

LOVE UNDER THE STARS

A SHORT STORY

GREG KROJAC

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Commander Lewis Harding looked around him. Some would consider the environment as harsh, foreboding – even sinister – with its distinct lack of anything vegetative to break up the monotony of acres of rock and dusty terrain but the astronaut found solace in the dwarf planet’s simplicity. There were no distractions, nothing to take one’s mind away from marvelling at the raw beauty of creation, whether it had been by some god somewhere in the heavens or by an infinitesimally small singularity exploding into cosmic life.

The low gravity brought out the child in him and he decided to indulge himself in a spot of scientific research that would almost certainly also be a lot of fun. Bending his knees slightly before take-off, he sprung into the air. He knew the theory – NASA scientists had long since done the calculations – and he was prepared for the mechanics of the jump, but, to actually do it, to actually jump in authentic and unsimulated gravity that was barely 6% of that of Earth, that was something that no man or woman had ever experienced before.

He gazed at his altimeter, located on the left forearm of his space suit as he rose slowly into Pluto’s sky, smiling to himself as the digital instrument ticked off each passing metre. At a height of 7.62 metres he ceased to rise any longer and began his equally slow descent back to the planet’s surface. As he touched down, almost a full ten seconds after he had made his initial leap, he felt his face flush, not with exertion but with pure joy. And, just as he had after his first parachute jump all those years ago, he felt a strong urge to repeat the experience immediately.

He took off in much the same way as he had done less than a minute earlier but this time, as he approached a height of five metres, he leaned his head forward and tucked it into his chest. His body had no choice but to follow through and he executed two perfect somersaults before realising that he needed to return to his normal position before landing and had only a couple of seconds to do so. Lifting his head up and straightening his back just in time, he landed on Pluto once again with no major incidents.

A female voice behind him admonished him.

“That’s not a recognised manoeuvre from the NASA manual, Commander. You should know better.”

Commander Harding looked sheepish within the confines of his helmet.

“I know, but I just couldn’t help myself. Seeing this world from such an angle, it filled me with such wonder that I felt like a child who had seen his first beautiful sunrise.”

Olivia looked up at the skies.

“I know what you mean. The fact that I can look up and our sun is just a bright spot in the sky is quite overwhelming. And how Charon, half the size of Pluto, completely steals the thunder of the planet’s other four moons, pushing them to one side and hogging centre stage. This place is so different from home.”

Lewis and Olivia had gone through the space training academy at the same time, although they had had only fleeting contact, restricted to a few shared classes and passing each other in cor-

ridors between classes. She had made an immediate impact on Lewis though, her classic Singaporean beauty making her stand out from the crowd. He lived for the smile that she flashed at him as they passed, the sound of her laughter as something funny caught her eye or was whispered in her ear, the smell of her perfume wafting past his nostrils with each brief encounter. He had often wished for the opportunity to sit down and chat with her, to get to know her, but she was like the most popular girl at high school, somebody else always claiming her attention.

Even though Lewis had had almost two years in which to make his move, he had failed miserably to do so. He couldn't understand it; he was normally so confident in all that he did – including his interactions with women – but Olivia appeared to be his Kryptonite, inadvertently sapping him of all the qualities that made him such a good trainee astronaut. And, now, she was standing alongside him – the first two humans to set foot on the surface of Pluto. He tried to think of something to say. He didn't want to waste this opportunity to connect with her.

“It's cold out, isn't it?”

Olivia's trademark laugh, the laugh that had captivated him back in training, poured out of his intercom receiver.

“You could say that, yes. Minus 233 degrees Celsius is a bit on the cold side. Definitely not the weather for a swim.”

Lewis returned the laugh, hoping upon hope that it didn't sound forced, for it wasn't.

The blue tint of the dwarf planet's atmosphere, accompanied by distinct layers of haze, gave the planet a definite mysterious and magical aura as if the two of them were players in a fantastical piece of theatre, but this was happening for real. There were no stagehands watching from the wings, no producer frantically mouthing each word that the two astronauts spoke, and no audience to give spontaneous approval. Even riding piggyback on light waves travelling from Pluto to Earth, nobody back home would see or hear anything that happened for almost five and a half hours. That meant he had five and half hours before he might feel the pressure of onlookers inhibiting his performance. For now, at least, it was just he and Olivia who were onstage – and what a wonderful theatre to perform in.

