centauri Time, after all. The air-conditioning was over-adequate, but that could be forgiven giving the internal design of the hall- a merger of the styles of East and West, imitation Greek pillars with traditional Chinese lanterns hanging on them. The lighting was mainly warm-based- a collage of yellows. One of the crew came and offered to take my luggage to my room, and I thanked him. He inquired about my room number. I gave him it. He thanked me and left.

(Author’s Note: Centauri Time (CT) is British Time, or GMT 0. It was first adopted on Centauri between the ATO (Atlantic Treaty Organisation), Axis and Comintern to act as standard time on Harmony. Now, it is widely recognised as ‘official time’ across the Orion Arm.)

Said light meal was self-serve- each person took a paper plate, and took what we wanted from dozens of metal trays of all manner of delicacies. I grabbed two plates and took the basics: rice, leafy greens, carrot-potato mix, lean meats, and a bit of fish, before standing and waiting

The hall soon became crowded as more and more people came in- second class, third class, fourth class, and finally General. Caiwei was in the latter, waving to me. I passed her the second dish and we found a nice table at the front.

By then, the General passengers had all entered, and now the real cruise could begin.

It now becomes imperative to state that at the front of the hall was a stage. It was thus on this stage that came the captain, a portly gentleman of sixty years. And thus was delivered a speech:

“Welcome all passengers to Sanctuary Spacelines, the premier space cruiseline service for travel in the Local Subcluster and Juno Reach. Started as a express service to deliver colonists to the Sanctuary Worlds in the 2100s, it has evolved into luxury travel for he and her who wishes to perform interstellar travel in a swift and comfortable manner. The journey shall commence tonight at 11, and you can watch it from the top deck, which features a 360 degree reinforced transparent fiberglass dome. Just remember: ‘Here at Sanctuary Spacelines, our ships are your sanctuary!’”

At this, the passenger and crew gave a rapturous applause, for though the speech was drivel in my opinion, the captain was a brilliant orator and had said it in such a way that warmed hearts and excited minds. I gave some half-hearted applause, as did Caiwei, as it seemed she was not roused either. We began eating, and since I had dinner at 5 (I assume she was in a similar situation) we were exceedingly hungry. Yet both of us did find a mysterious urge to consume food in a dignified manner in front of each other, and thus though I wished to stuff myself within three minutes, I had to eat slowly. Eventually, we finished a meal which both of us, though eating at a pace I considered slow, felt had been too short.

“What now?” asked she, “I’m too excited to sleep.”

“Same, frankly,” I replied, “Wanna go to the dome?”

“Yes. Yes.” she said, slightly frantic- and I did not know why- “Please. Is there something telling us how to get there?”

“That corridor leads to an elevator,” I pointed out, the sign above the corridor declaring the same information.

Holding hands, we rushed through the crowd which seemed to have lodged itself in that corridor like some disgusting phlegm, and-

The elevator arrived, doors opening at a fast pace which us both still found disgustingly slow, and we burst in, almost knocking into the elderly couple which was about to get out of the lift. We apologised profusely and they smiled in response. And thus into the elevator, and-

Up. Up. Up. Fuck, why isn’t it going the fuck up-

Ah yes, the button. Where’s the highest one?

Forty? Brilliant! Spam it, spam it-

Both of us reached for the button at the same time, and thus it was not the button I pressed, but her finger on it. She smiled awkwardly. I apologised.

We zoomed up at a glorious speed, past another thirty floors- for the floor we had entered on was the tenth, with the ones below being maintenance and machinery. Floors eleven through twenty were level after level, line after line of rooms, whilst floors twenty-one through thirty were commercial and F&B and recreation- shops, stalls, restaurants, parks, gyms. From thirty onwards, it was mainly the sort of absolute dopamine- for instance, thirty one through thirty four was a huge indoor playground, and thirty five through thirty eight was a indoor water park- water-resistant digital screens on the ceiling and walls maintaining a pretense of sun and sky. Thirty nine was some sort of food center- two dozen stalls selling every kind of food from every corner of the Orion Arm. Sometimes the lift stopped and some people left, and sometimes it didn't, and we zoomed on.

Finally, came a *ding*, and we had reached the fortieth floor.

Out then, and look up to see the infinite rapture, the all-black.

