

Lumen Essence

by

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Nominated for the 2007 Aurora Awards



Lumen Essence was first published in issue 9 of Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine. The story features the character Willie Lumen, who appeared in Hayden's story *The Luck Of Willie Lumen*, published in Neo-opsis issue 3. *Lumen Essence* is nominated in the Aurora category "Best Short-Form Work in English"

Issue 9 of Neo-opsis featured a cover based on *Lumen Essence*, as well as two interior illustrations, done by the editor Karl Johanson.

Aurora ballots are available at www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora. In addition to being able to mail in ballots, on site voting can be done at the convention Con*Cept (www.conceptsf.ca) on Saturday October 13, and at VCon 32 ([/www.vcon.ca](http://www.vcon.ca)), up until 6:00 PM, Saturday October 20th.

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Marissa Ianno threw herself back in the acceleration couch. Again. She folded her arms and fixed her best pout on her sixteen-year old face and said. “I don’t want to and you can’t make me.” Again.

Willie sighed and tried not to roll his eyes.

“No, I probably can’t but your parents paid me good money to try. So

please buckle up and get ready for the tour of a lifetime.”

“Buckle up? Is that another one of your cute atmospheric touches, Captain Lumen?” Marissa frowned and reached for a drink pod.

Willie snatched the pod from her hand and engaged the safety field.

“Not in the control room, remember?” said Willie. Marissa put on her innocent face and shrugged. “I don’t know how you can stand these things anyway? They’re practically pure sugar.”

“That’s the whole…” Marissa started before the field mercifully cut her off.

I gave up a comfortable life on the moon for this? thought Willie, not for the first time. I had it made – citizenship, enough money to live out my natural life and then somewhat with the occasional rejuvenation treatment and all.

Well, at least you’re captain on your own ship and owner of the biggest tourist operation in the asteroid belt.

“The only tourist operation in the asteroid belt,” said Willie out loud. “It’s like selling tickets to the O.K. Corral.”

Still, he thought, Captain Lumen does have a nice ring to it.

Willie flipped the switch that let the computer take them out of dock for a four-hour cruise.

Yeah, right, he thought as the safety field tightened around him.

“Oh, look, an asteroid,” said Marissa, pointing through the forward observation screen. “And, look, another asteroid. This is so lame. Why can’t we see interesting things?”

“These are interesting,” said Willie. “That asteroid is where Red Pedersen discovered a chunk of pure gold as big as this ship. And that other one was the first…”

“Ancient history!” moaned Marissa. “Why can’t we go see where the Independents have set up their base?”

“Because they don’t like visitors – especially one’s broadcasting a Compact registration.”

“And what’s with that anyway? You own this ship. You didn’t have to sign on with the stupid old Compact.”

“Your father is a senior member of the Compact…” said Willie.

“Yeah, tell me something I didn’t know.”

“Besides, the computer is programmed for a set tour – the one your parents paid for.”

“Yes, sir, Captain Babysitter.” Marissa smirked. “So disengage it and fly solo. I fly my scooter solo all the time back in Moonspace.”

“Where they have navigation beacons every hundred clicks or so – out here they are as scarce as hen’s teeth. Nobody flies without computer assistance.”

“Don’t you know how to navigate?”

“Of course, I know. You can’t get your Captain’s papers if…”

“What the hell are hen’s teeth anyway?”

“It’s an expression from...”

“If you know how to navigate, then it must be because you’re chicken.”

Marissa grinned and flounced out of the cabin.

Willie felt his face flush. Okay, he thought, just put it down as reason one hundred and seventy two why you never had kids.

“You’re not fooling anyone, you know,” said Marissa, as a third chunk of jagged rock hurtled by a few meters from the ship.

Willie’s hands danced across the control panel. “Quiet!” he barked, “and let me fly this thing.” He stared through the view screen and shifted from side to side as the ship lurched to avoid another hunk of debris.

