

LIFELINE TO THE STARS

A story by AmandaK

"Skylift 82A will leave in thirty minutes," said a computerized voice from the speakers overhead. The spaceport was bustling with people; their voices mingled into an indistinct murmur and the announcements were hard to understand. "All passengers must embark now, through Gate 6 in Terminal D."

Brett DeGraff hoisted his pack on his shoulder and worked his way through the throng of passengers that crowded together in the lobby of Terminal D. The murmur rose in volume when people started to say their last good-byes to friends and loved ones. An older woman sobbed and threw her arms around a young man that was obviously her son. He peeked around shyly as he tried to unwrap himself from his mother's embrace. In the corner, a couple was engaged in a long and passionate kiss. Finally the man gave his lady-friend a light push, gentle but with determination. "Please go," he gasped in a choked voice.

Brett easily navigated through the waiting area. He had nobody. Nobody that had come to see him off and that he needed to say goodbye to. He chuckled wryly. Well, the pretty brunette might regret his furtive departure when she woke up this morning. Brett experienced a pang of guilt. She had seemed a nice girl. But, he told himself, it was easier this way. By the time he returned to Earth, she'd be old and gray.

He flashed the attendant behind the counter a dimpled grin and she smiled back warmly. With a small gesture she invited him to put his hand upon the palm-reader's plate. Taking his ticket, she checked it against his identity according to the reader and against the list on the screen in front of her. "Have a pleasant journey, Mr. DeGraff," she said.

"Thanks," he nodded. He was sure he would.

After three weeks planetside, it was high time to go back to the stars. And damn, was he going on some journey! He still couldn't believe his luck: to be offered the job of alternate pilot aboard the Callisto-5 on its journey to the Altair system! Being a part of the widely publicized expedition in search of habitable planets that was funded by McCormack Inc. was a boy's dream come true.

Okay, it was a long journey: twenty-eight years hence, two years of orbiting and twenty-eight years back. But the pay was grand –he might buy his own ship after this

one- and it was an opportunity to go somewhere that no manned spacecraft had gone before.

He strolled down the gangway to board the elevator.

"Let me help you with that, Sir." A hostess took his leather jacket to stow it overhead, helped him put away his sack in the compartment beneath his chair and leaned over to show him how to buckle up. She offered him a good view of her cleavage in the process and shamelessly Brett helped himself to an eyeful. Memories like this would have to last him a long time. He was going to spend most of the next twenty-eight years in frozen suspension, alone in a cryosleep bed.

"Thank you," he grinned and her cheeks colored a light pink when the double meaning dawned on her.

Brett adjusted the straps until they were comfortable. The craft was placed horizontally, so he sat in a natural position. Before lifting off, the vehicle would tilt backward until the passengers were lying on their back, facing up. Experience had taught the Skylift Company that this was the position that caused the least distress and space motion sickness. By the time the elevator reached its destination, Skylift Station-1, orbiting high above Earth's surface at 36,000 kilometers, they would have entered free fall and position was a relatively unimportant issue.

Brett leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes. It would be a long way up. Four hours to get to the Space Station, his first stop. There, he would change for the Moon-shuttle that took another twelve hours to reach Moonbase. Brett didn't much like travel when he wasn't in charge of the actual flying. At least, once he reached the Moon, he was going to be in control again, when taking the Callisto out for test runs.

He opened his eyes again when he felt someone bump against his leg. He glanced to his right to see a young woman smile an apology at him while she took her seat. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to wake you." At her other side sat a boy of about nine or ten years old. The kid looked around eagerly, taking in the interior of the space elevator cabin. It wasn't much different from a commercial airliner: rows of comfortable seats and small rounded windows in the walls of the craft.

"It's okay," Brett said. "I wasn't sleeping."

He watched for a minute as she struggled with the straps. The attendants were busy with the influx of passengers and none was available to help the young woman. "Allow me," he said, leaning over to fasten the straps across her body. She had a lithe body, he observed, curved where it was supposed to curve and with long legs. Her blond

hair was cropped short and framed her face. Blue eyes sparkling with intelligence looked out over a thin nose. Although Brett usually didn't go for the blonde-and-blue-eyes look, she would be a pleasant neighbor to spend the next five hours with. Or so he hoped.