The fortieth floor of the great spacecraft- paved with cobblestone, looking like a mini park, dots of greenery- small islands, brick-built rings with dirt within growing grass and a tree. Small food stalls and a cafe dotted around, and best of all the great transparent dome. Through the glass we saw Harmony- the night side. The patterns and great dots of lights, signals of multiple megalopolises, linked by great eternally illuminated metrorails, and yet the green obvious, a world tended to by hundreds of AGIs over regions, any abnormalities of the environments of land, sea and sky reported immediately to the UCR Ministry of the Environment, where they were rectified within several months. Ten billion citizens, living in one of the highest standards of the Orion Arm- where families had four children on average not due to government policy or economic necessity, because simply would and could. Children that would get free high-quality education from kindergarten to university, children that would never know what a hospital bill was, children that would have affordable housing and well-paying jobs, children that would be given a future.

Peace. Progress. Prosperity. For ever and ever, as long as men still live, and stars still shine.

One of a mere seven worlds out of the thousands of the Orion which ensured utopia.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Caiwei asked.

"Not as beautiful as you," I replied jokingly.

"Aww..." she responded, blushing.

I checked my phone- which thanks to her charger was now at 70%- and found the time as 10:05 CT.

“Still about... 85 minutes. What do you wanna do in the meantime?”

“Well,” she asked, “how do you feel about just sitting?”

“So just nothing?”

“Yes. That would be nice.”

We spent the next eighty minutes sitting there, just looking at each other, then the cobblestones, then the endless rapture above. There were people around us- and they knowingly chose not to come closer or annoy us. We just sat there, our warm spirits rendering us impervious to the cold air.

Hands joined.

Hearts paired.

Heads cracking thinking of how to woo the other- as though any needed to be done.

Chapter Three: Blastoff

It was just somewhere between the fortieth and fiftieth time we were staring deep at each other when came the announcement:

“This is your captain. Blastoff in T minus five minutes. Expect little to no disturbance- all internal stabilisers at above 99.5%.”

“This is my first time doing an interstellar voyage,” I told Caiwei.

“Me too,” she replied, “Will it be scary? And will the stars become streaks, like in the movies?”

“I don’t know about travel in the system. But interstellar jumps are instant. So no peering into the arcane rapture, just off and gone, to Sirius we go.”

“I’ve heard Sirius is a beacon of gender equality,” commented Caiwei.

“Yep, more liberal than Centauri- where people have to protest for months just so you don’t serve twenty years for liking the same gender.”

“I remember the protests- I was eight.”

“As was I. My mother seemed to like the protestors- she’s quite culturally progressive, she’s from the CSSR after all, the Bacchus Generation, living in the revival of the Orion Arm- the first generation after civilization was truly interstellar- connections restored, economy revitalised, colonies redeveloped, overpopulation solved not by lowering population but by increasing infrastructure. When we were passing the protestors once- they were marching in our neighbourhood’s direction, you see- my mother let one of the protestors carry me on his shoulders- said protestor was a father, and had brought his own children to the protests.”

“My family really hated them. Called them the woke terrorists.”

“Conservativism- that which pulls back civilization in the name of security and tradition.”

“Ignorance disguised as pragmatism,” agreed Caiwei, “Speaking of Sirius, do we get to go planetside for a while?”

“Don’t think so-the starship just goes in, docks for a bit, gets what resources are needed, deposits information, gets more information, and off we go to Procyon.”

(Author’s Note: Faster-Than-Light communication is expensive, and the only users are powerful nations and interstellar megacorporations. Most do not find the need to interstellar communication, but if there is such a need, they pay the spaceline to send the message for them through carrying it in data on the ship. Since interstellar jumps are instant- the week of time between each system is mainly passing through a system. Since interstellar strings are affected by gravity, they grow weaker in a system, thus systems are mainly traversed at sub-light speeds.)

“When will the first jump be?” Caiwei asked, curious.

“Well, it’ll take about ten days to fully leave Alpha Centauri- since the Centauri system is larger than others- three stars and all.”

“Wow,” She gasped.

