

The Love Song of Laura Morrison

by Jerry Oltion

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Teigh was unpacking when he heard the sound at the window. He looked up from the pressure crate, but he could see nothing outside that might have made a noise; only the landscape curving upward in the distance. He looked out at it for a moment, then shrugged and turned back to the crate, lifting out a twist of gnarled wood that looked like a miniature oak tree in winter, which was in fact part of a pine's root system turned upside down. It had cost him nearly five hundred dollars to ship along, but ever since he had found it sticking out of an icy riverbank nearly ten years ago he had taken it with him wherever he went. Its weathered branches held for him the essence of Earth, a moment of life frozen in its struggle with the elements.

He stood with it cradled in his hands while he turned once around in search of an appropriate spot for his treasure, and he heard it again. A kind of high-pitched squeak, like a bearing going out, or...

Or a kitten, hanging onto the ivy that grew along the divider between his apartment and the next, looking down over one shoulder the way kittens do when they're thinking about jumping.

Teigh set his tree down on the bed and stepped to the window. He still wasn't used to the light gravity in the colony and he didn't know what the varying rate would do to a falling object's velocity, but he was pretty sure that a three-story fall wouldn't do a kitten any good even here. He opened the window gently so he wouldn't scare it into jumping, reached out from below, and pulled it in, saying, "Well, little thing. Where did you come from?"

The kitten was gray and white and practically all fuzz. It looked up at him and meowed again.

Teigh stuck his head back out the window and looked along the building. The ivy originated from the apartment below and to the right; a perfect trellis for climbing kittens.

"So," he said as he pulled his head back in. "You're checking out your new neighbor. Hello. Nice to meet you." He let the kitten pull its legs up until it was standing in the palm of his hand. It couldn't have been much over two months old. "You're cute," he told it, "but I'll bet your mother wonders where you are."

He looked out the window again, but he saw nobody below and he didn't feel like shouting. "Well," he said, "I guess it's time I did a little visiting myself."

* * *

The nameplate on the door said Laura Morrison. Teigh looked down at the kitten in his hand and cocked an eyebrow. Single? He pushed the doorbell.

A voice from within said, "Just a minute," and there were some bumping sounds, then the door opened to reveal a white-haired woman in her seventies or so. Teigh tried to hide his disappointment.

"Hi, I'm Teigh Kuhlow, from upstairs in 308," he said. "I, uh, I found your kitten climbing on the ivy."

The woman nodded wearily and reached out for it. "Not surprising. Sorry. I'll close the window."

Teigh shook his head. "Oh, no. I didn't mean that. I didn't mind, really. I was just afraid he'd fall. I, uh, I like kittens."

She lowered her hand and looked at him through squinted eyes. "You do."

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

The woman smiled for the first time. "The last guy who lived up there, for one. Hah. Well, come on in, then. I've got a lot of 'em."

Indeed she had, Teigh discovered when he was inside. He counted six cats without looking hard, three of them from the same litter as the one that still purred in his hand. There might have been more, but if there were they were hidden in the lush foliage that grew almost everywhere. Laura led him to the kitchen table and moved a potted geranium from one of the chairs so he could sit.

"So you got the Hulk's apartment, eh?"

"The Hulk?"

"That's what I called him. Barbells. Always lifting them, banging them back down on the floor. Said he needed to keep in shape in the light gravity. Hah. What did he know? I've been here thirty years without lifting a barbell once and I'm still kicking." She took two cups down from a shelf and filled them with water. "Tea?"

"Uh, yes, please."

"Good, 'cause I don't have coffee. Horrid stuff. Should've left it on Earth. That where you're from?"

"I was. I guess I'm from here, now."

She nodded. "One-way ticket, huh? Me too. What do you do?"

Teigh set the kitten on his lap, where it promptly curled up to sleep. "I'm an architect. I'm working on the life support system for Daedalus."

"Daedalus?"

"The starship."

She put the cups in the microwave, punched a few buttons, and reached into a canister for a tea bag. "I use regular tea," she explained. "Don't like the aftertaste that heat-em-up stuff leaves. God knows what chemicals are in there anyway. Starship, you say. I didn't know they had one."

