

HAILING FREQUENCIES

by
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Sam3 slapped the last of the coffee crystals into the dispenser pouch, zipped it and shook. A minute later, it was steaming and ready. To him, this was real coffee, as real as anything he'd ever tasted. For nearly eight years of space wandering that was fine, and he truly didn't mind. Now, though, he felt surges of insurrection welling inside his heart – he knew he was being called – not by any political force, nor by any fanatical religion. Sam3 heard the call of his wicked stepmother...Earth.

He squirted a second tube, twisted shut the personal drinking pipe, disengaged it from the dispenser, and glided himself out of the *Sunstreak's* galley, down the main passage and toward a cabin designated for his shipmate, Anthony. He wasn't sure that Anthony would feel well enough to accept the peace offering, but he felt obliged to try. Peace in space was even more necessary than the fabled peace on Earth he'd been taught while growing into adulthood. Their proximity and lack of escape avenues enlarged each squabble beyond a sane man's comfort zone.

The drinking tube felt warm in his hand. An old-fashioned cup might have been nice. Preferably, one made of earthenware, actual pottery from home. Then, maybe the coffee in it could be hot, truly hot – enough to warm Anthony's bones in this cold of space. It would be nice. He missed the gravity, even artificial, of a space station, but this ship was too small to warrant such extravagances. It had one purpose – exploration – and comfort was not part of the deal.

Lying in his bunk, arm hooked into the line of incessant meds necessary to keep a Natural alive, Anthony struggled to turn over. His gray unkempt hair wisped this way and that across his glistening forehead. Sam3 entered the cabin fully and realized his timing was good. The Velcro on Anthony's left side wouldn't catch right, pulling too hard on his side anchor straps, and he struggled as though imprisoned in a web. Sam3 was sure it didn't help that his shipmate's bone density had dropped to dangerous levels, and the slightest aggravation probably caused severe pain to accompany bone breakage. The ship rolled slightly, turning past solar entity HD290458, keeping a sizeable enough distance, and the slight draw of passing gravity tugged at Anthony's straps, causing him to cry out. "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

"Let me..." Sam3 tentatively reached for a strap, and then paused, when Anthony's thrashing about nearly freed him into mid-room space.

"I'm such a useless piece of crap, out here!" He let out a long breath and stopped struggling. He turned his pale, blue eyes to acknowledge Sam3's entrance, but there was no welcoming joy. "What?"

Sam3 smiled. "Well, I thought you could get the hell up and do some work."

"Yeah, right." He shrugged and added, "Get me outta this, will you?"

"Sure," he said, releasing the coffee tube and allowing it to drift in the center of the cabin. The Velcro fasteners, though somewhat old fashioned, worked well in most situations. No one had ever perceived any need for technical improvements in this area. Though, perhaps it was time to rethink the situation. He reached for the strap, again, to free his shipmate, and unzipped it hard.

This was something you had to adapt to. By instinct, most humans would cringe at the release of a support strap, waiting for the ultimate "thunk" of a body falling to the ground. No such result occurred in space. Freed from his bed, Anthony drifted, spiraling away from the wall, and reaching out, managed to gently right himself. His hand rubbed at his abdomen, and he seemed queasy. He oriented against Sam3 so they could converse. After a moment, one hand reached out. "You brought me a gift?"

"A peace offering." Sam3 snatched the coffee and proffered it to the man. "If you'll accept it."

"Oh, the last of the coffee, isn't it?"

"It was great while we had it," he answered.

"Damn. Don't you want some?" Anthony held up the tube of precious liquid.

"Already had my share, thanks."

"I can't believe we're actually out of it. Doesn't it scare you to run out of food?"

"We're not even close to running out of *food*. Coffee was an addition to the list, per your request, as I recall. They only sent a five-year supply, and –"

"I know, it's a miracle that it lasted this long," Anthony interjected. But then he added, "I thought it would be enough."

"Hey, all you have to do is develop a taste for reconstituted orange juice."