We sat for the next few minutes in silence- until came the message:

“This is your captain. We are commencing blastoff in T minus five seconds- four- three- two- one-”

Then came a deep rumbling from all around us, before it stopped, and I saw a flash of light from the edge of the transparent dome- about where the back end of the ship was. There was also the sound of machinery for about four seconds.

“We have successfully blasted off. First Jump in 240 hours, 0 minutes. Thank you for travelling with Sanctuary Spacelines.

"It's as stable as on planetside," commented Caiwei.

"Two hundred and fifty years of space travel development does that," I replied trivially.

"Have you read a lot about this subject?" she asked.

"No- I'm a humanities student, like you. But the stability is ensured by some sort of gyroscope thingy, and the internal gravity field that ensures people inside don't float also does that. If that turns off for a single second, thanks to acceleration, we will fall towards the rear of the ship, hundreds of meters from here, and end as little bloody puddles of mush. That is why there are so many safety protocols and yet everyone treats space travel like a risky surgery."

"So that's why they said it was dangerous."

"That's mainly for sub-light-speed travel- Faster Than Light- or FTL-travel is much more stable, surprisingly. Breaking the rules of physics and nature does that."

"That's a relief," Caiwei sighed.

"Well, I guess it's time for rest- it is eleven, after all."

"I sleep much later than that- usually midnight."

"Amateur. I sleep at two in the morning-" I boasted, before realising that probably wasn't the type of thing to be proud of- especially not in front of your crush- that's what I think she is to me now?

"And when do you wake?" she asked, curious.

"Usually ten in the morning. Of course, this is for the holidays- for school days I sleep at ten. But I haven't done that for four months."

"Oh, okay! In which case, do you want to watch a movie together?"

"What? How?" I asked, curious.

"Uh-" she seemed flustered. Perhaps I had been too interrogative- or aggressive- or surprising- fuck why did I do that- "There's a movie theater somewhere- on floor twenty-eight or twenty-nine, I think."

"That sounds nice. What movies do they have?"

"I think they're showing *Direction of the Scope 4*."

“Oh that? I really liked the previous trilogy- I even watched it on the night before an exam-” she said, before stopping, “Uh, I would never do that. That’s so irresponsible. Anyway, what do you think the fourth movie will be like?”

“Well, this is the first time I’m watching it, and the trailer hasn’t even been released yet- this is an exclusive premiere. Come, I wouldn’t want to miss it- it’s eleven thirty.”

As I said “thirty”, we reached the elevator. We rushed in, and I accidentally pressed the button for the thirtieth floor- I had been saying the word two seconds ago. She had pressed twenty eight, and I could only smile in shame before we were brutally pushed to the back by a dozen other people who had also been waiting for the elevator. I instinctively shielded her from this, and was knocked- smashing against the transparent glass wall of the lift, which thankfully did not shatter. The bastard who had done it smiled apologetically. I smiled back as I imagined caving his head in with a brick before calling in a crew of un-Hippocratic doctors to surgically turn his corpse into a walrus.

Yes, there is something very wrong with me. No, I will not elaborate.

“Oh my- are you okay?” asked a concerned Caiwei.

“It’s fine- I’m not made of porcelain, thankfully,” I winced, holding back a shriek.

By the time my right shoulder had gone from a murderous pain to a dull ache, the elevator lifts had opened at twenty-eight. We had not stopped once before- evidently, everyone within was here to see DtS.

(Author’s Note: DtS is an acronym for Direction of the Scope.)

With this realisation, I grabbed up Caiwei, my shoulder vehemently protesting in the form of a pain that made me want to shatter the glass with my other shoulder and hurl myself out of it. I firmly ignored said protest, sweeping her off her feet. Caiwei protested, citing embarrassment, until she saw the crowd about to start queuing, then ordered me to go faster. Carrying her in my arms, I burst to the front counter. I saw the queue there- already established, forcing us to have to go back to the back of the queue and resign ourselves to utter boredom for the next twenty minutes, before remembering I had a first-class ticket that effectively made me nobility on this glorified metal firework.

“Here’s the ticket-” I proclaimed, putting Caiwei down, who had started laughing at the absurdity of the occasion, “First class, you see, allowing me premier access to the movies, with a plus one. So if you don’t mind-”

“Just go,” burst out the woman standing there, herself also laughing.

