

The Greatest Science Fiction Story Ever Told

by Stephen Heger

“Apollo twenty-two. Come in.”, the voice crackled through the speakers of the aircraft.

There was only silence broken by a solitary meow and the slight whistle of oxygenated air through the ventilation system.

“Captain Snuggles, now that you are in orbit we will remotely engage the artificial gravity in T-minus ten seconds.”

Captain Snuggles, a tabby, floated through the cockpit of the thirteen billion dollar spaceship, careened off the side paneling and was sent on a collision course towards the gray, short- haired Gomez.

“Nine...eight...seven-”.

When any of the Felinonauts passed by each other in the zero gravity there was either mewling or hissing. Even though they had trained together for several years there was still some bad blood between the crew. Snuggles and Gomez collided in the slowest of motion and managed to get a few swipes in before their velocity carried them apart again.

“Six...five...four-”.

Along with Captain Snuggles, also on board the craft were Lieutenant “T-Bone” Tyler, a retired mouser from Wisconsin, Snowball, a former lap cat and yarn-ball whiz, and the aforementioned Gomez, a stray from south of the border. Many of

the US citizens and critics were up in arms about sending an immigrant into space on the American dollar but he didn't let it distract him the slightest. The general populace didn't seem to be bothered at all about the idea of sending cats into space.

"Three...two-".

This motley crew of space felines had no idea what was in store for them. Nor did they care. They had been prepared for every eventuality and laughed in the face of such a daunting mission. Whatever it may be.

"One."

A light blinked on on the control panel and instantly the crew fell to the deck. The sudden crash landing sent them, minus the all black and long-haired Lieutenant Tyler, scurrying for cover. T-Bone landed and stood his ground. Ears back, golden eyes wide as he crouched and surveyed his surroundings, Lt. Tyler was ready to spring into action at a moments notice. Being able to keep his wits about him was what made him the leader of this expedition. Nerves of steel.

"Captain Snuggles, you and Snowball will start with the list of experiments as covered in your training and pre-flight briefing. Gomez, you need to check the integrity of the space craft and make a list of repairs in priority order. Lieutenant Tyler will oversee any other issues. Good luck men, er, kitties. I mean cats. Over."

After receiving their orders, Snuggles jumped atop the control panel and sat there, momentarily dazzled by all the blinking lights and then, bored, began grooming himself vigorously. Snowball wandered around aimlessly sniffing the crevices and cracks of the spacecraft seemingly sizing up the ship and all its workings. Gomez found it in his best interest to begin stalking Lieutenant Tyler and attacked in a series of guerilla style ambushes ending with a severe

thrashing that sent him scurrying for cover. For the moment at least. New attack plans flitted through his feeble brain within seconds.

“Houston. This is Cape Canaveral. Are you getting the video?”

“This is Houston. Yes, we are receiving the footage, sir.”

“What in blue blazes are they doing?”

“It seems, ahem, that they are doing what cats do, General. Sir.”

“I see that! What the hell is Snuggles doing over there?”

“Licking his genitals, I believe, sir. Actually, he seems to be licking where his genitals used to be.”

“Goddamnit! This is important work. Why aren't they following protocol? Their training?”

“Might be that they're cats, sir.”

“Try some positive reinforcement. Maybe it will jar their memories and kick in their training. Start the feeding cycle now and enable the Lo-gravity Innership Twofold Toilet and Excrement Recycler.”

“Feeding pellets have been deployed, sir, as well as the introduction of the L.I.T.T.E.R. box.”.

The crew immediately heard the clicking and whirring and stopped in their tracks. Ears rotated and twitched at the strange, yet familiar sound as heads jerked around looking for the source. From below the flight control panel a door slid to the side and a series of telescopic arms set down trays of food, water, and milk. The entire crew hastily charged from every direction and converged at the

same time at the deposited meal. They slid, tumbled and crashed into each other and everything that had been laid out for them. This sent pellets careening and liquid cascading in every direction. A few moments of regaining bearings and the crew began devouring the disarrayed food except for Snowball. Snowball approached the overturned feeding trays and newly made mess cautiously, took a sniff, and looked directly at one of the cameras and stared in disapproval.

Across the cockpit two more doors slid open and deposited a plastic storage container filled with the best of the clumping litter that NASA could have ever designed.

"Good, good. The crew is responding to the feeding."

"Sir, permission to speak."

"Go ahead Houston."

"What exactly are they supposed to be *doing*, sir?"

"Well, tests and other research stuff. But in space. Something to do with the lack of gravity. Very scientific."

Gomez had been licking his chops as he waited atop some real expensive blinking panel and stalked his next victim. Tyler walked under him and Gomez dove, landing atop his prey as they tussled and tumbled and hissed and meowed some more.

"But hasn't anyone thought that they're cats? Wouldn't scientists and researchers have been a better crew to send up?"

"Been there done that. How are we supposed to win the space race if we do the same thing over and over again, son?"

Snowball had three legs in the L.I.T.T.E.R. box and one out as he watched the action, which due to its intensity, caused him to miss by a good two inches. Snuggles had decided it was time for some sprawling and stretching and just laid out across the floor and dozed off.

"But-"

"But nothing. I hear we got us some ferrets out at Lackland that have been in training for deep sea exploration. That's progress and this is America. We do it our way regardless of how useless it may seem."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's get back to, oh jumpin' jesu on a pogo-stick, what the hell is going on in there now?"

"Couldn't tell you, sir. Couldn't explain a thing..."