"When they grow oranges with caffeine, I will." They exchanged smiles. Anthony lowered his voice a decibel. "Hey, I was –"

"Cranky?"

"Tired...and so were you." Anthony threw him a perfect sidelong scowl.

They shared a laugh. It was all too brief. Anthony said, "Did you talk to her again?"

Sam3 shuffled his feet, tugging each boot just free of the Velcro strip centering the floor, feeling the rip-connect sensation beneath his insteps. Though floating about the ship was easier, the *mockwalk*, as crews often called it, helped to keep human muscles and chemical balances functioning at optimum levels. So, Sam3 had formed the habit of using the strip to negotiate his way around the ship. He saw Anthony struggle with the same, though it seemed harder for him each time. How could he deny him hope? Anthony was talking about Brigitte2, of course. The ship's navigator performed her duties flawlessly, and had been the source of conflict between these two men.

"No, I've been busy with those repairs to the AFS," Sam3 said.

Anthony grimaced. "Here we are, stuck in nowhere, and you're worried about the automatic flushing system?"

"Hey, toilets are important." They both needed to laugh, and this was their rare opportunity. It didn't last long.

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The voice resonated about the Bridge, emanating from three speakers, hooked up to varying locations along the rear wall. It sounded vaguely female, though somewhat mechanical. She said, "Yet again, you insist on calling me by that archaic and malicious numbering system. The designation laws are *misguided* in my case. I'm just as human as the first Brigitte." Studying her, Sam3 could not help but feel the irony. She did not appear human, at all. To Sam3, she looked more like a giant, pudgy white-skinned octopus with a large round head and a body that seemed to be little more than the head's lower half. Where a human might enjoy a solar plexus around the middle, she sported layers of rippling bulk which seemed to spill across and over the console, so that it appeared that a cephalopod had latched onto a prized piece of machinery. *Yet, the first Brigitte was no more human than she.* The original had been created out of so many tiny bits of unidentified genetic material that she could not be ascribed to any particular original donor. Hence, she was seen as an original, herself.

However, even as the scientists were congratulating themselves on the original Brigitte's creation, she had died. They neglected to calculate how deadly the Earth's gravitational pull would be to an organism designed to live in weightlessness. Brigitte2's originating cells were salvaged from the first disaster, and she was "born" or released from her artificial womb in a space lab. Even then, she nearly died, and needed to be transported further away from the planet's pull. To this day, she complained if they approached too closely to any planet of size enough to tug at the ship meaningfully. Sam3 wasn't sure if Brigitte2 had merely forgotten the circumstances of her "birth" or

had chosen to accept some fantasy instead. He couldn't believe that she never knew, as it had been system-wide news at the time of her creation.

The most noticeable thing about Brigitte2 was her skeletal structure. Whatever bones might show beneath her gelatinous skin seemed large and spongy – more like thick rubber than bone matter. It gave her a rounded nonhuman appearance. She had no hair, which had apparently been deemed unnecessary. She lacked a nose and mouth, with smooth skin covering the patch of face left blank by their absence. He shuddered to think that he might have been created like that. It was mere good fortune that made him appear more like an average person than her. Yet, he had to marvel at her. Brigitte2's ADP/ATP systemic needs were met by a bio-battery, attached to her back. She was a true space being, capable of surviving without food or air – hence, no nausea from constant free-fall, and no need for an air support system. The system onboard the ship was added for the other shipmates. Alone, she could travel lean and fast, in an excruciatingly small ship. Earth's scientists must have considered her their best advancement in human genetic technology ever.

There was so much more, too. Brigitte2 handled the navigation systems via her arms and legs – four tentacles, really – which were designed to be plugged directly into the ship's input sockets. She barely blinked her double eyelids while equations and plans swirled along her neural pathways to the ship's brain which, itself, was reported to contain some human brain cells. Through this connection she controlled the Lockwood Ion Propulsion Drive and moved the ship from system to system with great speed and accuracy. Clearly, Brigitte2 and the ship enjoyed a particularly successful symbiosis...linked, joined, and connected as one living entity. No wonder she didn't want to give them what they needed.

