

Weyland-Yutani Corporation.

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(Story commission)

The World Building.

River sprinted, breaths heaving, his long rose-tinted hair perpetually obscuring his face. Was he nervous? Most definitely. Stressed? Beyond the limit. Yet, the young bobcat couldn't afford to miss the morning hyperloop, especially now that Aiden had lost his job at Streeling Corporation's armaments factory. It meant this month's rent would entirely fall on River's shoulders.

"Apologies! Coming through! HEY! HOLD THE DOOR!"

Despite his attempts, the bobcat clumsily brushed past nearly everyone on the bustling platform at Anston's central station. While it was a wide, double platform, built to accommodate two-story hyperloopers on a typical weekday, standing space was a rare luxury. But for River, this was nothing new. He and the anthropomorphic springer spaniel, his life partner, were all too familiar with life in a second-tier industrial planet like Eisnor.

Yet, luck didn't always favor the young anthro couple. A stone's throw from reaching the train's door—resembling more a sardine can than a train car—River heard the telltale hum of magnetic coils charging. Before he could confirm if the door had closed, he watched the adjacent car rise a few inches above the platform, accelerating away.

"Oh, not again!"

Defeated, the bobcat watched the magnetic train accelerate and depart the platform. A train he should've boarded, the only way to ensure he wouldn't be late for work that morning. Yet, he had no choice but to await the next one. The silver lining was that he'd managed to edge closer to the boarding area, potentially securing a seat for the journey, a luxury he seldom enjoyed as he faced the daily commute.

Eisnor was an ungrateful planet, yet ripe with opportunities for those who couldn't find contentment living in a third-world planet like D'Sora, or those enticed by the false promise that someday, somewhere in their lives, those born on third-world planets and on the Galactic Empire's periphery would have conditions to establish themselves and enjoy a dignified first-world life akin to those in prime planets like Tantrur. In River and Aiden's case, it was a blend of both. River, like Aiden, was born on D'Sora, a distant agrarian planet at the empire's periphery. Life was simple, with few prospects for advancement. Jobs were scarce, salaries painfully low. It took years of hard work, pooling their money to afford an interplanetary passage on an old Terrestrial-class ship, a class long replaced by the grander, more comfortable Arcadia-class vessels.

Securing visas for Eisnor was a breeze; Eisnor was an econopolis planet, where every square inch was concrete. On each acre of land, there lay a factory, a building, or some facility. All they needed most was cheap, disposable labor to operate functions or machinery they hadn't yet automated. Centuries ago, the planet was entirely devoid of its original flora and fauna, transformed into a wholly artificial sphere floating in space. Life sustained here solely thanks to extensive machinery, stretching from its core to its seven continents. Despite Eisnor's climate and temperature being entirely controlled artificially, it was far from pleasant. Acidic rains corroded anything and everything on the surface not shielded by some basic thermal shield. This factor alone created a unique paradox in Eisnor, setting it apart from its planetary counterparts.

In most econopolis planets, those living on the surface live better. The joy of witnessing the sun rise, set, seeing stars, clouds, and the blue sky reserved only for the upper classes or those who could afford it. But not in Eisnor. Due to the intense industrial activity of all factories, both surface and those located deeper within the planet, emitting highly toxic and heavy gases from its manufacturing industry into the atmosphere, those with wealth and means lived in the intermediate levels, relatively lower than the surface. The rest, the poor, dwelled in the scorching depths closest to the core or the filthy surface where walking unprotected for mere minutes could spell lethal cancer.

For River and Aiden, newcomers from their home planet, the young couple never stood a chance of settling in the intermediate levels. Instead, they found themselves confined to a miserable life in the depths close to the planet's core. But Eisnor, a cutting-edge industrial planet, produces everything the empire needs. Why is it so difficult to maintain a planetary climate control system that provides minimal quality of life for all inhabitants across all levels? The answer is simple: To achieve this, one either increases investment in planetary machinery, the very one that keeps the planet spinning, quite literally, or reduces pollution. However, reducing pollution implies diminishing production efficiency. The wealthy corporatists, who don't even live in Eisnor, see no advantage in having an inner planet function like an industrial park if there were any regulations that could even marginally—by 0.1%—affect the efficiency of their factories.

Consequently, the young, twink-like bobcat was perspiring, even though he had just left his tiny apartment he shared with his boyfriend in megablock A26 a few minutes ago. Worse, River couldn't even tell if most of the sweat was his. It was impossible to navigate through the Anston platforms without brushing against all sorts of people. Personal space is an alien concept to Eisnor inhabitants. River, with his beautiful orange fur and slightly lighter inner fur, had no option but to stand still in a corner, his long bobcat tail close to his body to prevent it from being trodden upon or abruptly pulled by someone rushing by. Standing silently like a corpse, River was, in fact, using his neural implant to entertain himself a bit while waiting for the next hyperloop. He vividly remembers the first days when he arrived on Eisnor from his home planet, feeling melancholic and uncomfortable, surrounded by people standing in queues or moving on rover boards or flyber personal vehicles that seemed like machines. Today, River is just another face in the crowd, part of the disposable workforce as viewed by the empire, seeking any distraction in the virtual world provided by a chip implanted directly into his brain, even if just for a minute, from the regret of moving to Eisnor.

It didn't take long for River to receive a notification from his neural link, a message from his supervisor at the cyber cafe, warning him about his tardiness once again. The message emphasized the reality of a vast pool of available workers ready to replace him and reminded River how easily replaceable he was. Undoubtedly, the message was rude down to the last comma, but River didn't want to dwell on it now, as his neural chip had just alerted him that the next hyperloop had arrived.

Moving at over 500 km/h, the hyperloop wasn't the only but by far the most efficient mode of transportation throughout the econopolis. Similar to the turbolifts inside buildings and megablocks, hyperloops traversed in all directional axes across the nearly infinite levels of the machine planet. There were no windows as there was nothing to see beyond the endless network of tunnels connecting the hyperloop stations across the planet. Instead, large paranoid holographic displays bombarded passengers with 24/7 advertisements. Thanks to the neuralink technology that almost everyone had in their brains, even if two different individuals faced the exact same holographic display, they'd never see the same advertisement. Each advertisement was personalized based on users' tastes, preferences, and thoughts gathered directly from their minds. For those without a neural chip installed, they could enjoy a bland, featureless gray steel wall with a blue cyberlead ribbon running along its entire length; after all, that was the true form of the holographic display.

Often, trains moving at half speed whizzed along their energized magnetic tracks wall-to-wall with megablocks. Those unfortunate enough to live in apartments adjacent to the hyperloop system's tunnels had to endure the displeasure of hearing the high-tension magnetism every time a train passed. Aiden, River's boyfriend, almost had a nervous

breakdown due to the incessant AI-driven autonomous trains that never stopped, not even in the wee hours of the morning.

Stepping off the platform at the destination station, at street level, River encountered more gray, cold, lifeless colors—metal and polished steel walls that comprised the buildings and skyscrapers in the service district within one of Eisnor's intermediate levels. They extended for hundreds of meters until they met the equally gray, cold, and colorless ceiling, marking the boundary of that level within the econopolis. All of this, accompanied by much dust, dirt on the streets, and polluted air, even in these districts located in the more affluent levels, had the appearance of stale, poorly ventilated air loaded with everything a living being should not be breathing for too long.

The day passed swiftly. River spent most of his time as he did every day—serving customers, organizing sales computers, and managing orders at the cyber cafe, sometimes even preparing beverages himself during peak hours. The only advantage of working at the cafe was being able to indulge in the sweet aroma of coffee and other drinks made by the machinery on-site. Knowing that the moment he stepped onto the street, he'd be exposed to Eisnor's degrading climate made him grateful for the job he currently held. Even though all the beverages were artificial and the coffee was 100% fake, generated by nanoreplicators. Natural food and drinks were a luxury reserved only for first-world planets in the empire, such as Mallow or Salusa Secundus.

The journey back home wasn't much different from the way there—more people, unpleasant odors, confined spaces, excessive noise—until River finally set foot inside his individual apartment within his megablock. If there was one thing megablocks excelled at, it was acoustic isolation. It was the only place in the world where an individual could enjoy silence and a minimum of comfort and peace, unless, of course, they were neighbors to a hyperloop tunnel.

"Love! I'm back! How was your day today?"

The bobcat shouted in an animated and outgoing manner. It was something to ponder how an individual could remain spirited and hopeful after several years in Eisnor, worthy of an academic study in its own right. Sometimes, River's open and positive personality was the only thing keeping Aiden going.

"Bad!"