It was thanks to this that us two found seats somewhere at the center at the crowd of seats- close enough to not strain the eyes with every look at the screen, far enough to not have to lift our heads to see the upper bits of the screen- what they called the screen-crown.

"Drat- I've forgotten snacks," I grumbled, after having tried to reach at a non-existent popcorn tub.

"No matter," replied Caiwei, still panting after having shown several hundred people what a throughout declaration of mirth and merriment was, "I'll order them through the website. Is it 'miniurl.theaterrefreshments.sol?', or-"

"Yep, it is." I said, "Get the fried tapioca chips, extra large, and a bottle of- anything you want?"

"Fanta, I guess," she replied, "German... efficiency, right?"

I tried to laugh, really, I did, but I couldn't.

"It's fine," she said, "I... also didn't think that was very funny."

"Sorry. Anyway, just order what you want. I'll pay you back later- in fact, I'll pay you right now-" and at this, I pulled out four hundred Centauri Dollars- four bills of a hundred each, of course, "Keep the change."

"What- no need- count it on me- you..can..repay me with a kiss?" she said, awkwardly.

"Oh, it's fine- I mean, yes. Yes."

We both blushed awkwardly.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I heard that line from a movie-"

"It's fine- please don't apologise for everything." I replied.

"Oh, sorry- oh."

I laughed, and she joined in until we remembered she still needed to pay. So in went her bank card number- and I looked away for politeness. After that, the refreshments came in two minutes. I wanted to begin their consumption immediately, but Caiwei wanted to save it for the movie. I reluctantly concurred and we sat there waiting for the movie to start.

"Uh- about that kiss." I started.

"Yeah. Uh-" she replied, blushing- come think of that, she does that quite a bit.

“Shall I?”

“Yes. Please.”

And I plunged my lips on hers. And we shared a kiss- just there, isolated from the rest of the Orion Arm but from just two thoughts- that we were kissing each other, and that that was all that mattered.

The movie passed by like a blur after that- three hours. So was the elevator trip to floor fourteen and then the walk to our rooms, until our paths finally diverged, and though we parted for the night, my heart followed hers to her room, whose number I remembered, carved deep as a spear in every corner of my mind.

Good night, world. Down under I go.

Chapter Four: Morning

And up I come again.

Get in the routine- fuck, I didn't brush last night. Where's the luggage? Fuck, is it missing? Wait, I gave it to that waiter-looking guy- oh, there it is.

The brown case was propped against the white-coloured wall neatly. I thanked him silently in my mind before opening the thing, and it burst open right after I unzipped it. A brief look was taken at the sole window that I saw- showing me a view of the endless starry void. I grabbed the electric toothbrush and one of those small tubes of toothpaste for travel, and brushed my gnashers. After that, a wee was taken in the toilet bowl by yours truly, and then I took a shower- for I had slept in my clothing the whole night, and had not turned on the air conditioning of my room- so my clothes were now dripping with sweat. I called for a attendant from the old-fashion telephone at the bedside table. They replied something along the lines of:

“We'll be there in half a minute.”

I waited five, and took the chance to take a quick shower in the toilet attached to the cabin, the hot water warming not just my body but my soul. The shampoo and soap smelled faintly of flowers- though I knew not which. After that, I wiped myself down on the clean towels placed neatly on a rack right opposite the showerhead, though positioned a whole foot above. By the time I had gotten out, I was about to change into some new clothing when came a voice:

“Room service, sir. May I come in?”

"No." I replied coldly, before realising how rude I sounded, "I meant, no thank you. I am changing. Sorry for the wait."

"It's fine, sir," came the reply.

I swiftly changed into business casual and opened the door.

"As I previously said, I require a change of bedsheets and blanket, as they are wet with my sweat- I meant, uh, nothing. Please change them."

"My pleasure, sir," replied the smartly dressed room attendant.

There was a small table and chair at the side of the room, which I used to put on a clean pair of socks and shoes.

"Could you bring my previous clothes to the laundromat?" I asked.

The poor attendant gave the slightest wince at the pile of wet clothing, before adding them to the pile of bedsheets and blanket he had already been holding. He departed, waiting until the room closed to gag as silently as he could. I heard him though, and cleared my throat. Hearing that, he hastily took his leave.