"Sorry, *Brigitte*. I forgot." Sam3 gestured in reluctant contrition. Anthony merely stood back, leaning against the portal, and watched. His face belied terrible anger, bordering on hatred.

She had very little in the way of shoulders, but the way she heaved seemed to emulate a shrug. He could see edges of her arm tendrils stretching away briefly from their sockets in the ship. "In fact, I'm probably more human, because I was conceived in the minds of humans, first. This is more than mere natural reproduction. I came from the human *mind*. That makes me the most human of all of us." Her eyes drew over to his side of the Bridge, and she appeared to be awaiting his reaction.

Sam3 froze.

"Only...the naturally reproduced humans – we – don't need a fuckin' wall speaker to talk, you monstrosity!" Anthony's rage boiled over yet again. Worse,

he showed no signs of cooling down as he had in the past. Sam3 had to intervene before permanent damage occurred.

"He's tired...and a bit out of sorts, Brigitte. I'll take him to his bunk."

"What if I don't want to go? You expect me to lie in that thing and ride it to...where? Where, exactly, are we going? Where in hell am I riding it, *Brigitte5?*" His obvious use of the wrong number compounded the fact that he used any number, at all. Sam3 rushed to his side and tugged him out of there.

Once outside, he drew Anthony close. "I thought you were going to let me try, this time!" he hissed.

Immediately, Anthony deflated and dropped his chin. "I'm sorry. Just couldn't listen to her garbage anymore."

"Go, go back to your bunk and wait!"

Anthony peeled his boot free and started the trek back. Rip, clunk, rip, clunk. Even the sounds of his footfalls rang a death knell. Sam3 felt a sense of urgency. He knew Anthony was right. They were trapped with this being who insisted on following her own genetic programming despite the fact it was killing one shipmate and hurting the other. He pondered his next move. His strategy would have to be brilliant and he feared he wasn't quite up to the job. However, with their survival and future hopes in the works, he slammed his best thinking cap on.

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The conduit was tight, but if Sam3 felt any twinges of claustrophobia, he willed them away. Fortunately, this weakness had been fairly well bred out of the space traveling population nearly a half-century earlier. Just a few inches ahead lay the coils which made possible their communications with humanity. Brigitte2 had effectively sabotaged these coils – possibly with an energy overload – and eventually re-routed their information input, normally sent to the communications bay, to an unknown site lost in the bowels of the ship. She must have done it from the Bridge, because he and Anthony rarely saw her leave it. She could navigate herself around in the weightless conditions, and it was somewhat eerie to see this giant squid-like creature float down a passage. However, she rarely seemed to want to disengage herself from the controls anymore. It was as if she had grown into those portals and become an extension of the ship's brain.

Sam3 hoped to repair whatever damage she'd caused, rework it from there, and re-establish communications. Perhaps they'd send a rescue ship or force Brigitte to turn around, somehow. Of course, Sam3 knew it was highly unlikely. Costs being what they were and the fact that he and Anthony had signed releases upon boarding the ship, allowing that the company was not responsible for "unfavorable outcomes" of space travel. Still, it was the only

plan he'd been able to come up with. He had to try. Maybe some kind soul out there would take pity on them. Maybe.

He reached the coils and pulled his tiny toolkit from his breast pocket. Keenly aware that he was detectible as he worked, Sam3 worked diligently placing all his hopes in this one attempt. There were no speakers in the conduit, so he knew Brigitte2 would not try to communicate with him. Such an activity would be a waste of time and effort on her part. Rather, she would probably find some way to stall or stop him from what she no doubt would perceive as mutiny. Sam3 had to admit, she was probably right. This was mutiny. He wondered if she would go so far as to kill him. He stripped the first coil, exposing the alloy and its connection to the main circuit. He reached for a wrench, tiny, ancient by design, but still so practical in many ways. Grasping it, he forced the connection to loosen. It didn't want to give up easily, and he found it difficult to position himself in this tight space so that he could twist it. Using his back muscles against the tube's side, he leaned forward and nearly bent himself permanently in a 45 degree angle, but he managed to do the job. It clicked, squeaked, and the wrench moved freely toward the far wall. A good beginning, but only that. He needed time to continue, and he hoped Anthony was successful in buying it.

