

# Love is in the Air

Hamish Trolove

The beams of their torches swept the corridor, picking out motes of dust and other airborne particles in bright scintillating shafts. Piles of cables and debris were scattered across the metal floor from open panels in the corridor wall from where they had been pulled. Leanne checked her suit's wrist readout.

"Breathable atmosphere. CO<sub>2</sub>'s a bit high. A bit warm, but that's no surprise. All looks okay." she flicked the protective cover back over the display. "Pretty much as Tam advised."

"It is so nice to be able to stand straight." Ashton reached up. "I can reach right up and *not* touch the ceiling. I can stand straight and not whack my head against a bulkhead."

"Getting claustrophobic on the ship were we?" Leanne smirked to herself. "You'll get used to it after a couple more years. You just need to toughen up."

"I swear the only one fully comfortable onboard is Stanton. I don't know how Karl manages."

Leanne crouched and inspected one of the piles of cables. "Scan this, and add a note, *Optic fibre cables, fair condition.*"

"I mean, he's so big."

"Because he's tough." Leanne cast her torch beam up an open service duct. "Ashton. Focus. Task at hand. Get your camera in here and add a note; *800 by 800 ducts. We'll need Bruce doing disconnections.*"

Leanne shone her torch into a partly open hatch then pushed through herself. "Looks like one of the labs."

"Not much equipment left." said Ashton behind her.

"High value, smallish items. No point leaving them behind when the place was abandoned." Leanne examined a rack of test capsules.

"What were they researching?"

"I don't know, but this equipment looks like it was something biological."

"Here?" Ashton was puzzled. "It's like Hell outside. There's no biology here."

"Makes sense if you didn't want your experiment running away and setting up camp out in a nice steamy rich environment. Over here. Capture the overall space. Add a note; *high grade stainless and various gas and fluid fittings.*"

Ashton wandered around the stripped laboratory, watching the display build up a model of the room as he panned the scanner around. Satisfied that enough detail had been captured, he jotted a note onto his AMC<sup>1</sup> and checked his wrist readout. He put his hands to his helmet faceplate. "Are your atmospheric readings still safe too?"

"Passable." Leanne checked her wrist readout, nodded.

A slight hiss accompanied Ashton sliding his faceplate up to reveal his brown eyes and angled planes of his nose. He took a deep breath. "Good to breath other air. It's quite warm though."

"Smells?"

"Nothing much."

"Good enough." Leanne slid her helmet faceplate up. Its reflective surface gave way to her intense grey eyes, and smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. "Technically, I should have waited five minutes to see if you keeled over, but everything seemed okay." She breathed in, savouring the unfamiliar air. "It's not as good as a space station or planet's air, but it's better than the air on the ship which we've breathed a million times already."

"What else have we got to do?"

"Still quite a bit more of the station we haven't surveyed. Old plans suggest there are still a bunch more labs to look at." Leanne consulted her AMC. "The power centres, we've seen. The cafeteria was flooded and also out of packets of crisps. The computer core had been removed, so not much of interest there. I think we have some storage modules, the command and communication centres, life support, and living modules still to go. Although, some of those areas are exposed to the outside elements seeing as parts of the exterior cladding have been removed."

"Marika was going to run the spiderbots through the exposed areas wasn't she?"

---

1 Arm Mounted Computer

"She was, but we may still need to go in there if anything needs a closer look."

"Okay. We'll call it quits and get back to the ship." Leanne marked off the area on her AMC.

Ashton stowed his equipment and was just about to lower his helmets faceplate, when he sneezed.

"Sumimasen."

"You'll be glad to have done that before you closed your visor." chuckled Leanne.

Ashton gave her a wan smile, grimaced, and closed his helmet.

The edge of the sky was a deep purple, as night closed in. Sand dusted against their suits, blowing off the rocks and drifting dunes in the constant wind. The industrial looking bulk of the *Addington* loomed over them like a metallic grey and grubby, pockmarked beige<sup>2</sup> cliff. Jutting sensors, and hard edged geometry, filled the spaces between the massive rounded mushroom-like shapes of the antigravity field emitter nodes. Wearily they trudged up the ramp to the ship's airlock. They were met by a large woman squeezed into standard issue orange jumpsuit. "Welcome back guys." she said. "Let me help you out of your suits."

