

Fired

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Deep inside the spaceliner *Can of Peaches* there was a small dim bar called the Slingshot Lounge. The *Can of Peaches* along with three sister hotel ships moved between Earth and Mars continuously. The ships never stopped. They never landed. Because there were four of them, you never had to take the long way. The ships were really in an orbit around the sun and used the planetary gravity to slingshot forever between the two worlds and thus the name of the bar where John Wagner went looking for love in one of the very few places it might reasonably be found and met the fire woman.

When John was on duty, he was an “outside guy” -a man or woman who gets into a space suit and goes out to fix whatever needs fixing on the outer skin of the *Can of Peaches* . He was a permanent peach. He had not set foot on Earth or Mars in many years. Tourists were ferried up to the liners from the surface of either planet. That was the most expensive part of the whole deal. The rest was just a matter of going around and around and since almost anything could be simulated to a degree you couldn't tell the difference and since everyone was augmented to the eyeballs and beyond, you had to wonder why people bothered going in the flesh. Part of it was a status thing. You had to have the bucks if you wanted to take the ride. People claimed there was something immediate and elemental that squeezed the very core of your being when you looked into the deep darkness of space with unaided eyes. John didn't see it anymore. Maybe he'd gotten used to it.

Another factor was the long shot that you might be there when the “dark spot” returned. If it ever did come back, you might get gobbled up and disappear forever. A little danger tossed into the mix. Ten years before, the rip in space known as the “dark spot” had appeared. Several things had emerged and the spot had disappeared. Just like that. None of the emerging things had ever been tracked down and identified. Aliens or rocks. Who knew?

Since there was never a shortage of tourists on board, John figured there might be someone new in his favorite bar, so he got his persona buffed and beaming (dress-black uniform and spaceman boots, rugged chin and piercing ice-blue eyes, a random gleam from the teeth) and set on out after work, augmented peepers scoping and pheromone sniffing around for monkey business. He waltzed on into the Slingshot and took a stool, signaled the polar bear bartending that he needed an Irish on the rocks, looked left and right without really looking like he was looking, and oh, man, would you look at her?

John couldn't say exactly why the fire woman was so hot, sitting there (if sitting was what she was actually doing) looking anything but human, all blue and maybe made of some kind of transparent jelly your fingers just ached to touch. You'd pretend to touch her and say, “Ouch!” Or “sizzle” or maybe just “ssssss,” and she'd say, “Oh like I haven't heard that one before,” but by then she'd be smiling (if you could call it smiling) and everything would be cool. He'd buy her a drink. Or would she go for some kind of gas instead or maybe a hickory log? Whatever fans your flames, sweet cheeks. And speaking of cheeks, that black splatter spot just below her left eye was a nice touch. It was like looking at the “dark spot” through a telescope from a long way away. He should say something, but how do you break the ice with a fire woman?

But then she beat him to the punch. “You ever do it in a spacesuit, bobby?” When she spoke, sparks drifted from her mouth and winked out as they touched the bar.

“What?” John was knocked off his game. “My name's not Bobby.”

She looked startled like she'd been working on that utterance for a long time and was confused by his reaction. Maybe he hadn't heard her right. Maybe she had an accent. She'd be from some exotic locale on Earth or Mars, somewhere no one ever went who didn't have a lot of money or wasn't sweeping up or serving little sandwiches and tea and now she was up here slumming and looking for a spaceman but she couldn't know much about spacesuits if she thought they could both get into one much less do anything once inside.

He was tempted to look at the fire woman with his "other eye," but that would mean he was done here. Looking at the sad underbelly of the bar and the people in it unaided by augmentation would end any fantasy he might get going. He'd made that mistake more than a few times—the worst was probably the Amazon Queen who turned out to be a little old guy who might have gotten small inside suddenly, since his exterior draped around his frame like a cloth double-bass bag around a cello. Looking had spoiled the mood.

