

Firmament:  
Radialloy  
by J. Grace Pennington

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This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, living or dead, are merely coincidental.

*For Hope, my beloved Watson  
Because she's my biggest fan.*

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# SPECIAL THANKS

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# CHAPTER I

He always said that I had the measles when he found me on his doorstep back in 2299, and he also said that I was less than a year old. I believed him, because first of all he was a doctor and ought to know about such things, and secondly, I would have had to be a pretty pitiful sight to induce him to take me in.

He also said that it wasn't until he'd nursed me through the measles that it even occurred to him to keep me. That made sense also, given his status as a rather private bachelor with a small practice in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Adopting little orphan girls with measles probably wasn't something he'd planned on doing, but he didn't seem sorry that he'd found me. I know I wasn't.

He also probably hadn't planned on going to space ten years later, but he didn't seem sorry about that, either. I knew he'd had his doubts at first, but he'd felt it was the right thing to do.

Since I'd spent half my life in space, it was more like home than Earth was. Our home now was the *Surveyor*, a class-A vessel, who, like the late-twentieth-century probes whose name she bore, was assigned to explore, document, and inform. Specifically, to search the outer reaches of the galaxy and beyond for alien life forms. Here, we had friends, plenty of everything, and I could be with the Doctor and help him with his work all I wanted.

"Andi, where'd you put the new instrument?" he called to me from sickbay.

"You mean the compact magnetic resonance scanner?" I yelled back. I hurried to finish washing my hands.

He stepped into the long, clean, starkly white sanitation room, where I was blowing my hands dry, his thin form framed in the center of the metal doorway. "That's not very funny."

"It wasn't meant to be funny, that's what it's called."

Not knowing a good answer for that, he eyed the dryer I had been using. "You'd think that in the last three hundred years they would have invented something better than that for hand drying. Those things have been around forever."

"So have you, and I like you just fine." I smiled mischievously as I approached him.

He glared at me, clearly trying to decide how to take that. But at last he smiled, and then laughed, and then patted me on the shoulder. "I suppose I should be grateful for that."

“You might as well,” I laughed back. I surveyed him, and then reached up to adjust his collar, which was folded under slightly. “The new uniform looks really nice.”

“It’s too stiff,” he grunted. “I don’t know why they have to change regulations constantly. Green isn’t my color.”

I smiled. Green was the absolute perfect color to go with his delightfully deep gray eyes and his iron gray hair. I smoothed the front of my own jacket with a hint of self-consciousness.

“How does mine look?” I wasn’t sure fair skin, honey-golden hair and brown eyes would go with the forest green.

His expression changed to a rare, warm smile. “You look fine.”

The “fine” meant more coming from him than “beautiful” would have meant from anyone else. I smiled at him.

He grunted a bit. “All right. Now tell me where that scanner is.”

I hurried out into sickbay to get it, taking in the bright whiteness of the room, the comforting hum of the monitors and the slight scent of drugs and sanitizer with a happy sigh. This place never got old for me.

When I reached the main medical supply cabinet on the opposite side of the room, I opened the white metal doors and pulled the tiny, cylindrical scanner off the shelf. “Here it is, Doctor.”

He took it from me, looking it over skeptically. “You sure this thing is an improvement? Looks pretty strange to me. I liked the old scanner just fine.”

I closed the cabinet. “I haven’t worked with it that much yet, but I like it.”

He tossed it in the air a couple of times. “Pretty small. These things took up a whole room when I was in in medical school.”

“Yes, they use directed safe radiation to strengthen the magnet. I read about it.”

He raised one eyebrow. “Radiation?”

“It’s safe and easy to use, Doctor, don’t worry. It works pretty much just like the old MCT scanner.”

“Yes, but I just got used to that one. I don’t see why they’re always inventing new things.”

“You were just criticizing ‘them’ for *not* inventing a new hand dryer.” I couldn’t help it, I really couldn’t. It did seem to annoy him a bit this time.

“Well you can tell them from me to stop inventing new scanners, and start on the hand dryers. Now come on, Andi, I need your help.”

“Yes sir.”