After a few minutes, came another similarly dressed man- room service, this time the routine. I told him his colleague had already come. He expressed understanding and asked if I would like breakfast in bed. I politely declined.

It was then that came another knock at the door. Said attendant expressed his confusion- for no one else was scheduled to come attend to me for the morning. I opened the door to see Caiwei, and she smiled- whether for seeing me, or that she had memorised the room number correctly, we shall never know. And thus she gently wished me a good morning, and I wished her the same. She offered breakfast at a nice cafe her friend had told her about at floor twenty-six. I expressed my surprise that a friend of hers was also on this ship. She said that her friend would be joining us two, though iterating that it has been her friend's insistence and not Caiwei's request that had resulted in this.

"She might- no, will- question you or something. Just ignore her if the questions are too.. Private."

"Noted, thank you." I replied, and grabbed my wallet, which thankfully I had removed from my pocket before my slumber, otherwise it would have been on the way to the laundromat.

Thus we set off for floor twenty-six.

Soon, we entered the small but bustling cafe, and found our seats at a table, where a young woman sat, evidently of some British descent, not just from her look but from her accent when she greeted us with:

“Hi.”

It was some sort of British accent, I remember, though I did not know the exactments back then.

“Hi!” exclaimed Caiwei.

“Hello,” I coldly greeted, trying to pretend formality, for a case of the good ol’ imposter syndrome had hit me.

“Hi.” said the young woman, staring me down closely.

“So, what is your name-”

“Here I ask the questions.” came the cold reply.

Slightly flustered, I smoothed my jacket and replied,

“Ask away then, though I have the liberty of deciding whether I wish to answer them.”

“You will soon find that liberty rests not with you,” she replied.

I turned to Caiwei, and she could only awkwardly smile.

“Well, that remains to be seen. Do not waste my time.”

“Woah, chill,” cut in Caiwei, “What if we... just ordered first?”

“I have ordered for myself.” stated the young woman.

“Please, Anne, don’t do this,” Caiwei pleaded, “You make me look...”

I thought it not my place to interfere, and thus did not.

“I would like the Chicago cheesecake, and a hot... uh, teh tarik.”

They looked at me like I was mad.

“Milk tea, I mean. Sorry.”

“I’ll get the same,” Caiwei decided.

At this, Anne (for that was seemingly what her name was) glared at Caiwei.

I suddenly found the humor in it all, and stifled back a giggle.

“What do you think you are laughing for?” asked Anne, furiously.

“Nevermind.”

And then I whispered at Caiwei, for by now I was getting pissed at this half-ape she called a bestie, and trying to sound less like someone about to commit horrendous crimes of assault and battery, asked:

“Is she.. Always like this?”

“You don’t whisper in front of me!” exclaimed Anne.

“Please, Anne, stop. There’s nothing wrong with him!” Caiwei pleaded, by now extremely embarrassed.

“Oh, that’s what they all fucking say,” Anne declared.

By now, the cheesecake came, and I tucked in heartily. Noticing that Caiwei was beginning to eat in a more normal way instead of that hyper-rigid polite consumption of food last night, I also chose to do the same. Finding the cheesecake particularly delicious, she proceeded to try to feed me a strawberry that had been lying politely on top of it. I opened my mouth to consume it, and found it sweeter than most strawberries.

“Caiwei, why? Eighteen years without a boy, and the moment you get one you act like this?” ranted a livid Anne.

“Respectfully, that’s none of your business,” I rebuked, “She has already told you to stop.”

“I’m leaving.” She swept up her handbag, which was some mock luxury brand, and marched off, whilst hissing in my ear as she left, “Fuck you, incel.”

With her leaving, we both relieved a sigh of relief.

“Is that... your only friend?” I asked.

“I.. guess?” came the uncertain reply.

“Respectfully, I don’t think she’s a good one.”

“But she’s the only one.”

“Please let me replace her. I can do better.” I blurted out, before realising how cringe that sounded.

“Oh... it’s alright, I guess. Please do.” she replied as awkwardly.

We spent the next fifteen minutes feeding each other cheesecake. To this day, I do not understand why we did it- perhaps it was our way of showing possession over the other, or merely just a gesture of care. But analysing in detail is boring- and thus I shall omit it.

