

Chapter 1

Claire Yang:

Arrival

The pressure on my body suddenly eased. The filtered roar of the engines gave way to stillness and quiet, and there was no feeling of motion at all. Strapped in, I didn't really have a sensation of weightlessness, but my arms felt lighter now. It was no longer an effort to lift them. "So, this is what it feels like," I thought.

Sam cleared his throat and turned to face me, as far as his harness allowed.

"They say you git used to it," he said.

A space capsule is too small a place, I thought, its occupants too close and too familiar. A metal confessional with a door you can't open. That's not my metaphor, I read it somewhere. But I can't think of a better one.

"They say a lot of things, Sam."

In the white light of the ship's cabin, Sam looked to me like a man-sized mound of grey putty, sprinkled liberally with brown age spots and white stubble, and poured into a pressure suit.

"Wanna snort, Claire?"

Sam had produced a small squeeze bottle from somewhere in his suit, and he held it out to me, an invitation to conspiracy.

"No thanks. I might need to use my brains today."

"Suit yerself."

He sucked amber liquid, and coughed. Tiny golden globes of Kentucky bourbon floated in the space before his watering eyes.

By all appearances, Sam was not a qualifying candidate for space duty, in any capacity, let alone Station Commander. But I knew: he had friends in high places. Powerful people who valued loyalty, and a willingness to not ask questions.

Soon, the station came into view, a giant, white, four-spoked wheel, gently spinning in Earth's reflected glow. Clusters of antennae sprouted from its steel skin. Some reached out to Earth, sending and receiving. Others faced out into the void, listening.

The muted crackle of maneuvering thrusters filtered into the cabin. Through the viewing ports on either side, the Earth swung around us as the ship began its docking sequence. On screen, the station's docking hub spun more and more slowly, as our little ship synchronized its rotation to that of the station. In a few moments, the ship and station completed their automated dance, latched in a consummating embrace. The vid/control panel swung up and out of the way, and the hatch in front of us opened into the station's docking chamber.

Sam went first, extricating his mass from the seat. Pushed off too hard for zero gravity, struck his head on a bulkhead, bounced toward the hatch. He floated through the opening and crashed to the station's deck in slow motion.

I floated carefully through the ship's hatch and into the station docking chamber, arriving next to Sam as he hovered awkwardly just above the deck, clutching a handrail. The chamber was a large cylinder, equally wide and deep, like the inside of a drum, lined with storage closets, systems monitors, and railings for hands and feet. The clean smell of plastic and ozone. Two men were waiting for us.

The man with bright blue eyes spoke first. Powerfully built, broken nose, and a thin scar that ran down the left side of his face. He was younger than his shaved head made him look at first glance. His military fatigues contrasted with the white station and our blue jumpsuits. Space

Force. Why did they insist on wearing camouflage, even on space missions? But the outfit suited this tautly muscled man, floating there with a foot cavalierly shoved under a rail to hold his position in zero g. A silver cross on a fine chain had escaped from under his fatigues, drifting just in front of his broad chest.

With a shock I realized I had been too distracted to hear what he was saying.

“...your ship now, Commander Johnson,” the man said.

Sam pulled himself up a little straighter, nodded. “My ship. Thank you for keepin’ the lights on, Major Shriner.”

Shriner motioned to the tall, thin man beside him. “This is Station Manager Philippe Doux, European Space Agency. He will be your right-hand man.”

“I am very happy to know you, Commander,” said Doux. His accent was thick. The flag on the left shoulder of his blue jumpsuit was French.

“Damn glad to meet ya.” Sam’s handshake was too vigorous for zero g.

After a moment, Sam motioned to me. “This here’s Claire Yang, our comms tech mission specialist.”

The bright blue eyes looked straight through me.

“Ma’am,” Shriner said, with a curt nod. “I’d appreciate a diagnostics run, soon as possible. We’ve had two outages in the last 48 hours. Surveillance is non-operational. Unacceptable.”

