

## Love and a Plasma Pistol

I stood in the airlock vestibule trembling. Fatigue, cold and vaporous as winter fog clouded my ability to focus on any singular thought. Blindly, I tried to determine if my involuntary convulsions were due to the anxious anticipation of being on the cusp of seeing her again or from the weariness I felt deep in the marrow of my bones from the arduous journey that I'd survived to get to this point.

Despite such muddled thoughts, I divorced myself enough to notice the condition of the airlock door in front of me. I was surprised to see it was peppered with deep pits and laced with numerous scratches marring most of its lunar dusted surface. For a door that was the last bastion between the vacuum of space on the one side and life preserving oxygen on the other, I would've thought the surface would be well tended and thus robust, clean, and impeccable.

Instead, like me, it was haggard and tired; worn and wrung out by the grind and grit from the highly abrasive lunar regolith. The irony didn't go unnoticed. I detachedly regarded this door as a physical manifestation, a microcosm, of what I'd been through. We were simpatico. When I'd left earth I'd been clean shaven, had put on my best outfit and looked as good as I'd felt. Now, as I looked down at my broken finger, bloodied shirt and urine soaked pants, I didn't look, smell or feel good.

I slipped my non-splinted hand into my pants pocket, rubbed the engagement ring between my thumb and index finger like a talisman hoping to divine an answer, a thread of truth, however gossamer thin it may be, or maybe even a bit of luck. This trip to Aristarchus to propose should've been the most exciting trip of my life. Instead, almost

as soon as we'd lifted off it had turned into a disaster, wrapped in calamity and garnished with a bow of catastrophe, you know, for a bit of panache.

If everything that'd happened to this point had been a fore gleam, perhaps asking her to marry me would also end in disaster. Although I didn't really believe in magic or the power of a talisman, I couldn't stop rubbing the ring.

I was confident she'd heard about the shuttle's emergency landing at the lunar outpost, but as soon as the airlock pumps completed their task and the airlock door slid into its recess, she was going to see and, unfortunately, smell the physical manifestations of the disaster, calamity and catastrophe this journey had vomited upon me. I wasn't so confident she'd be prepared for that.

Corralling what little energy I had remaining, I focused on what the next few moments would bring. I accepted the fact I couldn't go back in time and erase what had happened, it was what it was. I turned my attention away from the fact I was a hot mess and focused instead on how I was going to explain it all before repulsing her to the point she'd never want to see me again.

I had no clue where I would even start. Although I had no reasonable or even plausible explanation for the events that had transpired over the last 16 hours, I found myself nonetheless reviewing all that had happen in a last ditch effort to find a sliver of explanation and with it a thread of sanity and therefore hope.

My first conclusion: My trembling must be due to fatigue.

## Part 1 – The Chicken Man Cometh

True love, as I've recently come to understand, makes you do stupid things and when I say 'you', I mean me. I'm sure nobody else has ever found themselves sitting in the last seat, in the last row onboard a ramshackle, third-rate discount lunar shuttle watching a drug addled man in the throes of a hallucination wave a plasma pistol around demanding the shuttle turn around because he'd forgotten his chicken at the launch facility.

When I was a child, my Pop frequently gave me what he referred to as his private reserve advice which I learned as an adult was just a fancy way of saying, "Don't tell your mother I told you this."

Watching this bug-eyed loon waving what I could only assume was a fully charged plasma pistol, all the while continuing his rant about his chicken, a bit of that private reserve advice percolated up from my subconscious. "Son, make sure you always out-crazy the crazy."

"Hey! Chicken Man!" I yelled at the druggie. "Relax, Dude. I had to leave my albino goat behind. The launch control officer wouldn't let me bring him on board; some stupid crap about quarantine. But I ain't worried. I hear they have one hell of a mercantile at Aristarchus. I'll just get a new one when I'm there and I'm sure you'll have no problem getting yourself a chicken."

Lowering his pistol, the druggie looked at me long and hard. "Well," he whispered, "nobody will ever replace Pete."