The doggy, in turn, responded in his serious and direct tone. Aiden described himself as a shy realist, but being realistic in Eisnor was just a euphemism for being extremely pessimistic. Yet, it was only with Aiden's cold, calculating nature that the young couple could leave their planet, a true adventure that was already taking its toll.

"No need to feel that way, with all the experience you have in operating heavy machinery in transformation plants, I'm sure you'll find another job soon."

The bobcat said this without stopping for a moment to look directly into his boy's eyes. With a 20-hour work shift daily, there wasn't much free time in the schedule to do anything at home other than eat, take a shower, and sleep. Yes, that's right, a standard 20-hour workday, 7 days a week was the norm in Eisnor. Wonders of technology, with bodily and neural implants, individuals needed far fewer hours of sleep to function, or even none at all. Although there are experts against such heavy industrial routines, they are clearly a minority compared to the power of the large corporations.

"Well, I know. But the issue itself isn't that. I'm only getting opportunities for jobs in the deeper levels, almost within the planet's core. I won't go back to work there at all. It took quite some time for the fur on my tail to grow back since the last time I worked there. I'd rather expose myself to the acidic tempests on the surface than go back to work down there."

Indeed, the closer to the core, the worse the heat, which was hot enough to cause fur loss in certain individuals, unfortunately, as was Aiden's case. Besides, times were changing. It had been a while since the Empire engaged in war, and relations with Terminous had been chilly since the last direct conflict. Eisnor was a vast industrial park, but a significant portion of its industry was devoted to feeding the imperial war machine. With the Empire living in relative peace, the demand had considerably dropped. Eisnor's industries were adapting as fast as they could to reorganize their manufacturing plants and shift back to producing civilian goods, but it wasn't something that could be accomplished overnight.

Those who could were migrating to other industrial planets. And indeed, the correct phrase here was 'those who could,' as Eisnor was under interplanetary blockade due to an epidemic outbreak that the imperial media and propaganda department had strictly forbidden any mention or discussion of. The only certainty was that anthropomorphic beings were, for some reason, immune, while humans were dropping like flies.

River, seizing the opportunity, replicated his joint on the kitchen nanoreplicator, walked over to the coffee table where the somewhat annoyed doggy had finished his dinner. He

sat down at the table with his boyfriend and, looking directly into Aiden's eyes, began speaking in a direct and calm tone.

"Love, maybe it's time we reconsider that offer we received from the pharmaceutical lab in Mallow."

Aiden's facial expression changed almost immediately, shifting from weariness and frustration to irritation.

"But I thought we had already discussed this. I don't like the idea of you going alone to another planet and leaving me here to pay rent and handle everything on my own. Besides, they basically want to use you as a lab rat."

Said the young spaniel doggy, his voice displaying genuine concern for River. Interplanetary travels usually took months, and even with the corporation responsible for the said laboratory offering to cover the entire trip, including round-trip tickets on high-level passenger ships like the Elysium-class ships, it was simply too much time. Not to mention the time River would have to spend in Mallow until the experiment's completion.

"But love, they're willing to pay a lot of money. Enough money to afford us a move to a better place. I mean, not just to a megablock closer to the intermediate levels. Perhaps moving to a place far away from this terrible planet."

Aiden listened, and it wasn't the first time. After a brief moment of a sigh, the young canine, equally sleek and twink-like as his bobcat boyfriend, took a deep breath for a moment. His black snout widening his nostrils a bit. He scratched his ears of soft white fur, as soft as the orange fur on his boyfriend's tail. And then, finally, he said.

"Alright, if they're still upholding the offer, why don't we try negotiating with them so that we can go together? I know I wasn't selected for any experiment, but who knows, if we insist, they might accept just because we're a couple."

As he said that, the bobcat's eyes filled with an immediate sparkle. More than just the money or the excitement of being part of a pharmaceutical laboratory experiment, what River truly wanted was to experience, for the first time, the lifestyle of a first-world planet. Mallow was an excellent destination for that, being the financial capital of the galactic empire, housing the largest stock exchange in the galaxy, and beyond that, all

the financial elite of the empire, owners of major corporations, headquarters of companies that spanned almost the entire galaxy, were also there. Mallow was considered the elite of the elite planets, crafted and designed by the elite for the elite. To find a better quality of life than in Mallow, you'd only need to head to the capital of the galactic empire itself.

Several days had passed since River had reviewed the pharmaceutical group's proposal in Mallow and sent a response. Amazingly, the light-years' distance between the two planets wasn't necessarily a problem; with almost the entire galactic empire covered by a sophisticated system of quantum light beam communication, messages between planets could be transmitted instantly. So, why the delay of days? Simple: bureaucracy. As was once said, 'The only thing that saves us from the bureaucracy is its inefficiency.' Every time the empire failed to achieve its objectives, whatever they might be, it didn't lose due to the efforts of its opponents, but rather because of its own overwhelming, cumbersome, and centralized governmental machinery.

A man could make holographic calls instantly to his wife on the other side of the galaxy, but approval from the empire's censorship and telecommunications department for such a call could take days, if not weeks or months, depending on the individual's importance and influence within the empire itself. Needless to say, for River and Aiden, both young twinkles trying to make a living as lower-class workers on an industrial planet, they had very little, if any, influence. But the Weyland-Yutani Corporation did; and because of its significant influence within the galactic empire, it was solely due to that that the department of stimulus and control authorized communication response between them in a matter that took only a few days.

Upon arriving at his megablock apartment, amid his hurried routine of only 4 hours of daily rest, River briefly passed by his personal terminal screen. Just enough to notice that the response from the Weyland-Yutani Corporation had arrived in his inbox. Without even stopping by the kitchen to replicate his dinner in the nano-replicator as usual, the bobcat immediately began reading it. A smile spread across his face upon reading that the corporation had agreed to provide transportation and accommodations for both the feline and the canine, as long as they were willing to board the next flight to Mallow immediately. In detail, the response stated that tickets for both first-class seats on an interstellar passenger ship and a transport shuttle had already been reserved for both of them. Additionally, the message noted not to worry about interplanetary visas, as it had already been arranged by the sender.

A brief moment of reflection might have led River to realize that when the alms are too generous, the saint gets suspicious. However, as the thoughtful side of this relationship was not present at the moment, the bobcat proceeded to mark 'yes' to everything and agreed immediately, fearing that the response time for their message to reach Mallow

might be long enough to make the corporation change its mind. Meanwhile, Aiden would be on his way home, bringing the good news that he had finally found a new job position, located closer to Eisnor's intermediate levels. But his good news would soon be overshadowed by the news received by the bobcat himself an hour before his arrival.

"I don't know, are you sure we need to do this? I mean, do you need to go through this? I just got a job, and now..."

Unsure, uncertain, the young canine hesitated as he entered the expansive megablock apartment, taken aback by the bobcat's uncontrollable enthusiasm as he began to share his news.

"Aiden! It's clear as day that we need to! This is our chance to leave this place!" River replied, gesturing widely, as if he could point to the entire planet in that way.

Aiden, however, sighed knowingly. There was something undeniably amiss about the Weyland's experiment proposal; his conscience hinted at a sense of desperation from the Mallow Corporation to enlist a volunteer, an anthropomorphic from Eisnor, for whatever reasons they might be. Nevertheless, not wishing to go against the bobcat's fervor and having already agreed that if the corporation was willing to sponsor their joint trip, he wouldn't have arguments to oppose it, Aiden retrieved his personal holographic terminal from his pocket and said.

"Alright, I'll make the call and resign from the position. It will probably mark the shortest employment stint in the galaxy. Hope it doesn't mar my personal record."

River immediately leaped from the sofa, pouncing on the canine twink with a completely white pelt, enveloping him in a tight, enthusiastic hug, his lengthy furry tail brushing against the furniture behind him.

"Yeah Yeah!!! I love you, Aiden!"

In return, Aiden embraced his boyfriend, his tail wagging, but immediately found himself in a position where he had to remind the bobcat that he needed to breathe too.

"I love you too, darling, but I need to breathe as well! You're squeezing too hard!"

River swiftly recoiled, chuckling softly, a blend of enthusiasm and nervousness evident, gathering his lengthy feline tail closer to his body before composing himself enough to respond.

"Well... I'll start packing our things. We depart early in the morning on the first flight out of Eisnor. I just hope the weather on the surface tomorrow is... 'good'... I hate turbulence on the STOs."

Without even stopping to rest, the feline began to prepare for their departure from the megablock where they had spent most of the past year. Not that either of them needed to sleep, having neuralink chips installed. The task of packing wasn't complicated either. In an era where nearly everything could be dematerialized with nanoreplicators, converted into energy credits, and rematerialized later, moving was as simple as changing clothes or a body suit. Quite literally, since clothes and bodysuits were worn and stored in the exact same manner. This allowed the apartments of the future to have only one room or at most two.