“The autopilot light is still on,” said Marissa, her voice dripping with ennui. “This is part of the tour.”

She disengaged the safety field and stood. “I’ve had better rides at the arcade.”

Willie leaned back in his chair and let the computer do its work. Maybe I should turn the gravity compensators off and see what kind of ride that gives you.

“I’m going back to my cabin for the rest of the tour. Even reading would be better than this. Unless you’ve got another suggestion?”

Marissa stood at the entrance for a long moment, as if expecting some response.

“Well?” she said.

Willie glanced at her. She was framed in the doorway, her right arm raised to steady herself against the frame. The pose lifted her already short skirt and pulled her blouse tight across her breasts. Her head was tilted slightly so her hair fell across one cheek. She stared at him intensely, her dark eyes glittering. Then, she slowly licked her lips.

Willie tried desperately not to laugh. Teenagers are delicate creatures, he told himself. Delicate and vindictive. One wrong move and you’re screwed. Or one right one for that matter.

Willie snorted and tried to turn it into a cough. That led to a giggle. Then, a guffaw. When he looked up again, Marissa was gone.

This tour couldn’t be over too soon as far as he was concerned.

Willie looked up from his own reader when he heard the faint hum of the engines stop. Good, he thought, just a few more minutes while we wait for the sunrise over Alpha Prime and then back to base.

He thought briefly of wandering up to the observation screen to watch. It wasn’t much but, then, as he was discovering, nothing was much in the asteroid belt. The thought of running into Marissa in the narrow confines of the ships corridors was enough to keep him in the cubbyhole he had deemed Captain’s quarters.

An alarm sounded.

Willie hauled himself upright, more annoyed than concerned. The ship's alarm system had been giving him trouble ever since he had bought *The Shining Hope*. It tended to go off at the slightest provocation and had yet to signal a real emergency.

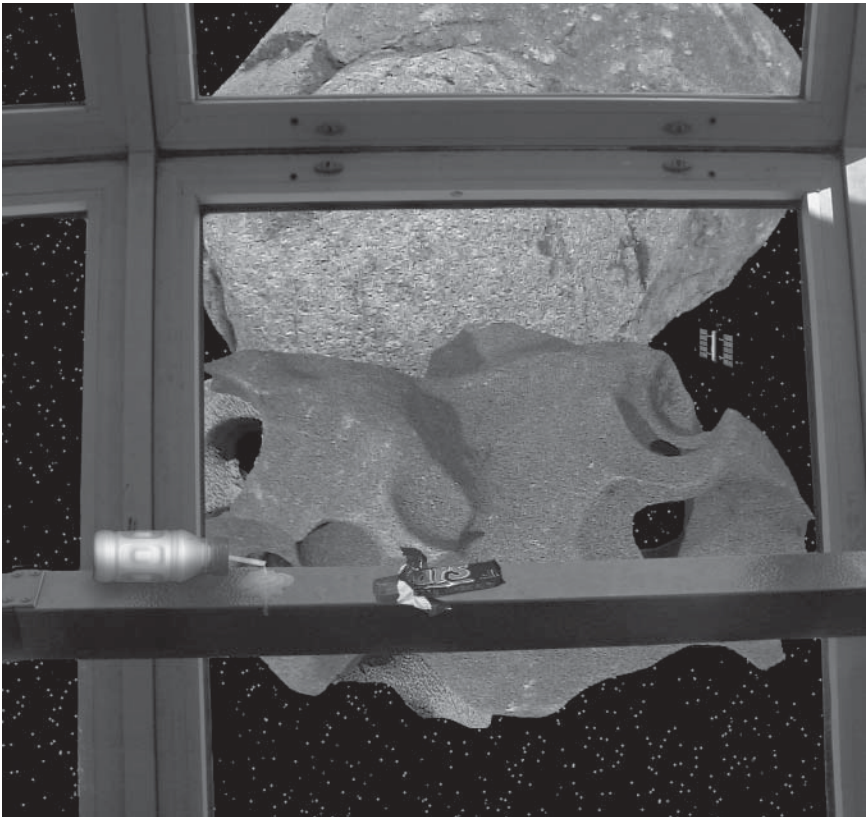
Still, procedures were procedures. Willie hurried along the length of the ship to the control cabin. There was no sign of Marissa even though he had carefully briefed her on what to do in case of an emergency. He thumbed the intercom. "Marissa, report to control. Marissa!"