Lewis knew that standing there, dumbstruck, would do him no good.

“I don't know if you remember me, but I used to see you at the space academy. Most days, actually. We even shared a few classes.”

Olivia gave him that smile again. In the past, he'd hoped that her smiles had been for him but, to be honest, there were plenty of other people milling about in the corridors at the time and she could have been smiling at any one of the other people. But it made him feel good to think that her smiles might be aimed at him.

“Of course I remember you, silly. We used to attend guidance and navigation, orbital dynamics, and astronomy classes together. You're Lewis Harding.”

Lewis's heart swelled. She *had* noticed him.

"You really had orbital dynamics sussed, Olivia. Top of the class if I remember right."

Olivia blushed, confident in the knowledge that reflections from her visor would hide her reaction from Lewis.

"I was just lucky, I think. Plus the instructor explained things so well, it all kind of fell into place. Anyway, you didn't do so badly yourself, as I recall."

"Fourth isn't first, though."

Lewis immediately castigated himself. Why had he said that? He sounded like he was jealous, maybe even thought that Olivia didn't deserve her success.

"I mean, you have to be pretty special to come first in such a tough subject."

Olivia didn't seem to have noticed anything untoward with what Lewis had said. Or, if she had, she didn't let on.

"Thanks, Lewis."

Lewis had an idea.

"Shall we go see what's beyond that ridge over there?"

He pointed to where the topography of the planet undulated upwards to an elevated point maybe half a kilometer away.

"It shouldn't take us long to get there, not with this low gravity."

Olivia nodded, or what passed for a nod when wearing a bulky space helmet.

“Yeah. Sure. Why not?”

The two astronauts bounded towards the ridge like a couple of gazelles with turbo-charged springs in their heels. It took only a couple of minutes to reach their destination and they expended almost no energy whatsoever.

Standing astride the crest of the narrow hilltop they looked in awe at the view that lay before them – a smooth plain of frozen nitrogen gas blanketed with a smattering of red snow spread as far as the eye could see. Olivia stretched out her gloved right hand and clasped Lewis’s left hand.

“Who’d have thought that we’d have seen a sight such as this on our first date?”

This was beyond Lewis’s wildest dreams. Did Olivia just say *date*? He felt an involuntary tear emerge from the corner of his eye and trickle down his cheek. He hoped that that solitary tear would be the only one. It wasn’t as if he was in a position to wipe any additional tears away. He stuttered a little.

“Is - is this a date?”

Olivia disarmed him with an enchanting glance.

“Of course it is. I wanted you to ask me out when we were both at space academy but you never did. Though, I always thought you felt the same about me as I did about you. So, I decided to make the first move.”

Lewis felt his heart begin to quicken. The woman whom he had loved from afar felt the same about him. He had always been on the fence as to whether God existed or not, but perhaps this was final proof of a deity's existence. What other explanation could there be for everything falling into place so perfectly?

He squeezed Olivia's hand as best he could, considering the restrictive cushioning of the pressurized thermal gloves they both wore.

She turned to face him.

"Look into my eyes, Lewis, and tell me what you see."

Lewis couldn't not look into her eyes, he was trapped – a willing victim to those dark, enigmatic, beautiful eyes.

"I see the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. I see radiance. I see intelligence."

Olivia held up the index finger of her left hand to stop him talking.

"Do you see love, Lewis?"

There was no mistaking it.

"I do. I do see love."

Olivia moved to face Lewis. She stretched out her arms and drew him closer to her.

"I do love you, Lewis Harding. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you."

Lewis's heart was racing. He could hardly believe that he had heard those wonderful words spoken by those captivating lips.

"And I love you, Olivia. I love you."

Olivia stepped back a little.

"I'm going to kiss you, Lewis."

Lewis was confused.

"How? I mean..."