“I’m sure you’re right,” I answered as I tapped my fist softly against my chest assuming Pete was his chicken, “but as long as you keep Pete right here in your heart, he’ll always be with you. Just like Gnasher will be for me. He was more than a goat. He was one the best friends I’d ever had, man.”

Slowly holstering the pistol, Chicken Man looked at me through wide dilated eyes. “You’re weird” he said finally lowering himself back into his seat.

Thanks, Pop.

I turned my attention to the seven rows of other passengers that sat between me at the rear of the shuttle and Chicken Man sitting in the front. Only a few had bothered to watch the scene as it had unfolded. If any of them had been startled by the drama, they now sat with bored disinterest while the rest of the passengers hadn’t been perturbed enough to pause their personal holo shows, as if being sandwiched between a drug crazy loon with a plasma pistol and a nut ball talking about a goat was an everyday occurrence.

No matter. With the drama now settled, I could get back to ruminating about her. After all, she was the reason I found myself on this god-forsaken lunar shuttle in the first place. At the end of our last vid-chat, she’d implored, “I’m dying to see you! I’m going positively crazy here without you. Can you come see me before I head back to the lab?”

As if her words alone didn’t possess the same powerful pull of Saturn’s gravity, the beseeching way she’d whispered them were equivalent to Saturn’s rings; captivating, beautiful, mesmerizing. There was nothing else in the solar system that could even compare.

Caught in her verbal orbit, I was powerless to do anything less than get to Aristarchus as fast as humanly possible. She only had a two week reprieve before she had to go back to the far side for another month long stint at the geologic outpost she'd been assigned.

I *had* tried to book passage aboard other lunar shuttles, but not surprisingly, all were booked solid for weeks. I had even called a few hoping there'd been a cancellation, meekly begging the customer service rep I needed to get to the moon to see my gal, but was politely told the most they could do was put my name on a standby list. Buoyed by this possibility, I'd asked how long the list was.

“There are currently 43 names on the list, sir.”

So here I was, among at least one hallucination-addled druggie, sitting in a seat that shared a wall with the single lavatory onboard. And from the smell emanating *through* said lavatory wall likely contained either decomposing human remains or low grade nuclear waste. Probably both.

I placed my hand on my leg and traced the outline of the engagement ring through the fabric of my pants and wondered, as I'd done at least a thousand times since meeting her, what was it about her that'd been so different? How had I fallen so hard, so fast? It was silly, right? I'd spent a grand total of 36 hours with her in person, but I needed only 1/60<sup>th</sup> of a single hour to know she was the woman I wanted to spend every minute of every hour with.

I'd dated quite a few women, some even seriously, yet they all had had a shelf life; an expiration date. What was odd about this revelation was that I hadn't been aware of it until I'd met her. Only then did the past become clear. All of the others had been mere shadows of the heart. She, she was something else all together and I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that made her so different. Why was I powerless in avoiding great personal harm by flying aboard this crap shuttle?

Despite these indigent conditions, despite not coming any closer to figuring out what it was about her, I let it go for the moment and allowed my thoughts to drift to her, her being Mae Phillips.

## **Part 2 – The Meeting**

I saw her across the produce section of the grocery store, watching as she idly browsed the fancy cheeses' on display. Normally this would've raised a red flag as I consider 'fancy cheese' as one that can be sprayed from a can. Despite the obvious differences we may share as it pertains to cheese, I nonetheless felt myself being pulled toward her. My heart pounded in my chest as I approached, but I managed to subdue the gallop as I blindly grabbed what I thought was a small round of Brie.

"Excuse me, mam," I started. She turned slightly and I caught the slightest wisp of cucumber and watermelon, not from the produce around me, but from her perfume or body spray, I couldn't tell which. It was intoxicating.

“You better stay where you are,” I continued in my best faux authoritative voice, “If you get too close to this Brie you may melt it straight away. How’s that for the cheesiest line you’ve ever heard?”