Sam3 wondered if all Naturals were as volatile as his crewmate. Anthony displayed a quick temper, which he often attributed to the fact that he didn't feel well. Sam3 couldn't compare his own minor discomforts with the fading bone density Anthony suffered. Their years in this capsule were killing him, now more quickly at the end. Though Sam3 suffered from homesickness and loneliness, he could physically survive in this environment far longer than his shipmate. Of course, Brigitte2 could outlast them all. *She must be counting on that*, he thought.

The first coil came free in his hand, and he pulled it close to his face to examine it. Indeed, the insides showed signs of burnout, as he'd suspected. He pulled a fresh coil, "borrowed" from a cooking pod in the galley, and slipped it into the slot. He turned the wrench and tightened it into place. In a few more minutes he'd accomplished the same with another coil taken from the AFS. He hadn't been simply fixing toilets, as Anthony accused. Everything seemed to fit. Now he hoped it would last until he could make use of it. He believed Brigitte2 had no sensors, and would not be aware of the switch – he hoped – until he'd had a chance to send out a mayday.

He was exiting the conduit, when all lights went out. The ship's sounds echoed around his head, as he gently slid himself into the main corridor and attached his heels to the Velcro strips.

Sam3 wound his way to the Bridge and discovered Brigitte2 and Anthony in a heated argument.

"Listen, you bitch! You'll let go of the controls, or I'll help you do it!"

Her face glistened in the bare lights given off by her console. "Refrain from calling me names, or I'll include your actions in my next report."

"And when will that be? When I'm dead! Bitch!" He gestured obscenely then slapped his hands down on the top of the console inches from her face.

She shut her eyes, anger pulling them into tight slashes on her otherwise barren countenance. Her multiple eyelids trembled, and sparks shot out from Anthony's hands.

"Ayeeee! SHIT! Are you fucking crazy?" Anthony's hands flew from her console. He appeared surprised, and Sam3 realized that she must have found a way to electrify her surroundings for protection. Perhaps it was like that all along, but she had never used this weapon before, not in all their years together.

Anthony backed away, cradling his scorched palms.

Bridgit3's voicebox boomed, "You'd better get some burn meds on that right away."

"Like you care!" he shouted in retort. Kicking the bottom of her console swiftly, he thrust himself away and literally flew out of the room, rubbing his hands. He glided past Sam3 without a word. Sam3 turned around on the Velcro strip and followed the other to the Medical Bay.

"Damn! Did you see that? The bitch has wired up the ship! We are not safe here, anymore."

"I'm not sure we ever were."

"What?"

"Shhh...we'll talk later."

Anthony cast a glance around toward the ceiling camera aimed at them and blinked in silent agreement. Sam3 had lived with him long enough to know they would be discussing this later on, in Anthony's cabin, with the Steamclean Machine turned on. He'd come out of there feeling like a wet rag, but at least they believed they had some privacy to talk.

It was during one of these chats that Anthony and Sam3 had discussed their own backgrounds, and Sam3 had speculated openly as to why Earth would allow a Natural to join the exploration team surveying dark matter across several lifetimes of open space. "Perhaps," he'd said, "They didn't quite trust us clones and hybrids, so they figured having you along at least to start the mission was a good idea. They didn't much care if you survived very long. Just long enough to set the routine for the rest of us – as if we're machines to be tested and released." Sam3 recalled seeing the expression of abject misery

cross Anthony's face. For that one moment, only, he was glad he wasn't a Natural.

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The Steamclean Machine didn't make a lot of noise, but they hoped that if they spoke quietly and faced each other directly, and closely, the only thing Brigitte2 would suspect was mere homosexuality. Against the steady *psshhhhh* of the machine, two nude men stood in the alcove and whispered to each other.