"Thanks Marika." said Leanne, stowing her helmet in her locker.

"I just enjoy undressing you guys. You do know that don't you." She turned to Ashton. "Especially you handsome."

Ashton blushed and ducked his eyes. Marika laughed and unclipped his camera pack. She had just removed his helmet when he quickly turned away and sneezed. "Sorry."

"Salud!" said Marika.

"I don't think I'm done yet." said Ashton, his face screwing up. He sneezed again.

"Dinero!" said Marika. "Any more?"

Ashton held up a finger, and staggered as he sneezed again.

"Amor!"<sup>3</sup> Oh Ashton!" exclaimed Marika, "I never realised." and blew him a kiss.

Ashton went beetroot red and couldn't look at Marika. "It was dusty in the facility." he mumbled.

Marika gathered up their suits and headed for the low hatch. "Go and sort yourselves out. I'll get these suits ready for tomorrow."

"Thanks Marika." Leanne called after her. As she ducked out of the airlock, she turned to Ashton. "See you in the mess."

Ashton sneezed.

"Nat's given the go-ahead for a large scale salvage operation." Leanne squeezed herself into the vacant seat beside Ashton.

"Is there anything you want me to do?" Ashton absently swirled heart patterns in his pumpkin soup.

"Nothing tonight. We'll go back over for a deeper survey tomorrow."

"Hello sweetie." Marika plumped down in the seat opposite Ashton, and gave Matt, seated beside her, a playful shove to make more room for herself. "So, were there any beautiful lost maidens to rescue in the facility?"

Ashton blushed, grinned sheepishly, and dropped his eyes to his chickpea fritters.

"Imagine what they'd be like, lost and alone for so long and then to have a strong handsome, virile young man like you turn up? We'd all need to be there to keep them off you and protect your virtues."

"You'd be shouting encouragement." said Karen, leaning into the conversation from the neighbouring table.

"I wouldn't do that!" Marika's expression was pure innocence. "Such a baseless accusation. The lube I carry with me at all times is purely for the 'bots. I wouldn't dream of throwing it to the poor girl as she rips his clothes off."

Ashton's cheeks and ears burned.

"Cut that out, you guys." said Matt. "Don't tease poor little Ashton. I'd be happy to take care of any lost and lonely maidens that we might encounter."

"I'm sure you would too, hunk." laughed Marika and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Play nicely children." Natasha, retrieved her meal from the dispenser. "We want to keep the newby *on* the team, not drive him off screaming."

"I was being awfully nice to him." Marika put on a hurt tone. "I'll give him a big hug when I next bump into him."

---

2 Formerly white.

3 Latin American Spanish: When someone sneezes the response is *salud* ("health") after the first sneeze, *dinero* ("money") after the second, and *amor* ("love") after the third.

Natasha rolled her eyes.

"What are these?" Ashton wiped a hand across one of the dusty curved plasti-glass panels set into a row of machinery against the laboratory wall. He coughed, glad that his suit faceplate was up.

"I'm picking some sort of containment or storage unit," said Leanne. "Anything inside?"

"Hard to tell." Ashton stood on tiptoes, and shone his torch through the grubby window. "It looks like lots of glass vials. I can't tell if there's anything in them." He inspected each one in the row, but suddenly came to a halt. "This one's been damaged." His torch beam picked out a ripped seal around the panel. Where the others were a pristine white inside, this one was yellow with grime. Dark streaks and stains blotched the shelves and ruptured glass vials.

The panel yielded to his pry-bar and clattered to the floor. Ashton pulled out one of the tiny vials and looked closely at it. "There is a code here; LV-502."

Leanne shrugged. "Could be anything," and sneezed.

"*Gesundheit* Leanne." Karl's deep voice came over their suit radios. "I was going to join you to give the bots a hand, but we're having a bit of trouble with *Gonzo* again. Karen's working on a quick software patch that should get him going again. I'll be across as soon as I can."

"Hi Karl," said Leanne, sniffing. "The bots seem to be managing okay. We left them dismantling power centre two which seemed the most straightforward."

"Sorry about that," said Karl.

"Take your time. We'll be here all day."

"Hello. What's this?" Ashton picked up a sheet of transfers off the floor. He silently read the labels, then cursed.

