

# CHRISTMAS 2130 - A SOPPY ROMANTIC TALE

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Untamed snow floated lazily down, to pile against the house's real glass windows with a Grimms fairy tale charm. My friends, who mocked my ancient house from the luxury of their underground apartments, began to drop by as if by accident.

"I was just passing," they would say, "Is that a real wood fire?" And I would smile at them and display my licence to burn organic fuels, while I poured sherry into antique glasses and glowed at their astonished enjoyment.

White snow and twilight outside added the final touch, made the strange living light of the fire seem all the more golden as it leaped and twisted over the tree. The saffron and azure angels, the ruby coloured planets and silver spaceships hanging among the dark needles glittered and flashed like a nebula of bright stars as they swayed in tiny draughts of warm air. A chaotic jumble of presents glowed beneath them like the tumbled contents of a giant's jewel case. I stopped pacing and gazed: It was perfect. But was it perfect enough?

Jay was coming; my virtual friend, my friend on the net. We had met several times - in theory. Avatars, digital representations of ourselves, had met in virtual space, and talked, and become friends, and maybe more.

But would he like me? My avatar had been thinner than I was, more beautiful. Also, I had met him in realms created from our shared imagination, while the two of us had never in reality been less than light-years apart...He was such a hero, and I lived such a dull life. Was I going to ruin everything?

Jay was a spacer, born in deep space, of a family that had been deep space scouts for generations. He thought nothing of being the only living creature in parsecs, relying absolutely on himself. He slept with only a man-made wall between himself and the eternal, airless, absolute cold of space. And, when it was necessary, he repaired that wall himself; going out into the ocean of death where a single mistake could mean explosive decompression, his blood boiling away, his desiccated body drifting unmarked in darkness forever.... He was so brave.

I began to be afraid. I looked around the house again; cosy, perhaps even twee, and so safe! Surely a man like that would have contempt for me. I had never risked myself, I had never been in life threatening danger. I liked to think about it, and talk about it, but I had never experienced it, not like him. He was going to think me such a coward. Why had I ever agreed to this meeting?

The sound of a grav-car settling, whooshing away the snow by the doorway, made me

bite my lip. I took a deep breath to steady myself. He was here; the friend that I was about to lose, because I was a coward and he was not.

The door opened, stately, automatic - I had been expecting him after all. I almost tried to jam it closed again, but there was a scuffle and he was inside all at once, panting, leaning back on it, forcing it shut behind him. We looked at each other wildly.

He was less handsome than his avatar, skinnier. The brown of his cropped hair was more nondescript, the green eyes less vivid. He seemed almost panic-stricken as he pushed against the slowly closing door.

"There's frozen water falling out of the atmosphere out there!" he yelled and, turning, scabbled frantically at the doorjamb for a lever that wasn't there. "The temperature control must have failed! Where the hell are your pressure seals? You're losing heat and air!"

"It's called snow." I said gently, while a great Christmas present of joy and relief unwrapped itself in my heart, "It's meant to do that."

"It is?" and suddenly he was flushing scarlet, confused as a schoolboy, his green eyes standing out from the scald like slightly grubby emeralds.

I took his bag, pressed him to drink wine, arguing him out of his fear of it; "This is Earth. You don't have to be in control all the time here, there are no systems to go wrong." Then we sat up for hours and talked.

Eventually he relaxed enough even to come close to the fire, studying it in wonder.

"Fire, and heat loss so that water freezes," he marvelled, his delicate face foolish with drink, "In space they're both the stuff of nightmares. I never thought they could be enjoyed."

After the third glass of claret he fell asleep on the floor. He trusted me enough for that, and it made me feel warmer than the wine. I brought his coverings down and tucked them around him, and then I went to bed myself, but I couldn't sleep. It was Christmas Eve, and I was too excited. I lay and watched the ceiling for a long time.

Late in the night the snow turned to rain. Jay woke up, yelling in panic; "Coolant leak! You've got a coolant leak!" and I found him wandering blearily around the landing, looking for the engines.

We sat up after that, eating toast and drinking coffee in the kitchen, watching the pale dawn brighten on the holly berries in the garden and the glimmer of the rain. He was astonished by everything.

We went together to church - a lot of the deep space scouts are religious, their life is perilous, and they need all the help they can get. He seemed more at ease within the windowless walls, with the heating system putting out an even warmth and a faint

sussuration of sound.

"This at least is the same wherever you are." he said after the service, "God in His very nature is like space; infinite, eternal, glorious."

"Yes," I smiled as we walked back through the sludge. "But He was born here too, and I dare say He played in the snow when He was a little boy."

"I don't know how he bore it." Jay laughed, trying not to cower under the ceilingless expanse of sky.

When we got home I put the shutters down over the windows, watching him relax as the terrifying sight of the fast dissolving snow was blocked away.

"Thank you." he said, self conscious suddenly, turning my present over and over in his narrow hands. "You're so brave to live here." He looked down at the shiny paper with an expression that made my heart race like fever.

"I love you." he said quietly, "You're such a hero."