

*It's hard to do real lunar science when all anyone cares about is "The Kiss" on your successful Space Station soap opera. But can Jo and Ted find a way?*

## And Away We Go

by

C. J. Peterson



whispered.

"**A**ngelique," he murmured. The woman floating before him released the controls and turned from the mass spectrometer, her hair a golden halo, a glycerin tear sparkling on her cheek.

"Derek," she

“Don’t cry.” He stroked away the tear. “I love you,” he said gruffly. “I’ve always loved you.” He drew her close. Slowly her arms rose to embrace him and their lips met in a lingering kiss. Three...two...one...they pulled their faces apart just enough to gaze passionately at each other, and...

“Cut!” yelled the director. “That’s the money shot, kids,” she added. “Take a look.”

The actors maneuvered out of the International Space Station’s geology lab. They joined the film crew in the corridor to watch the video of their last scene.

“You two have real chemistry as a couple.” A couple dubbed, unfortunately, “Derelique” by the enthralled fans of the show. The film editor switched to some alternate views of the scene, lingering on Angelique’s dreamy expression. “That kiss will be ratings gold.”

“Thanks,” Jo Gallante said, grateful they didn’t need another take. “It should be. We dragged out the romantic tension between the two scientists for almost three seasons.”

“We did,” Ted Urquhart agreed, in his own voice rather than Derek’s seductive growl. “So many anguished glances. So much silent longing.” He surreptitiously wiped the sticky fake tear onto his pant leg. “But now what will the fans obsess about?”

“The writers have some ideas for the next story arc,” the director said, as the crew packed up for a different shoot. The show had subplots all over the station: a rivalry in the plant lab, espionage in materials science, even another romance heating up among the astronomers. “You could go Heathcliff-and-Cathy, separating the lovers. Or Nick-and-Nora-Charles, with banter and innuendo.”

Derelique reacted politely with identical blank looks.

“But I have to be honest. Audience engagement tends to drop off after the first kiss. New love affairs are more exciting than old ones.” The director kicked off and sailed down the passage. “You should be prepared to get written out next season. Sorry.”

“That’s show biz,” said Jo, feigning nonchalance. When they were alone, she told Ted, “We can’t go back to Earth. Not yet.”

“There’s always teaching.”

“Exactly.” Jo pulled her sweatpants over the skintight bodysuit that female lunar geologists wore in space, at least when the cameras were on. “We’ve got to find some way to keep our roles going.”

“Heathcliff and Cathy? Weren’t those comic strips?”

“No idea. I’m going to finish logging the results from the last regolith sample.”

While he waited, Ted messaged the producer and all the writers. Then Jo texted their agents as they drifted down the space station’s core. Ted wrote to their publicists as they passed the reality show filming in the canteen. Near the shuttle dock, they were ambushed by an exclusive behind-the-scenes tour group; considering what it cost to visit the Space Station, they couldn’t very well leave without posing for selfies with their admirers.



They finally escaped but stalled again outside the main sound stage. A giant wind machine blew extras across the set in the hull-breach sequence for some movie. They scuttled through between takes. They were near the living quarters – setting for a rather racy soap opera – when they heard the voice of the head writer returning their calls.

“Tarzan-and-Jane,” he announced. On their shared screen he was upside down, along with some palm trees.

“Derelique is too popular to just fade out. We can end big. I’m thinking Who-Shot-JR big. You in?”

“You mean, you want to have one of us get shot?”

“What?” He reached forward and swiveled his screen 180 degrees. The blue of the California sky resolved into a kidney-shaped swimming pool. “With a gun? In space? That would really be jumping the shark.” He read their expressions and spoke slowly. “I just mean a *cliffhanger*. You know, danger and suspense, followed by action and special effects.”

“Oh.” Jo’s eyes widened. “Oh! Could we film on location? On the Moon?”

“It would be perfect,” Ted seconded. “It’s already in the story line. The geologists have been getting samples from machines on the surface to analyze in the lab. They’re about to make a big discovery but they need more evidence and the extraction equipment has failed. We wouldn’t even need to build a set. There’s already a broken rover stuck in the Aitken Crater.”

“One of the Chang’e rovers,” Jo said. “It belongs to CNSA.”

“Is that some new content provider? Or a consortium?” asked the writer. “Uh...Netflix Sony Amazon?”

“Netflix!” Ted exclaimed bitterly. “Netflix’s budget is *double* that of the CNSA. And it’s more than NASA’s budget, too. ESA is bankrupt, along with the European Union. This is what you get when you privatize basic research in science. Look at Russia. Look at India. Look at -  
- ”

“China,” Jo said. “CNSA stands for Chinese National Space Administration. It was an actual research rover. The drill jammed and drained the battery. CNSA couldn’t afford to send a repair mission.”

“But China can afford to make *movies*,” Ted fumed.

“Wait a sec.” The writer scratched thoughtfully at his three-day-old growth of stubble. “That gives me an idea. If we got a space agency to cooperate, we could film a ‘making of’ documentary along with the adventures of Derelique on the Moon. You’d get credits in two separate award categories!” And so would he. “You said there was some scientific mission?”

“The Chang’e was drilling for sub-surface metals. The concentration could confirm one theory about the anomalies in the Moon’s mantle and crust, and perhaps reveal how the Moon formed originally.”

“Sorry I asked.” He rolled his eyes. “That’s a total yawn-fest. We’ll find terrorist bombs or something. I know, we can tie it in with the espionage plot in the materials lab. Are you two okay with a nude scene?”