“That’s why I’m here, major.”

Doux cleared his throat diplomatically. “And now, please, let us descend to the outer ring. I will show you your office, commander. And I am sure you both will appreciate the gravity there, after your trip, no?”

Station Manager Philippe Doux was long and thin and loosely jointed. In zero g, his knees and elbows swung widely, like a scarecrow treading water. He pushed off to float through the passageway and into the central hub, a cylinder similar in size to the docking chamber. This was the station's core, the hub of the "Big Wheel" as they call it, where critical life support and communications systems were located. Spaced evenly around the edges of this chamber were four large openings, the entrances to long tubular corridors. These were the spokes that connected the hub to the outer ring. Doux turned smoothly and drifted towards one of the four tubes, motioning to us to follow him. Johnson bounced along behind. I followed carefully, still finding my space legs. Shriner swam through the air behind me, like a shark.

As we pushed feet-first into the tube, hand rails became a ladder and within a few moments I began to feel the weight of my body pressing against the ladder's rungs, and there was now a definite impression of up and down. Below me, Sam began to struggle as the gravity increased. Further down, I saw Doux had already reached the foot of the ladder and moved away. I paused as Sam stepped down to the deck, still clinging to the ladder, his breathing labored. He finally shuffled out of the way and I slid down the remaining two meters to the foot of the ladder. Shriner followed suit, narrowly missing me as his boots hit the deck. After days in zero g, my body felt strangely heavy in near-Earth gravity.

We were in the center of a corridor, about three meters tall and twice as wide. The spotless white floors, wall and ceiling were brightly lit. When the station became fully operational, there would be a hundred or more scientists, technicians and engineers here, heading to their labs at the beginning of the artificial day or back to the observation deck at the end of their shifts. For now, a skeleton crew was wrapping up pre-operational work, and we were alone here in the

wide, white hall. I felt the smooth vibration of the station through the soles of my shoes, heard the faint hum of its machinery, sensed the soft breath of recirculating air.

At a gesture from Shriner, Doux resumed his role as tour guide. “Welcome to the Promenade, the main corridor of the Big Wheel,” his long arms spread wide in invitation, reminding me again of a strange scarecrow. “The deck beneath your feet is the outside edge of the station, the rim of the wheel. The station is spinning at two rotations per minute, creating centrifugal force that presses us against the inside of the rim at nearly the equivalent of one g. Better than living in constant free-fall, I think you will agree!”

Doux smiled widely as he said this. But I noticed a different emotion in his eyes. Was it fear?

He waved his long arm forward. “Now, allow me to show you to your office, Commander Johnson.”

The broad path curved up and out of sight ahead of us and behind us, hiding what lay beyond, giving a sense of a continuous present. A large observation port to our right presented a dazzling view of Earth, bright blue and white in a field of infinite black. The west coast of Africa glowed in browns and greens. Europe lay under a thin blanket of white clouds as a storm swirled dreamily over the blue Atlantic.

Sam grunted over my shoulder. “Further you git, the prettier she looks.”

“We’re building a new city, Sam! A city in space,” I said, shaking my head at the wonder of it. “Hundreds of people will live up here, looking down on Earth, like we are now....” A new feeling of hope filled me up, left me breathless. Life was beautiful, limitless. Humanity was taking its first baby steps, away from the grave we were digging for ourselves. Hot tears sprang to my eyes at the joy and terror of it.

Of course, Sam had to ruin it.

“A space station this big, that’s new all right,” he said. “But when ya go and fill it up with people, they gonna bring all their mess with ‘em, same as ever. All the pride, trouble and mess. People are people, Claire, wherever they go.”

Goddammit, Sam.

I turned to show my disappointment at his little joke. But he didn’t flash his folksy grin this time. He kept his rheumy eyes on Earth, as it gently circled around the edges of the observation viewport, spinning slowly now towards night.

“Sam?”

He recovered with a start, and the grin returned to his doughy face: “C’mon, little lady, time to earn our pay.”