Following him between the two long rows of cots that lined the walls of sickbay, I chuckled to myself. I remembered the first time I’d called him

“Doctor” at age nine. It had been a pert joke about his tendency to give me work to do as if I were a nurse. He’d raised his eyebrows at me then, but it had stuck and become habit for both of us.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked dutifully.

Leaning over a patient and connecting the scanner, he pointed over his shoulder towards a young man who lay on a cot on the other side of the room. “Take care of him.”

I reached into a white box that hung on the wall and pulled out a pair of rubber gloves. Snapping them on, I moved over to the person he had indicated.

It was a young lieutenant, I observed by the insignia etched on his metal arm band. Although the *Surveyor* was a private ship, rather than one of the few military vessels, she still followed the traditional ranking system of captain, commander, lieutenant, etc. I’d asked why once and the Captain had explained that there had to be some rank, or how would anyone know who was in charge?

I frowned at the armband as I approached. The Doctor was opposed to them as a general rule—said they restricted a patient’s circulation. He had frustrated the Captain when we first came aboard by refusing to wear one himself or allow me to wear one. They had compromised by deciding that we would wear cloth bands instead. If the Doctor had gotten to this young man first, the wide, white band would have been removed from his upper arm before he had time to even think about it.

The patient’s eyes were closed as I approached him, and I took the opportunity to observe him. I didn’t know who he was, which puzzled me, since I knew all one-hundred and twelve people on the ship by sight at least. He was about twenty-five, I guessed, clean-shaven and average height with regular features and dark brown hair.

I punched my authorization code into his monitor so I could read his status and the beeping attracted his attention.

“Who are you?”

He had some kind of accent, one I’d never heard before. Not that that meant much, I hadn’t heard many accents in my days. Most people on the ship were American, and in the collective two or three weeks a year I spent back on Earth I never had much opportunity to meet other people.

“I’m the Doctor’s assistant.” I selected the “case history” tab on the screen before turning to face him. “Did you just come in?”

“A minute ago.”

“That explains it.” I put my hand under his elbow and clicked open the armband. “This should have come off right away.”

“Hey...”



“No heys. With such low blood pressure, you shouldn’t even be wearing one of these. I’m going to have to have a talk with Captain Trent about this.”

I deposited the armband in the Personal Effects Box which hung just below the cot.

“How long have you been subject to hypotension?” I questioned, pulling out a bottle of crystalloid tablets from that station’s medicine cabinet.

“What, you mean my low blood pressure?”

“That is the general meaning of the word hypotension.” I took secret joy in flaunting my medical knowledge to the uninitiated. “You get lightheaded and exhausted when you move too much or change quickly from one position to another, correct?”

“Yes. I was just going to rest, but Captain Trent said..”

“Captain Trent was right.” I handed him the pills and a glass of water, and he took them meekly, still eyeing me.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Andi Lloyd.”

“Any relation to Doctor Lloyd?”

“He’s my father.” I poured a few drops of Enari into a bottle of water, closed it and shook it well. “Drink this after your next meal, and drink at least sixty-four ounces of water a day. Notify the Doctor immediately if it happens again within forty-eight hours.”

The lieutenant took the bottle, still staring at me. Then he looked at the Doctor, who was patching up a patient’s hand on the other side of the room.

“You don’t look much alike,” was his casual comment.

“No, we don’t.” I wasn’t interested in explaining the relationship to someone I didn’t even know. “You can leave now, just rest for about two hours, and I advise you not to put that armband back on.”

“Thank you,” seemed to be all he could think of to say. “Goodbye.” Standing up, he took the armband out of the box and held it between two fingers. “By the way, my name’s August Howitz. I’m the new navigator.”

“Goodbye, August Howitz. Have fun navigating.”

I wasn’t sure what he’d think of this, but he smiled and nodded, then gave his bottle a good shake before leaving the facility.

I turned off the monitor, stripped the sheets from the cot he’d lain on, and tossed them into the laundry chute, then replaced them with fresh ones. I stretched and yawned, glancing around the room for patients. There were none, and I tripped over to the Doctor, who was straightening some supplies.

“Can I go help with lunch?”

“All right,” he nodded. “I’ll be down in a while.”