

Tennis Matches and Space Bugs

By Colleen Ottomano

The small hard object whistled through the air, and seemed to veer to the right as a limb stretched out, trying to no avail to return it to the sender. With a smack, the object hit the wall and reversed course.

"Hey, watch it!" Valerie yelled, as the tennis ball narrowly missed her head on its way back to her partner.

"Watch it yourself," Daniel grinned at her as he swatted the ball away with his racket.

The soft thump of the ball echoed in the background as the two comrades chatted. The whirr of a generator could be heard in the distance. The peace that emanated throughout the place was amazing. The fact that this place was even functional was a miracle.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!" The sound of klaxons wailing interrupted the concentration of the game, and the ball and rackets were left, forgotten on the floor. The laughter that had permeated the game faded as the two people sighed and marched off to the control room to respond to the emergency.

"What do you think it is this time?" Valerie asked her partner, as they walked down the corridor lined with a silvery, metal plating.

"Probably some stray rat got into the heating system," Daniel reached up and absently scratched his head. "Seriously, how could the supply crew miss a rat in a high security base?"

"Beats me," Valerie shrugged her shoulders. "I'm placing my bets on the power conduits near the East Solar Field. They were on the fritz last week."

"Sure, if you say so." Daniel pressed the open-button on the panel next to the door in front of them. "After you my dear," Daniel bowed, flashing her a smile.

"Cheeky—" Valerie socked him playfully in the shoulder.

"Ouch, that hurt!" Daniel faked indignation.

"You wish it did," she spouted over her shoulder as she walked into the control room. Daniel sighed in resignation.

"So, what seems to be the problem?" Valerie asked the man who seemed to be in charge.

"Yeah, what's up boss?" Daniel asked as he rested his elbow on his partner's shoulder.

Commander John Arvick was observing the grid on the panel displayed before him. The other technicians in the room were busy working at their stations. He turned around, seeming a bit surprised.

"What are you two doing here?" he asked with a bit of a scowl on his lips.

"What do you mean?" the two asked in unison.

"All response personnel are supposed to report to the War Room when there is an emergency. Didn't you get the memo?"

"Memo? Did we get a memo?" Daniel asked turning to Valerie.

Valerie shushed him. "We're sorry sir. We'll be sure to check our mail more carefully next time." She spoke to Arvick seriously.

"You better. Now get your collective asses to the War Room." He shoed them with his hands.

The two proceeded out of the room, one glaring at the other, as Commander Arvick turned to the man at his side "Will they ever learn, Walter?"

"Learn what, sir?" the technician asked puzzled.

"Never mind," Arvick muttered to himself as he returned his attention back to the screen.

"So nice of you to join us," came the sarcastic voice of Carson Felds from the middle of the room, "What were you two up to?"

"Sorry Captain," Valerie responded. Captain was more of a decorative title, rather than an actual military rank. He was from the detective branch of the European Union, perhaps equivalent to a United States FBI agent. "We were getting in some exercise."

"No need to hear the sob story, just don't be late next time Ms. Laroush," Captain Felds addressed the latecomers, "and you too Mr. Barrow." Daniel was trying unsuccessfully to stifle a snicker at the reprimand Valerie was receiving; he quickly shut up as Capt. Felds turned to him.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, now if we could get down to business," he turned to the grid display behind him. There was a replica of the lunar base on the display, a three-dimensional hologram the flickered green with the air currents. There was an area of red on the map, which Daniel assumed was the area that was causing difficulties.

"That'll be five bucks mister," Valerie whispered through a grin, as she gestured to the map. "I was right, the East Solar Field is blown."

"We never shook on anything, Val, and what would you do with five bucks anyway? Buy some moon rocks? Ice cream would be so much more valuable." Now it was Daniel's turn to act serious and pay attention.

"You're no fun Danny," Valerie pouted.

"Me? No fun. We'll see about that later," he poked her lightly in the side. "Now focus, before we get yelled at again."

It was funny how the base had changed over the years. In the year 2010, when the initial planning phases had started, the lunar base was just going to sustain a few people at a time. Then "they," being the global collaborators in the project, decided to expand the plan. Why not set up a colony? If people are going to be there some of the time, why not all of the time? So the project expanded and evolved, until approximately a year ago when they actually started to build the base. It was quite an endeavor. Another step for mankind, on many levels. We would now live on the Moon. Even saying that sounded futuristic and fanciful. But it was the future, and dreams were becoming a reality.

Though with reality, came many problems. How would the colony be sustained? How many people could stay there? Well, the first problem was easy to solve. The energy problem was no longer a problem on the Moon. All they had to do was set up an energy grid composed of solar panels. The sun could power them. There had been four large Solar Stations constructed on the Moon; one on each of the four sides of the base called North Solar Field, East Solar Field, South Solar Field, and West Solar Field, nice and simple. They were all wired separately so if there were a problem with one of them, the other grids would not fail. This idea had seemed to work; all of the seven failures in the past months were isolated to only one of the grids.

"Mr. Barrow, I would like you and Sergeant Able to suit up and head out to the disconnected cable in the ESF and see if you can fix it. Bring a MIFDS with you just in case you need extra support."