Teigh smiled involuntarily at her quick changes in subject. "Oh, come on now. You have to have heard. They're building it right outside. It's the biggest news in the solar system."

"Ah, well, I'm not much for news, you know. Full of wars and killing and such. I decided about twenty years ago that it wasn't worth listening to."

"Oh."

The microwave chimed softly and Laura took the steaming cups out. There was a silence while she dunked the teabag in one cup, swished it around, and dunked it in the other. Teigh used the opportunity to gaze out the glass door in wonder. He'd thought the view from his apartment was spectacular, but Laura's corner apartment had windows on two sides, and the side that faced along the colony's spin axis had an unobstructed view all the way down its length. through the haze of distance Teigh could see the polar ice forming a bull's-eye in the middle of the endcap, melting at the edges to form the streams that ran outward from the center to the rim of the cylinder that was Spacehome. The three windows running the colony's length were strips of blue radiating from the pole, the blue fading to white overhead where the sun's brilliance dominated the sky.

This would be a coveted apartment, he realized. He wondered who Laura Morrison was to have it. The mayor's mother? But certainly the mayor's mother would know about Daedalus.

"You like the view?" she asked.

"Yes, very much."

"David did, too. He was my husband."

Suddenly it all clicked into place. "David Morrison? The architect?"

Laura turned, surprised. "You knew him?"

"No," Teigh said. "But I wish I had. Everyone on the Daedalus project wishes so too. We could have used his genius in designing the ship."

She pretended no false modesty. "Ah. Yes, maybe so. He'd have liked that." She brought the two cups to the table and sat down beside him. "He was always pushing for a starship. Even building Spacehome wasn't enough. He wanted the stars."

"Then I wish he'd lived to see Daedalus."

Laura looked out toward the pole. "So do I," she said.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Teigh took a hesitant sip of the tea, wishing he could ask for sugar in it but knowing that he wouldn't, then feeling surprise to taste the honey she had stirred in while he was lost outside.

Laura took a sip of her own and winked at him over the cup. Teigh smiled, somehow embarrassed. This wasn't the sort of behavior he expected from a seventy-year-old woman.

"Yeah," she said, "I do miss the old coot. Hard as hell to live with, but I loved him anyway."

Teigh had read biographies of David Morrison, but none of them had portrayed him as being particularly hard to live with. But then none of his biographers had had to live with him, either.

"What was he like?" he asked.

With a fond shake of her head Laura said, "Oh, well, he was a real space nut. One-track mind. 'Get our race into space' and 'Stay alive in L-5' and all that. When we first met he wouldn't take me out on a date unless I joined the L-5 Society. I didn't even know what the L-5 Society was, but David was so magnetic I went ahead and joined just to be with him. We were still in college then."

She took another sip of tea and gazed out over the colony. "He was always pushing. Made me take astronomy classes. Said that a person who couldn't find Cassiopeia without a map was as bad as someone who couldn't read. What do you think? Can you find Cassiopeia?"

Teigh felt the color rising in his ears. "Uh..."

"Shame on you. And you on the crew of a starship. Where are you taking it? Not Cassiopeia, I hope."

Her grin was contagious. "Nothing so ambitious," he said. "We're going to Alpha Centauri first. It'll take us about twenty years just to get that far."

Laura sighed. "You're a lot like David. He wasn't afraid of big projects either."

Teigh blushed again. Being compared to his personal hero --by his hero's wife, no less--was embarrassing. He stuttered a moment in search of something to say, then managed, "You must not be either. To come up here to live while they were still building it."

"Hah. No. I was terrified. But David was coming whether I did or not, so I didn't have much choice. I spent most of the first few months being sick, and then I got pregnant with Michael and spent *another* few months sick, but I guess you get used to anything after a while."

"I guess that's what it means to be a pioneer."

Laura said something that sounded like "Hrumph," and drained her teacup.

Teigh wasn't sure how to take that. He decided that a change of subject was probably safest, so he said, "What were you studying in college before you met David?"

"English literature," Laura said with a sudden smile. "Had my nose buried in a book almost all the time. I was going to be the greatest poet since Shakespeare, but I had to read everything that'd been written first, you know, and I never finished doing that. Do you like poetry?"

