

The Trails of Stars

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It was so quiet here that even Jimmy was starting to get a little uncomfortable.

He had always disliked noise, preferring to stay alone in secluded places and do things without being disturbed. But on this planet in the second half of the 21st century, crowding had become a common theme in every land. In his home of less than fifty square meters, there were nine siblings living. Tired of the endless nagging and interruptions, he became a special enrollment in the Astronautical Academy at the age of fifteen, and performed his first mission to the heavens at less than twenty. Despite not being talkative, he won the full recognition of the organization with his good discipline and calm mental quality, and can be said to have a promising future.

At the moment Jimmy was conducting a routine patrol alone. Jimmy did have a partner, a girl named Alice. Contrary to Jimmy, Alice comes from a wealthy family, being the jewel of the family, and seems to possess all the advantages as well as disadvantages that a little girl in a fairy tale should have. Jimmy shook his head as he thought of this. It sure that Alice's noisiness always goes beyond one's tolerance, but without her voice, this cabin becomes so cold that it is difficult to get used to.

"Could it be that I'm getting attached to her" Jimmy muttered, turning his head to the other seat in the cockpit, empty. "No, it's just the responsibility of being a colleague. Responsibility" Ugh, how dare I talk about 'responsibility'." He pressed out the small fire that had just been lit again.

Jimmy had made a serious mistake: he'd left Alice, his only companion, behind on the chilling Pluto.

"At least Pluto is safe, her life is not in danger. The organization has set up bases on several planets, so just think of it as her temporarily needing to recuperate for a few days in the middle of a mission, and I'll get her a good leave of absence when I get back. It's just that with this preemptive action, I'm going to have to carry disciplinary action for the first time as a captain. But that doesn't matter, after all, this time when I go back, I'm going to apply for retirement."

Jimmy bit his lip and pressed the acceleration button, dumping Pluto and heading straight for Earth, his home planet.

"Give me a clear explanation! Where did I get you in trouble again?" Alice picked up the ice on the ground and smashed it at Jimmy without a second thought. With no air in the way, the ice smashed heavily into the chest of the spacesuit before bouncing off ten seconds later.

"We're all adults, there's no need to be childish, I told you it wasn't you."

“Just be childish! I'm just childish! After all, what adult would choose to retire at your age? If you say it's not me, then please give another reason!”

“Nothing important, I'm just bored of it.”

“Bored? There's a specific reason for being bored of it, right? You're impatient to explain it to me, so let it be. Bye!” Alice ended the conversation abruptly, and left Jimmy's sight in a huff.

Jimmy did not see her at dinner time. By the time he was scheduled to leave, Alice still hadn't shown up. Jimmy looked around the neighborhood and there was no sign of anyone. In no choice, he returned to the ship alone.

“She should be able to take care of herself.”

Jimmy looked back, trying to wrap his heart in the thick snowfield along with the planet.

In fact, it was usually impossible to figure out who took care of whom a little more between the two. Jimmy would tuck in a sleeping Alice, and Alice would feed a feverish Jimmy his tonic. In the popular Internet language of the beginning of the century, it was probably a kind of “brotherhood and sisterhood” - at least in Jimmy's word.

Jimmy always turned on the ship's “pass-through mode” so that he could hear the sounds directly outside the cabin, as if he were immersed in the background noise of the universe. Alice tried to hear it too, and put her chin on the back of Jimmy's head, wondering, “What could the universe possibly sound like? I can hardly catch anything.”

Jimmy laughed, “That's because your mind isn't still enough. Be still and you can hear the heartbeats of the universe.” He was met with a blank stare and a “fool” comment.

Now, he suddenly realized that Alice was right - he was the only fool in the world, and that was not the “heartbeat of the universe” at all, it was Alice's own heartbeat.

“So does she really think I'm a fool? Definitely, I suppose so.” What could be the point of letting go of a great future, thinking of buying a big house for retirement at such a young age, and not finding a companion, an old bachelor with no friends chooses to live on his own? These were probably the questions she would ask. In fact, Jimmy probably can not answer, with countless items in the past, he always thought faintly, got tired faintly, and went away faintly. This astronaut's career, I'm afraid, has also come to the crossroad of boredom and departure.