So John didn't look at her with his other eye. Instead, he rolled out his own practiced line like a jet fighter ready to zoom off into the sky and shoot down many objections she might have against coming back to his humble spaceman quarters with him. Of course, if she wanted to go off and do it in a spacesuit, she might not have any objections anyway, but he had been working on this line for a long time, so he said, "So tell me, what's your favorite moon of Jupiter?"

"You ever do it in a spacesuit, booby?"

Well, she was nothing if not single-minded.

"I don't think that's possible," he said. "My name is John."

She just sat there burning in silence for a moment. Then she said, "You ever do it in a spacesuit, baby?"

He thumped his chest. "Me John. You . . . ?"

"Oh," she said. "Pam."

Oh, sure, Pam the fire woman from some place where people spoke the universal language with an accent.

"Well, Pam, there are lots of things we can do without spacesuits."

"Yes," she said. "Show me your spacesuit."

"You want a tour? You looking to see some of the places the tourists don't usually get to go? I think that could be arranged."

Why not? Escort her around a little, see some safe sights, and end up back at his place.

"Yes, let's go!" she said, and somehow she was standing without ever stopping sitting. It was like someone threw a couple of sticks on her fire.

John tossed down the rest of his drink and got up. He made a crook of his arm so she might take it, but she said, "Not yet."

"This way," he said and walked for the door.

There was a place where he could show her a view she wouldn't have seen from the passenger areas. It would not be a better view (the passengers had the best views, since they were the point, after all) but it

would be a little different. They could swing by the workshops, and maybe take a peek at a kitchen or two along the way. And after that she might be impressed by the staging area for outside work.

Hey, they could pop in on the bridge. Maybe the Captain would let her take a turn at the wheel.

They moved into the corridor, and the music and fake smoke stopped when the door slid shut behind them.

“You might want to turn down your nose through here,” John said. Dumb speak. What was he thinking? She would know about the smell in these corridors, since she’d come through them not long ago to get to the bar in the first place. She probably saw the Slingshot Lounge blurb in the passenger brochure about seeing some “genuine Permanent Peach life in the belly of the Can.” Completely safe. Well, maybe you’ll want to go in a group? Spicy. Dicey. Babbling. He hoped he hadn’t been saying any of that out loud.

He gave her a quick glance. She was still on fire.

“So, are you from Mars or Earth?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Are we there yet?”

“Not yet,” he said, and it occurred to him that he had just echoed what she’d said when he’d put out his arm and invited her to touch him. They were moving along side by side but were they going in the same direction? She seemed pretty single-minded about seeing a spacesuit and that was okay with him, but he didn’t intend to end the evening looking at his equipment-well, okay, so he did intend to look at his *equipment*. Show and tell. Touch. Boy, if she knew the adolescent babblony that was going on in his head, she’d go out like you blew on a match, but hey maybe there was something similar going on in her head; after all she’d searched out a spaceman and they were on their way to see his suit and who knew what else? It was like the way you could project whatever you wanted people to see when they looked at you, but did you really know what they were seeing since they could take your projection and work it into their own world in any way they wanted? When you were with someone you weren’t always in the same place at the same time. Like they say, stretch it out, wad it up, get loose, and be elastic. He and Pam might be walking along together, but they were worlds apart and alone and he suddenly wanted to really connect with her. He would turn off his inferences and ignore her implications. He would start with his “other eye.”

He stopped himself just in time.

Life is all about the stories we tell ourselves.

This was no time to blow the evening on some dumb longing that would result in the same old disappointment like they say doing the same dumb thing and expecting different results was well dumb so dumb de dumb dumb but oh look here’s the first stop on the Famous John Wagoner Ladies Tour of the *Can of Peaches*.

“Here’s something interesting,” he said. They had come to the place where he could show her a less pretty side of the Can’s outside skin.

“Spacesuits?”

“Later.” He opened the door and stepped back to let her enter first.

“No, now,” she said. “Which one is yours?”