MIFDS, Machine In Field Stabilizer, was basically a tool belt on steroids. Anything you could ask for in the specialty of fixing-things was on this rolling machine.

"I want you to head out in an hour." Capt. Felds then turned to other members of the response team and ordered them to prep the MIFDS.

"Come on Val, help me suit up," Daniel grabbed her hand and steered her out of the room into the prep station. There was a locker with D. BARROW printed on it. He flipped the latch and opened the door to reveal a neatly folded outfit, thanks to Valerie. On the door was a picture of Daniel, Valerie, and a few of their old friends from back in college when they participated in an astronaut training program. They were all smiles; Valerie had laughed as Daniel tickled her just when the camera flashed. Valerie and Daniel were the only ones who had stayed close out of school. They both loved outer space. Both could remember the long nights watching *The X-Files*, or any other science fiction show that was available. They would discuss the mysteries of the universe, as they lay on the couch, happy to have someone to talk to. Even with the busy jobs they had now, they always found time to enjoy each other's company, and return to the nights of hot popcorn and cold sodas.

Daniel took the suit out of the locker and proceeded to do a safety check. He looked to make sure there were no tears or holes; one mistake, and he would be space dust. These suits were their lifelines when out in space; a single membrane between the void of nothingness and the breath of life.

Valerie ventured over to the wall facing the row of lockers and lifted Daniel's helmet off one of the hooks. She gently turned it and searched for cracks; seeing none, she tucked it into the crook of her arm. By now, Daniel had slipped into his suit and was pulling on his boots. She walked over to him, and he nodded to her. She then placed the helmet on his head and fastened it tightly.

"Testing. One, two, three," Daniel's voice scratched through the communication unit in the helmet. Valerie gave him a thumbs-up signal.

"Good as gold, sunshine." Valerie walked with him to the airlock, where Sergeant Louis Able was already waiting; how he got suited up that fast, no one had figured out yet.

"Hey Scout, ready for some good old clanging on the grid?" Daniel spoke.

"Sure am," Louis "Scout" Able checked his wristwatch. "About time to head out."

"Right." Daniel turned to Valerie, "Don't let them get into too much trouble when I'm out, Val."

"Don't worry," she smiled. "You two be careful out there. Come back in one piece."

"Will do. You owe me a rematch when I get back anyway." Daniel pointed a finger at her and grinned.

"I'm counting on it." Valerie made to leave, but then turned and hugged Daniel around the waist. "Be safe," she whispered so only he could hear. Then she turned and left the airlock. Daniel pressed a few buttons and waited as the air pressure equalized on both sides of the doors. He then opened the outer door and ventured out with Scout, the MIFDS trundling along besides them.

After hours of searching for the problem, fixing it, testing the grid to see if it was functioning, and returning to base, all Daniel wanted to do was take a hot shower and go to sleep.

He returned to his room, which he shared with Valerie, and was not surprised to find her dozed off in the chair with a book on her lap. Daniel took the book and looked at the cover: *Radiative Processes in Astrophysics*. Daniel smiled. His little bookworm, but he wouldn't let her know that he thought that. Making sure to save her page with a spare scrap of paper, he placed the book on a nearby table. He turned the light off besides her and headed towards the bathroom.

After he had showered and dressed, he returned to his sleeping companion. "Val, sweetheart, it's time to get into bed," Daniel whispered as he moved a stray lock of hair out of her face. She mumbled and turned away from him. Daniel sighed. He bent down and carefully lifted her out of the uncomfortable chair and turned to place her on the bottom bunk that was tucked into the alcove. He pulled the blankets up around her. It was a cold in space, even with the heating system, and he did not want her to be chilly. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and turned to get into the top bunk.

"You still owe me ice cream," Valerie murmured.

"Were you awake?" Daniel lifted an eyebrow.

"Yup," Valerie looked smug, up until the point in which she yawned.

"Good night Val," Daniel said with a sigh, and started to climb up the ladder.

"Night Danny, don't let the space bugs bite."

With that Daniel drifted off, thoughts of future spacewalks and freeze-dried ice cream filled his head. No space bugs could scare him, the spaceman, with his best friend by his side, from the wonders that that the universe offered with an open hand to all who dared to receive them.

Afterword

In the future, we will run out of space on our beloved Earth. It's a fact. We must be prepared to expand to the great beyond. Humankind must realize this and take the next leap into space. The lunar base that has been thought of, and might fall through in the year 2024, is one of these steps. Some people say that this money should be spent helping people around the world; it should not be spent on the fantastic idea of a lunar base. The fact is, this money will be well spent. We have to start somewhere, why not here?

In addition to preparing us for the inevitable, by placing a base on the moon, we can help out energy problems. By creating an apparatus to be used on the Moon that can harness the solar power of the Sun, a large fraction of humankind's needed energy can be collected. These innovations can be what save us. We need to find ways to survive without harming the Earth. By exploring into the galaxy, we can expand our horizons; find new ways of solving our problems.

This is the only way to make progress. If the whole of humankind were to sit down one day and decide that the obstacle they were faced with was too astronomical, then what would be accomplished? Nothing; nothing at all. Exploration is important, no doubt.

We have been exploring since the dawn of time. This is the next logical step. We have already taken baby steps to outer space. It is only time before living in space is a reality.