She turned fully facing me and I was captured by her root beer eyes that sparkled as she smiled. “That’s pretty cheesy alright, but cute.” She paused for a beat then, “I hate to burst your bubble but not only are you holding the cheese upside down, I’m afraid that’s not Brie. It’s Camembert.”

“I’m Vello,” I said putting the cheese down and extended my hand toward her. “I apologize, if it’s not on a pizza or in a can, I’m not really a connoisseur of fermented curd.”

“It’s quite alright,” she said as she extended her hand out. Her long, beautifully tapered fingers wrapped around mine causing instant jolts of electricity to course through me. “It’s nice to meet you, Vello. I’m Mae.”

Before that moment everything had appeared normal, but as she stood shaking my hand, the world came into a focus and clarity I hadn’t known existed. It was as if I’d been viewing everything through a slightly fogged window and with a single sweep of her hand she’d cleared it. In that moment I knew I never wanted to be with anybody else.

I reluctantly let go of her hand. “I hope you don’t find this request too brash, but would you be available to dine with me this evening?”

### Part 3 – The “Landing”

There comes a point during every long journey where you're forced to consider how much longer the trip will last before you can find what you consider a decent bathroom vs. how much longer your bladder can hold out. Let's face it, nobody *wants* to use the lavatory on a shuttle, especially one with such questionable odors emanating through its walls. Yet, biology happens and I was at that point.

I checked my watch. We'd left Earth orbit 11 hours ago and figured we'd have at least another hour left. The numbers weren't lining up. I'd visited Aristarchus once before, but on that trip there hadn't been a need to experience that 'art' of zero-g toilets. I now had a need.

Disengaging the magnetic 5-point harness, I used the hand-holds and rails to make my way around the side of the wall and into the closet-like lavatory. Once inside and I'd thumbed the lock on the doorknob, I faced my first dilemma. I certainly didn't want to breathe through my nose, but I recoiled at the thought of breathing mouthfuls of whatever particulates may be floating in the air into my lungs.

I was moderately surprised to see a container of gel soap attached to a small shelf that was affixed above a small trash cabinet. I pumped a small dab onto my finger tip and then smeared it on my upper lip. I felt like a coroner I'd seen on the T.V. shows although I'm sure the stuff they used didn't smell like lavender and honey.

I secured my feet into what resembled ski boots that were bolted to floor to keep me anchored, grabbed the receptacle hose off the wall, covered the cup-like opening with



a clear plastic liner, and unzipped my pants. Just as I flipped the switch for the suction pump, I was interrupted.

“Ladies and Gentleman, may I have your attention please,” the voice of what I only could assume was the pilot came through an overhead speaker. “We’re experiencing some technical difficulties and we’re going to be making an emergency landing.”

Really?

“Due to the nature of the situation,” he continued, “the landing may be a bit rough so we ask that you stow any loose items immediately. We’re going in now.”

Although I had locked the door using only the thumb lock on the knob, I heard the unmistakable clack of the magnetic dead bolt engage effectively trapping me inside this closet of stench.

“Hey! Wait! I’m in here!” I yelled, but realized nobody could hear me. Besides there were no attendants on this shuttle so I was, literally, caught with my pants down.

Suffice to say the pilot’s prediction of a hard landing was spot on which is difficult to accomplish in 1/6<sup>th</sup> gravity. Had we experienced the same ‘technical difficulty’ on Earth, I would be dead. Truth be told, a small part of me wished I had died.

Despite the fact I’d managed to crawl on top of the cabinet like a cat stuck in a tree, my shoes, socks and pants from the knee down still managed to get soaked with green liquid. Perfect.