"I never told you this. It seems so stupid of me, now," whispered Anthony. He held his bandaged hands away from the steam vents. "They told me it was only going to be a four-year run. It was only a test. They didn't tell Brigitte2 that, because they wanted to see how she'd perform, but she was supposed to get a call to return." He paused. "There haven't been any calls, have there." This was no question. It was a pronouncement of his own realization.

There were two possibilities. Either something had happened on Earth, so that they were no longer able to request their return, or, they never intended to request it in the first place. Perhaps they'd had difficulties finding a qualified applicant who would be willing to die in space. Sure, such an adventure always sold well in comic books for children a hundred years earlier, but really, how many men wanted to give up their lives, wives, families, and futures to sit in a metal can and count sub-atomic particles across the galaxy? The job was not nearly so glamorous as children used to think. If the loneliness for a mate didn't kill a man, the boredom would. There was also the certainty that this was where he was going to die. The mystery of a person's future and eventual death were removed. No space aliens were going to attack and start an interstellar war. None had stopped by for so much as a chat. Perhaps in reaches of space that would take too long for Anthony's lifespan, there might be some primordial ooze that could one day evolve to intelligent life, but it was not going to meet him in space. No, their crewmembers, counting pad, and the stars...were all any of them had. The Natural, having been built for more earthly pleasures, surely felt the absences most acutely.

"Well, it has been over seven years, now." Sam3 shrugged. "Sorry. I think you were had."

"They should've at least hailed us. They should've sent word...so I'd know, finally."

"I guess they left all that up to her."

Anthony drew a deep breath, heaving his shoulders. "It was too easy. It's not like I'm the world's greatest astronaut."

"No Natural is, now." Sam3 said. "Even a hybrid like me wouldn't match up." He stole closer to Anthony's ear. "It's her. Only her. The rest of us are expendable."

Anthony blinked.

Sam continued, "I've only been able to come up with one solid reason why they'd want to have two males along with Brigitte2. You're not going to like it."

Anthony sputtered, and steam rose in a cloud around him as he tensed back, repelled. "No! You have to be kidding! I mean, how could she? How could *we*?" He shook his head violently.

"They need to keep the line going. Think about it. None of us will live forever. But the ship can go on pretty much indefinitely with a steady stream of Brigittes."

"Awe, God! No way! That's disgusting!"

The steam worked its way into his pores, and Sam3's body rained sweat. The water rolled down his body and into the collector drain. He whispered, "They might be keeping us alive for that."

"That's ridiculous. If that's all they needed from me...or you...they could have just kept some samples in the deep freeze. Besides, I'm sure they thought either one of us would contaminate her *perfect* genepool. Brigitte2 is many things, and one of those things is, she's completely engineered. They wouldn't dream of mucking up her offspring."

"You make it sound like she's a racehorse."

"Well, now that you mention it...isn't she?" Sam3 smiled at him. He knew something.

"What?"

"The name of our ship, *the Sunstreak*, it's not about the stars," Sam3 explained. "It's the name of a racehorse in story written about fifty or a hundred years ago. Someone was playing a little joke with the name."

He felt Anthony shudder. It could mean the heat was too much for his frail body, or he was reacting to the news. "Oh, my God," he whispered, "It's worse than being kept for food."

"All I'm saying is, it's possible they want to blend her genes with something a little less exotic. Maybe they thought the results would be sturdier, somehow." He backed away and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with his wrist.

Anthony just stood there, gray-faced and motionless, with sweat dripping off him.

Hastily, Sam3 added, "Or...maybe I'm full of shit."

"You think? Well, if it really is for our genes, then...*you* do it! If I get close to that thing I'm afraid I'll wrap something around its head and squeeze enough to give it a neck."

Sam3 couldn't help but laugh.

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"Nice and clean, gentlemen?" Brigitte2's voice boomed along the hallway as Sam3 worked his way back to his own cabin. He ignored it and kept moving. With the temperature controls and lack of people on board, he felt justifiably comfortable in wearing nothing but his mockwalk boots.