No response. Willie groaned. He'd probably have to go haul her up here himself. More opportunities to upset her. As if she needed an excuse. Better check what's wrong first.

Willie crossed the cabin to the control panel. His foot hit something halfway there and an object skittered and bounced off one wall.

A beverage bulb. Why don't kids ever listen?

"Marissa!" he shouted in the direction of the intercom.



Several lights were flashing on the board. That can't be right, thought Willie. He flipped the override switch. The alarm died but the lights stayed on.

"Marissa! Report in!" Willie felt sweat beading on his brow and upper lip. No response.

"Ship? Verify. Is the airlock outer hatch open?"

"Verified." The ship's voice sounded... wrong. As if there was sand in the gears. Which was silly. Ships don't have gears.

"Okay, okay. Close it."

"Unable to comply." Was that static?

Worry about it later, thought Willie, if there is a later. He launched himself out of the cabin and down the corridor to the airlock. Lights were on there too.

Willie peered through the thick Lucite window. Nothing there. Nothing but the sun rising over Alpha Prime. Shit. The door was open.

Fine. No problem. We can make it back without an outer hatch. *As long as the inner one holds.*

Just shut up for once. It will be fine. It's only twenty minutes. We'll just head back and...

And we should already be on our way.

The ship was silent. The ship wasn't moving.

The autopilot was off.

"Marissa!"

Then he saw it. The door to the suit locker was ajar. He reached out gingerly and opened it. Marissa's fire alarm red designer space suit was missing.

I've lost a Factor's daughter. They're going to fry me.

No. It's all in the security file. Everything is in the black box. When they open it they will see it – it was her fault. She broke my codes and turned off the autopilot. She overrode protocols and opened the hatch. She went for a joyride.

But you were responsible. You should have kept your eyes on her.

All I have to do is wait for her to get bored again and she'll come back.

"You take good care of my daughter, Captain Lumen," Factor Ianno had said.

And what did you say?

"She's in safe hands, sir. I'll guard her with my life."

Willie had a dark thought. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Maybe she wasn't coming back.

"Marissa, can you hear me?"

No response. Willie switched to the secondary emergency channel.

"Marissa?"

Nothing. Willie switched to the third and final channel.

"Marissa, come in please."

“I can’t. I can’t.” Her voice was small and shaking. It sounded as if she had been crying.

“I’ve turned on the outer lights. Can you see the ship?”

“I’m not sure. Oh, there it is. It looks so small.”

“How small, honey?”

“I can cover it with my thumb.”

“Okay, that’s not too bad.” No, it’s terrible. “You didn’t just jump out of the lock did you? You used one of the jet packs, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you used the black pack that was tucked in the back of the locker – not the green one in front.”

“I would have looked like a Christmas tree.”

“Right, and black goes with everything.”

“Yeah.”

Willie was silent for a long moment.

“It says it has fuel in it but the engine won’t fire,” said Marissa.

“I know. Okay, Marissa, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to prove to you that I know how to fly. I’m going to nudge the ship in your direction. When I tell you, you aim yourself at the airlock and open the valve on the fuel tank. It will give you enough thrust to get back inside. Do you think you can do that?”

“I... I think so.”

“Fine. Just keep on this channel.”

Willie turned from the communications console and checked the view screen. Where is she? Then he saw her – a tiny red speck moving slowly toward deep space. Away from any hope of rescue. He circled her with a digiwand and locked the information in the screen.

Not a problem. He’d have her long before her radio died, long before the oxygen was gone, long before the battery failed and she began to freeze.