## Part 4 – The “Bus”

The small lunar crew bus that had come to our rescue trudged over the undulating lunar surface at a paltry 10 miles per hour. Up and down, constantly either rolling over sun dappled hills or down through dark valleys, but never flat. If this sounds picturesque or idyllic, it's not. In 1/6<sup>th</sup> gravity, it's nauseating. Instead of feeling I was aboard a small lunar crew bus, I felt I were stuck on a crab boat in the middle of the Bearing Sea. During a storm. At night. With no Dramamine. The good news was there were at least two more hours of this and even better news: I didn't see a single barf bag. At the very least, I thought to myself, if I did end up puking it would balance out the stench from the lavatory that had dried and was now caked into my now crunchy pants.

In addition to the two drivers, the bus could carry six people. In what can only be considered providence, there had been two busses at the outpost near the 'landing' site so none of us had to wait the 6 hours it would have taken one bus to make the round trip.

I had tried everything in my power to get onto whichever bus Chicken Man wasn't, but he'd loitered at the front waiting until I was forced to board. I edged past him, boarded the bus and moved as quickly down the single aisle as quickly as possible and straight to the back.

Only when I'd gotten seated did I see him appear at the doorway and walk toward me. I could tell his intent was to sit in the seat across the aisle from me.

Out crazy the crazy.

“You can't sit there.” I said flippantly.

He stopped, looked at the empty seat, then back at me. “Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’? Look.” I replied casually pointing my thumb to the empty seat. “Somebody’s already sitting there.”

He looked at the empty seat again, then quickly back at me. “You can’t save seats.”

“Are you alright?” I asked letting incredulousness creep into my voice. “Somebody’s sitting there, the lady from row 3.” I leaned over and reached across the narrow aisle and rested my hand six inches above the arm rest and patted the empty air. “Don’t worry Eloise, you won’t have to move. My friend here will sit in the empty seat in front of you.”

I looked back up at Chicken Man. “See there. You’ve got her upset. Now would you please take a seat?”

Chicken Man looked at the empty seat once more, then back at me. “Dude, you really are a whack job.”

He may be right, but it worked. He turned and sat down in the seat in front of ‘Eloise’, right where I could keep my eye on him. The way I figure, that’s twice I’d dodged a bullet, or at least a possible plasma pulse and I wasn’t feeling very confident I’d be able to dodge a third. I just hoped he’d stay quiet until we made it to Aristarchus.

I looked out the small round porthole and onto the lunar surface and let my finger once again trace the outline of the ring. What was it about Mae? Did I really know her

enough to be certain she was my soul mate? Did I even believe in soul mates? My thoughts drifted back to the others before her.

I knew exactly what it was I liked about them, thought that I loved about them, as well as the things I hadn't liked. It was like an inventory in my head. I liked this or that, but not such and such and like a math equation: Likes minus dislikes equaled stay or leave. Everybody had always factored out. And I'd known, almost intuitively in the first few moments how it was going to end up, and I'd been correct 100% of the time. It was almost as if every previous relationship had existed for the sole purpose of proving my theory correct, but subconsciously hoping, just once, I'd be proven wrong. I hadn't.

But with Mae, for the first time, I knew the outcome would be different and I knew in that in first moment. But how did I know? What was it that made me so sure? Again, I let go of such thoughts and let my mind slip back to recalling the first and only meal I'd had with her before she'd left for the moon.

## **Part 5 – The Pier**

“I'd love to go to dinner with you.” Mae answered.

There are moments when you're barely conscious enough to realize you're not conscious enough to wipe a stupefied look of amazement off your face. I was having one of those moments as she'd just agreed to meet me for diner.

“Vello? You okay?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah! Yes, sorry. It's just that the last time I asked a woman out to dinner she burst into flames. I was looking for signs of smoke.”

“Well, that wouldn’t bode well for the cheese now would it.”

She was quick.

“Well, since we’re technically in the produce section, we could at least have fondue.”

If Mozart’s music is a symphony, Mae’s laugh was Mozart, Beethoven and Bach all rolled into the most amazing sound I’d ever heard. Her laugh was philharmonic.

“Are you familiar with the pier in Ocean City?” I asked waiting until her laughter subsided.

“Sure.”