The following morning, the young anthropomorphic couple found themselves inside the hyperloop heading towards the surface levels of Eisnor, and, to no one's surprise and the bobcat's dismay, the weather on the surface was... dreadful. Acid storms and winds exceeding 500 km/h with black clouds, filled with toxic gases that perpetually blocked the sky and the sun, formed the permanent backdrop for the surface dwellers. Imagining that all of this was bad but still better than living and working in the core of the econopolis, as Aiden so eagerly wanted to avoid. Here lay another inconvenience of a heavily industrial planet like Eisnor.

River and Aiden awaited boarding a small STO, which was nothing less than a shuttlecraft used to transport people from the surface of planets to high orbits where they could board the large interstellar cruisers for their journey. The issue was that since the existence of space elevators, few planets still used such rudimentary boarding and disembarking methods. Of course, less developed imperial planets, primarily agricultural ones, continued using this method due to the impossibility of installing a megastructure like a space elevator. However, for a grand industrial hub and an econopolis like Eisnor not to have a space elevator was a disgrace and a logistical setback.

Nevertheless, due to Eisnor's climate, which River detested, the installation of such megastructures was impossible. The acidity and corrosive gases in Eisnor's upper atmosphere disqualified any material from sustaining a space elevator on the planet. As promised by the Weyland Corporation, the boarding was swift, almost too swift; leaving

Aiden and River feeling almost like state authorities. As they ascended in the small STO, there was nothing particularly remarkable about this journey; much like any other, the STO was small, with cramped seats nearly sticking together. The bobcat would probably have been better off sitting on the canine's lap instead. However, the anticipation of knowing they would have first-class accommodations on a beautiful Elysium-class interstellar cruiser waiting made the discomfort of the short journey from the surface to orbit insignificant.

A loud hum of activated propulsors marked the takeoff. The small STO might not have seemed particularly grand, yet being a VTOL craft with the ability to ascend towards high orbit at an angle of almost 90 degrees, it covered dozens of kilometers in mere minutes. All this while facing acidic rainstorms with winds exceeding 500 km/h, courtesy of Eisnor's atmosphere. Peering through the small windows of the STO was both an insignificant and courageous act. The black clouds, whipped by wind gusts and liquids splattering against the window, persisted for almost the entire journey. At one point, it was even possible to witness the water's color shift from a transparent, faintly green hue to a vivid, concentrated orange tone. That was pure sulfur, condensed under low temperature and pressure, turning liquid and streaming along the craft's fuselage. With luck, the thermal shields could manage all this without major issues. Finally, space revealed itself above the dense mass of clouds.

The sight was magnificent, zero gravity in the cabin. As there was no one else on the STO besides the casual pair of young twinks, both anthros took the liberty to unbuckle and float towards the window. Hopefully, this would be the last time they laid eyes on that grim and desolate planet. The dividing line between space and Eisnor's atmosphere was still clearly visible but distancing itself as the STO maneuvered away, positioning itself in orbit to approach the grand Elysium-class ship. River, in semi-paralysis, was so consumed by his hatred and resentment for Eisnor that he could scarcely believe he was truly leaving that planet. Something deep in his soul hinted that he would probably die in that place, and even though reality proved otherwise, it was as if his higher consciousness refused to accept it. It was only when Aiden drew his attention to the other side of the STO that the bobcat snapped out of it.

"River, come and see this!"

As the bobcat floated in the opposite direction, approaching the other set of rectangular and small windows, his eyes widened before he uttered a resounding,

"Wow! It's enormous!"

Indeed, with over half a dozen kilometers in length, an Elysium-class ship represented the pinnacle of the Galactic Empire. The small STO appeared even more insignificant in comparison as it approached. Flying with the grace of a swallow, the shuttle navigated the space between the rings of the ship's anterior ring section, through the mid-section, affording the two passengers within a splendid view of the main dome, where an entire botanical garden was installed for the passengers' comfort. Inside, hundreds of restaurants, bars, spas, malls, recreation, and entertainment awaited. As the STO neared the airlock dock of the Elysium-class ship, it was possible to discern the prefix, J-01000dT Passenger Cruise Liner, emblazoned in bold letters on the fuselage, illuminated by powerful white spotlights. The shuttle was not heading for the traditional boarding zone; instead, it was headed directly for the airlocks reserved for exclusive rapid boarding, accessible only to those who had the financial means to pay for such privileges. Indeed, the taste of being able to enjoy such a lifestyle was beginning to elevate the thoughts of both twinks, even before setting their paws aboard the immense interstellar cruiser.

In a matter of minutes, the STO would be docking at the airlocker with the mastery that only a newly autonomous AI-controlled craft could accomplish. Zero impact. It was only when the artificial gravity warning was activated that both River and Aiden realized they were already secured within the Elysium. The remainder of the journey would be uneventful, relaxing, and luxurious, with infinite decks and amenities at their disposal. Even without sleep, neither the bobcat nor the spaniel dog would be capable of exploring everything that the immense luxury cruiser had to offer. The travel time for those aboard should not exceed a few days, roughly around a week. However, for those outside, the estimated time would be several months. All due to the dilation of special time around the gravitational bubble generated by the powerful engines of the Elysium-class ships. Space-time is relative, which is precisely why Aiden staunchly opposed allowing River to embark on an interplanetary journey alone. A journey of this distance, even on a top-of-the-line ship like the Elysium, takes time. On any craft of lesser caliber, it would take nearly a year from the perspective of those living in regular space-time, outside the gravitational warp generated by the ship's engines.

Two months – that was the ETA displayed on the fancy holoprojector screen on Isaac Konos's desk in Mallow. However, that was not sufficient to meet the tight schedule demanded by the chief research officer of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation's biotech division. Isaac was under immense pressure from his superiors. While the ICCA kept official data and numbers under wraps, anyone with a modicum of intelligence could discern the scale of the pandemic unfolding in Eisnor. At least, that was precisely how Isaac perceived it. Yet, it was not merely a matter of the Siamese feline's opinion; Isaac had to pull several strings to bring two poor low-class workers directly from Eisnor to Mallow. A task that, in other times, would have been mundane, but it proved to be arduous enough to prompt a lengthy discussion between Isaac and the head of

Weyland's pharmaceutical branch—a conversation that, by the way, had not yet concluded.

"Are you aware that your recent results are far from satisfactory? Tell me, Isaac, why should I believe that bringing these two wretches from Eisnor to Mallow would provide us with any advantage?"

The cold, disinterested voice of the holographic human questioning Isaac felt as if it pierced the depths of his soul, addressing not just his current project but the core of his being.

"We determined very well that the pathogen ravaging Eisnor does not affect anthropomorphic beings, and I have already confirmed in advance that both volunteers have indeed been infected for some time. Conducting research and studies in Class 6 facilities are imperative if we are to make any advancements from this point forward."

Isaac responded, striving to maintain the same cold, direct, and professional tone possible, knowing well that his research, much like his department, had already consumed rivers of funds. Justifying such a substantial budget for much longer was becoming relatively challenging. Not to mention the potential compromise of the entire corporation with the Imperial Communications Control Agency. Weyland-Yutani, like any other corporation, never plays to lose, and this often involves being one or two steps ahead of the Imperial government itself. The interplanetary blockade imposed on Eisnor was the most that the bureaucratic imbeciles of the Empire could decree thus far, out of fear that the pandemic might spread across other planets in the galaxy.

"Do you have any idea that if the ICCA comes knocking at our door demanding explanations about two clandestine passengers from a planet under interplanetary blockade, no one on this corporation's executive council will give a damn about you or about saving your furball that you call yourself."

And the big boss delivered his final warning, waiting for a response from the Siamese cat seated in his luxurious office, clad in his equally luxurious bodysuit. Until Isaac made his final point, leaning slightly forward in his chair to bring his face closer to the holographic projector's camera before saying:

Certainly, here's the continuation in the style of Isaac Asimov:

"Well, consider it this way. Eisnor alone has a population of approximately 800 billion individuals, with about 600 billion potential clients considering that we furballs, as you've just stated, are the minority. Besides, if the virus truly spreads across other Empire planets, the profit margin will exponentially increase. I am quite certain that the Emperor himself has no interest in letting more than 75% of his populace perish like insects. I believe the ICCA is not of concern at the moment. But, should my research truly fail, you and your friends from the executive council might as well watch together, hand in hand, as another company reaps the profits from selling the cure for this pandemic. Or in the worst-case scenario, being a furball as you've called me, I could simply sit back and watch your kind dwindle slowly while what remains of the Empire is inherited by us. Therefore, you may provide me with all the necessary budget... or not. The choice is yours."