Doux and Shriner led the way, the Frenchman’s long thin limbs and curly dark hair, the American’s athletic bulk and clean-shaven head. They were deep into a technical conversation as they walked ahead. The timeline for fully operational status was slipping and Shriner wasn’t happy about it. I half-heard a comment about how comms outages weren’t helping things. Shriner muttered something and jerked his head backward, presumably to indicate me.

We came to a small recess to our left. “Station Commander” was printed in block letters, starkly black against a frosted glass door. Doux waved his hand and the glass slid silently aside.

The room was long, stretching out to our right. At the far end sat a desk. In between the door and the desk was a conference table. Leaning against the table was a small, trim man in a camouflage uniform, like Shriner’s.

Shriner said, “this is Lieutenant David Martinez, Space Force.”

Martinez looked at me, saw the name on my jumpsuit. “Yang,” he said quietly. It felt like an accusation.

Sam shuffled sideways between the uniforms and took possession of the seat at the head of the conference table. He was already getting used to the almost Earth level gravity. He sat down with a grunt, waved us towards the table. “Gentlemen. And Mizz Yang.”

Sam cleared his throat, a phlegmy rumbling. “All right, let’s get to it. Status report, Mr. Doux.”

Despite the triumphant announcements of the official news feeds, everyone in the room was painfully aware of STAR’s stumbling steps to operational status. And being responsible for the delayed launch of this new crown jewel of the administration’s space program was a dangerous place to be.

“Periodic communications outages continue,” Doux began. “Root cause not identified. Level 3 diagnostics begin today,” he said, glancing up at me. “Emergency SFOG system offline, due to impurities found in chlorate canisters. New candles arrived with the ship today.”

That was a shock: solid fuel oxygen generators were nothing new, in fact they had been in use for generations. In case the station lost all power, they would reliably produce life-sustaining oxygen through a controlled combustion of a sodium chlorate and iron powder mix. Primitive, and effective. Quality control issues with the canisters was a troubling sign.

Doux continued. “Also, thermal control systems irregularities. We think we will have this under control shortly. And initiation of the on-board surveillance system is delayed due to these higher priorities, and our personnel shortage because of Commander McAllister’s evacuation.”

Doux looked up from his slim tablet, his list complete.

“Christ on a cracker,” Sam rumbled. “Okay, tell me ‘bout power, water, waste management, radiation shielding, robotics.”

Doux looked grateful to have a little good news to share. “All nominal, Commander.”

Sam grunted. “Alright. And how is McCallister doing?”

“Recovering,” Shriner said.

“Tell him the rest,” Martinez said.

Shriner took a deep breath. “Commander, we have reason to believe this station is being actively targeted for sabotage.”

“Tell me.”

“A few hours ago, we received signal intelligence indicating... your predecessor may have been poisoned,” Martinez said.

This made no sense. “What?” I said. “Commander McAllister was medevaced down to the surface due to cardiac arrhythmia.”

Martinez smiled ironically. “Yes, Miss Yang. That is what you were told.”

Sam was quietly intense now. “Keep goin’.”

Martinez shifted his attention back to Sam, waved a hand around the room. “Think of this as a military platform.”

“This is a science station,” I corrected.

A smirk flashed across Martinez’s face, but it faded fast as he leaned in toward me.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I’ll explain: this precious science station exists only to establish American control of low-Earth orbit. And when we control the orbit, we control the planet. I don’t give a shit about how many scientists they bring up here, or how much they will

learn about the weather,” he spat. “This is a strategic military asset, the highest ground on the battlefield—”

“We are not at war!” I said, louder than intended.

Sam cut in, cool as a cucumber: “And you think someone poisoned McAllister.”

“Not just someone.” Shriner spoke quietly, carefully. “The intelligence was captured from encrypted PLA transmissions. Chinese Aerospace Force.” Shriner’s brilliant blue eyes turned to shine on me now. “And they may have an agent onboard.”