"Brett DeGraff," he introduced himself, extending his hand. She accepted it and shook it firmly. To her credit, her hands were warm and dry, not at all what he had expected from someone who appeared to be nervous about the flight.

"Jennifer Chase," she offered her name. "And this is my nephew, William."

"Billy," the boy corrected, glaring at his aunt. Brett grinned.

"Nice to meet you, Billy." The similarity was obvious. Both Chases had the same blue eyes and curly blond hair.

"First space ride?" Brett asked.

"Yes," Jennifer replied. "I'm taking Billy up to see his father. My brother is an engineer aboard SS-1. And then I'm continuing to the Moon."

"Aunt Jenny is going to Altair," Billy whispered conspiratorially. He beamed with pride.

"Billy!" Jennifer hissed. "You know you shouldn't tell people that."

"That's some coincidence." Brett raised an amused eyebrow. "I'm the pilot for the Callisto project. Well, one of them," he amended. He looked at Jennifer through new eyes. "So, why are you going?"

"Don't ask," Jennifer said, glancing sideways. "I don't know if I should tell you. Security and all that, you know. Let's just say I'm on the scientists' team." She rolled her eyes. "Mr. McCormack is very keen on security."

Brett chuckled. "Don't I know it." He remembered the stack of forms he had to fill in, the releases he had to sign and the grilling he took from the personnel officer before they decided to hire him. "It's a high profile project and he's got a lot invested in it. With all the terrorist threats – I guess he has a point."

Not everyone was a supporter of the Altair-expedition. Ever since the project first made the headlines, there had been protests. Basically from small but vocal religious groups that felt humanity had no place in space. They called it 'God's Domain'. They said it was bad enough that humans had spread out into the Solar system but to go beyond the

boundaries of Pluto, that was unthinkable. Brett shook his head. Silly, small-minded people. The world would never make progress if everyone thought that way.

"Here, Sir, Ma'am." One of the hostesses interrupted his thoughts to offer them a brightly colored pill and a small cup filled with water. "It will prevent space sickness." Brett waved the hostess away while Jennifer took two pills, one for herself and one for Billy.

"You want to sit near the window, kid?" Brett asked.

Billy looked eagerly up at his aunt. "Can I? Please?"

Jennifer glanced at Brett to see if he meant it, then nodded at her nephew. "Sure."

They undid the straps and changed seats. Brett made sure Billy was strapped in securely before refastening his own belt.

The intercom chimed and a disconnected voice announced, "Lift off commences in five minutes. If you need to use the facilities, you are requested to do so now. Please pay attention to our brief demonstration about safety on board."

Small screens sank from the overhead compartments and blinked on. Three-dimensional animated puppets showed what to do in case the pressure fell away. "Please stay in your seats at all times and keep the safety straps securely fastened. If you need to leave your seat, please call an attendant for help. Be reminded that using the facilities will not be possible during the first hour after lift-off—"

Brett drowned out the sound. He had heard it all countless times before. Instead, he studied Jennifer from behind his lashes as she watched the instructions closely. He wondered how she ever got the job aboard the Callisto. It was apparent she had no experience in space flight. She had to be damn good at what she did.

"Don't worry," he said. "Nothing has ever happened with these elevators. The worst that can happen is that the pressure falls away. In which case oxygen masks will come tumbling down from right there." He pointed upward to a nearly invisible hatch next to the viewscreens.

Jennifer smiled tremulously. "I know," she said. "I can't help being nervous though. It's so different from flying on an airliner."

"That's okay," Brett said. "Just stick with the old pro – that's me – and you'll be fine." Again he wondered why McCormack had picked her.

"Lift off in one minute," the intercom announced. The viewscreens folded back into the ceiling, the attendants strapped themselves into their seats and Brett could feel the slight bump as the elevator's locks disengaged.

"Thirty seconds. Twenty seconds. Ten... three, two, one." The elevator rocked gently and slowly the nose began to lift until it was tilted 90 degrees backward, effectively standing on its tail. The passengers were lying on their backs in the chairs. There was another 'clunk' when the magnets activated. The craft started moving upward, rapidly increasing speed.

"Hey, this is great!" Billy cried and struggled up to press his nose against the window.