“How ‘bout we meet there? 6:00 tonight?”

“That sounds perfect.”

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That perfection was at risk of turning to a cold, hard reality of which I was all too familiar; being stood up. I nervously looked at my watch, 6:02 and still no sight of her. I’d arrived 15 minutes ago, standing with my back to the ocean, anxiously scanning the crowds of people walking by. My gaze had fallen on myriads of people, my eyes passing over them all looking for my one.

For those that didn’t spontaneously combust when I’d asked them out, I had been stood up more times than I was willing to admit. Despite what my gut was telling me,

my head told me Mae wasn't that kind of girl. Perhaps that's just wishful thinking, I thought to myself, then I saw her.

She wore a simple, elegant black cotton summer dress with a thin, yellow, three-quarter length sleeve cardigan and black sandals. Her long curly brunette hair wafted behind her in the warm ocean air like something you'd see in a shampoo commercial. She looked stunning. I nervously raised my hand to get her attention. She saw me and smiled.

Then, quite unexpectedly, a wave of panic crashed over me. Do I shake her hand? Give her a hug? Do nothing at all? I didn't have long to decide.

"Hi there." She said stopping in front of me before I could make up my mind on what to do.

Without thinking, I took both of her hands into mine. "Mae, you look absolutely stunning. I kinda feel bad for the ocean and the sunset, it's not often the two working in concert get upstaged."

She smiled and my heart melted.

"Have you been to the restaurant at the end of the pier?" I asked turning around to face the end of the pier.

"No, but I've wanted too for a long time."

“Mae, tonight is your lucky night. It’s a 50’s diner. Not 2050's mind you but 1950’s, old-old school. It’s nothing fancy, but they make great burgers and shakes although I’m not too sure about the fries.”

“You’ve never had their fries?”

“No, but I will tonight. I usually order the onion rings but I don’t want to have onion breath when I kiss you at the end of the date.”

She smiled. “Is that right? You think you’re going to get a kiss?”

“Mae, I don’t see how this could end any other way. Unless, of course, you tell me you’re a black widow who’s just been released from prison. And even then, I’m not so sure that'd stop me.”

“Nope, I hate spiders. Now come on, you had me at 1950’s. Let’s get this show on the road.”

We turned and ambled, hand in hand, down the old wooded pier. The sun was nearing the horizon and fishermen were lining up on both sides casting their lines into the water angling for the evening catch.

Ahead, I spied a slightly overweight fisherman bending over his tackle box causing his jeans to ride down.

I leaned into Mae and whispered, “Just say no to crack.”

If she laughed at my sophomoric humor, I would know without a shadow of a doubt she would be the one for me. She paused, looked, saw what I was referring to and stifled a laugh followed by a muted, “Ewww!”

“Now and for always, Mae.”

“What?”

“You’ll understand what that means some day, but promise me you’ll remember it okay.”

I squeezed her hand gently and she reciprocated. I was head over heels, 100% in love with this woman, and would be now and for always.

### **Part 6 – The Chicken Man Returneth**

Deep in my reverie I thought I heard, faintly, a woman scream. A single, quick, high-pitched affair which drew me up only slightly. I drifted between my lazy ruminations and reality for a beat, then two, then I heard the scream again.

Fully in the moment, I immediately turned toward Chicken Man where sure enough, he’d taken off his harness and was once more wielding that damn plasma pistol.

“Stop this bus! I can’t take it anymore. I need to get off!”

The crew access door was closed and likely locked, no doubt the drivers unaware of the commotion going on unless they had a closed-circuit camera and could see it. The way things had gone to this point, I didn’t want to put any bets on it.



“Hey, man...” Is all I got out before I heard the distinctive pop of the pistol being discharged.

Immediately, I smelled the noxious odor of burnt hair then heard the sickening hiss of rapidly escaping air next to my head. I turned and saw a quarter-sized hole in the side of the bus. Instinctively, I turned and slammed my palm against the hull hoping to plug it, or at least slow the rate the air was escaping but the edges of the metal was still red hot from the plasma burst causing me to reflexively withdraw my hand.