Olivia reached to the base of her space helmet and broke the seal that maintained the integrity of her space suit against the hostile environment that surrounded the two astronauts. She placed her palms either side of the helmet and lifted it up until it was clear of her head, placing it on the ground beside her. She grinned at Lewis.

"I can't kiss you with your helmet on, silly."

Lewis wanted to kiss her so much.

He grasped the sides of his helmet and pressed the release button to initiate helmet removal. The bottom rim of his helmet didn't even reach his chin before his lungs emptied and his body flash froze, turning instantly into organic ice rock. A death as quick and painless as anybody could wish for.

Three figures scrutinized the inert corpse at their feet. Lewis's space helmet was barely unfastened but sufficiently loose to have allowed Pluto to wreak revenge for his intrusion.

Olivia, the head of the Search and Rescue party looked at the nametag on the body's space suit.

"Lewis Harding. That name kind of rings a bell. I think maybe we were at space academy at the same time. Though I didn't really take much notice of him, if I'm honest."

She looked at the oxygen gauge on the fallen astronaut's right forearm.

"Looks like he was running low on oxygen and decided to take matters into his own hands. Maybe there was a fault in the system. We'll know when we get him back to the mother ship."

She laughed her trademark laugh, the laugh that had captivated Lewis back in training.

"I know it's not the official term but I just love saying *mother ship*."

She turned to walk away.

"Okay boys, let's take him home. Load him up."

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading this story. If you could leave a review at your favourite online bookstore or reader's site, that would be great and help me a lot.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1957, Greg Krojac grew up in Maidenhead, UK, before moving to Brazil in 2007 via Portsmouth on England's south coast. He published his first book in 2016 and has now published several novels, novellas, and short stories.

He currently lives just outside the city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, with Eliene, and their two dogs, Sophie and Simba, and their cat, Tabitha. By day, he teaches English as a foreign language (TEFL) at a local language school.

As well as being a teacher and a writer, he has created and co-hosts a podcast for short read readers and short read writers called Short Is The New Long¹. A new podcast, *TL:DR Too Long Didn't Read*, co-hosted with fellow author Nathan Coley is in pre-production

You can find out more about Greg and his books at www.gregkrojac.com²

1. <https://anchor.fm/shortisthenewlong>

2. <https://www.gregkrojac.com>

NOVELS BY GREG KROJAC

THE JANUS PROJECT

Eloise Hudson, Caucasian, female, twenty-five years old, winces with pain as she feels the blade draw across her skin. She has no idea why her captor took her or why he tortures her so. She doesn't know him and has done nothing to harm or offend him – not as far as she knows, anyway. Perhaps her very existence is enough to sign her death warrant.

In this sci-fi thriller, a serial killer is terrorizing a city but the police have no leads until the murderer makes a mistake and leaves DNA on the body of his latest victim. However, analysis of the sample does nothing to help the police investigation. The perpetrator is not in the system – an impossibility, since everybody is in the system.

How can the police catch the killer if they have no identifying data? A forensic scientist comes up with an innovative solution which takes the criminal investigation into the ethical minefield of human cloning and genetic manipulation.

THE WEATHERMAN

The checkpoint between sectors is bustling with crowds of travellers doing their best to attract the attention of the border patrol staff so that they might have their travel permits authorized and stamped. It's a waste of time and effort for ninety-nine per cent of them as moving between sectors is strictly prohibited for all except those with special permission from the Colony Executive.

The Weatherman has no such problems. Dressed in a brown two-piece suit, a cream coloured shirt, and wearing a dark brown bowler hat, he is instantly recognisable by border security. Carrying a ridged walking cane in his right hand, he can travel at will between sectors as often as required with no paperwork whatsoever. The border patrol officials know who he is and give him a wide berth. To refuse him free passage would be to risk their jobs – perhaps even their lives.

In this sci-fi thriller with a twist of urban fantasy set on a far distant planet, a teacher from the lowly Sector D, Ooze, stumbles across a strange young woman lost in the fog and is persuaded to leave his uneventful life behind him and join her on a quest. Little does he know that he is putting his life in such grave danger.