Ahead of Jimmy, the large planet Jupiter was showing its true colors surrounded by its many satellites. He decided to stand up and get himself a cup of coffee, for the night was still long.

“Don't you like this interstellar travel?” Jimmy recalled the scene Alice threw out the question was just in this cafe.

“Your cappuccino, be careful, it's hot.” The shopkeeper handed over the porcelain-white coffee cup, over which the rising steam blurred the lenses of Jimmy's glasses.

“I can't say I like it, but I can't say I hate it either.” He looked around the establishment of the store and said, “I'll probably retire in a few years, run off to some planet and open a cafe like this one, preferably with as few people as this. Will you come and take care of my business?”

Would his own self at the time have extended such an invitation? At present Jimmy can't help but chuckle, taking a sip of the white foam on the top of his coffee.

Alice bristled and said, “Probably. It's just that I'd like to fly for a few more years, and there are so many planets I've heard of but have never visited yet. And who's to say what's going to

happen in the future!”

Jimmy drank it all in one go, not adding enough milk to make it too bitter. He put on his spacesuit and walked out of the store, throwing behind all the pieces of conversation he had left in the past.

Jimmy returned to his flight, turned off the pass-through mode, and began to play up *the Well-Tempered Clavier* by Bach. These neat melodies had accompanied him on countless upset nights. And - “meow” - so had Chopin. The little orange cat with the hefty reputation had not only managed his figure with rhythmic beauty, but had also learned by ear the skill of conducting with his hands, and had already shown his hand at several concerts.

“Chopin, you're awake!” Jimmy closed the protective cover of the dashboard and greeted Chopin warmly. Chopin gracefully cat-stepped past Jimmy and stood on Alice's seat. He gazed out the window at the crystal-like rings of Saturn, his eyes glowing with starlight.

“You like those bright rings too, don't you?”

Jimmy remembered when he and Alice had come on a mission to sample Saturn's rings a little over half a year ago.

Up close, Saturn's rings consisted of several juxtaposed orbits of varying widths that stretched all the way to the sky. He remembered roaming along one orbit with her, unable to take them all in sight. When it was time to leave, Alice was so unsatisfied:

“May I keep a small bit of it as a memento of the day?”

“Strictly speaking, this is not in line with organizational discipline. But I'm only responsible for reminding, so you decide for yourself.”

“Alright then.” Alice's face was a shade of red and a shade of white as she reluctantly reached out from behind her back and added the tiny bit of sample hiding between her fingers to the organization's sampling box.

On the way back, Alice was as giddy as ever, counting the wonders she'd witnessed that day, but Jimmy noticed the red corners of her eyes, which stood out against her pale skin.

Two months later, at Alice's birthday party, Jimmy brought a whole box of samples of Saturn's rings.

When Alice asked in surprise, Jimmy just smiled mysteriously and said, “Their first mission is accomplished, and now comes the second: Happy Birthday to you!”

He wouldn't tell her, of course, that it was the result of his marching orders at the Captain's, in exchange for full attendance and overload for the latter half of the year.

Maybe it was those six months of overwork that had stretched his mind and body to the limit, Jimmy thought. Was it worthwhile, to put in such hard physical labor just to get a smile from a colleague? But he didn't seem to regret it, he just had a slight puzzle.

“Love is not asking if it's worthwhile.”

These are the words of the Chinese writer Eileen Chang, which Jimmy heard from Alice. One day Alice discovered this sentence, excitedly held her portable device and read it to him, but Jimmy was only too unromantic to lecture Alice, that reading too many non-nutritious words of love is harmful to the brain; Alice strongly argued that the motto is not about love, this is used by

Eileen Chang to describe her mindset of keeping herself all over the writing, “rewrite over and over again so many years”. On the contrary, this narrow-mindedness that immediately thinks of men and women when it comes to “love” exactly indicates a brain seriously damaged. These words stuck Jimmy half a day without a word. How at this moment would he unreasonably judge himself with that motto again.....

Is this love?

Jimmy reached out and stroked his palm all the way across Chopin's head, spine and tail. To Jimmy's great satisfaction, Chopin never yelped at times like this, just squinted and lifted the corners of his mouth, as if he were slightly drunk in the gentle sunlight.