Isaac concluded his brief monologue triumphantly. On the other side of the hologram, the well-dressed human of relatively advanced age contorted his facial expression with distaste, as if he could reach through the hologram and twist the Siamese cat's neck; had he been able to, he might have. Without confirming the release of the extra budget, he simply responded before disconnecting.

"Very well."

At the end of two months, both River and Aiden had become so accustomed, or rather, spoiled, by the luxurious life aboard the Elysium-class cruiser that returning to their normal lives on Eisnor would pose a considerable challenge. That is, if they ever returned there. In the worst-case scenario, the young twink couple could contemplate forcing their stay on Mallow, even if it meant doing so illegally, or argue their extradition to some other planet. With Eisnor under interplanetary blockade imposed by the Empire, selecting an alternative destination wouldn't be challenging.

The debarking sequence on Mallow would be considerably more straightforward compared to Eisnor. This was due to Mallow's modern space elevator, an imposing megastructure visible from high orbit. A vast spaceport located at the orbital tip of the colossal cable, capable of accommodating and docking over 100 large cruisers simultaneously. As the majestic passenger ship slowly approached, more details became visible. Countless hyperloops were observed ascending and descending the immense cylindrical structure, connecting the spaceport to Mallow's Central Corridor Station—the entry point to the planet's first-tier status and the main bridge connecting the planet to the rest of the empire.

Mallow, much like Eisnor, was an econopolis-like planet. Despite having a considerably smaller permanent population of around 100 to 200 billion inhabitants, excluding tourists and temporary workers like River and Aiden, it was relatively larger than the industrial planet. However, from this point onwards, the differences became exponentially stark. Viewed from orbit, the design of the continents, seas, rivers, and lakes—all entirely artificial and meticulously planned—was visible. Mallow boasted a temperate climate, offering regions catering to all preferences, ranging from snow to deserts to tropical and temperate climates, all with meticulously programmed and artificially controlled seasonal variations. In Mallow, it never rained, at least not without scheduled time and prior notice; there were never storms, floods, or any unplanned disturbances.

But how could two apparently identical planets be infinitely different? The answer was simple: a master plan. As mentioned earlier, Mallow was a utopian planet designed for the privileged few who could afford it. Like all other first-world planets in the Empire, it was replete with luxurious cities featuring spacious mansions, sophisticated skyscrapers, meticulously planned public transportation, ample space for all activities, forests, groves, parks—whatever one could think of. Unlike Eisnor, where the goal was to cram as much labor force as possible into the smallest space, in Mallow, one could wake up in their mansion, board their personal flyby vehicle, go to work, and return without ever having to glance at or even near their neighbor's front gate. It was luxury among luxuries—space, privacy, and convenience for the privileged few. It seemed like perfection to the elite of the empire.

As the glorious Elysium-class ship was performing its final approach procedures, preparing to dock at the spaceport, River and Aiden, who had made it a point to go to bed early the previous night to wake up early and witness the entire approach and docking process directly from the panoramic view of their suite's cabin, received a holographic call from the Weyland-Yutani corporation's research facilities. River, after briefly glancing at the canine's face with surprise, immediately answered the call. The holographic system in the suite projected a life-size image of the Siamese cat, dressed in a polished metallic gray corporate body suit, as if he were actually aboard the ship with the couple.

"Good morning, I know we haven't been formally introduced. I'm Isaac Konos, but you can just call me Isaac. I represent the biotechnical research department at Weyland-Yutani. I hope you enjoyed the accommodations provided during the trip. I must add that you've chosen the right moment to reconsider our proposal. Extracting you from Eisnor nowadays would be, for all intents and purposes, impossible."

The second feline spoke with an elegant, measured, and sophisticated tone that could even be considered tedious. But River and Aiden better get used to it—everyone in

Mallow spoke and carried themselves more or less that way, as if they were semi-gods superior to everything and everyone.

"The journey was splendid!"

River was the first to respond, his relatively loud, extroverted, and extravagant tone, which to the typical Mallow resident might seem inelegant and annoying.

"Has the situation worsened so much there in two months?"

Aiden followed, speaking lower, with a shy and direct manner. A way of speaking that made the Siamese cat, present only as a hologram, show a small, faint smile before responding to the canine, completely ignoring the bobcat for not sounding elegant enough.

"You wouldn't imagine. But let's put Eisnor aside and focus on what really matters. At the moment, I'm on my way to Mallow's Central Corridor Station and will meet you there on the surface once you step off the Hyperloop. Don't be late; we have an extremely tight schedule. River, we'll perform a Molecular Diagnostic Scan on your body later today."

And without warning, the holographic pillars shut down, the AI voice from the suit's personal computer informing them that the call had ended.

"I didn't like him," River said, looking at his boyfriend, now sporting an angry expression, whereas before he had maintained a wide, friendly smile the entire time.

"Me neither, but I warned you. These corporate types are all spoiled brats with a superiority complex."

Meanwhile, dozens of kilometers below, flying at over 300 km/h in a Class A-2 personal flyby vehicle, judging the newly arrived couple of anthros, were two other anthros. One was Isaac himself, and accompanying him was a raccoon boy with gray fur ranging from lighter to darker shades, sporting blue eyes and purple hair.

"Give them a break, Isaac. You might not remember anymore, but you were young once too," said the raccoon, dressed just as elegantly in form-fitting attire, accentuating his slender, fit physique.

"I may be 326 years old, Gaal, but I don't recall ever wearing such tacky clothes or speaking as rapidly and anxiously as that bobcat," Isaac responded without bothering to look at his team member's face, gazing out the window of his flying car as it hovered over small pockets of congestion on the vast, wide avenues below. Neither of the two anthros piloted the vehicle; flying cars navigated autonomously.

"Maybe because you've always been a rich, arrogant jerk who never had to climb up in life like I did, or like those two are trying to do?" Gaal replied, quite brutally and street-style, which, in turn, prompted Isaac to divert his gaze from the window and lock eyes with the raccoon, giving him a look that could be described as 'I'm glaring at you.' Although Gaal was one of the few members of his team who never got intimidated by that.

"Just so you know, I have nearly a hundred years more life experience than you, whiskers. Although you may lead an entire division just because you're someone's golden child, you could learn a thing or two from me," the raccoon boy added before Isaac could say anything.

"Look, Gaal, isn't this your stop? Why don't you... just get off already? Be efficient."

The Siamese cat with a coat of white and grayish-blue fur responded with a diplomatic smile as his luxurious A-2 maneuvered around its axis to land before taking off once more, this time carrying only Isaac toward the Central Corridor Station in Mallow.

Meanwhile, still in orbit around Mallow, the Elysium Class ship carrying the young twinks had completed its docking procedure and cleared for disembarkation. River and Aiden quickly discovered that leaving the ship itself would take longer than descending via the space elevator to Mallow's surface. This was due to the colossal size of Elysium-class ships. Yet, in a farewell tone, the feline and canine anthros bid adieu to the luxurious vessel that had been their home for the past two months, or rather, days from River and Aiden's perspective. They were now two months older, despite aging just a few days. And because this wasn't their first interplanetary trip, despite being 26 and 24 years old respectively, both seemed relatively younger. Their initial journey from D'Sora to Eisnor covered a greater distance and didn't rely on the cutting-edge warp drive technology found on more modern ships.

Now, walking through the spaceport towards the arrivals and triage section, the bobcat insisted on strolling calmly, akin to a delighted child exploring a new amusement park. Aiden, while impressed, was more reserved, constantly reminding himself of their meeting with the head of the research department at the Central Station in Mallow, just below.

"Love, let's keep moving. That cat looks like he's about to have a fit if we arrive a few seconds late..."

Aiden spoke, noticing that his partner had lagged behind considerably, prompting the white-furred spaniel to stop and turn to search for the bobcat. For a moment, Aiden feared they might have lost track, but relief washed over him as he found the orange bobcat gazing at the beautiful view of Mallow through one of the immense panoramic windows of the spaceport, projecting the outside vista for those within.

"It's so beautiful!"

River exclaimed as Aiden approached and stood by his side. Before continuing, now speaking directly to his boyfriend.

Absolutely, here's a translation in the style of Isaac Asimov:

"There were days when I thought I'd never get to see this in person, only through holograms."

"Technically, you're still seeing it through a hologram."

Aiden replied, attempting a feeble joke. In response, River lightly brushed the tips of his claws against his lover's belly, pretending to scratch him, causing the spaniel dog to instinctively dodge backward.