"What's up," Leanne was suddenly alert.

Ashton had gone pale. "Viruses. This was a virus research facility."

"Shit!" said Leanne. Both clapped their helmet faceplates down.

"Base," Leanne called. "We have a problem. The facility was undertaking virus research. One of the virus containment units had been breached."

"Have you been exposed?" it was Natasha.

"Highly likely," said Leanne.

"What with?"

"Unknown. The label said LV-502. Hold it..." Leanne accepted the transfer sheet from Ashton.

"Ashton's found a sheet that may help us. Serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, are mentioned alongside the ID codes."

"Sorry to butt in," it was Anthony, the ship's storage and inventory controller who also had the dubious honour of being the crew's medic. "Those chemicals all play a role in mood."

"LV-502 has *oxytocin*, *dopamine* and *serotonin* noted beside it with what might be blend ratios. It's mostly oxytocin."

"Oxytocin; the love hormone," said Anthony. "A love virus? That's a new one on me."

"So how are you feeling?" Natasha said.

"Aside from the sneezing, not bad. And right now Ashton's looking pretty good. I just want to rip all his clothes off and make love to him."

There was shocked silence on the radio, and behind her, Ashton blushed pink.

"I'm kidding," said Leanne, but a wicked smile remained on her face.

"I think you're mistaking lust with love," said Natasha in an exasperated tone.

"Maybe, the virus has expired in the time since it escaped," said Anthony. "We'll need to quarantine you two for a while, just in case."

"Well," said Leanne taking in her tiny cabin. "This is going to be quite cozy with two of us in here." A second bunk level had been added to the rack containing her narrow bed. "Do you prefer to be on top or bottom?"

"How long did they think we'd be in here?" asked Ashton nervously.

"Two weeks. Maybe shorter if Ant and Tam can isolate an antiviral."

"Two weeks? What are we going to do?"

"Get to know each other *really* well?" suggested Leanne. "Learn each other's terrible habits."

Ashton looked horrified.

"Yeah," said Leanne. "I really like to fart in bed." She watched Ashton's appalled expression with amusement. "Don't worry. I don't really. I think we'll find we can do some work from here, and we'll have access to the ship's entertainment library."

Ashton looked relieved, then "But what about the virus?"

## Love is in the Air

---

"Relax. We'll be fine. It won't be any worse than a minor cold. Besides the others will be keeping tabs on us. Ant, Tam, and the med-bay will be able to treat us if things go down-hill." Leanne was surprised to find her hand resting on his upper arm.

The shade of a smile lifted the corner of Ashton's mouth, and he nodded. "Thank you."

"How was that for you?" asked Leanne leaning back against the wall.

"It was good." said Ashton from his perch on the top bunk.

"Are you sure? You blubbed through most of it."

"I did not." sniffed Ashton. "It's the virus making my nose run and eyes stream."

"Sure. Okay, you choose the next one."

"What about *Tagging Pritchard*?"

"I don't know that one."

"Comedy. About a bunch of miners who strike it rich at Pritchard's Reef."

"Okay. Dial it up."

"Knock knock!" said a muffled voice on the door intercom. "May I come in?"

"Only if you're good looking." said Leanne.

A slender figure in a hazmat suit pushed the door open and squeezed in. "How are you guys doing?"

"Oh it's you Ant. Yeah, you can come in. We're fine." said Leanne, but glanced up to Ashton. "Ashton may be getting dehydrated from all the crying he did during *Ticket Home*."

"Hmmm. Becoming overly sentimental and weepy." Ant jotted something on his pad.

"I didn't cry that much." Ashton was indignant.

"Quick to become defensive." Ant jotted something else on his pad then put it away, and pulled out a pair of syringes. "I've come to take some samples. Who's first?"

"Is it just me or is it getting a bit warm in here?" Ashton peeled off his jump suit to expose a hairless chest and toned shoulders.

Leanne watched in fascination, then caught herself. "Ah... yes it is a bit warm."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm a bit warm too." said Leanne fanning herself. "Can you dive into that drawer there, and pass me the teal top?"

Ashton opened the drawer beside him with a look approaching fear that something dreadful would leap out. Leanne smiled, eyebrow raised. "I swear there's nothing naughty in there." She cocked her head.

"Don't tell me you've never opened a woman's drawers."