"What I've read of it," Teigh admitted. "I didn't have a whole lot of time for reading it in school, though. Just what we got in Freshman English."

"Ah, yes. 'In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.' T.S. Eliot. Remember him?"

Her words had loosed a tumble of images in his mind. "Yes! Yes, I do! The Ballad of J. Edgar Prunecoat or something like that, isn't it?"

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Laura said, laughing. "Let us go then, you and I/ When the evening is spread out against the sky--' I think everybody gets that one. You know, I was going to be a teacher once, too."

"You were? Why didn't you?"

She looked away at the colony. "Oh, well, you know. David had his project, and we were moving all over those first years. And then we moved up here and I had the family to look after and it just never seemed to come together." She shook her head. "I don't even read as much as I used to anymore."

"Why not?"

Laura looked at Teigh as if she were sizing him up before she imparted a secret, then finally said, "I grow old... I grow old... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." She shrugged. "Same poem. It's hard for me to get to the library sometimes. Arthritis, tendonitis, you know. All the old-people stuff. You caught me on one of my good days."

"Can't you just download books onto your computer?"

Laura looked embarrassed. "I never could get the hang of working one of those things."

"I could show you. It's really easy."

She was definitely blushing now. "No," she said. "I don't get along too well with gadgets. Anything with buttons on it. Besides, there's nothing like having a real book in your hand when you're reading."

"I suppose not," said Teigh, who had never read a book on anything *but* a screen. He had a sudden thought. "How do you get your mail if you don't use a computer?"

"I go to the post office," Laura said in the voice a person uses to answer a dumb question, but her laugh was a quiet, little-girl sort of a laugh that carried no contempt. "On my way to the library. My grandkids think I'm crazy too," she added, "but they humor me. They're scattered out all over the solar system. I get letters from Ganymede and Vesta and Ceres all the time, but they come by regular mail, on paper."

More likely the post office printed them out for her from the digital transmission, Teigh thought, but he supposed they *could* still send letters by ship. People sent packages, after all. But it cost a fortune, even shuttling up from Earth. He shook his head. If Laura would learn to run a computer she could save herself a lot of trouble and a lot of money too. He didn't doubt that she could; she'd shown plenty of facility with buttons when she used the microwave.

But it didn't sound like she was interested. Teigh shrugged. "Everybody's got their own way of doing things," he said. "I'm certainly not the one to say what's crazy and what isn't." He finished his tea and set the cup on the table, scooped up the kitten in his hands, and said, "I should get back to unpacking. I've got to dig down as far as my socks before I go to work tomorrow. Thank you for the tea, and the lap-warmer."

"Any time." Laura stood and took the kitten from him, and followed him to the door. "Come back and visit again," she said.

"I will." Teigh stopped at the door to look at something he had missed on the way in: a fish bowl shaped like a pressure suit helmet. He bent down for a closer look, then laughed in surprise. It *was* a helmet. He looked up at Laura and asked, "What do you do for a suit when you go outside?"

"I haven't gone outside since David died," she replied. "There hasn't seemed much point."

"Oh." He stepped into the hall. "Well, maybe I can take you to see the ship sometime. And you can show me Cassiopeia."

She grinned. "Maybe so. We'll see."

* * *

As he unpacked, he thought about Laura and her husband. David had died almost twenty years ago in a construction accident, before Spacehome had been completed, but he had been the driving force behind it even after he was gone. It had been his plans that got the public funding for the project in the first place--his incredibly detailed plans that showed not just a cylinder with houses and forests and farms in it, but just where the houses and forests and farms ought to go and how to get them there. He had designed the entire colony right down to the last rivet and rock; he had written the manual on living in space, and then he had sold it to the world.

It was hard to imagine his wife as the kind of person who couldn't--or wouldn't--work a computer, but Teigh supposed it was just another sign of David Morrison's genius that he could build a high-tech world with room enough in it for someone like her. Maybe she was part of the reason why Spacehome was so livable. She was a reminder that people were individuals and wouldn't all fit the same mold. She

provided the human touch to David's technical expertise. Teigh would have to remember her while he helped design Daedalus's lifesystem.