"Promise we'll live here, forever?"

River asked, looking directly into Aiden's eyes. The question seemed sincere. The spaniel dog, unsure how to respond, gently caressed the beautiful bobcat's face before answering.

"I promise."

And there, in that moment amid the bustling spaceport hall of the Mallow space elevator, River and Aiden shared their first kiss on their new planet, one they would soon call home.

"The passage through the arrival terminals was swift, and the descent via the hyperloop from the high orbit of the planet to the surface was even quicker. Unlike the hyperloops of Eisnor, on Mallow, the compartments' holographic systems rendered them entirely translucent, allowing passengers an unobstructed view of the outside world as if the walls didn't exist. A stark contrast from the tiresome advertisements projected in the Eisnor Hyperloop. The descent was swift, and soon the dark, shadowy, and cold expanse of space was gradually replaced by the clear blue, tinged with orange hues, of the Mallow sunset.

The econopolis-like planet, serving as the financial center of the Empire, was already beautiful when seen from space, and as the hyperloop descended, the high-speed space elevator became even more breathtaking. In a matter of minutes, the young anthro couple were stepping their paws onto Mallow's soil. The central station of the Mallow Corridor was, for all intents and purposes, a feat of modern imperial engineering, a structure vying for supremacy with the megastructure that was the space elevator itself. The foot traffic was substantial, much like any bustling station or high-traffic spaceport, yet space was ample, with everyone enjoying vast, wide corridors and environments, providing each individual with all the comfort and personal space needed to navigate to their diverse commitments.

However, there was a noticeable difference in the 'energies' or spirits of the citizens of Mallow compared to those of Eisnor. Despite being a wealthy planet of the elite and high society, an almost eerie silence pervaded the station's ambiance. And as mentioned earlier, it wasn't due to emptiness; quite the contrary. However, each inhabitant of the first-tier planet acted and carried themselves as if they were gods in person. No one dared to look at each other, let alone exchange a good morning or afternoon. It was as if despite having all the space in the world, nothing could ever accommodate the egos of each individual traversing those halls. Speaking of egos, it didn't take long for the young couple, upon descending from the escalator at the arrival sector and heading to the main hall, to spot the same Siamese cat who had contacted them moments earlier while aboard the high-orbit passenger ship.

Isaac held the holographic table above his head with one hand, turning it into an improvised sign where the names River and Aiden were visible. Such a gesture filled

the sophisticated feline with embarrassment. Under normal circumstances, an intern or chauffeur would have been assigned the task of receiving the newly arrived pair of anthros. But given the circumstances and the tight schedule, the old saying was clear: if you want something done right, do it yourself. As soon as the white spaniel dog and the bobcat spotted the Siamese feline, they both smiled and waved their hands to let Isaac know they had seen him and were walking toward him.

"So, we're finally being introduced in person. I believe you're Isaac. I'm Aiden," said the spaniel dog, as politely and courteously as he could manage, extending his hand to shake the Siamese cat's hand. Meanwhile, the three-hundred-year-old cat looked the spaniel dog up and down, dressed in white trousers and an outdated red sweatshirt with orange sleeves, and without even shaking Aiden's hand in return, he turned away and began to speak.

"You're 7 minutes, 36 seconds, and 86 milliseconds late. Please follow me; the vehicle is already waiting," he said, striding away as if he were herding a pair of country bumpkins with an IQ at least 300 points below his own. Aiden felt immediately offended, his facial expression contorting in disappointment the moment Isaac turned his back and began walking, ready to voice his disapproval to the research chief responsible for the entire project. Yet, he was immediately halted by River, who deliberately stepped on his white tail.

"Sorry for the delay; it took longer to disembark from the Elysium than we had anticipated," the bobcat said, conveying an apologetic tone. Isaac, attempting to heed his team member's advice, opted to give the young couple a small concession, which resulted in a terse and direct response.

"That's fine."

Without stopping or turning back to acknowledge the two anthros following behind, Isaac replied. Deep in his soul, already battered by centuries, and in his mind, always preoccupied with work, Isaac felt a slight tinge of envy toward the two young men. They were both beautiful, with well-shaped bodies, and above all, truly young. Their bodies were indeed real, unlike Isaac's and almost everyone else's, over 100 years old but with an appearance of 21. The exact case for Isaac, with his 326 years encapsulated in a 26-year-old twink body, only made possible because 90% of his body was no longer his original body. Instead, it comprised cybernetic implants, artificial organs, and organic/synthetic skin with liters of nanomachines coursing through his veins to ensure everything continued to function. Everyone here was more machine than human, knowing they would never die and living their lives as such. With complete disregard

for the lives of others, each lived as if they were the center of the universe. One could say, 'Welcome to Mallow,' regarding this entire situation.

Walking outside the station, the landscape was paradisiacal—luxury vehicles and people flying in every direction, towering skyscrapers entirely made of spread material, bridges, and hyperloop tunnels connecting structures everywhere, all mingled with an abundance of greenery, trees, parks, and gardens. Mallow was indeed a utopian, artificial planet designed down to the last screw. The newly arrived couple even slowed their pace to observe in detail the impressive scenery around them. Isaac, however, continued walking, unfazed by the world around him. Having lived on Mallow for centuries, the Siamese cat took everything for granted, considering it mundane. It was only when he was already placing the tip of his high-heeled boot on the step of his A-2 that he realized the two anthropomorphic twinkies had fallen behind.

Isaac glanced back, lowering his blue ice infovisor glasses a bit, observing the two "country folk" gazing around and upwards agape.

"Ridiculous, seems like they've never seen a first-world planet before," he muttered, though indeed, they never had. However, Isaac simply put his infovisor glasses back on, quickly checking the internal holo-display in the lenses for the time. He considered that it wouldn't hurt to delay their arrival at the Weyland-Yutani research facilities for a bit. After all, what's a drop to one already wet? This exact thought prompted the Siamese cat to command his personal flying vehicle to start its engines via his neuralink. As expected, the ignition sound drew the attention of the distracted anthros, prompting them to hurry towards the car.

Now, with the three of them seated inside, Isaac masterfully multitasked. He conversed with Aiden and River while simultaneously conducting a personal video call with Hari, the skunk with purple fur, the youngest member of his research team. Additionally, he managed a handful of messages from technicians making final adjustments to the Imperial Class light cruiser that would be used for the experiment. In other words, multitasking.

Multitasking had become exceedingly common in modern society, with everyone fitted with their neural link chip performing at least five or more tasks simultaneously while engaging in conversation or enjoying a meal at family dinners or among friends. However, just because it was widespread didn't mean it was healthy. One of the main side effects was evident as Isaac sat across from River, staring fixedly towards the horizon as if he were a machine in standby mode, waiting for the fly car to complete its pre-programmed route.

"Mr. Konos, I'd like to thank you again for the opportunity and for agreeing to cover the expenses to bring Aiden along with me..."

River spoke, yet there was no response.

"Does he hear me?" The bobcat asked, shifting his gaze to his boyfriend sitting right beside him. But before the spaniel dog could respond, Isaac himself spoke.

"I hear and see you perfectly, I was just attending to important matters."

Then, like a machine coming to life, Isaac crossed his legs and turned his face and expression to look directly into the eyes of the young couple seated in front of him inside the vehicle.

"Oh... good!" River responded, visibly startled to the core. This was because the neural link chips he and Aiden used didn't allow such a smooth and immediate transition between virtual reality and real life. Only state-of-the-art neural link chips allowed such a profound level of multitasking bordering omniscient, such as Isaac's. For River or Aiden, only a sudden jolt or a virtual notification could bring their attention back to the real world if they were deeply immersed in their virtual engagements, similar to how Isaac was at that moment.

With his attention forcibly focused on that environment and moment, Isaac couldn't help but notice River's attire. Seated before him, the bobcat wore much lighter, loose-fitting, and sporty clothes. River donned a short, body-hugging black running short, while on his upper body, he wore an equally short black tank top made from the same fabric as his shorts. The combination of tight, revealing clothing stirred something in Isaac that he hadn't felt in decades—anxiety! Anxiety about executing the mission he was about to undertake shortly and the knowledge that he would be exploring the sexy body of the bobcat sitting across from him made him excited. Of course, needless to say, the Siamese cat was able to conceal all his anxiety and arousal from the two young companions in his car with mastery and ease. After all, it's hard to feel much anxiety when, for all intents and purposes, you're an immortal being.

It was at this moment that Aiden decided to break the ice.

"So, regarding the research that will be conducted. I was thinking if we could talk more about it."

The spaniel dog spoke calmly and curiously.