Ashton shook his head, found the top, a light vest top, and handed it to Leanne.

"Shove over a bit. There's not much standing room in here." Leanne unfolded from the bunk, and eased herself out of her jump suit taking care not to punch Ashton in the face or elbow him in the guts. That didn't stop her from hip bumping him and standing on his foot. She turned away and pulled off her sports bra and slipped on the light shirt. "That's better."

Ashton had his eyes closed.

"Relax Ashton. We're going to have to get used to seeing each other rather more *casually* dressed. I for one am not keen to go to the toilets every time I want to get changed, nor do I have any pyjamas."

"I'm sorry." Ashton looked mortified.

"Ashton?" Leanne's grey eyes raised to his brown eyes. "Have you ever had a girl friend?"

Ashton stared at the floor, then gave a microscopic shake.

"A good-looking guy like you? I'm surprised. I would have thought a nice guy like you would have women tumbling after you."

Ashton shook his head. "Even if they were interested in me, I'd just fluff it up, and they wouldn't like me."

"Fluff it up? How?"

"Saying the wrong thing, not being into all the things they're into, not giving them all the attention they deserve."

"Ahuh?"

"I might say something that hurts them."

"We're a bit more robust than that. We make mistakes, we have regrets, we've hurt people, we've been hurt before. We're human. We're individuals and have our own strengths, interests, and desires."

"I'm sorry. I've upset you." Ashton's eye's shone.

## Love is in the Air

---

"No, you haven't." said Leanne, "but you've got me all fired up. Here's a thought for you: Had it occurred to you that any girl who might have liked you was prepared to give it a go, or maybe they had the experience, confidence and skills to make it work?" Leanne sat back on her bunk bed.

Ashton shook his head. "I'd never thought of it that way."

"If you muck it up, so what? Maybe you'd both muck it up and then laugh about it. You'd both be learning. If it didn't work, then you'd have given it ago. Mark one up to experience. That's what it's all about. Nobody gets it perfectly right. If they did, that might almost be creepy."

Ashton studied the floor.

"I think you'd be surprised the number of women out there who would quite like you, if you gave them the chance." Leanne relaxed onto her bed, hands behind her head, and stared at the underside of bunk above. A frown crossed her face as she pondered the conversation. Why had she argued it so passionately? It wasn't a topic she'd ever thought about discussing with anyone, but here she was lecturing the new (but very sexy) guy about male-female relationships as if it personally mattered. She glanced at Ashton. He too was staring into space<sup>4</sup> lost in thought.

Careful not to wake Leanne, Ashton slid off his bunk and tiptoed across to the bag of clothing the crew had retrieved for him from his own tiny cabin. Attached to it was a tag in Karl's writing.

*Hi Ashton. I hope you guys are doing okay in there. Here's enough clothing to keep you going for the next couple of days. You tell us if Leanne is getting tough on you. We'll see you out here soon. Karl*

Underneath it was a note from Matt;

*Hey Ashton. Behave yourself in there. Good taste in clothing dude. See you soon. Matt.*

Scrawled across the bottom diagonal was;

*Love the underwear! You sexy beast. ❤️ Marika.*

Ashton rolled his eyes. Obviously, sorting his clothes had been a committee affair. He selected his usual underwear, dropped his smiley face pyjama shorts, and wriggled into his seamless black g-string.

"Nice butt!"

He froze, and looked sheepishly over his shoulder. "I thought you were asleep."

"Light sleeper." Leanne explained with a smirk. "Is the show over?"

Ashton wriggled his hips, turned red, and quickly found some shorts.

Leanne laughed. "While you're over there, chuck me some clothes."

Ashton sorted through Leanne's drawers and threw her a wad of black clothing. At least he would be safe selecting all black items.

As they ate their muesli, sitting side by side at the tiny work station desk, Leanne asked "How did you sleep?"

"Okay." Ashton paused then, "Lots of dreams."

Leanne cocked her head and nodded encouragement.

Ashton lowered his eyes. "About you and me ..."

"Yes?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We were just together. We seemed happy."

"Funny." said Leanne. "I had the same sort of dreams. Sitting together, holding each other. Just being together."

"How strange." said Ashton. "What does it mean?"

"It's those chemicals at work. How'd they make you feel?"

"It felt right."