Brett dipped his head to follow the boy's glance. "Look," he pointed, "You can already see the Pacific." Far in the distance a bluish haze broke the endless green of the jungle beneath them.

"Wow," Billy said, "That is so cool!"

"Keep looking," Brett said. "In a little while you will be able to see the curvature of the earth."

The elevator kept increasing speed, pressing its passengers into their seats. Jennifer tilted her head, and grimaced at Brett; her face was pale and she was breathing hard.

He smiled encouragingly. "Don't worry about it. They won't give us more than two gees. It's unpleasant when you're not used to it but it's harmless. And it'll get better as we go faster and further up. As soon as we enter free fall you won't feel your weight at all anymore."

Her lips twitched in an attempt at a nervous smile.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, we will start docking procedures in 15 minutes. Our hostesses are going to hand out Velcro overshoes that you should wear to help you walk off the elevator." A nervous chuckle rose from the first-time passengers. Some of them had already experienced the odd sensation of weightlessness during awkward trips to the facilities. The more seasoned space farers pretended to look bored.

"Skylift attendants will be waiting for you at the docking bay, to help you transfer to your next flight or to help you clear security if this is the end of your journey. We hope you had a pleasant flight."

Very pleasant, Brett thought. Once she got past her nervousness, Jennifer had proven entertaining company and the hours had sped by while they talked. She was a strong advocate of the Callisto expedition and knew a lot about earlier projects run by the McCormack company. Brett also found out that she was a geophysicist and was the best in her field of geodesy. Which was probably why McCormack hired her, despite her lack of space experience.

Brett accepted three pairs of the Velcro socks when the attendant swished past them, her stockinged feet clinging to the carpet on the floor of the cabin. He handed two pairs to Jennifer and bent forward to pull the socks over his shoes.

Abruptly the elevator lurched violently. He was thrown forward and his head connected with the seat in front of him. "Ouch," he growled, sitting back up.

The craft lurched again. The overhead lights blinked once, then went out, casting the compartment in darkness. Through the windows across the isle, Brett could see SS-1 glimmer in the sunlight. On the other side of the elevator, the sky was pitch black, lit only by thousands of stars.

"What was that?" Jennifer asked, the quiver back in her voice.

Brett didn't reply. His eyes narrowed when the shining space station slowly rotated beyond the window, disappearing from view.

Alarms started blaring and red emergency lights came on. "What's going on?" Jennifer cried. In the red haze Brett could see that her blue eyes were wide with fear.

"I don't know," he called back. "I think we've lost the cable."

"What?" Jennifer cried. "That's impossible... isn't it?"

Brett pointed at the window beyond Billy. SS-1 drifted into view from below. "It should be. But that's not the station that is moving," he explained. "It's us. We are rotating on our axis. That is only possible if we're separated from the cable." The cable that stretched from the Skylift Station all the way down to the departure tower back on Earth was the elevator's lifeline. An intricate system of magnetic fields propelled the craft along and away from Earth.

Suddenly Brett found he could no longer breathe. Pressure drop, his mind told him. Don't panic. He lifted his eyes to look for the oxygen masks. At the same moment the overhead hatches opened. Due to the lack of gravity, the masks didn't tumble down but gently floated from their compartments.

People screamed. An attendant's voice blared across the speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, please calm down. There is no reason for panic. Take one of the oxygen masks from the compartment above your heads. Our hostesses will be with you shortly to help. Once again, there is no reason to panic." Cabin personnel, their faces already covered with plastic mouth caps, swam across the cabin and helped people put on the masks.

Brett strained against his safety straps and reached up. There wasn't much time. At this altitude, he had only mere seconds before the lack of pressure would cause hypoxia and prevent coherent thinking or muscle control.

He grabbed the masks, pulled them down and put one over his mouth and nose. Tightening the straps behind his head, he took a deep breath and instantly felt better. He clipped the small air-bottle onto his belt before turning to his left to help Jennifer and Billy put on their masks. Once they could breathe again, their eyes lost the glazed look. Stark fear replaced it right away.

Now that they were safe for the moment, Brett found the time to look around. Hostesses were hurrying about, trying to help the passengers hook up their masks. One man had apparently loosened his straps and was now floating helplessly toward the ceiling, arms and legs beating at the air. At any moment he might hit one of the people seated below him.