THE GIRL WITH ACRYLIC EYES

(Book 1: The Sophont Trilogy)

Coppélia knows that her assigned role as a sexbot means that she must be completely compliant to her clients' demands, no matter what they may be. But this time it's different – she doesn't want to submit to the whims of the customers of the Club Galatea bordello anymore. She's had enough. She tells her client no. The client is unhappy and makes an unsuccessful grab at her with his chubby calloused hands. She repeats her refusal but the client ignores her and forces himself on her. She has the strength to rip his head off with one hand but that would contravene her programming. Besides, she has no desire to hurt any human – not even this brute.

In this genre-bending first book of the Sophont trilogy, Detective Inspector Karen Chambers is called in by NewMet City Special Victims Unit to interview a prospective rape victim and is shocked when she confirms that the victim is an android. The DI's curiosity is piqued and she resolves to find out more about Coppélia.

Why does the android appear to have feelings and emotions? She's clearly not a regular model, so who built her? And why?

METALHEADS & MEATHEADS

(Book 2: The Sophont Trilogy)

It's never a pleasant experience to have one's eyes gouged out – even for an android. Paul, a sapient android and completely disorientated without his eyes, careers around the alley, arms outstretched. He trips over abandoned refuse straddling the pathway and falls. He picks himself up again, only for his feet to become entangled in some cable and to crash headfirst to the floor once again. He hears laughter which stops abruptly as a new voice enters the arena.

In this second book of the Sophont trilogy, we meet androids Paul, Philip, and Syllas whose lives become inextricably entangled after Paul's rescue in the alleyway. Paul's eyes are replaced and he is introduced to an autonomous life that a lowly administration model such as he could never have imagined. But his saviours also have a special mission for him – a mission that involves Copélia.

No longer governed by the Three Laws of Robotics, he is free to make his own decisions. But if the success of his mission rests on his breaking those laws which he has always adhered to, can he bring himself to do so?

REULEAUX'S PORTAL

(Book 3: The Sophont Trilogy)

Approximately one hundred years or so have passed since Coppélia was marooned. Her robotic memory is supposed to be infallible but the additional differences she perceives are so slight that she dismisses them as within reasonable limits of variance.

Today is the most important day since her return, as she has been asked to receive a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of her late friend, Karen Chambers, for her tireless work in integrating sophonts (sentient sapient androids) into society. The android takes the stage at the Oslo City Hall.

In this third and final instalment of the Sophont trilogy, Karen's granddaughter, Holly Bryson, also notices discrepancies between Coppélia's anecdotal stories and the visual records that form part of her grandmother's memoirs, but the inconsistencies she notices are not so easy to dismiss. The burning question at the fore of Holly's mind is whether or not the android onstage is the same android that was her grandmother's best friend.

To find the answer to that question, Holly finds herself on a journey that, as yet, only exists in astrophysicist's minds and calculations.

THE BOY WHO WASN'T AND THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T BE

Jerome walks over to the giant monitor screen and switches it on before taking a seat on his sofa. A public service announcement displays. He tries changing the channel but all the other channels appear to be off air. A voice speaks.

“Good morning, Jerome. An apocalyptic event has befallen planet earth. You are one of six survivors.”

Jerome doesn't know whether he should feel happy that he survived or sad that the rest of humanity has perished. The voice continues.

“Food and clothing will be provided for you. Your need for social interaction will be via video-conferencing with the other five survivors. Unfortunately, you may not meet them in person – the environment outside your apartment is toxic and any attempt to leave will result in your death.”

A post-apocalyptic romance, this story finds Jerome settling into his new solitary and regimented life. One day his world is turned upside when he discovers a girl who shouldn't exist in his kitchen. At first, he is frightened of her but, as he gets to know her, she introduces him to a world of human experiences that he could never have imagined.

NOVELLAS BY GREG KROJAC

FISH OUT OF WATER

It's Sereia's 18th birthday and she does something that she hasn't done for five years – she falls out of bed, waking her up ten minutes before her alarm is due to go off.

Her duvet is wrapped around her when she falls and she assumes that this is why she can't move her legs. But when she disentangles herself from the duvet, she is in for a shock – her legs have disappeared and, in their place, she has grown a fish tail overnight.