“Ship, I need you to plot and execute a course to the visual location I’ve marked on the screen.”

“Unable to com...” The ship’s voice cut off abruptly.

“Ship?”

“Undergoing... auto... repair.” It sighed.

What the hell. Willie examined the control panel. He hadn’t seen it before but the panel was slightly scratched at one corner. Marissa hadn’t broken his codes; she’s broken the panel and directly accessed the operating system. Teenagers and technology. Nothing’s safe or sacred.

Willie pried the panel open and looked in horror at the remains of his computer. Things that should be solid, were liquid. Things that should be loose were fused. The gel packs had lost their healthy green glow and were stained with a sickly reddish brown. He reached out and touched one.

Sticky.

Cola.

She had broken the panel, disconnected the autopilot, shut down the protocols and then...

She spilled her drink all over his computer.

She had killed his ship. And herself in the process.

Nothing to do now but send out a distress beacon and wait to be picked up. There would be trouble but it wasn't his fault. The black box would exonerate him.

I'll guard her with my life.

It's just an expression.

Willie ran his hand through his thinning brown hair. Trigger the beacon. There's nothing else to be done. He stood and glanced at the view screen. The digital marker was still tracking Marissa.

Like a ghost, the faint reflection of his face stared back at him. He looked old and his eyes were like two dark pits.

When you take something on, you have to finish it. Or you can never take anything on again.

Yeah, but the ship's dead. The hatch is jammed. There's nothing to do.

Don't you know how to navigate?

Yeah, but...

Then it must be because you're chicken.

Willie dug a calculator out of a locker and started to do the math.

It was possible. Just. If everything worked right.

Getting out of the ship wasn't a problem. Blow the emergency hatch and crawl around to the airlock to retrieve the green jet pack. The one that worked.

The hard part was keeping the ship livable for when they came back. If they came back.

"When," said Willie sternly.

The hatch was meant to be used only as a last resort. Blow the hatch and all the air rushes out. Which pushes the ship off course and away from its logged position. The emergency beacon appeared to be dead – another victim of teenage clumsiness. It might take a while before the patrol noticed they were overdue and even longer to find them in the confused jumble of rock and metal that surrounded Alpha Prime.

In the worst-case scenario – and there was no reason now not to expect the worst – we can't afford to move and we'll need every atom of oxygen we can muster.

That meant he had to build a seal around the hatch before he blew it.

Meanwhile, Marissa continued to drift farther away. Time was of the essence.

Whether the seal was done or not, he had to blow the hatch in fourteen minutes

if he was going to have enough fuel to catch her and bring her back in time. Thirteen minutes later, he was in his suit, pressed between the makeshift seal and the hatch. His hand hovered over the trigger. If one of the bolts misfires and punctures my suit...

Sometimes, Willie, I think you think too much.

The hatch blew. The seal held.

So far so good.

Willie had been outside a ship before but never this far from dock. There was nothing but the pinpricked velvet blanket of space and the hard bright light of the distant sun. He took a deep breath and focused on his feet. He shuffled carefully across the hull of his ship. The magnetic boot plates should hold him but if they didn't, well, that was another problem he couldn't solve.

Now, get into the airlock and check the pack for fuel. It's full. Thank you. We still have a chance.

"Marissa, can you still hear me?"

"Where have you been?" There was an edge to her voice.

"Sorry, honey, I've been working. There's a change of plans."

"Aren't you coming for me?" Careful. If she panics now, this isn't going to work.

"I'm coming. Marissa, is your suit still talking to you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stare at the ship, at the lights. Are you doing that?"

"Yes."

"Now ask your ship to plot a line to where you're looking." Willie waited for her to comply.

"You should see a faint green line in the display. It looks like its leading back to the ship, right? Take off the pack and line up the fuel nozzle directly along that line pointed away from the ship. Now open the valve."

Willie imagined he could hear the faint hiss of the gas and see the white plume against the blackness.