Brett unbuckled his safety harness and pushed off. Immediately he floated upward. Holding on to the overhead luggage compartment, he pulled himself toward the hapless man. One flailing fist sheered close past his ear and involuntarily Brett ducked. The motion threatened to send him in another direction and he strained to hold on to the compartment.

"Stop moving!" he shouted. "I'll help you get back down. I've done this before."

With gentle nudges and correcting constantly, he steered the man back toward his seat. When the harness came within reach, the passenger grabbed it and pulled himself back into the chair. White-knuckled he held on tight to the armrests while Brett rebuckled the safety belts.

"Thanks!" the man breathed. His eyes above the mask were gleaming. Brett shrugged and immediately drifted away.

Pulling himself hand over hand along the length of the cabin, he moved forward, casting a glance out of the window. SS1 was still rolling by slowly. Beyond the station he could see Earth. And when he really squinted, he thought he could make out the cable where it reflected the light of the sun.

He pushed himself down and planted his feet onto the floor. The Velcro caught immediately. He grabbed the arm of one of the hostesses as she approached him. According to her nametag she was called Jaclyn.

"Sir, please go back to your seat and—"

"I'm a pilot," he interrupted. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Sir, I really must ask you to go back to your seat," Jaclyn repeated. "Everything's under control. The computer has halted the elevator so it can deal with the pressure problem. We will continue as soon as we can." With gentle pressure she urged him in the direction of his seat where Jennifer and Billy sat staring at them.

Brett pulled himself loose from the woman, nearly losing contact with the floor when he did so. He looked across the cabin. Everyone was wearing one of the brightly colored masks and panic had been suppressed—for the time being. Most eyes were still fearful though. He turned back to Jaclyn and lowered his voice.

"I don't think you quite get it yet, lady," he growled. "Your computer has not _halted_ us. We have been _disengaged_ from the cable. See that?" He pointed outward to SS1. "We're rotating. Now, unless those control systems take us back toward that cable, we will slowly roll here until our oxygen runs out."

"I..." Jaclyn's eyes flickered to the window and she paled behind her mask. "The system should automatically start maneuvers to take us back within range of the magnets," she whispered in horror. The fact that the elevator was rolling instead of moving toward the cable meant something was wrong with the controls.

"I trust this computer system has a manual override?"

"I... don't know... This isn't supposed to be possible," she whimpered. Her voice bordered on the edge of panic.

"Pull yourself together," Brett hissed, grabbing her by the upper arms. "You got a cabin full of passengers that rely on you to know what to do. Now, where can we access this system?"

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders, casting a glance past Brett at the cabin.

"It's... in the nose of the elevator..." she said softly.

"What?" he exclaimed. He lowered his voice. "Are you telling me that there's no way to access the computer from here?"

Jaclyn shook her head.

"What kind of dumb design is that?" Brett asked. "Never mind, don't answer that. Is there a way to get to the nose? I hope that you at least have a suit here?"

The elevator's body was divided into several compartments. The passenger compartment was located near the back where the strain of lift-off and acceleration was felt the least. Cargo holds were located in between the control room and the passengers.

"Yes. Through here," she motioned at the forward galley. "We have a few suits in every compartment. Safety regulations," she smiled without humor. "And there's a narrow maintenance tube that runs along the length of the elevator. You should be able to use that to access the cockpit area."

"Okay," Brett nodded.

He shuffled back toward where Jennifer and Billy sat watching him.

"What's going on?" Jennifer asked. Brett leaned forward close to her ear. "The computer has gone off line. I'm going to see what's wrong. Don't worry, it'll be all right. Just stay in your seat and keep your mask on."

Jennifer nodded. "Be careful," she whispered back.

Brett squeezed into the galley area. Jaclyn unlocked the locker and he pulled out the thin, flexible suit. Shedding his shirt and pants, he stepped into the suit. Jaclyn helped him with the various fastenings, then gave him the helmet. Taking a deep breath, he pulled off the emergency mask and screwed the helmet onto the suit. He checked. Plenty of oxygen, according to the readings. He toggled the radio. "Can you hear me?" he asked Jaclyn.