The starship was going together in a completely different way than the colony had. With Spacehome they had had the complete plans from the start, but Daedalus's designers were barely a jump ahead of the builders. It was a reflection of the changing times; people were more impatient to get into space now that the first efforts had proved so successful, but the lack of an acknowledged genius for a designer was also part of the reason. Nobody had yet come up with a complete set of plans that somebody else couldn't tweak into a slightly better configuration. And now here was Teigh to add his own twist to the developing plans. Well, he thought, thanks to Laura he might at least have a direction to twist them.

* * *

The next few months were the most intense in his life. The problem of designing a closed environment that people could live in for twenty years was bigger than anything he had ever worked on before, and he found himself immersed in it from the start. He dreamed it at night and he lived it during the day, and slowly a picture began to emerge. It was a picture of mutability, gained from studying David's plans for the colony and noticing the changes that had been made in it since. In twenty years any lifesystem would become boring, so the answer to that was to make it changeable. Spacehome was by its very nature changeable and always changing; new housing replaced old, trees grew and forests expanded, and living styles from Earth and the outer colonies swept through in constant waves of variation. That wasn't as easy to do on a starship, but Teigh thought it might be possible. If the building materials were modular and if the modules were small enough to move around easily, then the crew could conceivably rebuild the entire lifesystem in transit, and they could do it as many times as they liked. The trick was not so much in designing the finished product, since there would be no true finished product, but in designing what the building blocks would look like and how they would go together.

Teigh took the idea to Laura after he had worked it out. He had visited with her a few times since their first meeting, and he had learned to value her quick insight into human nature. This time she listened to his explanation of building materials and mutable living quarters and looked at his drawings, and when he was done she said simply, "Not everybody will want to change things around."

"That's true," he said. "That's the beauty of it. If you like what you're living in then there's no reason why you have to change it, but the opportunity is always there. Just knowing that you *can* change it if you get bored will probably be enough to keep most people happy."

Laura nodded. "You know, this whole idea of yours sounds like something David showed me once. I'd forgotten all about it until now."

"He did a starship design?" Teigh had never heard of a David Morrison starship plan. Nor had anybody else, he was sure. But who was to say what David had worked on in his spare time? And if he had...

He felt like the carpenter who uncovers a fresco by one of the Old Masters behind a false ceiling. A David Morrison starship design!

"Do you think you could find it?"

"Me?" Laura said. "Hah. Not in a million years. It's on his computer. But you're welcome to give it a try if you want."

"I'd--" He swallowed. He couldn't speak.

"Come on, you said yourself that computers are easy."

"It's--" Teigh managed. "It's--that's--I mean, I'd be honored."

"Oh, cut that out. Next you'll be building monuments. Like as not my memory is playing me false and there's nothing there at all anyway." She got up and led the way into the study.

In the back of his mind Teigh still expected to find a shrine to the brilliant architect, kept exactly as David had left it the day he died and dusted carefully every day by his grieving widow, but when Laura flicked on the light that illusion fled with the darkness. Books and papers lay stacked on every horizontal

surface, a blueprint that had been taped to the wall had come loose on one corner and dangled outward, and a stack of empty boxes threatened to fall over onto the desk. Laura gave them a shove in the other direction and waved at the computer sitting to the side of the desk. It was covered with dust, disturbed only by the footprints of kittens.

"Have at it," she said.

Some of Teigh's nervousness disappeared when he saw the computer. It was at least twenty-five years old, but he recognized it just the same. It had been an incredible machine for its time, the one that had reconciled all the other so-called "standards" into a single true standard that was still in use. He would be able to run it, provided it still worked.

He blew off the dust and sat down in front of it, fumbled for the power switch, and turned it on. The fountain of sparks he had half expected didn't happen; instead he got the normal sign-on message and a menu of choices. One of them was a directory, a listing of all the files in storage. Teigh chose that, and file names began to scroll onto the screen.

Ten minutes later he had it. There was an entire subdirectory entitled "starship" filled with drawings and specifications for not only the lifsystem but almost every other aspect of the ship as well. Teigh brought up one of the files on the lifsystem, wondering how close he had come to David's conception of it, and received his second shock of the day. The plans were almost identical to his. The only difference was in the degree of detail; David had once again put in every rivet and bolt.