He came in behind her and closed the door, but instead of seeing the forward display area, he saw that

they were in staging area 4, where he came at the start of every shift to check the schedule and see if he was slotted for outside tasks. He had meant to come by here near the end of the tour, but what had happened to all the parts in between? That vague scene of chaos on the bridge surely couldn't have really happened. He had not had that much to drink. In fact, he had had only the one drink before Pam the fire woman talked him into going off against all regulations to see his spacesuit.

Oh, yeah, the regulations. It was like he was just now remembering that the whole idea of a private tour was so against the rules he wouldn't ordinarily even consider it. It was one thing to sneak a passenger into your quarters, it was like they expected that, you were only human, but you didn't take them where they might screw something up or get hurt and sue the company. The arguments she had used were no longer in his head, but he could remember that they had been very persuasive, and now they were where she wanted to be.

"Put it on," she said.

"What?"

"Your spacesuit," she said.

"Actually, we're not even supposed to be here," he said. "I can't put on my spacesuit without filing the forms."

"Here," she said. "This must be your hat."

"Helmet," he said and took it from her. He didn't remember getting into his spacesuit, but if he were going outside, he'd definitely need his helmet.

She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned in close. He could feel her flames licking around his ears. Then she flowed into his suit like a big burning blue snake slipping into the neck hole or maybe like blue fire water flowing over his shoulders and around his body and down to his toes and up his legs and thighs-little sting-slap burning bites all over.

"Put it on," she said. Her voice seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"What?"

"Your hat."

He raised the helmet and put it on and set the seals.

"Ready?" she asked.

And then it was like when they say, "Okay I'm going to count to three" but then they say "one" and shoot you anyway. There was a tremendous explosion, and he was blown out into space.

He could see a large landmass, a planet or moon where none could really be-a rough and barren place. He could not tell if there was an atmosphere. As he tumbled he saw the *Peaches* going down, debris scattering from a ragged rip in its side. Beyond the ship, he saw a star that might have been the Sun but he was pretty sure it wasn't the Sun. Maybe the Dark Spot was back and the *Can of Peaches* had fallen into it and they'd all come out the other side light-years away.

He could replay some of the highlights of his life-his boyhood playing with the polar bears on Mars, going into space (and never coming back, so there!), first love, last love, last week, cheesecake. He'd probably have time to play that much back before he hit the ground. There would never be time to go

over everything in his augmented memory banks. You experienced augmem from the outside like looking up an item in a book, but ideally such an item triggered the actual memory, and you experienced that from the inside like those tiny soft hairs on cheerleader thighs in the gym dome on Mars when he was seventeen. Replay. But shouldn't this be all white light or something? Did you think you were going to get some great moment of clarity here at the end? Did you think there would be dancing girls?

His body ached with her blue fire as he fell.

"Are you there, Pam?" He reached out and touched her.

"Thanks for the ride home," she said. "It was supposed to be easier than this."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going now," she said.

His arm exploded in fire as she left.

At least he could find out what she really looked like. He switched on his "other eye," but she was still a blue fire woman walking out of the Slingshot Lounge.

That couldn't be right.

"Hey!"

She stopped at the door and turned back and gave him a little wave with just her fire fingers.

Well, the bartender was just some guy who needed a shave and maybe a breath mint. He put another Irish on ice down in front of John. There was a crackle of static and he said, "You should have shown her your spacesuit, Sport."

John banged himself in the side of the head suspecting a malfunction. Pam just kept burning, but now he was falling toward the surface of the new planet.

His arm really was on fire.

Pam was a graceful blue burning cloud. She dipped and soared and skimmed over the surface until she came to a cave. She disappeared inside.

The Dark Spot sucked up the planet and swallowed it and then disappeared just before the *Peaches* passed through where it had been.

John initiated emergency procedures and got his suit sealed. He would probably lose an arm, but he could make do with a mechanical. He could see that the *Peaches* was going through a few emergency procedures of its own. Had the ship hit the strange planet from the Dark Spot, all would have been lost, but that hadn't happened. Pam had closed her door just in time, but that didn't let John off the hook. They would fish him out of space, and he would be in big trouble.

Maybe if he had worked a little harder, she would have taken him home to meet the folks.