"I believe the communications department of Weyland-Yutani provided you with a detailed service contract, and I assume that if you're here, you've read the contract thoroughly."

Isaac responded directly and coldly.

"Yes, but... the contract mentions testing new medications. Drugs, right? Like pills? I was wondering if we could discuss the composition of these pills? Will they be nanite pills? Synthetic drugs?..."

Aiden insisted, only to be immediately interrupted by the feline in a brutal manner.

"Mr. Aiden, assuming you've read our contract, you know that the content of the medications to be tested, as well as their formulas, are under industrial secrecy as they represent the intellectual property of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation. Please refrain from asking such questions."

Once again, Aiden felt a strong urge to punch this brat right in the face, but he managed to contain and conceal his anger perfectly this time, without needing River's intervention. River, on the other hand, immediately drew his boyfriend's attention to the window of the vehicle. Even flying at over 300 kilometers per hour, it was still possible to observe much of Mallow's beautiful architecture, infrastructure, and landmarks. Isaac, on the other hand, refocused on his virtual tasks, using his neural link to draft, review, and send reports to the division of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation in Trantor, the empire's capital.

The remainder of the journey proceeded with the young tourist couple conversing enthusiastically between themselves, occasionally exchanging affectionate gestures, seemingly unaware or perhaps forgetful of the presence of the third feline aboard. It didn't take long before the imposing Weyland Tower emerged on the horizon. The A-2, guided by its AI, approached one of the numerous bays on the rooftop of the impressive skyscraper, descending to land. The tower was indeed majestic and imposing, boasting its own system of internal hyperloop trains, despite already having a robust turbolift elevator system. The trio walked through the corridors of the upper floors until they reached the nearest turbolift, with Isaac leading the way at all times. As they stepped

inside the turbolift, the Siamese cat remarked, "We are slightly behind schedule, but still within the timeframe."

The fact that they were within schedule seemed to be the only thing capable of putting a faint smile of contentment on the corporate feline's face.

"We'll make a brief stop at the conference room; I will introduce you to the rest of my team. Right after, River, you'll undergo a battery of tests with Hari. I believe you'll like him; he's almost as young as you two."

Isaac continued speaking, now appearing much less rushed and even somewhat receptive and friendly.

"Oh, so they're in their early twenties? And they already work for a big corporation like you!"

River asked, speaking with enthusiasm as if receiving confirmation that reaching that level of prosperity and recognition at a young age was possible. Only to have his hopes dashed by Isaac's response.

"Almost that, I think he's 156 or something. A hundred and something years is..."

The two twinks looked pale, staring blankly at the wall ahead as if they had been run over by a truck. 156 years old and still considered the "youngest" member of the entire team.

At that moment, the turbolift made an unexpected stop. Isaac immediately wrinkled his nose as he was certain he had entered his priority code when inputting the desired floor. This code should have prevented the system from allowing this particular turbolift to be stopped or requisitioned by others, unless... As the doors opened, none other than Hober Mallow himself stepped into the turbolift.

"Isaac! What a great coincidence. I was just thinking about you," Hober Mallow, a member of the executive council and a permanent seat on the board of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, interrupted.

His market share made him a considerable owner of the company, and his vote not only had the power to terminate and shelve all the research conducted by Isaac's department but also to put the Siamese cat out of a job.

"Oh, I'm headed to conference room number 9 in the basement. Could..." At that precise moment, Isaac thought to himself: Ah, that explains a few things.

"We are heading there," Isaac replied, sounding as outgoing, friendly, and even slightly effeminate as River. The bobcat standing behind Isaac was left dumbfounded, glancing sideways to see if Aiden was witnessing the same transformation in their boss's demeanor. Both were surprised by the total change in personality, from pure arrogance and superiority to almost a flustered demeanor in the presence of their superior.

"Great. I'm so looking forward to seeing the conclusive results of your research that I decided to come from Trantor to Mallow personally. I hope it's a surprise; it was a coincidence bumping into you in the turbolift," the short human said, looking up at the anthro feline called Isaac, who was almost twice his size. Furries were naturally taller than humans, but Hober Mallow's short stature, even by human standards, made him a dwarf among anthro beings like Isaac, Aiden, and River.

This sometimes led to awkward situations, such as Hober asking someone to press button number 9 as he couldn't reach it himself. Moreover, it wasn't a coincidence at all that they had bumped into each other in the turbolift. Isaac and the two volunteers were already heading to the same floor, conference room number 9, and the turbolift had Isaac's priority code inserted. When Hober inserted his, obviously having more priority than Isaac due to his position within the corporation, the turbolift was immediately and slightly redirected to pick him up from the floor where the human was located.

I'll continue in the style of Isaac Asimov:

"So, I suppose you two are River and Aiden," Hober said, looking at the two anthros standing behind Isaac. Yet, Isaac didn't even give River or Aiden a chance to respond. He took the lead and, like a good ass-kisser, said, "Correct as always, Mr. Mallow," managing to put on a charming smile that seemed almost impossible for him.

In contrast, the small man simply took a step forward, ignoring Isaac completely, and held the bobcat's hand in a way that indicated he wanted to speak directly to the volunteers.

"Excited?"

"Quite, I'd say a little more concerned than excited," River replied, his heart racing knowing he had just shaken hands with one of the richest men in the galaxy.

"Oh, don't worry. Weyland-Yutani has you in good hands," the small human said, holding the bobcat's hand firmly and amicably, until the turbolift inexplicably stopped before reaching the desired floor. Hober casually walked out, but not before looking back directly into Isaac's eyes, saying, "And don't forget to hand over my results, Isaac."

Habor spoke with a casual smile as the turbolift doors closed, giving the impression that Isaac was just another failure on the verge of being dismissed. This made it clear that Hober Mallow's presence here signaled that the corporation's board had had enough of Isaac and it was time to make some significant progress in the research. Moreover, Mallow's mere presence in the lift with the trio was just an exercise in intimidation—pure soft power. Isaac, on the other hand, took the opportunity to make a small joke and express his real opinion of the man who had just left the turbolift.

"You know what they say about Mr. Mallow, don't you? Small man, huge ego."

A dark humor joke that elicited laughter from the two occupants of the elevator alongside Isaac. Without further incidents, the turbolift soon arrived at the desired floor within the depths of the research facilities. The Weyland Tower was a corporate skyscraper on the surface and a high-security laboratory complex for research on highly contagious pathogens below the surface. All sorts of research were conducted there, from civilian to bioweapons for military use. But given the circumstances of the plague facing the Galactic Empire, no other research was consuming as many resources as the one led by the Siamese cat named Isaac at the moment.

As they exited the turbolift, the stark difference in the structure of the facilities was immediately noticeable. Solid reinforced concrete walls that seemed capable of withstanding a tank crashing into them at full speed constituted the corridors' structures. Every door the trio passed, now heading towards the conference room, was controlled by automatic security, likely too heavy to be opened manually. Both the bobcat and the spaniel dog were impressed by the change in the atmosphere, somewhat startled. But who was actually more concerned was Aiden. The canine knew that such an investment in security and preparedness could only mean that the situation was serious, if not desperate; far more serious than described in that virtual contract forwarded by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation for the young couple to sign.

Amidst all the sophisticated security structure, a single transparent glass door stood out, above it a small sign saying 'Conference Room Number 9,' and upon entering through the door, a team of 4 anthros were already comfortably seated, awaiting the boss who had just opened and crossed the door, bringing along with him the two test subjects.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Sorry for the slight delay. But given the current circumstances, delays have unfortunately become normal in our projects. Well, I'd like to introduce you to our volunteers, River and Aiden."

Isaac spoke with a certain gravitas, sounding more like a leader at that moment rather than arrogant or anything else.

Of all the four members of the main team, the first to rise and personally greet the young couple was a skunk anthro with a youthful appearance, around his early twenties, yet exuding the energy and demeanor of someone genuinely younger than the rest of the team.

"Hi, I'm Hari. Nice to meet you," said the purple-furred skunk with white inner fur, sporting purple irises that matched both his outer fur and the suit he was wearing. A small punk detail in his outfit was a black collar around his neck with polished steel balls engraved on it. His suit had chest openings that displayed a good portion of his chest fur to the world. Hari greeted the two young individuals in a lighthearted, kind, and welcoming manner.

The second team member to greet the twink couple was a rabbit, equally slender, appearing youthful, in his mid-twenties, and in good physical shape. His fur was speckled with white marks all over his body, with the main fur being brown, and his eyes also a shade of purple matching his body suit. His tightly fitted body suit seemed almost like a second skin, leaving both his legs, thighs, and arms exposed to the world, with the only opening in the posterior designed for his fluffy rabbit tail to protrude.