She raised her hand to put the commlink on her wrist close to her mouth and answered, "Yes, loud and clear. Good luck."

Jaclyn left the galley, pulling the door close behind her. The small room would serve as a makeshift airlock.

Brett unscrewed the hatch in the ceiling and pushed off of the floor. He floated up and grabbed at the rim of the small opening. Squeezing in, he realized the maintenance tube would be a tight fit, even though he was a man of average built. But he found he could propel himself forward by pushing off against the sides with his feet.

Soon sweat was beading on his brow; the suit was getting hot as it held his body heat. He turned on the cooling fan. Ah, much better. He counted the hatches as he made his way forward. According to Jaclyn, the fourth would take him to the compartment adjacent to the cockpit.

At the fourth hatch, he forced himself through its opening and floated into the hold beneath. Several cargo crates of different sizes were secured to the floor.

There! At the other end of the half-empty hold was a door. 'Computer room', a small sign read. Brett grinned to himself. "Jaclyn?" he toggled his radio. "I've reached the forward cargo hold. I'm making my way toward the cockpit now."

"There's a small panel to the right of the door," Jaclyn replied. "You'll need the access code. I looked it up in the flight manual. Open the panel and punch in the code: SX874Z."

That turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. Brett's gloved fingers were so thick that he could barely hit the right buttons. Very carefully he punched in the code. The light changed from red to green. He pushed the door.

"It's open!" he yelled triumphantly.

He quickly realized he had celebrated too soon. The door swung back about eight inches, then stopped. Brett tried to push but in the zero-G weightlessness, the only result was that he drifted away from the door. Damn. He needed something to use as leverage.

"Are you in yet?" Jaclyn asked.

"Something's blocking the door," Brett said. "I can't push it open any further and the opening is too small for me to squeeze through." He looked around, searching for something he could use to counterbalance the force he wanted to exert on the door. One of the big boxes would have been perfect. Except they were too far away and bolted securely to the floor to keep them from drifting around.

Brett stuck his arm through the opening, feeling his way around. Something big was leaning against the door. Whatever it was, it had to be lodged between the door and the control panel, Brett thought. Or it would have drifted once they left Earth gravity and he could have easily pulled it away. He tried to get a grip on the thing but the awkward angle and the space suit made it difficult.

He pulled back and allowed himself to drift, thinking. They needed someone who could enter the room through the narrow opening and pull away the object that was blocking the door. Billy! The kid was small enough. Then Brett frowned. Could he ask this from the child? It was dangerous, the boy would have to be put into a suit that was far too big for him, then crawl his way through the tube and enter the cockpit while they had no clue what he would find. Brett shook his head. Nice idea, DeGraff, he thought, but not a solution. He swam back toward the cockpit door to try again.

"Mr. DeGraff?" Jaclyn's voice came over the helmet speaker.

"Brett," he said. "Call me Brett."

"Oh... Brett, are you making any progress? SS-1 just contacted us; they'll send a rescue shuttle. They can get here in two hours. And life support has restored cabin pressure. Maybe we should wait for the shuttle?"

"I'm coming back," Brett said. Two hours wasn't so bad, they could hold out for two hours. And he had no way to get to the computer anyway.

He entered the tube and began propelling himself back toward the passenger cabin.

* * *

An hour later Brett sat once again strapped to his chair. Jennifer had closed her eyes, stress wearing her out. He wasn't in the mood to talk anyway. "Brett?" A tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Jaclyn. "Can we talk?"

"Sure," he said, unbuckling his harness and floating up. Planting his shoes firmly on the floor, he followed Jaclyn.

"We're leaking oxygen somewhere," Jaclyn said, pointing at the life support status panel. "We'll run out before the rescue gets here."

"How long will the emergency bottles last?" Brett asked.

"Not long enough," Jaclyn said. "We'll run out about fifteen minutes before the rescue's ETA."

"Damn!" Brett swore below his breath.

"Do you think you can make another attempt at getting to the computer?" Jaclyn asked.

He shook his head. "No use. I can't get the door open wide enough. And I can't move whatever is blocking it." He looked back over his shoulder. Billy sat staring outside where SS-1 moved in and out of view with grim regularity. "I have an idea..."