With the rapidly decreasing air pressure, my ears popped and I was already feeling light headed. Not that I had a preferred way to die, I take that back, I suppose it's everybody's preference to go to sleep feeling perfectly normal and simply not wake up, but barring that unlikely event, death by asphyxiation, on the moon, in a bus, by the hand of a druggie who missed his chicken was certainly not how I wanted to go.

Not wanting to simply sit next to the hole while the air continued to escape, I released my harness resolved to do something, anything. If I was going to die, at least Mae would know I did so trying to do something heroic, however pathetic the attempt may be.

I stood up, my legs weak and my chest tight from the lack of available oxygen in the cabin. I steeled myself, took as deep a breath as possible, held it in and hurled myself at Chicken Man. My flight toward him seemed to be in slow motion, but finally I landed my shoulder right into the middle of his chest while I grabbed at the pistol.

The impact knocked it free and as he and I continued the backwards trajectory, I saw a shroud of blackness begin to appear around the periphery of my vision. I knew it would be less than 30 seconds before I lost consciousness.

I was overcome by a feeling of peace. Perhaps it was the lack of oxygen, but the thought that I would be rendered unconscious before I actually died I equated to falling asleep. In a way, then, I'd get my wish. I'd die in my sleep.

The tunnel of blackness continued to encroach on my vision and became so narrow it looked like I was viewing the world through a straw. My head weighed a metric ton then in the next moment felt light as a feather as my thoughts turned to Mae.

Despite being moments away from eternal sleep, I smiled. Even now, although I'd only known her for a few days and spent only a handful of hours with her, she'd given me a love and with it a peace I'd never known.

Then my world went black and I was gone.

### **Part 7 – Revival**

Pain. That's all I felt as I came to. I opened my eyes and was looking at a bank of lights attached to the rounded ceiling of the crew bus.

"That's right, buddy." I heard a voice then saw a face appear above me which I recognized as belonging to one of the crew bus drivers. "Take it easy, you're going to fine."

Pain shot through the top of my hand and into my wrist.

“What happened?” I mumbled.

“In addition to a singed scalp, it looks like you broke your middle, but we’ve got it splinted as best we can. We’ve arrived at Aristarchus.”

“Where’s,” I trailed off not sure if they would understand ‘Chicken Man’ and I certainly didn’t want to sound like a crazy person babbling about, well, a chicken man so simply continued, “the guy with the gun?”

“Don’t worry. The Aristarchus constabulary took him off first, before the rest were offloaded.”

Offloaded? What a strange word to use. Disembark, leave, exit; all better words. Offloaded made it sound like Chicken Man and the others were inanimate cargo.

Fear flashed through me. Was I the sole survivor and they had offloaded the bodies? “You mean everybody else died?”

“No, thankfully nobody died but everybody was unconscious for a bit as our first priority was sealing the leak. We initiated an emergency repress to keep the O2 levels high enough to keep everybody from asphyxiating to death. There’s no telling what could’ve happened had you not acted the way you did.”

The memory of landing on top of Chicken Man before passing out was slowly coming back to me. The pain in my wrist shot up my forearm causing me to wince.

“Yeah, you busted up your finger pretty good probably from the impact with that nut ball. It was pretty obvious your finger was pointing in a direction it shouldn’t so we kept you behind. You’re the last one.”

Of course, why not? Why not keep me from seeing Mae as long as humanly possible? I sat up and moved toward the front of the bus. Despite all the insanity, I was about to see her and I wasn’t about to waste another second.

### **Part 8 – Dweller on the Threshold**

I stood in the airlock vestibule trembling. Fatigue, cold and vaporous as winter fog clouded my ability to focus on any singular thought. Blindly, I tried to determine if my involuntary convulsions were due to the anxious anticipation of being on the cusp of seeing her again or from the weariness I felt deep in the marrow of my bones from the arduous journey that I’d survived to get to this point.