"I'm Salvor, pleasure to meet you," said the rabbit anthro in a somewhat shy and slightly uncertain manner, brief but polite.

Lastly, the third team member to greet Aiden and River was a raccoon with dark and light gray fur, his hair obviously dyed purple in an attempt to scream even more youthful vibes, despite Gaal having not had his youth for at least 400 years.

"I'm Gaal, pleasure."

The raccoon spoke with a dry, arrogant tone, carrying a hint of disdain as he introduced himself. Among those present, Gaal was the only one dressed in a body suit as elegant and sophisticated as Isaac's, despite not having anywhere near the same financial status or prestige as the Siamese feline. Much of his life was a façade; in reality, Gaal had far more internal frustrations stemming from his advanced age and apparent lack of progress in life. Although in Gaal's mind, he was certain he could conceal these frustrations and remain unnoticed by the public, to more perceptive observers, it was relatively easy to grasp the origins of his grumpiness, arrogance, and bitterness despite his youthful appearance alongside the rest of his team.

The final member of the team to greet the pair of genuinely young twinkles was another canine. He could easily be considered the most arrogant and toxic member of the team, even more so than Gaal.

"I'm Raych, the team's chief engineer. Graduated from Tundror."

The canine spoke with a tone that seemed to imply superiority over everything and everyone, emanating pure pride for having graduated from one of the best colleges in the galaxy. Despite being somewhat short, there was not an ounce of humility in his voice. Furthermore, his pride was evident even in his attire. Among those present, Raych might have been the anthro with a youthful appearance in his mid-twenties wearing the most revealing body suit. Aside from the eye-catching colors of his body suit—black, white, red, maroon, with golden yellow details, which to some extent matched the colors of his brown and white furred body—the canine's outfit had a wide opening at chest level, exposing a good portion of his upper body, including his nipples, as well as his thighs and buttocks since his long boots ended at knee height. The little clothing that covered his body was tightly fitted, leaving little to the imagination. However, both his arms were covered, especially his forearms, which appeared to be in thick gloves, a matter of necessity rather than choice.

Raych, as previously mentioned, was an engineer; therefore, he needed a practical and quick way to access the HUD controlling all the instruments in his suit. This made it impossible for the somewhat showy canine to leave his arms entirely exposed as was the case with Salvor, the rabbit's suit.

"Well, very well. Now that everyone has been introduced, does anyone have more questions?" inquired the Siamese cat leading the team. Aiden even prepared to speak

up; the spaniel dog did have numerous questions. However, since he, for all intents and purposes, was not an official member of this research, Isaac took the liberty to completely disregard him. Even before the white-furred doggy had the opportunity to say anything, the Siamese cat finished by saying, "Great! That settles it. Everyone can return to their tasks. Hari, please guide young River to the molecular scanning room."

Following the instructions, the skunk boy with purple fur quickly joined the orange-furred bobcat, both walking together with the skunk leading the way. Aiden, slightly irritated by having his freedom to question completely overridden by Isaac once again, resigned himself to follow his boyfriend alongside the skunk, and soon, the three anthros were out of the conference room.

"So, Raych, graduate of the Imperial College of Tundror. Will you do justice to your degree and tell me if the Raven is ready, or should I expect more delays and drama as usual?" Isaac questioned his engineer with a tone that accurately conveyed his dissatisfaction.

"Listen here, you spoiled cat, if you had even an ounce of understanding of how challenging it is to adapt an imperative class ship to fly inside someone's body..." Raych spoke, clearly sounding angry, even puffing up his chest in an attempt to assert himself against the Siamese cat, who was decidedly taller. However, the raccoon then stepped in with a cold, calm, and professional tone expected from the team's older corporate member and said:

"When the kids are done fighting, will the other adults here finally get a real project update?" The Siamese cat simply rolled his eyes, maintaining his posture of a standing madam toward the canine engineer until he looked back at Raych and said, "It's over to you, engineer."

Raych collected himself briefly before proceeding. "Most of the adaptations have been completed. Essentially, all the sensor and navigation aspects are finished, and the ship is ready to fly through someone's bodily interior. Now, what's really taking time is reconfiguring the thermal and primary shields of the vessel to withstand the immense pressure of the bloodstream and body heat. Particularly, I'm paying special attention to the primary shields because once miniaturized, the energy shields will lose a significant portion of their effectiveness. Unless you want to perish when our ship gets engulfed by one of the white blood cells inside that bobcat's body."

Raych concluded his briefing, emphasizing his final point, and looked directly into his boss Isaac's face.

"Okay, do you think the ship will be ready to carry out the mission by tonight?" Isaac responded directly and unshaken, maintaining eye contact with the canine.

"Most likely, yes."

"Great. In that case, we'll be on standby with Raych. When Raych and his technicians give us the green light, I'll notify everyone. The rest of the protocol is already known to everyone, so there's no need for me to repeat myself. Until then, I'll ask Hari to keep the kids entertained in the examination room. We only need a single molecular scan of River's body to use as a map in our navigation systems, but having more scans won't hurt. Isn't that right, Salvor?"

Isaac finished, his voice now fluctuating between polite professionalism, weariness, and stress. Meanwhile, Salvor, the timid rabbit who would serve as the team's pilot and navigator, summed up in his shy tone,

"Basically, yes..."

"Great, I think we're done here."

At that moment, the remaining four anthros exited the conference room and headed back to their tasks. Except for one - the gray-furred raccoon with purple hair - who remained seated until everyone left. Once Gaal made sure he was alone in the conference room, he moved his hand to the control HUD on his suit's left wrist. With a button press, a flathead model drone, previously hidden through its holographic camouflage on the room's ceiling, became visible.

The drone, rotating on its own axis while still attached to the ceiling, aimed its facial scanner at the raccoon's face. Confirming Gaal's identity, the drone established an interplanetary holographic transmission with a hidden and mysterious figure, whose voice and face were distorted.

"The two volunteers arrived safely, and the team is preparing to commence the expedition tonight, if there are no more delays. I obtained detailed schematics of the ship today; it seems they are adapting an Imperative-class light cruiser, the Raven model, for the miniaturization mission."

Gaal promptly reported, while the obscured figure on the hologram replied, "Very good, Gaal. So far, you've provided us with almost all the data we need. And once you achieve the primary objective, your personal account will receive so much money that you'll never have to work for any corporation again."

The distorted voice chuckled, but Gaal didn't join in. Instead, he responded directly.

"I need more assurances from your people regarding the timing and extraction point. After all, corporate espionage is usually punished by death."

"I've said it before, nothing for you to worry about. But since you're so insistent on worrying, why not go ahead and try to send us the volunteer bobcat's body scan data, huh? The rest is our problem, not yours."

Abruptly, the call was terminated, leaving the raccoon boy sitting in the conference room chair, sulking and twirling his hair. Deep down, Gaal knew this plan had all the makings of a disaster. But deeply entrenched in this plan beyond the point of no return, he could only forge ahead.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, the trio of anthropomorphic beings—Hari, River, and Aiden—were in the examination room.

"River, I need you to remove all your clothes for this examination. You can keep your underwear on."

Following the instructions, the orange-furred feline shed his already minimal clothing, left only in a pair of dark purple boxers with pink stripes that, coincidentally, matched his equally dyed pink hair.

"Now, lie down here."

The skunk boy instructed calmly and politely while operating the machinery for the examination. As Hari finished his sentence, a platform materialized below a molecular beam cannon. The bobcat feline lay down, tensing up and holding his breath. Hari chuckled lightly, reassuring River that it wasn't necessary.

"Relax and make yourself comfortable; the examination will only take a few minutes."

And so, the skunk boy redirected his attention to the operational HUD display to initiate the process. Aiden, meanwhile, observed alongside Hari, asking, "Molecular diagnostic scanner, why all this precision?"

Indeed, molecular diagnostic scanners could detect specific molecules within the patient's body and even analyze individual cells while the patient lay down, seemingly relaxed and feeling nothing. The precision of the machinery was such that it would be the standard type of scan an individual would undergo if they wished to be cloned, for instance.

"Routine procedure, given the nature of the drugs we're going to introduce to our handsome friend there—we need a detailed map of his body before and after," Hari replied honestly, sounding enthusiastic, although he was obligated to comply with the internal norms and policies of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation.

Not long after the two anthropomorphic beings concluded their brief conversation, the device was already generating the results of River's body analysis: Red blood cells: 5.5 million per microliter of blood, White blood cells: 8,000 per microliter of blood. Neutrophils: 65%. Lymphocytes: 30%. Eosinophils: 2%. Basophils: 1%. Cells from epithelial tissue, connective tissue, muscle tissue, nervous tissue, endocrine tissue, reproductive tissue; stomach acid content: pH 1.4.