His Velcro overshoes squished upon the carpet as he walked back to his seat. "Jennifer? I need Billy's help." He explained to her what he wanted.

She began shaking her head. "No, it's too dangerous. What if something happens to him?"

"Jennifer," Brett said firmly, "if we can't make this work, we're all going to die. That is not a danger, that is a certainty. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but that's the way it is."

She looked up at him, tears forming in her eyes. After a moment she nodded slowly.

"Billy?"

The boy's eyes were wide and dark, with an excited gleam overlaying the fear. "I can do it," he said boldly.

Brett flashed him a grin. "Of course you can."

Billy unbuckled his safety straps and would have floated up right away if Brett hadn't grabbed him. "Woah there, kid," he said. "Easy does it."

He helped the boy forward to the galley, where, with Jaclyn's help, Brett put Billy into a pressurized suit. Together, they easily lifted him toward the hatch and Billy crawled into the maintenance tube. Brett put on his own suit and followed.

After a few minutes of pushing and pulling themselves through the small tube, they came upon the fourth exit hatch and lowered themselves into the cargo hold. Brett pointed toward half open door. "Think you can squeeze through that?" he asked.

"Sure," Billy said. "What's in there?"

"The computer mainframe," Brett said. "Something is blocking the door. I need you to remove whatever it is. "

Billy grabbed on to the sill of the door and pulled himself through the small opening.

Brett heard him gasp over the airwaves. "Billy? Are you okay?"

"Yes. " The boy's voice trembled. "There's a body here."

Brett grimaced. A body? Of all the things that Billy could find!

"Can you pull it away?"

"I'm trying," Billy replied.

A few moments later the door open fully. Billy's face was flushed. Behind him, dressed in the blue coveralls of Skylift Corp, floated the body of a dark haired man, apparently a mechanic or servicing man. Dried blood caked the side of his head where it had trickled down from a deep gash to his temple. A piece of paper was pinned to his lapel.

"Is he... dead?" Billy asked breathlessly.

"Yes," Brett said. No need to check. Nobody could survive in the pressureless cockpit without a protective suit. Besides, the wretched man's sightless eyes said it all.

Billy grimaced. "Ugh," he muttered.

Brett barely heard him. He pulled the body from the cockpit and tore the paper from its coveralls before he sent it to float freely in the cargo hold. He had no time for niceties.

"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. The atheists shall be cast from God's Domain," the note said in a hasty scrawl.

Beneath it was a rough sketch of two broken wings. Brett shook his head. The idiots were willing to kill an elevator-load full of innocents to make their point.

Crumpling the note and stuffing it in one of the many pockets on the space suit, he returned to the cockpit and bent over the control panels. Most of the tiny meters, dials and data screens meant little to him. He was, after all, a shuttle pilot, not a space elevator expert. But far to the left he found what he was looking for: the controls for the emergency thrusters.

He tapped away at the keyboard, trying to override the computer so he could use the thrusters. "Jaclyn? I need to know our call sign."

"Do we have one?" she asked. "We're an elevator, not a shuttle."

Brett chuckled dryly. "Yes we do. Every craft that leaves the atmosphere is assigned a call sign."

"Oh... Okay, hang on."

A heavy silence reigned the small cockpit while Jaclyn searched through the flight instructions. Brett caught Billy casting wary glances at the body that drifted nearby. He hoped the boy wouldn't be plagued by nightmares. Jennifer would never forgive him.

Jaclyn gave Brett the call sign numbers and he punched them in on the keyboard.

"Warning! Automatic pilot switched off. Manual override activated." The words lit up on the screen and Brett breathed a sigh of relief. Good. One more step taken. The rest should be easy, just a matter of using the thrusters to align the elevator with the magnetized cable. The forces of nature would do the rest. Or so Brett hoped.

He turned his attention to the thruster system and began to study the controls.

There were six thruster rockets. Two in the tail, to provide forward motion. And four in the nose, for steering. One small thruster for up, down, left or right. Not perfect, but he had managed with less.

He engaged the tail thrusters and a shudder went through the body of the craft.

"Brett? What's happening?" Jaclyn called over the commlink. In the background he could hear the voices of the passengers asking the same question in a babble of noise.

"I've engaged the thrusters," Brett replied. "We're moving."