After this session of cake-feeding which honestly I really enjoyed, we left the cafe.

“Where do you think we should go?”

“Anywhere,” she replied, “as long as it’s with you.”

“Wanna.. Just walk, and see what we like?”

“Sure,” I replied.

The next few hours was spent shopping around floors twenty-five to twenty-seven- the large size of the starship ensuring at least an hour and a half per floor. Half an hour into floor twenty-eight, she exclaimed that she was hungry. I looked to that which we were holding- in my hands, my selections- some new clothing, a fresh pair of shoes, and for god knows what reason why a full map of the Juno Reach- which I justified to myself by internally repeating the phrase: “It’s for travel”, and last but not least a selection of books from the bookshop on floor twenty-seven, Wing B. In Caiwei’s arms were also a set of clothing- some of which matched mine- and two sets of slippers- for we had heard Juno’s beaches were pristine. She had bought a stack of books twice as tall- of which her favourite was “A History of Tension and Conflict- The Terran Interregnum”, which she was currently engrossed in. She wore this nice beach cap we had seen- a nice straw hat with a plastic flower attached. The top of said cap was non-existent- she said it was for keeping the hairstyle in shape, and I agreed, for I could see its use.

It was two by now, and thus we made our way towards a ramen shop, about to indulge in some broth-soaked noodles, when from the front was heard a sound that I had heard only when I was eight, when the protests started getting violent and they tried storming the Ministry of Culture, and then came-

BANG
BANG
BANG
BANG

BANG
BANG

And then from the front, came a cry in Russian-

“Слава рабочему классу! Подстрели, фашистская свинья!”

I was about to run until I realised a rifle was trained on me.

Chapter Five: Encounter

“Behind me, Caiwei!” I barked- who gives a fuck about politeness when you’re going to die?

I decided to try to negotiate.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to maintain calm whilst staring into the barrel of a firearm.

The person pointed the rifle pointed his rifle at me, and barked in Russian. His companion- also a rifle-holding terrorist, stepped up, and in accented English, said with a distinct y-glide:

“Hands up.”

I looked around me, only to realise everyone else had fled. Behind the two terrorists was a corpse- some old man whose hair would have had been white if not for the blood giving it a distinct shade of crimson. He was dressed in highly formal wear.

I raised my hands.

“The girl behind you too.”

At this, Caiwei also raised her hands.

“We will not harm you if you do not resist. Understand?”

We nodded- what fucking else was there to do?

By the looks of it, they were operatives of the Red Orchestra- otherwise well known as “those commie terrorists”.

“You will stand here.” declared the woman. I looked around, and noticed the other shops had long since lost their workers- probably fled or hid.

It was then that I noticed a fire extinguisher right beside me, sealed in a glass box labelled 'SMASH IN CASE OF EMERGENCY ONLY'.

Well, if this wasn't an emergency, I didn't know what was.

I had taken a course in fire extinguishing- those were my secondary school days, of which my school cared about safety quite a bit, thus were common safety briefings and demonstrations.

I guess I was fulfilling its purpose- removing danger.

I balled my right hand into a fist and smashed the glass. Retrieving the fire extinguisher, I pressed the nozzle, releasing a mist of white powder. After blinding the woman and distracting the man, I burst off, pulling Caiwei along with me. In her hand was the book she had been reading, which by some miracle the woman had not asked her to drop. That was the only thing we were able to retrieve in the heat of the moment, and as we burst off we passed several individuals with vests marking them as security and pistols marking them as people whose business we had best not interfere with.

We made a beeline for the end of the wing we were in, where a protective barrier had been set up. Two people looking similar to those we had just encountered quickly pulled it aside. We turned back and the last thing we saw were the two terrorists- restrained and being escorted off.

"Do we still get lunch?" whimpered Caiwei.

"All in due time. Fucking scary though!"

"Yep," was all she could reply.

Chapter Six: Jump

Afternoon was not as eventful, to Caiwei's relief and my dismay. An announcement was made through the PA system onboard that until 6PM, we were limited to floors eleven to twenty- otherwise known as our cabins. Caiwei and I spent the afternoon in her room- which she had, unlike me, bother to customise. She had bought magnetic-padded posters that could be easily removed without stain- until she realised the wall was not magnetic, and had resigned to hanging the two posters by two nails which were embedded about two meters high on the wall- why were said nails there, I had not the slightest clue.