"I can't believe it," Teigh said. "He did this twenty years ago and it's still better than anything we've come up with since."

"David understood how things work, and how people work," Laura said. "Time doesn't affect that."

Teigh nodded. "How do you feel about us using these plans?" he asked. "Would you let me show them to the design group?"

Laura thought about it a moment, then shrugged. "Why not? That's what he made them for, to use. If they'll do you some good, then you're welcome to them."

"More good than you can imagine," Teigh said. It was true. It would mean giving up the credit for the design, but having David Morrison's name on the plans would effectively cement them into place. They could get on with the job of building the ship instead of constantly changing the details, and the crew who flew in it would start the trip knowing that the design was right. Their confidence in it would go a long way toward making it work.

He sat with his hands resting lightly on the keyboard, marveling at how much information had been locked up behind it all this time. He supposed this was how Laura felt when she blew the dust off a book and opened it for the first time in years. On impulse he said, "Why don't I show you how to get into the library with this?"

Laura's reaction was too immediate to be thought out. "No, I'm too old to be learning how to run one of these things."

"Nonsense," Teigh said. "If you can run a telephone you can run a computer. Watch." Explaining what he did at every point along the way, he returned to the opening screen, loaded the communications program, and accessed the colony library, all by picking options off menus. The library computer gave him another menu of choices, from which he picked the poetry index, and the author index under that.

"Okay," he said. "We're there. What do you want to read?"

Laura looked flustered. "I don't know. I usually just browse until I find something interesting."

"Easily done," Teigh said. He picked the first name off the index--Alan Aaron--and got another menu of titles. He picked the first title, and the first page of *After Gazing at Ganymede* scrolled onto the screen.

Laura leaned forward to read it, but after a few lines she straightened and said, "Hrumph. Doggerel."

Teigh laughed. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know the difference."

"No? Here, I'll show you." She turned away as if to go after a book, then stopped and turned back. "What am I doing? You've got the whole library right there. Okay, see if you can find Pope in there. Alexander Pope, his *Essay on Criticism*."

Teigh did, and within seconds was presented with the lines:

"Tis hard to say if greater want of skill

Appear in writing or in judging ill....

"There," Laura said. "Read that. He talks mostly about critics, but he's got a lot to say about good poetry, and the Essay is good poetry in itself. See here, this is called a couplet, and it's in iambic pentameter..."

* * *

Hours later, printouts of Laura's favorite poems in hand, Teigh made his way back to his apartment. He sat up well into the night reading them, laughing in delight at the crisp imagery and humor in her choices. He'd used to think that poetry was all stiff and formal and hard to follow, but not after reading Shakespeare's sonnets. Some of it was--he was going to have to read five or six more times through the Essay on Criticism before he could truly say he understood it, but he had to admit there was a certain attraction even to the difficult stuff.

He grinned when he realized what had happened. He had tried to get Laura excited about computers, and instead she had gotten him excited about poetry.

* * *

He stopped by the next afternoon to copy the starship files off of David's computer. Afterward, as he and Laura sat at the kitchen table over tea, he said, "You ought to go ahead and go into teaching. You're good at it."

Laura looked up at him in surprise. "Me? Hah. I've seen lots of seventy-year-old English instructors, but they were all on the way out, not in."

Teigh shook his head. "The best teacher I ever had was in her eighties. Late eighties. She was there because she liked what she was doing, and she made everybody in her classes like it too. You've got that same knack; you shouldn't waste it."

"No," Laura said, "I'd have to go back to school myself, get a teaching certificate, learn what's being *taught* these days--no, it's too late for all that, even if I wanted to."

"It's not too late. People live longer now than they used to, you included. You've got plenty of time to do anything you want." He paused, thinking, then said, "Remember J. Alfred Prufrock? I read about him again last night. He didn't act when he had the chance and he regretted it the rest of his life. That's kind of silly, don't you think? If you've got time to regret not doing something, then you've got time to go back and do it."

Laura looked out toward the axis, where a group of pedal planes were spiraling around one another in a near-weightless aerial dogfight. After a time Teigh realized she wasn't going to answer.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess it's none of my business."

