Evolved

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I never really understood what he did, but I understood that it was important and that he was brilliant. I am talking about Dr. Nathan Kilkenny – Nate.

The way it was explained to me was that when we arrived at the system of Proxima Centauri we understood that there were possibly two “exoplanets” in what was called the “Goldilocks Zone” and that each of them would present challenges for our plans to colonize. We had engineers who could design suits and structures to allow us to shelter from a hostile environment, we had other engineers who could put together plans to “terraform” one or both planets to develop atmospheres more like ours, and then we had one additional engineer who was looking at how the human body might be changed to adapt to an alien biosphere. Nate was that engineer – a bio-engineer.

I was really only a child when I was chosen to embark upon the 20 year journey, but I was smart and fit and voraciously interested in astronomy. I volunteered and my parents let me go.

I have to say that my obsession with the heavens faded a little as the heavens collapsed, for that is how it seems to be when you leave Earth. You lose all points of reference. Suddenly astronomy seemed so different. I guess I wasn’t as intelligent as people thought I was, but I was young and keen to be useful. I became more interested in artistic things, and despite the fact that our mission was scientific, my new pursuits were considered to be positive for the future colony.

But we had twenty years to make ready and I still had to make a contribution to the science being developed aboard our ship. To make that contribution I was delivered to Nate when we were about 5 years out and I was barely 18.

“Yes, I am an engineer, but I am not an engineer in the sense that you know it,” he said to me. “My tools are DNA, and the biochemicals that send messages through the human body.”

To be honest, I understand mathematics fairly well, but this kind of practical science is a problem for me. Nate always said that I had something like a female brain when it came to structures. I still don’t understand exactly how our spaceship goes so fast other than that we drag some photon emitting reactor powered machine behind us and we ride the beam with our solar sail. We move at only 20% the speed of light, but that is very fast. 20 years is not a lot of time to travel 4.3 light years

The human body is easier to understand. It is something that I can appreciate as an artist. That means not just its external form but how it is structured. That is where art and science come together, it seems to me.

Of the two planets Proxima B was our best hope, Nate explained. “It is only a little more massive than earth which means that we may have to work harder in overcoming gravity. I need to look at how to modify bodies for more strength. You present a challenge.”

He was just teasing me. I am not large and certainly not strong.

“Proxima A is smaller so less gravity and less atmosphere, but how could we cope if that was our only option? We simply don’t know until we get there.”

Which is exactly why our mission did not leave Earth with all the answers and just spacemen to implement prepared plans. That would never work. You need scientists and engineers who can work through the problems.

“Don’t worry, we will find you a role,” he told me. I believed him. He was that kind of man.

To be honest I was just happy to be with him doing what I could, so when he suggested that I might be a subject I was happy to say yes. There would need to be approvals, but it was clear even to me, that you cannot develop science without experimentation. You just need to minimize risk. Nate said that it is always easier to get approval afterwards, if what you do is a success.

The first subject of the experiment was Nate himself. He wanted to prove the capacity to re-engineer the crew for Proxima B by making people stronger and able to cope with greater gravity in things like blood circulation. Humans have evolved at 1 atmosphere so what happens are 1.2? The heart needs a greater capacity to draw blood from our legs, maybe help by specific muscles in the legs for compression. Nate was talking about re-engineering himself.

“You don’t have to volunteer but it would be good if you did,” he said. “You are young so your ability to adapt to change should be better.” It made sense to me. Besides, we were a team as he liked to say. It might be more accurate to call me a sidekick.

“As an alternative I need to prepare you for the other planet – Proxima A,” he said. “That requires light body mass, protective fat layers because of the thin atmosphere. I have some ideas about how to do that. It will be the opposite of what I am doing with growth hormones, but it will prove what can be done.”

Of course, I said yes. He started straight away. He measured the changes in me straight after he measured the changes in himself.

I have to say that I was more interested in what was happening to him, so I did not take a lot of notice at what was happening to me. I suppose that the one thing that I did notice was that his body was becoming very powerful and also very attractive to me.

I suppose that I never had much time for thinking about sex the way an 18 year should. I was the youngest aboard by some years and I had always assumed that I would be normal. I liked looking at the female form and sketching it as a beautiful thing. I never felt the same way about the male body until Nate started to change.

It also seemed to me that he had been looking at me differently as well. He suggested that I keep my own body clear of all hair but grow out the hair on my head, and he often used to say that my hair looked really nice. I had noticed that it seemed full and glossy in a way that it never did before.

Eventually, in the lab while we were going through the measurements we accidentally came into contact with one another. It should have meant nothing, but instead it was like electricity arcing across a vacuum. It just seemed to shock us into some crazy behavior. We started kissing and groping one another. Before we knew it we were having sex, of a kind. It was fantastic, but a total surprise to me.

He called in “an accident of procured evolution, but you have turned into a woman.”

I guess I had. I mean by that time is was no taller than I had been but I was smooth and soft with long hair and with small but obvious breasts on my chest and just a nubbin in my groin.

“Is it a failure, then?” I asked him.

“Not from my perspective,” he said.

When we finally got to the Proxima system we discovered that neither planet was fit for habitation, and we decided to move on into space in search of alternatives.

It is just as well because he is suited for B and I am suited for A, and leastways while we are looking for a planet Nate and I can be together. He is a brilliant scientist, and the way he makes love to me … well, I am glad that I am now a woman.

The End

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