"Same." Leanne put a hand on Ashton's hand. Ashton smiled, put down his spoon and laid his other hand on top.

"Cooee! Lovebirds. Are you decent?" It was Marika on the door intercom.

---

4 In actuality he was staring into the cupboard door behind which Leanne's books and notes were stored. Had there been space, he would have been staring into it.

Leanne and Ashton looked at each other. "No!" they said in unison.

"Too bad. I'm coming in anyway." the hatch opened and Marika squeezed through. The hazmat suit she had managed to stuff herself into had *Anthony Carter* across the breast pocket. "Oh. Don't you just look like a perfect couple?"

Leanne fluttered her eyelashes and gave Marika a coy look.

Marika's expression softened and she gave them a lingering smile.

"Er ... everything okay?" asked Leanne.

Marika caught herself, started. "Sorry. I was away with the faeries." She sniffed and placed a datapad on the bench beside their half-eaten bowls of muesli. "Can I ask you a favour?" She tapped on the datapad. "We have Bruce working in the service ducts around the virus containment unit. Seeing as you two know that area, can I get you to keep an eye on his video feed?" She sniffed again. "Damn! I need to blow my nose."

"Sure." said Leanne. "Can we control him?"

"This is the bot command screen." Marika swiped to a new page. "Left, right, forward, back, stop, auto, and the big red stop everything button. It's easy. You'll figure it. And if you really get into strife give me or Matt a call."

"Okay. Leave it to us." said Leanne maximising the screen showing what Bruce could see. "Oh. There's an incoming call from Tam." She tapped the datapad. "Go ahead Tam."

"Good morning Leanne, Ashton, and Marika disguised as Anthony." the screen changed to Tam's avatar, which today, was a bald albino with fine elfin features and dark designs around his eyes.

"Hi Tam. What's up?" asked Leanne.

"Anthony and I have been analysing the data from Ashton's camera, the sheet Ashton found, and what we know of the *Kallowplan Novation Corporation* who originally ran this facility. We think we have identified what the remaining viruses do."

"What have we been exposed to?" asked Leanne. "As if we can't guess."

"You have potentially been exposed to a virus that causes your body to generate quantities of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin at the levels that induce strong feelings of love and attachment. It would appear to be a love virus. The experience is likely to be quite pleasurable. This isn't something that can be said about the others."

"Which are?"

"As far as we can tell, the others are; fear, anxiety, jealousy, disgruntlement, contentment, despair, indignity, confidence, confusion, and the common cold."

"Contentment and confidence would be okay."

"True. However, we recommend safely destroying all of the cultures so we don't get exposed to the negative ones and there is less risk of a dangerous mutation of the positive ones."

"Will leaving the vials exposed to the planet's atmosphere be enough to kill them?"

"Probably, but it may not be hot enough to guarantee that they are all killed. We suggest bringing them here in a suitably sealed container which we can heat treat. Spiderbot Trev is almost to Bruce with a suitable container."

"If we have been exposed, when do you think it happened?"

"The virus was probably airborne and so your exposure could have been anywhere in the facility." said Tam.

"That's a worry." said Leanne. "We came back to the ship after our first survey."

"It is possible the other crew have been infected. This depends on the gestation time, which we don't know." said Tam.

"Yay!" said Marika. "Sounds like fun."

"Marika. It will be hard to tell if you have been infected." said Tam. "because you're like that all the time anyway."

"Thank you Tam." Leanne switched the screen back to Bruce's cameras, before Marika could come up with a suitable rebuttal.

Marika huffed, then smiled again. "Helping Bruce should keep you guys entertained for a bit." she said, swinging the hatch open. "Tah tah loviess I've gotta run. I've several bots to prime and I desperately need to sneeze, but not in this suit." She blew them a kiss and eased herself out of the cabin. As the door closed there was a sneeze following by an "Oooh yuck! Gross!"

"Right. Let's find our way to the virus containment." said Leanne. She guided Bruce back out of the service duct, and along the corridor towards the lab where they had found the viruses. Something resembling a large metallic spider dropped from the ceiling and turned to face them. It was Trev. Trev

offered up a stubby tube. Leanne activated Bruce's manipulators and accepted the tube. "Great. We're all go."