The sun was getting closer - from Jimmy's perspective, it was already the size of Chopin's pupil. The next stop is Mars, and now it's the epilogue of my astronaut career, Jimmy's heart fluttered.

In fact, Alice was probably the only one who knew of Jimmy's intention to retire. If she hadn't spoken to her relatives and friends about it - she had been hanging around all day and hadn't spent many days on Earth, and shouldn't have had the opportunity to talk to anyone about Jimmy - then the only one who could share this feeling with Jimmy at the moment was the witty kitten Chopin.

“It's so nice, honestly! At least I have an old friend to listen to me.” Jimmy looked eyes with Chopin, “Well? Any unfinished business from the trip?”

Chopper didn't wait for him to finish before jumping off the ground and heading back to his den for a drink of water.

“Wow! So there's so much water on Mars! And the temperature is so low, it's turning to ice. I thought it was going to be a big scary furnace just like the color of the surface!”

“Well strictly speaking, all that solid water is not very pure, don't drink it, something bad will happen.”

“I know! Don't treat me like a child!” Alice had an aggressive stance that made Jimmy feel that this young female partner of his first mission would definitely cause a lot of trouble for him.

“Why are you giving me that look? Say, do you have some bad intentions? Quickly confess!” Alice questioned as she dug out a piece from the glacier and threw it at the frozen Jimmy.

It took Jimmy several seconds before he regained his senses, “You, you, you, what kind of behavior is that? Are you crazy?”

“Crazy crazy crazy! It's just never cured!” Alice picked up another piece of ice, “Oooooops!”

“You're, ugh! Then me, me too!” Driven by the strange intuition, Jimmy also picked up a piece of ice and threw back at her.

Even though, in the eyes of the Martian tourists that day, these two idiots were literally going to disgrace the people of Earthlings; and even though it was also the silliest day of Jimmy's twenty-odd years of life, it was also one of the most enjoyable, reckless, and nowadays nostalgic days he'd ever had.

He began to be able to understand joys of his chirpy brothers and sisters.

He began to realize that he didn't have to be alone, to be the quietest one all the way through, as if he were participating in a “loneliness marathon”.

He finally realized that what he had hoped for but failed to achieve was simple - if a little friend reached out to him, he could also put aside his burdens and have a good time together.

But all that was going to pass, childhood or loneliness, Alice or the stars, would eventually become words in his memory. His new life on Earth, a new life of embracing loneliness and licking each other's fur, was already beckoning him.

Earth was already beginning to dominate the star-studded canvas in front of him. Home, it was just around the corner.

Jimmy suddenly came out of the thought of writing a letter to Alice, a long letter that would sit somewhere in this spaceship, to include his many, many thanks, her many, many virtues, and their many, many memories. It was an old-fashioned way of expression, and nowadays a child of a rich family, like Alice, has probably never even seen a paper or a pen.

He stood up, walked out of the cockpit and headed for his bedroom. Paper, pens and envelopes were in the room.

As he passed the hibernation chamber, there was a crash in the lightly covered hatch, followed by a loud "meow" from Chopin.

Was something there? Jimmy opened the hatch and was dumbfounded for a moment - Alice was slowly sitting up from one of the hibernation capsules, still wearing her pajamas adorned with a bear design.

"Hey! Hibernation capsules are used for at least three months, what kind of person would use it as a capsule hotel and wakes up only after a few hours?"

"Capsule hotel? What century is that? There's truly a generation gap that I can't fill. Eh, what you're saying is that it would be easier for you to lock me up in there for a few months?" Alice scratched her tousled hair back, "Hum, that's true, anyway, you were planning on never seeing me again."

"How the hell? Where did the words come from! How could I think of you like that?"

"By the way, what are you doing here rather than sailing the ship?"

"I, I" To write her a letter on paper, Jimmy couldn't tell her the truth anyway, and in the rush of the moment he blurted out, "I just wanted to ask where we're going on the next mission. "

Alice froze, and even Jimmy himself was frightened by his own words. Without saying anything, Alice took an arrow step and jumped on top of Jimmy like a rabbit, almost pouncing on him.

This time he heard, more clearly, the heartbeats of the universe.