Once inside, Sam3 shut the door and slipped the Velcro, allowing himself to float toward his bed. He was strapping himself in when Brigitte's voice sounded again. This time, the voice seemed quieter, as though she were speaking only in his cabin. He knew she had the ability to control that, but had rarely been aware of her bothering with it. "Sam3, would you please report to the Bridge?"

"Ah, what for? I'm just turning in. I'm pretty tired."

"It's important."

"Fine. I'll be there in a minute." He didn't feel comfortable being nude, in person, in front of her. Grabbing his slipsuit, he glided out the door. Never mind the damned mockwalk.

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He could feel Brigitte2's eyes follow him from the door as he circled around to the front of her console. The large view window was behind him, now, and he turned briefly to glance at it and make sure her wish to see him didn't mean someone – or something – had made contact. He didn't see anything. He wasn't surprised.

"So? What can I do for you?" He forced a smile.

"I-I need to ask what's going on." she stammered. This sounded very odd, coming from a machine on the wall.

"I don't know what you mean," he replied.

"Between you two. Ship's personnel records do not record either of you as being homosexual. Why are you doing...that."

"Brigitte—" he caught himself from saying the numeral, "have you been spying on me?"

"No! But it's not like my cameras have eyelids. They see what they see, and the images are forced on me." She paused. "I was just curious."

"Well, then. You know about the documented studies of males in captivity."

"Yes, but you showed none of the notable signs. No aggressive tendencies, no sexual variation beyond midrange –"

"Now, how the hell would you know about any of that?" This was starting to anger him.

"It's all in your records. Of course, I know you have read up on me. We all know everything there is to know about each other. Cut the pretense."

Well, he had to give her that one. She was right. He shrugged. “Yes, but some things are better left...un-discussed. Do you understand?”

She nodded. What an odd movement that was. Her entire body seemed to heave back and forth. He knew the gesture, however, and accepted it. “Then, why do you bring it up? What business is it of yours what goes on privately between another crewmember and me?”

He was afraid he already knew the answer.

“You’re right. It is none of my business, really. It’s just that, I’m going to need your help, and Anthony has been such a...negative...aboard ship lately. I’d hate to have his misgivings about our mission infect your attitude.

Infect. What a curious way to put it. He thought for a moment that she might have meant *affect*, but then he realized she had a dictionary and thesaurus plugged into her brain. She didn’t make mistakes like that. She meant it. She said it like Anthony was a disease.

“Look,” she went on, “I know you’re not exactly a pure clone, but you come from a hybrid mother and a redirected father. So, perhaps –”

Sam3 bristled. “Perhaps I can what? Help you kill off the only natural human onboard? Not a chance!”

“Wait! I wasn’t going to say that!” She jiggled in her slots and bared inches of pale humanoid-type flesh on her tendrils before sinking back into the tubes. “I was going to say, that I think you will understand my situation a little better. You’ll at least give me a fair hearing.”

“What more is there to say, Brigitte?” he asked, adding, “We’ve already talked this thing to death for months.”

“For over six months, yes. And before that, Anthony and I argued about it for a couple of years. In fact, I think he started pouting at the four-year mark.”

“Then...*what?*” his exasperation showed.

Brigitte stared at him for a long time. Finally, she said, “I need you to help me with my baby.”

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Sam3 didn’t remember running off the Bridge. He ended up in the Galley, somehow, shaking and sucking down another coffee for warmth. He felt dizzy and unsure of his level of consciousness. *She finally said it*, he thought, *she wants me to – to...* Gad, it was just too disgusting to imagine. He searched the cubbies and found a small vial of calmant. Twisting it open, he didn’t allow a single drop to escape before pushing it to his lips and sucking down its contents. Immediately, he felt more relaxed and his hyperventilating ceased. He dropped the container into the recycler and stood there for a moment gathering his wits. There was, of course, only one option. He had to go break the news to her, gently, that he was not interested in mating with her.

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"You want to...what?" she asked. The speaker-voice registered fairly distinct surprise.