"Shall we try *confidence* first?" suggested Ashton pointing to one of the containment units. "If we break the vials accidentally it won't be too bad."

"Good thinking." breathed Leanne easing Bruce forward. On screen, she drew around the containment cover panel and selected a cutter to work on the seal. She glanced at Ashton's face close by hers, fixated on the display. "Okay?"

"Looks good. Do it."

Quicker than the eye could see, Bruce's cutter flashed around the indicated seal, and the cover panel clattered to the deck.

"They're kinda scary machines aren't they?" said Ashton. "They could do some serious damage very quickly. Is there any way to slow down its actions?"

Leanne searched through various configuration screens, and eventually found what she was looking for. "Here we go. That was set at maximum speed. I'll set it to *human supervised* speed."

Lips set in a tight line, Leanne guided one of Bruce's fine manipulators into the cavity. She carefully lifted the set of vials out and softly lowered them into the waiting container.

Taking it in turns, they worked over each of the containment units, opening them, removing the content, and depositing the vials in the container. After the last vial had been retrieved, and the container was closed, they both sat back exhausted.

"I'm glad that's over." said Ashton.

"Nice work." said Leanne. She set Bruce to auto return. They watched as the field of view swivelled and began flowing by as Bruce scuttled along the corridor, sometimes running along the ceiling, sometimes flattening through gaps between seized doors. She swiped to the communication display. "Tam, Bruce is inbound with a load of viruses in the canister."

"Thank you Leanne and Ashton. I will take over Bruce's control and put that container straight into the heat treatment furnace."

Leanne closed the communication screen. "I don't know about you, but I could do with some R&R outside of this cabin. Game?"

They had examined the scene of the disappearances, and picked up a clue. It appeared to be a damaged data-chit for an exclusive club on the outskirts of the city. The remaining sun was touching the horizon, it's bright companion having already set. The street was awash with its baleful red glow, and the people around them were pulling their coats tighter, heads sunk in thick scarves. Ashton turned the data-chit over in his hands. "It's not much to go on."

"I'm surprised we didn't find more at the scene." said Leanne. "And nobody who might have seen anything seemed keen to talk."

"It doesn't look like the data layer has been damaged." Ashton examined the broken and scratched edge of the data-chit. "It may still work enough for us to get into the club."

"It would be nice to know whose it was." Leanne took the chit, and waved it across her scanner. "Hmhf. Encrypted."

"I expect we'll get to the club and something will happen that will give us some more clues." Ashton said, examining his antiquated data gloves<sup>5</sup>. "Sloppy game design really."

"We could try a different game. Or we could just go into this bar here." Leanne nodded towards the grubby windows of a run down bar across the street. The signage flickered and distorted, but it looked like the glowing letters said *The Last Resort* in standard language.

The ruddy light filtered through the streaked and grimy windows gave the bar and everyone in it a used coffee ground cast. Ashton found himself wanting to take off his VR headset and give it a wipe down. There

---

5 Data-gloves, data-trousers, data-shoes, data-headsets, and data-shoulder pad t-shirts were the raging fashion back in the 2280's on the world in which the game was set. At that time, the people had a desire to record absolutely everything about their day to day lives; what they had for breakfast, what their vitals signs were at any one time, what they could see, hear, and touch, where they were, and what they were doing. An enormous amount of data was collected which no-one other than marketing organisations looked at. A century later, the data was analysed by social scientists, anthropologists, and public health officials to gain many insights into the effects of rampant social media on health, degradation of mental faculties, wellbeing, and economic outcomes.

## Love is in the Air

---

were quite a few rough looking people at the tables and the bar, all talking over each-other to create a loud unintelligible mutter.

"I say, it's a bit noisy in here." shouted Ashton to nobody in particular. Immediately the noise level dropped as the game responded to Ashton's volume control command. "That's better. Now we might be able to hear each other."

"What sort of games do you like?" Leanne settled herself on one of the barstools at a table in a quiet corner.

"A good mystery is always fun," said Ashton, "but, I tend to go for those games where you have to balance resources and use strategy to good effect."

"Survival games?"

"Those and some of the community building games." said Ashton. "You know, not necessarily VR games. Have you played this one before?"

"I've played a couple of the other scenarios. They were quite good." Leanne waved a hand over the table top to bring up the drinks menu. "I think you're right though. They had the B-team creating this one. What insubstantial thing would you like to drink?"