Aiden made a point to glance over Hari's shoulder at the machine's results, hoping to better understand the specific calibration of the device as the spaniel dog had never quite trusted this venture from the beginning. However, Aiden wasn't an expert in the field. All he managed to glean from the displayed results was the special attention given to the boyfriend's immune and nervous systems. He also noticed that as soon as Hari sent the results through the facility's internal network to the engineering sector... From the spaniel dog's perspective, it made no sense, but that was all the information Aiden had for now.

Simultaneously, the skunk boy received a message through his neural link chip instructing him to stall the young couple a bit longer because the other team members and technicians hadn't yet completed their tasks. Without hesitation, Hari led River through various devices available in the medical wing, performing a series of tests on the bobcat whose body he and the other main team members would be exploring and traveling through in a matter of minutes.

Unable to resist and seizing the opportunity, the skunk offered Aiden a full medical scan, which allowed him the chance to spend some time observing the alluring curves of the two young twink who were now clad in nothing but underwear. River in his dark purple boxers and Aiden in a tight red thong, barely containing the volume between his thighs. Hari struggled to contain his own excitement.

"I believe you're a doctor," Aiden inquired, now seated in front of a laser photocoagulation machine.

"Indeed, I'm the head of intensive therapy. Please, stay still or I might end up poking your eye," Hari requested.

"Apologies!" the white doggy responded, complying with the doctor's instructions as a thin blue laser scanned his yellow iris. The examination was automated, yet Hari's statement was an excuse to sneak a glance at the striking red shape between the legs of the white-furred spaniel dog. The bobcat was onto the doctor's slightly risqué strategy but chose to remain silent, curious to see how far Hari would go.

Fortunately for the skunk boy, he soon received a message via his neural link indicating that everything was ready and they needed him in Room A 113 to commence miniaturization. Hari calmly rose and spoke.

"Well, gentlemen, we have all we need. I'll leave you here until you're dressed, and a technician will come to give you further instructions on the next steps of the process."

And as he finished the sentence, the skunk offered a gracious smile to the young couple, walking toward the exit of the examination room. Aiden, rising from the chair and positioning himself next to his boyfriend, both clad only in undergarments, remarked,

"He does seem like a decent sort. Perhaps the sole amiable one within the entire team."

River, in turn, gave a foolish grin and, rolling his eyes, replied, 'I'll tell you what I saw later. Let's get dressed quickly before some technician walks in and finds us semi-nude.'

'And I wouldn't mind that, not even if they found us 100% nude ~'

Aiden teased, simultaneously placing his hand on the front bulge of his boyfriend's purple boxer briefs and giving it a slight scratch. River, emitting a low groan, moved his hand to push away his partner's hand, saying, 'Aiden, stop that!'

The spaniel dog merely chuckled.

In another room, relatively distant from the medical examination chamber where River and Aiden were, a sizable structure was in its final stages of preparation. The room itself was immense, spacious enough to accommodate a small imperial cruiser. Entering through the main door of this room, which bore all the hallmarks of an ultra-secret environment, was Hari, the skunk boy who had just completed all the examinations for the twink couple.

'Hari, change into your attire; we're essentially awaiting your presence.'

Isaac spoke, now garbed in a specialized all-gray uniform, carrying a briefcase, stepping onto the threshold of the stairway, about to embark from within the raven-class imperial model. Inside, all other team members were already assembled. The rabbit Salvor, stationed as the pilot and navigator of the ship in the cockpit; the doggy Raych, situated in the ship's engineering section, conducting final tests, simulations, and adjustments. Isaac and the raccoon boy Gaal together on the command bridge; Gaal, without arousing suspicions from the Siamese cat, attempted to clear the access terminals on the control panel so that his holographically camouflaged spy drone, the flathead, also aboard, could connect to the ship's computers and transmit in intricate detail and real-time updates on the progress of the expedition. And finally, the team's specialist medic, Hari, the purple skunk boy, seated next to Salvor to aid in navigation and optimize the best routes in line with the mission's objectives.

"Mr. Konos, I took the liberty of conducting detailed examinations on the volunteer's boyfriend, I would like..."

Hari began, immediately presenting himself to Isaac on the command bridge. However, the Siamese feline swiftly interrupted, stating, "Unnecessary, we won't be conducting any excursions into Aiden's body. Now, Hari, please take your seat at your post; the miniaturization sequence is about to commence."

Not long after Isaac finished that sentence, a controlled commotion erupted outside the imperative-class ship. Dozens of technicians, including several humans and other

anthropomorphic beings, were preparing to depart the area and initiate the shrinking sequence. Gathering their tools and ensuring the environment was impeccably clean, once the area was definitively clear of personnel, the miniaturization sequence commenced. A powerful shrinking ray, the machinery required to operate, generate, and maintain its functionality comparable to the size of a multistory house, sprang into action, shrinking a specially modified light space cruiser for this mission to a microscopic size and encapsulating it within a small capsule that would be immediately directed to the volunteer awaiting in another room. This procedure would prevent any suspicion from arising on the part of the bobcat, ensuring the secrecy of the operation's true nature.

In the other room, River, now without Aiden's presence, was once again dressed and going over instructions with a human technician. The bobcat was informed that today, only one capsule would be tested, and he should not leave the Weyland-Yutani premises during the testing period. Additionally, River was given a list of prohibitions outlining everything he couldn't do during the forthcoming hours, including abstaining from having sex and maintaining a fasting state.

"Before we begin, has it been more than three hours since you last consumed any food?"

The human technician inquired of the young anthro bobcat, nearly twice her height. River hesitated before responding, finally stating, "Yes..."

Completely lying, as he feared the consequences of causing further delays for the team.

Shortly thereafter, a small droid carrying a thermal conversion unit arrived in the room. Encased within the unit was the pill alongside a crystal-clear glass of water for River to drink.

Meanwhile, inside the vessel, the tension among the team was palpable. Each of the five members knew they had passed the point of no return and would soon be ingested. Suddenly, a beam of light pierced the moment the thermal unit's lid was raised, revealing outside and in the external world the same orange-furred bobcat that moments ago had been introduced to the crew inside the microscopic craft. The only difference was that River now loomed so gigantically large before them that his entire body could rival continents or even entire planets.

Presently, a colossal shadow fell upon the small, semi-transparent plastic capsule concealing the team's minuscule craft, formed by the tips of the gigantic bobcat's two

fingers, as River brought his index finger and thumb closer, poised to pick up the pill and ingest it.

"It seems the show is about to begin," Gaal remarked from his privileged seat on the command bridge, alongside the Siamese feline, moments before a resounding THUD! Followed by a strong jolt that shook the entire world before the young bobcat effortlessly and casually picked up the pill and its container.

From inside the vessel, the occupants witnessed in shock as the giant feline's lips drew near, revealing his immense, dark, and moist interior of the mouth to the world!

"So, Raych, are you absolutely certain that in your recent simulations, the thermal shields would withstand the stomach acid and compensate for the fact that we are now minuscule?"

Isaac inquired once more, somewhat out of apprehension at the sight of another feline's mouth, fully aware that this marked a point of no return.

"Should be fine," Raych responded in a sadistic and somewhat indifferent manner, prompting all other team members on the command bridge to turn and look at the canine engineer, who, at that moment, stood among them, meeting their gazes. Salvor, the team's rabbit, notably wore an expression of extreme concern, perhaps owing to being an herbivore and on the verge of embarking on a journey within the stomach of a colossal feline. Raych sighed, realizing his joke hadn't landed well, and greeted, "Well, considering our passage through his stomach will be brief, and he's properly fasting with an empty stomach for Salvor to navigate swiftly and efficiently, I don't foresee any issues."

The engineer's final words managed to reassure the team, until the raccoon boy spotted something concerning lodged between the bobcat's teeth.

"What's that!"

Isaac immediately zoomed the viewer's focus in the direction indicated by Gaal, and short-range scans confirmed alarming news. Lodged between the bobcat's teeth was a mass of biscuit. Judging by appearance and consistency analysis from the scan, it meant that the colossal feline, now about to swallow them, had eaten not long ago, and his stomach wasn't empty.

"Isaac! We need to abort!" Hari exclaimed, but before they could take any action, River released the pill onto his tongue, causing a minor quake for the team inside the craft, proceeding immediately to drink the water. Even before they could react, the team found themselves on the way to the bobcat's esophagus, with a powerful and resounding GULP! They were on their way to the stomach. Aborting the mission was now out of the question.

To be continued.