"No, I said I don't think I can. I don't want to. I'm sorry." He stared at the floor, too embarrassed to meet her gaze.

She laughed. He glanced up.

"Is that why you panicked earlier? You thought I was asking you to mate with me? Sheesh! You ran like I'd caught on fire, or something." She laughed again.

"What's so funny?" he wanted to know.

"Well, I'm sorry, too, Sam3...but I don't desire you, either." And with that she let out what could only be described as a full belly laugh. Only, in her case, it involved her entire head and torso in one undulating rolling motion.

He stepped closer. "You don't mean...Anthony?"

He thought she was going to asphyxiate with laughter. After a while, the rolling waves slowed and she was able to produce the signals from her brain for the speaker. "I see I need to explain my reproductive system to you. I'm surprised no one took you men aside, before, and gave you the facts. I mean, there's nothing to be ashamed of, here, really. Now, is there?"

Sam3 couldn't understand what she was getting at. He shook his head in agreement.

"Good. So, let me first tell you that I don't need you – or any male – to reproduce. The genetic surgeons, in their wisdom, gave me the ability to impregnate myself. And I have. I did it months ago, Sam3. I'm already carrying my offspring. The child will be born, by my figuring, within the next few days. Soon, at least. Very soon." She pulled her tendrils from the console, something Sam3 hadn't seen her do in a very long time, and floated in the weightless Bridge. It was obvious that she had grown much larger around the mid-section. She swayed in the open air, hovering, tendrils making swimming motions to steady her huge girth and keep her in place.

The only thing Sam3 could utter was, "Wow." He found himself leaning against the Bridge wall, gripping its handrails. Everything suddenly became a lot more clear to him.

"I'm sorry about what happened with Anthony the other day. Truly. But I have a child to protect, now, and I can't let him hurt her."

"You – you know it's a *her*?" Sam3 couldn't stop himself from asking.

"All my kind are. I suppose we're a new kind of female. One that is much improved from the original, I believe."

Sam3 paused to consider the situation. He really didn't have a clue what to do next, so he just asked the first question he could think of. "So...what is it you want me to do, then?"

Brigitte took a moment to maneuver herself back to her console. Once there, she wriggled her appendages into their slots. She ignored his question. Instead, she asked, "How do you know they didn't plan for me to do this? How do you know this wasn't part of the grand experiment?" She paused and said, "I'm only acting out what's in my genetic programming."

"You were taught some morality. I know it, because they taught the same to me."

"No, not the same. We were raised in different learning environments. While they were outfitting me for the ship with a definite plan, they were also finding ways to make use of you...and your genetic heritage."

This upset Sam3. He knew she was alluding to the fact that his birth had been a wild experiment, and much less carefully-conceived than her creation. His father, whom he never met, had been born a natural human, but had chosen to undergo redirection in adulthood to alter his body for space travel. Such experiments had met with only moderate success. For some reason, the necessary changes had shortened the earlier astronauts' lifespans by several years. But he had volunteered genetic material – actual sperm – after undergoing the genetic surgery, and those cells had been used to impregnate a clone female. The genetic surgeons were, at the time, still curious about the reproductive effects of cloning. The result was Sam3, a hybrid, and capable of living on in the vast weightlessness of space for much longer periods than a Natural. Living beside Anthony had proved that. What nobody knew, until now, was just how much longer he could survive in space. Judging from the years spent already, it appeared he could go on for a very long, insufferable time. What nobody counted on was the loneliness, even with crewmates, and the need for female companionship of the appropriate type. Sam3 wished it had been true that he could return to Earth within the four years. Perhaps they might have developed a female who could live in orbit with him. He knew that gravity would shorten his lifespan significantly if he were to try living on the planet. Still, he could make short, aching visits, and then return to orbit for respite. None of that mattered now. "Let's leave my background out of it, shall we?" he said.

She paused for a moment, studying him. "Yes, of course. I only meant that we had different learning environments."

"Understood," he said tersely.