She turned back to face him and said, "Yes it is. You're a friend, and friends are entitled to worry about each other. But remember, not everybody wants to change. Some of us are comfortable just the way we are."

Teigh nodded. "Point taken," he said. But at the same time he was thinking *but there's a difference between comfort and complacency.*

* * *

The lifsystem project was taking up even more of Teigh's time now that they had started construction on it, but he still made a point of coming to visit Laura at least twice a week. He showed her a couple more times how to turn on the computer and call up books from the library and how to print them out on paper if she still wanted to read them that way, but even though she learned how he never saw any

evidence that she had done it on her own.

It bothered him. He supposed everyone had the right to live their life the way they wanted to, but at the same time it seemed such a waste for her to sit around in her apartment with her cats and her plants and do nothing. She still had a good thirty years left--more if she would stay active--but it was obvious she'd already given up and was just watching herself grow old.

He tried to get her out more, going with her to the library since she wouldn't use the computer and taking her shopping when she felt like going and even taking her on the gondola around the curve of the colony on one particularly adventurous day. She seemed genuinely happy to get out, and that reinforced Teigh's conviction that even though she said she didn't want it, what she really needed was a change in scenery.

"You know," he said one day while he fended off a triple assault from the now-adolescent kittens, "you ought to come with us to Alpha Centauri."

Laura looked at him as if he'd suggested something obscene. "Me, on a starship? Forget it."

"No, I'm serious. The crew selection committee would jump at the chance to bring you along."

"What would they want with an old lady? Starships are for young people."

"Starships are for everybody. The human race isn't all under thirty, and it'd be a mistake to make a starship crew that way. They'd drive each other nuts."

"So you need a few coots and geezers to keep you all sane. Makes tons of sense to me."

Teigh thought of his pine root that he carried with him from apartment to apartment, how simply looking at its gnarled, aged branches could calm him down after a particularly hectic day, but he could think of no way to tell Laura about it without embarrassing them both. So he simply said, "It's true. We need interesting people no matter how old they are. You should apply for the crew."

Laura shook her head. "There's something my grandmother used to say; she was talking about airplanes, but it still applies. She said 'I want to keep my feet right on the old terra firma, and the more firma the less terra.' That's me too."

"You came here, to Spacehome," Teigh pointed out. "This isn't really what I'd call terra firma."

"David built it," she said, as if that ended the discussion.

"We're using his design on the ship too."

"Hrumph."

"At least come have a look at it. Remember, you've still got to show me Cassiopeia, too."

She smiled. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe I will."

"Today?"

"No."

"Oh come on. It's a good day for a trip outside."

"No, really, I--"

Teigh remembered what she was using for a fish bowl and said, "Don't worry about the goldfish. We can rent you a suit."

Laura laughed and shook her head. Without a word she got up and went into the living room for the helmet, brought it back, and pulled out the plastic bag that held the fish. "I'm an eccentric old coot," she said, "but I'm not about to ruin my spacesuit. All right. Show me your starship."

"That's the spirit," Teigh said, standing.

Laura dug the rest of her suit out of a closet and blew the dust off of it, checked to make sure she could still fit into it, and pronounced herself ready. They had to stop on the way to the airlock to fill her air tanks and put a new battery in the backpack, and as a precaution Teigh had the attendant pressure test the suit to two atmospheres while he was at it. It passed the test, and fifteen minutes later they were at the airlock, Teigh climbing into his own suit that he kept there.

"How do you feel?" he asked for about the tenth time. The colony's two main airlocks were at either end, at the center of the spin axis where someone going outside wouldn't be flung out into space, and he was concerned about her reaction to zero-gee.

She held out her hands thumbs up, and over the suit radio said, "Fine, for a terrified old lady. Let's hit

vacuum before I decide to go back home and knit something instead."

"All right, here we go." Teigh checked the seals on both suits one last time, led the way into the airlock, and pressed the cycle button. Their suits stiffened with the drop in pressure, and the outer door opened to space.

"Take my hand," he said.

Laura did, and he led her out onto the surface of the colony. He could hear her breathing hard, but after a minute or so she said, "Hah. Hasn't changed much. Where's this ship of yours?"

Teigh smiled. She'd be all right. "Straight out," he said, pointing overhead.

