

AND THE STARS SANG

By Trinity Hunter

Eleanor Allen was dying.

The doctors had told her that she had a month left to live. A month. That was all.

And the next thing they did, without a touch of remorse or sympathy, was ask her to run a mission that involved her dying in a terrible, glorious death.

She accepted.

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No one had ever seen a supernova up close before.

At least, not until now.

SUPERNOVA: A stellar explosion that briefly emits as much radiation as the sun or any other star might emit in its lifetime.

That's why Eleanor sat in the cockpit of a small shuttle, completely alone except for the constant beeps of machinery and the burnt smell of bad coffee. She took a sip out of a mug that was emblazoned with the NASA logo, and winced as the burning liquid scalded her throat.

The single star shone brightly through the thick glass of the cockpit's window. The red dwarf sat in its last stages of evolution, looking serene on the outside, but on the inside boiling with impatience.

An alarm sounded on the dashboard. Eleanor tapped the screen, feeling her face go slightly numb as she stared at the readings, bathed in an insistent red light.

This was it.

Before anything else, she took up the camera that was linked to the computer and snapped as many photos as she could with her trembling hands. They were immediately transferred to the command center, and within minutes Command replied. Eleanor read the final message from the team back home.

"Thanks for everything, Eleanor. Good-bye."

She smiled a sad smile, reading the few words one more time before turning away from the screen.

Solar flares offered an almost comforting flicker, like a homey fire, as Eleanor settled down into her chair. She watched as readings from the star flashed on the screen once before being sent back to Earth.

TYPE V said the screen. Unusual, rare, and never seen before by a human's eyes. They had been right. This would be worth the sacrifice.

But still, thoughts tumbled through Eleanor's head.

"Why am I doing this? Why am I not living out my last few weeks in comfort? With the ones I love? Why couldn't someone else do this?"

For a just a moment, she panicked. The teary-eyed faces of her husband and daughter filled her mind, waving a final good-bye as she stepped into the shuttle. She wanted, so dearly, to be able to kiss her daughter's curly head one more time, to be able to take one final long, loving look into her husband's eyes. But it was too late now. She couldn't go back.

And it was necessary, she knew, for NASA to study the effects of faster-than-light travel on the human body, as well as have readings taken of the supernova. And with only enough power to

go faster-than-light-speed one way, anyone else who dared to go on this mission would die of old age before they were even halfway home.

So it came down to the terminally-ill professional choosing to be stuck out in the depths of space, waiting for her death to come.

And it was here, just moments away.

The computer started ticking down readings faster and faster. Numbers appeared on the screen, numbers that made Eleanor shiver with both dread and a sort of morbid anticipation.

"*Ten,*" said the computer. She snapped a picture again, watching as the center of the star suddenly seemed to bubble like lava.

"*Nine.*"

She took a careful sip of her coffee, which now tasted too cold to drink. She dumped it out on the floor, not caring about the mess. It would be vaporized in mere seconds. Just like her.

"*Eight.*"

Eleanor stared at the screen. The computer sounded much too calm for the situation. It really had no idea it was about to be obliterated.

"*Seven.*"

She laughed.

"*Six.*"

Streaks of electric blue worked their way throughout the collapsing star. Eleanor took another photo. It was kind of beautiful, in a deadly way.

"*Five.*"

She stroked the picture that sat at the edge of her work station. The smiling face of her husband and her little daughter greeted her. "I'll see you again, someday," she whispered.

"*Four.*"

Eleanor bent down and attempted to wipe up the spilled coffee with the edge of her sleeve. Something in her couldn't bear to leave a mess.

"*Three.*"

All Eleanor could think about was death. The emptiness, the blackness, the nothingness. She decided it would be rather like space, only without the comfort of the flickering stars.

"*Two.*"

Tears fell down her pale face. A sharp pain went through her side, where the disease ate through her. She would die anyways, even if she wasn't here. That was a little comforting.

"*One.*"

The moment felt long.

Bright light shot out of the star. But no sound came yet. And for a moment, as Eleanor sat still, she could swear she heard the stars singing to her.

"*Good-bye,*" they said to her. She smiled.

"Good-bye."