It was Sam’s turn to scoff. “Nah. There ain’t any Chinese agents here.” He waved a thick hand around him. “Everyone on this station, they all been scrubbed six ways from Sunday.”

Martinez’s eyes met mine.

“Everyone. Right.”

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The briefing left me feeling shaky. Vulnerable. But it wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling. China was the enemy, and I looked like the enemy. If it wasn’t for Sam’s insistence, I’d never have been selected for this mission. The thing to do was to keep busy. Keep my head down. Perform above expectations. And don’t show fear.

I gathered my diagnostic gear from my tiny crew quarters, where it had been stowed.

“C’mon, little lady, time to earn our pay,” I mumbled in my best imitation of Sam.

The corridor was empty, silent, brightly lit. The breath of the circulation system, a low hum that I felt in my feet. I stepped to the base of the ladder.

Looking up, I saw someone was there, far above me, nearing the entrance to the central hub.

Sam?

I began to climb. Looking up a moment later, I saw the passage was empty. He must have climbed out of the tube and into the hub, weightless again.

I was about to call out when I heard something. A crash? A shout?

The echo died, and the tube was silent again.

Sam?

Passing the half-way point, I felt my body become lighter. In a moment I was able to push off a rung and float forward toward the hub.

This is the part I don't like to think about.

I drifted to the opening ahead at the end of the tube and looked into the round room.

Sam Johnson was suspended in the center of the chamber, his back to me, slowly turning to face me. But his staring eyes didn't see me. A constellation of shiny red globules circled his head, like tiny moons.

I was just beginning to understand that Sam was dead, when things got much, much worse.

Behind Sam's body, against the curve of the far wall, two men seemed to struggle with a heavy latticework panel. Suddenly there was a loud bang, and a jet of brilliant white flame shot from the wall. The chamber erupted into fire and smoke. A fiery column of blue-white raged into the chamber, illuminating clouds of black smoke. I can still hear the screams. The stink of burning hair and flesh.

FIRE!

I forced myself to move. Found the fire suppression handle, pulled it. Fire, fog, smoke, flashing lights, the klaxon alarm. Fear and death.

A moment or a lifetime later, the fire was out, the suppression system clicked off. Ventilators sucked the smoke and fog from the chamber with a dull roar. Across the chamber, I saw Martinez, gently cradling Doux. What was left of him. Martinez had a vacant, mad look in his eyes. Doux's face was a black, smoking mess.

And dead Sam Johnson turned slowly to stare at me again, through his little red moons.

A loud buzz filled my head and I felt far away, looking through the wrong end of a telescope at a distant horror show. The view narrowed until blackness closed in on me.

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I opened my eyes. Shriner held my shoulders in his large hands, shaking me gently. "You alright, Ms. Yang?"

I blinked and nodded. I was still in the central chamber, with a blinding headache. An unholy stink of burnt hair, and the fainter, fresh scent of wintergreen from the fire suppression system.

Shriner held me in place with one strong hand as he waved one of the crew over. "Get a mask on her, she got a lungful."

Other men in blue jumpsuits were in the chamber with us now, wearing respirator masks. One of them swam up to me, slipped a mask over my face. I looked for Sam. I didn't see him among the dozen or so people busily moving around the chamber.

Two men were struggling to put Doux's body into a long, black bag. They got it around his legs, and pulled at his long arms, waving in the air like someone drowning. As they zipped the bag closed, one hand seemed to wave a last goodbye.

“Where’s Sam?”

No one answered. I pulled the mask off.

“Where is Sam?!”

Shriner turned to me, sadness in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I know he was your friend.”

Marinez shook his head at Shriner. “Fucking Doux! He tried to kill us all,” he said, jabbing a blackened hand at the SFOG grating, burned and bent. A crew member was struggling to wrap Martinez’s hand in gauze while he gestured.

A new alarm rang out over the dull roar of the exhaust fans, followed by an automated voice: incoming ship.