She leaned back, tilting her head back still more, and said, "Oh. Doesn't look like much from here."

"It's twenty kilometers out. We'll take a car over."

"Okay. Lead on."

The cars were kept in a garage beside the airlock; Teigh checked one out and helped Laura inside, then set its autopilot for the starship and settled back for the five-minute trip. "So," he said, "where's Cassiopeia?"

Laura leaned forward and looked out the front windows for a minute, then turned to the side. "Got to be able to find the Dipper first," she said. "What have they done with it? Not there; that's Sagittarius. Hah, that's a clue. Sagittarius there puts the Dipper... there. Got it." She pointed out Teigh's window. "See it?"

"The *Big Dipper*?"

"Right. Now you follow the pointer stars north, past Polaris, right on over to--" There was a pop like a bursting balloon, and Laura's surprised exclamation was drowned out in the hiss of escaping air.

Teigh could see the blowout in her suit where the underarm seam had ripped when she stretched it to point. Pressure testing hadn't caught the weakness there. He felt panic closing in at the sight, but it receded when he remembered where they were. The car had its own air.

"Hold your arm tight to your side!" he said as he searched for the car's pressure control. Laura couldn't have heard him over the howl of air rushing through her suit, but she didn't need to be told to plug the leak. She pinned the arm down and doubled over to the side.

The car's controls seemed a sudden blur of switches and dials to Teigh. He had gotten a full briefing on them all when he had first come up to the colony, and he had passed his flying test with ease, but for the quick trips back and forth to the ship he had never pressurized the cabin and now, months later, he had forgotten how to do it. He heard the hiss of Laura's air dwindling as her suit tanks bled dry, and still he hadn't found the right control. Fighting panic, he began to read the labels one by one and finally found the right switch, then almost broke it off in his haste to flip it on.

Air rushed into the car. Teigh reached out and pulled off Laura's helmet, but she wasn't breathing and there was blood on her lips.

He felt the gentle tug as the forward rockets fired to slow the car for docking with the starship. Looking up he saw its familiar shape growing nearer, and he switched his suit radio to the emergency channel and shouted, "Blowout! I've got someone with a suit blowout. Help me!"

"Where are you?" a calm voice asked.

"Coming in a car. I've got the cabin pressurized now, but she was in vacuum for a while, and she's not breathing."

"I'm opening the emergency lock. Is your car on autopilot?"

"Yes."

"Switch to remote. The red switch on the upper right corner of the--"

"Got it."

"Hang on," the voice said, and at the same time the car's thrust doubled and it swung around past the aft of the ship and curved in toward a still-widening rectangle of light. The car shot in through the lock, still decelerating, the door slammed shut behind it, and within seconds people were pulling Laura out and ripping off the rest of her suit.

Teigh watched helplessly while the medics forced air into her lungs and tried to stimulate her heart into

beating again, getting nothing, nothing, nothing... and then a faint beat that faltered and stopped again. More breathing and pushing on the chest and another heartbeat, this one holding for a while longer before it stopped. Again, this time with pure oxygen.

At last Laura was breathing on her own; a horrible, bubbling breathing that made Teigh sick to listen to it, but she was alive again.

As the medics carried her into the ship, one of them turned to Teigh. "Are you all right?"

He managed to nod.

"She's going to make it. You did good. She's lucky you were there."

Teigh shook his head. He found his voice and said, "Not so. If she was lucky she wouldn't have met me. Wouldn't have had some stupid kid dragging her around doing things she didn't want to do in the first place. I damn near got her killed."

* * *

He told her the same thing when they let him in to see her a few hours later. She was inside an oxygen bubble and her voice was barely a whisper, but her response was clear all the same. "Wrong. My suit blew because... it was too damned old... but that doesn't mean I am. I used to think I was, but I... had a lot of time to think about it... while my life flashed in front of me. You were right, it'd be silly... to die in a rocking chair. I'd rather go out in the middle... of something, like David did."

"You--" *almost did*, No. Wrong thing to say. Instead he said, "You're still invited on the trip to Alpha Centauri."

Laura was silent for a long time, so long that Teigh thought she had fallen asleep with her eyes open, but just as he was about to get up she nodded once and said, "So when do we leave?"

* * *

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