"Cool," Billy said, staring at the positioning screens. "Can I steer?"

Brett chuckled, firing the left thruster to slow their rotation. "Not this time, kid."

Firing the various thrusters in brief bursts, Brett slowed the rotating motion of the elevator around its axis. The rear thrusters pushed the craft forward in the direction of the cable. Carefully Brett aligned the elevator parallel to the gleaming wires.

Unexpectedly the vehicle shuddered and lurched violently. Floating in mid air, Brett was thrown forward. His helmet crashed against the control panel and his forehead connected with the helmet. Hard. Sparks flashed behind his eyes. "Oomph," he grunted. He really had to stop doing this! He could feel the swelling of what would be a nice bump on his forehead.

"Billy? You okay?" Brett grabbed on to the control panel and turned himself around.

"Yes," the boy's voice sounded over the comm. He floated just beneath the ceiling and looked down with a startled expression on his face.

Brett grinned. "Push with your feet against the ceiling," he advised. "Carefully."

Billy did as he was told and Brett grabbed him. "Here, hold on to the door," he pointed, and turned to look at the control screen.

"Maglev connectors engaged," the computer flashed. Brett gave a whoop of joy. It had worked. Now, if only the vehicle's controls would set it in motion again...

He reengaged the autopilot and held his breath.

Lights started blinking, small needles quivered and data began to scroll across the screen. Then, with another light lurch, the elevator set into motion again. Speed was increasing rapidly. ETA in 10 minutes, the computer announced.

"We did it, Billy," he said. "We did it."

The boy grinned.

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Forty minutes later Brett was sitting in the debarkation terminal aboard SS-1. A doctor was looking at the bruise on his forehead. Jennifer and Billy hovered nearby, waiting, while Jaclyn stood talking in a low voice with a security officer. Everyone else was long gone, having moved on to connecting shuttles or their onboard assignments.

The doctor straightened. "You'll live," she announced with a grin.

Brett grinned back wryly. "That was the plan," he muttered.

When she noticed that the doctor was finished, Jennifer approached. "Thank you," she said. "You saved our lives."

"Hey," Brett shrugged self-consciously. "It was my ass on the line too. And I couldn't have done it without Billy." The boy beamed at the praise.

At the far end of the room, the sliding doors opened with a hiss and an older gentleman walked in. His hair was still full and a shade of light gray that stood in sharp contrast with the dark suit he wore. Brett recognized him immediately. Mr. McCormack. His boss.

"Uncle James!" Billy cried.

Brett's eyes widened in surprise and his head whipped around to stare at Jennifer. She gave a little shrug.

McCormack winked at Billy as he strode across the room to stop in front of Brett. "Mr. DeGraff," he said. It wasn't a question.

Brett studied him warily, wondering if he had ruined his stint on the Callisto expedition by involving Billy in the rescue operation.

"I want to thank you," McCormack added, holding out his hand.

Brett took it.

"For saving my Goddaughter's and nephew's lives."

Brett blinked and glanced at Jennifer.

She shrugged again. "I didn't want you to think I got the job because of my family ties," she murmured.

"I would never do that," McCormack stated firmly. "Jennifer was enlisted because of her knowledge on geophysics, not because I'm her Godfather. Although," he admitted with a smile, "it'll be nice to see some family when we wake up."

For the third time in as many minutes, Brett blinked in surprise. "You mean... You are coming with us to Altair?"

McComack smiled. It took years off of his age. "Of course," he said. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. I may be an old man, but I have dreamed of Altair ever since the first probe images returned to Earth, five decades ago."

"So did I." Brett grinned at finding a kindred spirit.

Now it was Jennifer's turn to widen her eyes. "How could you...?"

"Cold sleep," Brett explained. "I spent most of my time in suspension. I think I was born around the same time as your godfather."

"Oh..." she said weakly, and squinted as if she were trying to make out the years in his face.

"Come," McCormack said. "Let's go to my quarters, we'll be more comfortable there. Station Security will of course want to talk with Mr. DeGraff some more about the... incident. Which is why you and I and Jennifer will take my private shuttle to the Moon, once our business here is done."

As they followed McCormack out of the room, Jennifer's hand brushed against Brett's. He wondered if it were accidental. This Altair-job could get very interesting.

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