

The Voyage of Caretta the Magnificent

A Legend of the Magic Turtle Who Became an Astronaut

*being a true and faithful account of the discovery of a new world
for the children of Earth*

Archive of the Lunar Storytellers' Guild · Edition of 2174

Chapter the First

The Turtle of the Tide Pools

Long before the rockets, before the great silver ships that crossed the dark, there lived upon the shores of the Galápagos a green sea turtle named **Caretta**. She was not, at first glance, a creature of destiny. She ate jellyfish and seagrass, she slept in the warm shallows, and she was, by every measure the scientists could devise, an ordinary turtle of the species *Chelonia mythica*.

But Caretta was not ordinary. On the night she hatched — the third night of a blood-red moon — a strange light had fallen from the sky and settled into her shell, and from that night onward she carried a quiet magic. She did not age as other turtles aged. She understood the speech of gulls and the grumbling of the deep currents. And when she pressed her flipper to a stone, she could feel, faintly, the pull of the stars overhead, as though each one were a distant tide.

For one hundred and forty years she lived this secret life, watching the small fishing boats give way to great steel vessels, watching the lights of the harbor grow brighter each decade. She might have lived a thousand quiet years more, had the astronomers of the Quito Observatory not detected, in the spring of 2098, a faint and rhythmic signal coming from the direction of **Alpha Centauri** — the nearest star system to our Sun, some four and a quarter light-years away.

The signal repeated every nineteen hours. No one could decode it. And Caretta, drifting in her tide pool, felt it in her shell like a heartbeat calling her home to a home she had never seen.

Chapter the Second

How a Turtle Came to Wear a Spacesuit

It was a marine biologist named **Dr. Yuki Tanaka** who first discovered Caretta's secret. While tagging turtles for migration research, she noticed that this one particular turtle's shell gave off a faint glow under ultraviolet light, and that her body, impossibly, registered no measurable age. Dr. Tanaka spent three years earning the turtle's trust, and in time came to understand that Caretta could comprehend human language and answer, in her slow and deliberate way, by tracing patterns in the sand.

When Dr. Tanaka learned that the turtle felt drawn to the Alpha Centauri signal, she brought the matter to the **International Deep Space Agency**. The Agency was skeptical — they were planning humanity's first crewed interstellar mission, and a turtle was not on the roster. But every navigational instrument they possessed struggled to lock onto the source of the signal, while Caretta, it seemed, could sense its direction without any instrument at all.

And so a decision was made that the history books would call either the bravest or the most absurd in the annals of spaceflight. Caretta would be trained as an astronaut. A special pressurized habitat-suit was engineered to fit her shell, fitted with water-recyclers and a gel that kept her skin moist in the dryness of space. She learned to navigate by starlight in a way no human pilot ever could. After four years of preparation, she was given a rank — **Mission**

Navigator — and a ship.

The ship was named the *Ocean's Memory*. It was powered by an experimental fusion drive and carried a crew of six humans and one turtle. On the eleventh of October, 2114, it left orbit and turned its nose toward the brightest of the southern stars.

Chapter the Third

The Long Dark Between the Stars

The journey to Alpha Centauri took twelve years. The human crew slept for most of it, suspended in cold-sleep pods that slowed their bodies to a whisper. But Caretta did not sleep. Her magic sustained her, and through all twelve years she kept watch at the navigator's station, her ancient eyes fixed on the slowly brightening triple star ahead.

Twice the mission nearly failed. In the fourth year, a micrometeoroid tore through the ship's primary cooling line, and the fusion drive began to overheat. It was Caretta who felt the change first — a wrongness in the hum of the ship that she sensed through her shell — and woke the engineer, **Commander Adaeze Okafor**, in time to seal the breach. In the ninth year, the ship drifted into a cloud of interstellar dust that blinded every sensor, and for forty days only the turtle's strange starlight-sense kept the *Ocean's Memory* on its true course.

Caretta later said — through the patient translation of Dr. Tanaka, who had come along on the voyage — that the long dark was not lonely. "The stars sing," she traced in the sand-table of her quarters. "Each one a different note. I have only to follow the song."

Chapter the Fourth

The Discovery of Nuevo Edén

They arrived at Alpha Centauri in the spring of 2126. The triple star blazed before them, and as the crew woke from their long sleep, Caretta led the *Ocean's Memory* not toward the signal's source — which proved to be a natural pulsing of one of the stars — but toward a small, blue-green world orbiting the gentler star Alpha Centauri B.

It was a planet no telescope from Earth had ever resolved. Caretta had felt it the way she had once felt the tides: a world with oceans, with a breathable atmosphere, with a gravity close enough to Earth's that a human could walk upon its shores. The crew named it **Nuevo Edén** — New Eden — and when the first probe confirmed liquid water and free oxygen, the cabin of the *Ocean's Memory* erupted in a joy that Dr. Tanaka described as "the loudest sound I have ever heard humans make."

Nuevo Edén was the first world beyond our solar system confirmed to be habitable by Earthlings. Its discovery, on the second of May, 2126, changed the course of human history. It meant that humanity was not bound forever to a single fragile world. And it had been found not by a machine, nor by a human, but by a turtle who could hear the stars sing.

Caretta was the first to set foot — or flipper — upon the new world. In the shallows of a Nuevo Edén sea, beneath an unfamiliar sky lit by two suns, the magic turtle who had crossed the dark between the stars rested at last in alien water, and was, the crew said, content.

Chapter the Fifth

The Legend That Followed

The *Ocean's Memory* returned to Earth in 2150 carrying the news, the data, and the soil samples that would launch a hundred new expeditions. Caretta came home a legend. Children who had not yet been born when she left now greeted her as the greatest explorer in the history of two worlds.

She never spoke of glory. When the leaders of Earth offered her every honor they could imagine, she asked only to be returned to the tide pools of the Galápagos, to feel once more the ordinary tides of the world that had made her. And there she remains to this day, they say — older now even than her long years should allow, sunning herself on the warm stones, listening to the gulls.

We tell her story still. In the floating cities and the lunar colonies, in the first small settlements of Nuevo Edén, parents tell their children of **Caretta the Magnificent**, the magic turtle who became an astronaut, who navigated by the song of the stars, and who found for all of us a second home among the heavens. We speak her name with respect, and with love. For she taught us that wonder can wear the humblest of shells, and that the smallest, slowest creature may yet carry the whole future of a species upon her back.

— *Here ends the account of the Voyage of Caretta the Magnificent* —