“Why would we -- ”

“Whatever keeps us working,” Jo interjected.

“Good,” the writer said. “I’ll call the showrunner.”

“I’ll call my contacts at Goddard,” Ted said.

“I’ll call my contacts at the Planetary Science Institute,” Jo said. Everyone disconnected and started tapping furiously on their screens.



Within weeks, three national space agencies had jumped at the chance for a manned Moon landing, the first in years. The Kiss aired and went viral. They were greenlighted.

Jo and Ted trained for the mission and rehearsed for the show using a mock-up of a Lunar Terrain Vehicle. They would be sealed inside the tiny cabin, wearing mandatory suits and helmets. The director filmed all their close-ups in advance through non-reflective costume faceplates. Stacky voices over the radio were wonderfully authentic



and completely unusable. The soundtrack required a suspenseful musical score and various imaginary noises from the disabled rover. Jo and Ted recorded their dialog over the background tracks and then lip-synced their way through yet more rehearsals. There would only be one take.

By the time the two of them sat strapped into the actual LTV, on the actual Moon, they had no sense that they weren't in another rehearsal. The drones outside filmed the old and new vehicles from different angles. The actors watched the live feed and operated the remote-control arms. In one earphone, they heard the pre-recorded Mission Control say, "The temperature is optimal," while in the other ear they heard a live voice saying, "Try again in 30 seconds. Now." When at last the battery on the stalled rover started to recharge, Jo and Ted touched their faceplates together for the benefit of the dashboard cameras.

"This will take a while," said Angelique's pre-recorded voice. Jo spoke directly to Ted: "We'll never get another chance like this. Look at the Geiger counter. Thorium

concentrations are much higher than they should be in the crust.”

“I know, darling,” Derek said, as Ted replied, “The drill got stuck on an unexpectedly dense layer where the crust was thinnest, which --”

“Not that unexpected if you’ve read Gallante et al., 2041,” Jo interrupted.

“-- which indicates water ice, not radioactive potassium, if you’ve read Urquhart et al., 2044.”

“It’s potassium, rare-earth elements, and phosphorus, KREEP. I mean, *Doctor* Urquhart.”

“Unless it’s just silicates and ice, Doctor Gallante!” The recording of Derek’s marriage proposal and Angelique’s tremulous acceptance played on. The actors held their poses, eyes locked. Soon they would pretend to be startled by the noise of the drill screeching to life.

When the sound came, Ted whipped around toward the view screens. Jo, however, unfastened her restraints and blew the hatch. She leapt outside, knelt, and picked up a

double handful of the Moon's surface. "Does this look like plagioclase feldspar to you?" she demanded. "Does it? This is mantle!"

"What are you doing? These suits aren't for EVA. They're just for driving the car!" Ted released his seatbelt as Jo reached inside the cabin and grabbed an emergency kit. "Wait," Ted yelled. "We're not supposed to get out!" He scrambled over her seat and bounded after her. They both bounced awkwardly in the light gravity. Jo fumbled to open the kit as she hop-scotched toward the front of the old rover. She took out a plasma cutter, dropped the kit, ducked under the frame of the Chang'e, and fired at the surface around the drill's shaft.

Through the inadequate soles of her boots, she could feel the drill vibrating, about to seize up again as it had years before. "It can't turn," Jo said. She shivered in her form-fitting suit, despite the insulation and the built-in padded bra. "Something's there." She blasted deeper to break up the ground. "Look!" Through the cloud of dust, the drill shaft suddenly pulled up, whirled freely for a second, and stopped.

A solid irregular chunk encrusted the tip of the drill. “Don’t shoot,” Ted warned. “You’ll melt the ice.” He pawed around in the discarded emergency kit for the sealant foam.

“You mean the *phosphates*.” Jo hammered the lump with the plasma cutter until the tool shattered into pieces. Then she swung one leg back and launched a powerful kick.

Ted sprayed the foam just as she connected. He encased the sample that broke off, Jo’s boot, and her newly-fractured foot. Then he caught her as she fell and carried her in great leaps back to the lander.

They were inside, resealing the hatch, when they registered the cacophony in their earbuds. The director was shrieking over their now-irrelevant canned dialog. The real Mission Control sternly ordered them back to the landing site.

“I’m first author,” Jo hissed to Ted.

“I need the publication,” Ted hissed back. “You’ve already got tenure.”



Their little vehicle pressurized, then lurched into motion. The drone footage showed several views of a manly astronaut carrying a shapely female to safety. No wonder the director was overjoyed. It was every B-movie poster and pulp magazine cover, ever.

“Besides,” Ted continued, “there will be more papers. We’ll be studying this sample, whatever it is, for the rest of our careers. As lead investigators, too. As Committee Chairs! As inductees into the National Academy of Sciences!” He grinned. “We’ll never have to take another acting job. Just think of it.”

“All I can think of is that last clip,” Jo moaned. Her foot throbbed inside the hardened foam. “I’ll never live it down.”

“Well, then, think of the residuals.” Their vehicle climbed aboard the lander that would take them back to the Gateway, and from there to the ISS, and from there to fame, fortune, and post-production. “We’re finished here. But we’ll have funding for our departments back on Earth.”

The dashboard camera was still running. Jo’s blanched and pain-stricken face was perfectly in character. She turned her head toward her colleague, and a real tear spun loose, floating for an instant as a glittering sphere. “We could have done so much more,” she said softly. “We’ll probably be the last geologists to set foot on the Moon in this century.”

“Probably. But you know what they say.”

“I do.”

“That’s academia.”



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