Ashton grinned. "Very well, I'd like to pretend to drink a ...," he perused the list. It was quite short, "a red beer."

"Back in a sec." Leanne slipped off her stool and headed for the bar.

Ashton watched her go, admiring the fluid grace of her movements, but reminded himself this was her avatar he was looking at. She returned shortly with a pair of glasses filled with a bubbling red fluid.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you." said Ashton as Leanne reseated herself. "Are you in a relationship?"

Leanne smiled. "No. I have been before. A few times. But they never lasted."

"I'm sorry to hear that." said Ashton. He lifted his glass, then put it down again. Leanne noted the ripples on its surface. Ashton was shaking.

"Don't be." she laid a hand on his and felt him relax. "I quite like my job. The long periods away would put a strain on any relationship, and in the end we'd always decide that it was better we went our separate ways. They were fun while they lasted."

"But what about -"

"The company has always had a policy of *don't screw the crew* which is pretty smart to avoid some nasty situations." Leanne grinned. "But that doesn't mean it didn't happen."

Ashton nodded, and studied the table top.

"Relax." Leanne took his other hand and turned him to face her. "If what Tam says is true, this *love virus* is spreading through the crew. With what's probably happening on this ship, I think that rule will go by the board." she laughed. "At least on the *Addington*."

"So. You would be okay to have a relationship with me?" Ashton looked deep into Leanne's eyes.

"What's with the puppy dog eyes, Ash? We're already in a relationship. It's getting deeper each day. I like being with you, talking to you, understanding you. I'd very much like to get closer to you still. You're a wonderful, gentle guy."

Ashton's eyes shone and he opened and closed his mouth a few times.

"Kiss me." said Leanne leaning close.

Suddenly every display around the bar lit up with red lettering that said, "INCOMING MESSAGE." and there was a *ping!*

Leanne smiled a lopsided smile and sighed. "Such good timing."

"A message for you." a burly customer stumped over and presented Leanne with a datapad with one big button on it with the tag, *accept call*.

Leanne pressed the button. The bar and everything around them blurred and muffled. An image opened in front of them. It was Anthony.

"Hi Leanne and Ashton. I hope I'm not interrupting anything." he sat forward and squinted. "Is that *Gateways* you're playing?"

Leanne nodded. "The *Falling Sky* scenario."

"Good game." said Anthony. "I haven't tried that scenario though. Any good?"

"We're still deciding that."

"The story seems a bit linear at this stage." said Ashton. "It may get better."

"Anyway. I wanted to update you on your situation. Hold on a sec." Anthony turned away and tried to stifle a sneeze. He shook his head. "As I was saying. You have probably figured this already, but you have definitely contracted the love virus *LV-502*. It is an airborne pathogen, so if it had been circulating for a while, you would have caught it as soon as you entered the facility."

"Which means you probably have it now too." said Leanne.

"That depends on the time to incubate, but I think you're right."

"Oh hi, Leanne and Ashton." Marika appeared in the image behind Anthony, and enfolded him in her arms. "How are you guys doing?" She gave Anthony a peck on the cheek.

"Very well thanks." said Leanne. "The rest of the crew aren't too pissed off with us for not being available to work?"

"Nah. What was it you actually did?"

"Smart arse!" huffed Leanne. "And you haven't succumbed to the *love virus*?"

"No. But I use it as an excuse to rub myself all over the blokes. I can't wait 'til you get out Ashton."

"Hands off. He's mine." grinned Leanne.

"Spoil sport."

"Okay. Enough of that." said Anthony. "I think we can say that most if not all of the crew are infected. Simone and Stanton have coupled up."

"They've got the whole dom – sub thing going." Marika's expression was wicked, and she slid a hand around Anthony's shoulder.

"Too much information." Leanne clapped her hands over her ears.

"Natasha and Matt seem to be getting on very well, and Karl and Karen are spending more time together than usual." said Anthony.

"And obviously you guys seem to be holding out against the virus just fine." Leanne smirked.

"Tam is working on an antivirus for the crew." said Anthony.

"What a killjoy." Marika muttered under her breath, and nibbled Anthony's ear.

"Well. I've gotta go." said Anthony hurriedly. "Something's come up."