"It's stopped."

"Okay, that's good. Just let the pack go."

"Don't you want it back?"

"No. I only want you back."

Willie paused. Now came the hard part.

"Marissa, you're a long way from the ship."

"I know."

"I need you to seal off the oxygen valve to your suit. Then, you have to use the tank like the jet pack."

"No! I'll die."

“You won’t. Trust me. I’ve worked it out. You’ll have twenty minutes supply in the suit. I’ll reach you and get you back before you run out.”

“No. I won’t. Someone will come. My daddy will send someone.”

“Your father doesn’t know. And there’s not time. You have to do this.”

“I don’t want to and you can’t make me.”

“You’ve got to, Marissa. I don’t have enough fuel to come get you and make it back again.”

“I CAN’T!”

“You have to trust me.”

“Trust you? Why should I trust you? You’re only another one of my father’s flunkies. They aren’t to be trusted.”

“Marissa, I may carry a Compact beacon but it’s my own ship. I’m my own man.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, Marissa. You don’t trust me. So I’m going to have to trust you. I’m coming to get you.”

“But you said you don’t have enough fuel.”

“I don’t. But I made a promise and I’m going to keep it.”

Willie checked his computations one more time and lined up on the rendezvous point. He fired the jets.

“I’m coming Marissa. Can you see me?”

“I can see the jet. But how do I know you’re in it.”

“Because I say I am. I haven’t lied to you. Have I done anything, anything at all to suggest I can’t be trusted?”

“No. No you haven’t.”

Silence.

“Marissa?”

“I’m doing what you asked.”

Willie counted down the seconds and shut off the burn. Nothing to do but wait. Wait and hope.

Where is she? She should be straight ahead. There. She’s off course. Must have missed the line by a hair. Not much but enough. They’d pass each other by twenty meters.

He’d done everything he could. No one would blame him now if he turned around and went back. She wouldn’t even suffer long. Her air would be gone in a few minutes.

He had done all he could and no one would blame him. No one except the ghost in the mirror.

No choice.

There’s always a choice. He burned a few seconds fuel and caught her in his arms. He could feel her hold him tight through the bulk of their two suits.

“It’s okay. I’m here now.”

He turned back to the ship and fired the engines. She’ll never know, he thought. She’ll slip into anoxia and never know. Never be disappointed. And me, I’ll watch the ship get closer and closer. We should almost be there when my air runs out. The engine died.

“Will we make it, Willie?”

“Sure, Marissa. We’ll make it.”

“All my life people have lied to me. I’d like to here the truth this once.”

“Yeah, okay, well... Idiot!”

“What?”

“Not you. Me. We’re going to make it.” Or at least one of us is. “Hold on.”

Willie stripped off his oxygen tank and cranked the valve wide open. He checked the calculations in the ship’s display. Still not enough. He threw the jet pack away as hard as he could. Then the oxygen tank. Then everything else he could detach from his suit. Then he opened the valve on his suit and let the last bit of air spurt into space.

He checked the calculations one more time before. Should do it. Thank you, Issac Newton.

“We’re going to make it, Marissa” he said and then threw away his suit battery too for good measure.

And the darkness and the silence closed in.

Willie opened his eyes and looked into the face of an angel.

I’m in heaven, he thought.

You don’t believe in heaven. Right.

“We made it.”

“Yes,” said Marissa.

“I mean we both made it.”

“I did what you did. I threw everything away. Even my entertainment pack. And then I held my breath and used my suit’s air too. I was almost passing out when I got us in the lock. But I hit the emergency button and, well, here we are.”

“Yeah, here we are.”

“Willie, no one. No man has ever done anything like this for me before.”

“Like this. I would hope not.”

“I mean. Anything nice. Never.”

“You’re young. But you’ll find out that there are lots of guys out there who will want to do nice things for you.”

“I guess. But, Willie...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you were my first.”

Willie laughed. “Me, too, honey, me too.”

End