I stood trembling and changed my mind. It was not due to fatigue after all but because I was so anxious to see her; finally. Reliving all I’d gone through to get to this point and knowing she was on the other side of that door made it all worth it. I heard the whine from the air pumps stop, the butterfly valves clack closed and with a final hiss of air, watched as the light above the door flashed from red to green then heard the satisfying clink of the magnetic lock being switched off.

The vestibule pressures had been successfully equalized. After everything that had gone wrong, I regarded this as a minor miracle. Pent up with a sudden jolt of nervous energy I inhaled deeply, held it in then blew it out in one powerful breath.

Ready or not, this was it. I watched as the door slid into its recess and I walked toward the threshold.

It hit me like a bolt of lightning. A flash of clear, lucid thought cleaved through the fog that enveloped my mind. In a moment of brilliant epiphany, everything made perfect sense. After our diner at the restaurant at the end of the pier, Mae had sent me a list of her favorite songs, Dweller on the Threshold by Van Morrison was my favorite. I stopped just short of the airlock threshold realizing, for the first time in my life, that's what I'd been all along, a dweller on many, many thresholds.

Until I'd meet Mae, I'd been standing on the outside of every relationship, in the darkness, never wanting to enter, content remaining on the outside straddling the threshold between light and shadow. Then Mae had cast her brilliance and I had been warmed because of it body and soul. I was done standing in the darkness because she'd obliterated it and with the darkness gone, I'd had no choice but to enter.

Lightning flashed again, another epiphany rending my mind in two as I suddenly realized the answers that I'd been seeking are unanswerable. Love, true love, is not an exercise of the mind to figure out; to weigh or measure or calculate. It's not checks and balances or about plus and minus. It's about those unbridled, unfettered, and unrestrained feelings that cannot be contained. Love, true love, cannot be defined by likes and dislikes, nor does it obey the laws of logic or reason, but love, true love, is the reason. True love will never have an answer when asked, "What are you?"

Before her, love had always had an answer. Not anymore. I stopped trembling. Calm and at peace I crossed the airlock threshold, both physical and metaphorical, into

Aristarchus. Mae stood, looking even more beautiful than I had remembered or that my imagination could ever conjure in her absence. Her smile was as radiant as ever, her eyes beaming warmth and excitement. She held a sign above her head, “Welcome to Aristarchus my Spicy Cheese Ball.” And with a nod to our very first meeting in the grocery store, she held the sign upside down. Oh how I loved this woman!

Caught up in her moment of excitement, she’d not yet noticed the state of my clothes but it wouldn’t be much longer until she at least smelled them. Slowly, inexorably, the look of pure joy metamorphosed to confusion. She lowered the sign and held it in front of her, almost as a shield as I approached.

“Hi, you,” I said stopping in front of her. “Are you ever a sight for sore eyes.”

“What happened to you, your clothes? Your hair’s been burned. What happened to your finger?”

“It’s a long story, but in a nutshell: A guy I’ll call Chicken Man had a plasma pistol who almost blew a hole through my head. Instead of my brains, he shot the side of the bus we were on thanks to the crash landing we’d survived earlier.”

She stood stock still. Her brown eyes probed into mine and I felt as if she were inside my mind trying to ascertain the veracity of my statement. My heart stopped, anxiousness pouring into my soul, but I allowed her in, let her probe.

“I’ve missed you so much and I can’t wait to hear all the details,” she said casually, “Come on, you smell like you could use a shower first.”

Despite what I looked or smelled like, despite what nonsense had just spewed from my mouth, Mae showed no hint of repulsion, even though I felt I was the very definition of it. I traced the outline of the ring in my pocket one final time and I knew no matter what transpired in our lives, we would always be okay.

It wouldn't matter if we encountered the 7<sup>th</sup> rate lunar shuttles, urine spillages, drug addled Chicken Men, or the plasma pistols of life, not only would our love survive, it would thrive.

The End