After Anthony had signed off, Leanne turned to Ashton and said. "So, that's it then. We're in the thrall of a love virus."

"So it seems." said Ashton. "I'm almost disappointed."

"Oh?"

"Well." Ashton's shoulders fell. "Is it the virus making us feel this way or is there something else, something real behind it?"

"I see what you mean." Leanne enclosed Ashton's hands in her own and raised them to her lips. "Let's just make the most of it eh? We'll learn things about ourselves. Love is a precious thing. Enjoy it while it lasts."

The next day Ashton and Leanne were again riding Bruce's data streams. Now the spiderbot was exploring the stripped remains of the communications array. Ashton patched the data stream through to the VR goggles. Donning them, he looked around. The array was now little more than a ceramic, and steel skeleton. The loader bots under Matt and Marika's guidance had done a very thorough job. Ashton handed the goggles to Leanne. "There's nothing left now."

"Agreed. I think we can tick this area off." Leanne surveyed the area. "The loaders may as well concentrate on the living modules. I don't expect there's much there so they should be able to clear them pretty quick. I'll pass a message to Matt and Marika."

"Where shall we send Bruce to next?"

"We still need to do a deep survey of the life support modules, so send him there."

"On his way." Ashton flicked through the layouts for the facility and directed Bruce towards the distant module.

"I have an idea to help us pass the time while Bruce travels." Leanne raised the VR goggles, a wicked smile on her face and a gleam in her eye. She grabbed Ashton's hand, dragged him out of his seat and propelled him towards her bunk. Turning him to face her, she slid a hand up under his shirt, enjoying the warmth and shape of his toned chest. She kissed him hungrily. Ashton, closed his eyes, and returned the kiss with his own new-found hunger. "You'd better lose the shirt and shorts." Leanne's eyes became Ashton's entire world. She lifted Ashton's shirt over his head while he fumbled with his shorts. He stood before her in his underpants, nervous, and excited. Leanne licked her lips, bundled him onto the narrow bunk, and slid in on top of him. "Now..."

The comm *pinged*.

"No use pretending we're not in." muttered Leanne. She patted Ashton's cheek, and gave him a quick kiss. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

Sitting at the desk, Leanne said "Go ahead Tam."

## Love is in the Air

---

“Good morning Leanne.” Tam still had his bald albino avatar on. “You’ll be pleased to know I’ve completed the antivirus. Although your immune systems should have beaten off the virus in about four days, I’m sure you’d like to have it out of your systems earlier.”

“Well actually. No.” said Leanne. “We’re quite enjoying it.”

“Funny. Nobody else wants it either.” said Tam.

“If you could experience love yourself, I’m sure you’d understand.” said Leanne.

“Ah. Emotions.” said Tam. “Not a particularly useful thing for a starship computer.”

“Thank you Tam. Was there anything else?”

“As the rest of the crew are also infected with the LV-502 love virus, there doesn’t seem to be much point in keeping you in quarantine. Normally Anthony Carter would also need to sign off your release, but he er ... seems to be otherwise engaged, so I’ll take full authority.”

“Thank you Tam. We’ll sort ourselves out from here.” Leanne closed the communication. She turned to Ashton lying on her bunk. “Sorry ‘bout that.” Making sure he had a good view, she whipped off her shirt and wriggled out of her pants. “Right. Now. Where were we?”

She snuggled in on top of him. “It’s good to see you’re still interested.” she grinned.

They lay cuddled together in the warm after-glow. Leanne propped herself up on her elbows, and gazed into Ashton’s brown eyes. Ashton had a huge smile. Gently he caressed Leanne’s shoulders, ran his hands along her collarbones and up around her face. She lowered her face until they were touching noses.

“Thank you.” breathed Ashton. “That was amazing.”

“You were pretty good for a first timer.”

“I’m lucky to have such a skilled and sensual teacher like you.”

They held each other close, basking in the warmth of their feelings for each other. Eventually, Ashton said, “What will happen to us when the effects of the virus wear off. Will we still love each other?”

“Do you want it to be so?”

“Yes. Yes absolutely.” said Ashton smiling and kissing Leanne’s hair.

“Then we will be. We can make it happen.”

Ashton hugged her close. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” whispered Leanne, and kissed him long and deep. “Let’s see how everyone else is getting on.”