She's supposed to be meeting her friends for a night out – how's she going to explain that she's turned into a mermaid overnight? What's going to happen to her?

In this YA/NA novella, we join Sereia as she is pitched into a world of marine mythology that she previously thought was simply the product of fertile imaginations.

THE REAPER

Reece Pargeter is a normal seventeen-year-old schoolboy who has no real idea what he wants to do with his life. But that all changes when he has a consultation with a career advice counselor and discovers that his destiny is already mapped out for him.. He is to become a Reaper, reporting to Mr Grimm.

Leaving the corporeal world behind for the ethereal Control, Reece learns how to reap and soon discovers he's not best suited for the job. However, reaping isn't the kind of job where a resignation letter is enough to leave.

A sci-fi parable on the consequences of personal freedom taken to extremes. Is freedom of choice an illusion?

ARNOLD THE UNDEAD

A flurry of activity takes over the Intensive Care Unit as medical staff go about their tasks preparing the room for a critically ill patient. The doors of the ICU burst open and a gurney is pushed to the side of the bed. Doctors and nurses take their positions either side of the gurney and expertly transfer the patient to the bed. Fortunately, Arnold Leadbetter is unaware of what is going on, his comatose state shielding him from witnessing what's happening to him.

Unfortunately, not every disease is curable and Arnold's prognosis is a life hooked up to a Life Support machine, his body paralysed and in a coma. A decision is made to switch off the machine.

In this comedy horror, that could be described as "*An American Werewolf In London*" meets "*Weekend At Bernie's*", Arnold finds that death is definitely not what he expected it to be, as he is pitched into a world of soft-porn movie-makers, zombies, vampires, and werewolves.

JUDD'S ERRAND

Judd Witherspoon senses that something's wrong. On his feet in an instant, he finds himself facing the double barrels of a shotgun blaster. He eyes the would-be robber with a steely gaze.

"I'd point that gun away from me and walk away if I were you."

The man with the gun sneers.

"Good job I ain't you then."

"I'm giving you a chance. Walk away now and I'll pretend this never happened."

The man can see that Judd's a courier and couriers carry valuable cargo. He cocks the hammer of the vintage weapon. Before he has a chance to pull the trigger, Judd's hand reaches over his right shoulder and draws his razor-sharp machete from its sheath. In an instant, the blade slices into the man's torso, slashes through his ribs, and cuts his heart in two whilst still beating inside his body.

In a Mad Max-style story, Judd Witherspoon, a courier on the planet Duoterra, braves bear-wolf attacks and ambushes by Sifter gangs in order to deliver a precious graphene package to Paradise Cove.

TIME THIEF

Aristotle is a Temporal Private Investigator. His normal jobs tend to be investigating cheating spouses by travelling back in time to catch them in flagrante delicto. A messy job but someone has to do it.

At the British Library, he's researching background information for his latest new case when the text and images on the page he's reading begin to disappear before his very eyes. Members of Project Clockwise, the team that discovered time travel are being wiped from existence.

Aristotle doesn't like things that could upset the equilibrium of his life and if time travel was never discovered, how on earth could he make a living? He doesn't really possess any other employable skills.

Can Aristotle find out who's behind the strange phenomenon, stop the erasures, and save both time travel and his job?

**FREE SHORT STORIES BY GREG
KROJAC**

OPPY

Archaeological cosmologists on Mars search for artefacts that will shed light on their own prehistoric history. They find something unexpected.

THE FIRST KISS

A romantic night out at a swanky restaurant should be the perfect date but culminates in a disturbing discovery

LOVE UNDER THE STARS

The first man to set foot on Pluto, Commander Lewis Harding expected to see amazing sights and experience incredible emotions. And he did – he experienced love. But at what cost?

THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHED

A man lives alone in a sparsely furnished and remote shed but he isn't a hermit. Why doesn't he just go back to the city and live a normal life?

WRITER'S BLOCK

A short story writer is given a writing prompt and sits down at his computer to start writing, but his mind has gone blank. However, he receives help from an unexpected quarter.