I asked if she wanted to play some online games. She agreed, but then we remembered our devices were all connected to Harmony's planetary network, of which we were a small but substantial portion of a light-year from, and the only network was the ship's internal network, which had just a few simple online games- which we all despised. Eventually we settled on playing I-Spy, which quickly grew boring. After that, I went to my room to get a board game,

passing a member of security on the way and explaining the situation. He allowed it, but I had to let him watch. After seeing that I had indeed taken out a board game, he sighed relief. He also asked if I was the person that had been cornered by the terrorists but had escaped. I said yes and he was amazed, asking for a selfie. We took the selfie- a portrait one- him smiling, me forcing a smile as well. After that, I returned to Caiwei's room.

We played the board game for the rest of the afternoon, and then the evening.

6PM came and went, and we remained, her sitting on the bed, I on a chair. Eventually she let me on the bed as well- the bed was king sized, you see, and we sat on opposing sides, with the board between us. She called for dinner to be delivered. It came- two sets of fish-and-chips, two accompanying bottles of drink- hers of juice, mine of cola. Eventually we finished our meals.

She resumed reading her book, whilst I used the ship's internal network to access the ship's internal forum- for even speaking to people in Alpha Centauri would mean a months-long gap between sending of a message and the receiving of it by the other party.

The forum had died down, though there were several tens of thousands of unread messages, all of which were varied reactions of the terrorist attack, from anxious, i.e. "That was so frightening! I hope noone was hurt...", to logical, i.e. "If you think about it, what this attack shows is that...", to perverted, i.e. "Have you seen the photo of that female terrorist? I wish I could..."

I laughed at the latter, and Caiwei asked what I was laughing at. I told her "nothing", and she seemed dissatisfied with the answer. I then showed her the message, and she broke out in giggles.

After she was done with the book, I asked to borrow it. She agreed, and thus our roles changed- her browsing and chatting on the forum whilst I was reading contentedly, occasionally breaking out in laughter over the more ridiculous of historical events. She would look over, and ask what had happened- I would show her, and then we would have a short conversation about our opinions on the matter, before the allure of the book pulled me back in.

By the time I was also done, it was eleven. Thus, I returned to my room. There was still security- just this time, a different person, and more relaxed. I entered, remembered to brush my teeth this time, and then entered sleep contentedly, recollecting the day's events.

The next day passed in a similar fashion. I spent the majority of the day in Caiwei's room yet again. The attached toilet to the room became a beacon of courtesy, what with me putting the toilet seat down for her, and her lifting it for me.

The day after that, however, was no ordinary day.

On 11AM, we would be doing our first jump- from the United Centauri Republic to the Sirius Federation. I spent the morning, as did the previous one, at Caiwei's room. She had already

ordered two sets of breakfast, which was cheese and chicken omelette. We gobbled down the whole thing before eagerly beginning another day of conversation with each other.

I did not think of a good conversation topic, and thus began with:

“What are your opinions on kittens?”

That, somehow, began a two-hour long conversation regarding the superiority of cats and dogs, of which I was a firm proponent of cat superiority, whilst Caiwei held her stance of dogs being better. Eventually, we pulled ourselves away from this debate to head off to the dome, to watch the jump.

Many had gathered there on floor forty- for the breaking of the rules of nature by the indomitable spirit of man is something worth watching, and yet how many times can the average man watch it- for the cost of a interstellar voyage is easily in the tens of thousands, and a voyage of eight such jumps higher still.

Personally, I paid slightly over half a million for my first-class ticket. Caiwei's ticket, being of the General class instead, had paid a mere hundred thousand. But both had been about about 5% of our families' wealth- a hefty sum indeed, not in stocks or land but on some teenage travel.

It was 10:42AM CT by the time we reached the dome, and we wasted no time in trying to find what good spots were left. For by now the dome was already filled with people, and some were already sitting on top of others. A human pyramid was being formed, though thankfully the crew put an end to it before any accidents could happen.

Then at 10:55AM, came the sacred message:

“This is your captain. Jump in T minus five minutes. Expect little to no disturbance- all stabilisers at above 99.3%..”