"And what's really important is, your learning involved Engineering and Design, am I correct?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I need to ask you to make use of your skills." She dug her tendrils into the console and seemed to bend into the machine. It appeared involuntary. "I need you to build a crèche for the baby."

He stared at her. "That's not the usual engineering I do."

"I know that! But I can't do it. I can't work with the equipment. It takes...it takes hands." She let out a long sigh.

"Oh. I see." He suddenly realized the predicament she was in. Here, she'd gotten herself pregnant but had no help with the necessities – not even a place to lay the infant down. Surely, she would need more help than that. He realized she was asking for his help, not just for her but also for the baby. This was something new to Sam3. Something new, entirely.

"Before I agree to help you, I require that you answer one question."

She moved slightly, and it seemed the ship moved a little. Course corrections were a common movement, and so minor in sensation that he might have imagined it. Sam3 recognized with some discomfort from the start that Brigitte was the only one of their trio who could actually pilot the Sunstreak. No navigation instruments were ever installed for a co-pilot. Though command hierarchy was never mentioned, it was obvious who was the boss. It was also obvious that he and Anthony needed her to stay in good health if they were to have any hope at all.

"I really don't have time to play games with questions," she said.

"Then, do it yourself." He felt a surge of adrenaline at refusing her, cold fear, but he wanted to at least make it clear that he and Anthony suspected what was up.

"Make it fast."

"Has Earth contacted the ship since we left?"

She stayed silent for a moment, as though sizing him up. He knew he'd hit a nerve.

She said, "Don't you think I'd tell you if they had, or if it had been anything important?"

"Well, which was it? Did they contact us...or did they contact us with something *you* deemed unimportant?"

She hesitated. "There were no meaningful contacts. Some static, once or twice. That's all. Now, will you help me?"

It didn't make sense. Static? Why had she never mentioned it before? He held his tongue and answered, "Yeah, sure. It's not like I have anything better to do."

* * * * *

The “odds ‘n ends” closet lived up to its name. Sam3 rummaged through the crates of assorted odd materials. Tape, coils of cable, plastic tubing, and sheets of rubber, all seemed to be a very odd assortment of goods, indeed. Until he realized...all of these materials could be used in the manufacture of a cradle. *Damn! They knew! Those bastards had to know!* He forced himself to shrug it off. Then, he set his mind on the task at hand, the construction of a device which would float near Brigitte2 and yet be anchored so as not to drift away from her. He wasn’t sure how the baby would...feed. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Perhaps some of those bulges in Brigitte2’s middle would accommodate this. If not, the plastic tubing could be rigged to supply...what? What did they have to feed an infant? *Of course, he thought, this will be no ordinary infant. It will probably sit up and ask for its own juice tube on the first day.*

He looked up from the third crate to discover Anthony staring at him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Sam3 took the next half hour to repeat the conversation he’d had with Brigitte2, and then to explain about the baby.

Anthony stood still for a bit, and finally leaned in to him. “Shower,” he whispered.

* * * * *

After the shower, Sam3 did as Anthony requested, although it felt like a stretch. He wasn’t sure Brigitte2 would accept it. He tried, regardless.

“Brigitte!” he called on the ship’s com, knowing it would reach the Bridge.

“What’s up?” Brigitte2 responded.

“I need you to come down here and take a look at some of the supplies. There are some choices.”

“You know that’s...difficult,” she answered. “Bring the choices to the Bridge, please.”

“No can do,” Sam3 countered. “I mean, I could make some guesses, here, but the baby would be the one to suffer because you didn’t come here to help me.”

“Well, just tell me what the questions are,” she said.

“Sorry,” he snapped. “Either you get down here on the double or I’ll take my best guess and hope it doesn’t kill the thing.”

There was a pause. “I’ll be there shortly.”

She arrived rather quickly. Sam3 hadn’t quite prepared for her by setting out the equipment, but he made do. His hope was to distract her enough with these choices so that she’d be away from that damned console for a few minutes. Anthony had begged for a chance to see what was going on without her interference. So, while he showed her cable and rubber sheeting, he knew

that Anthony was studying the console board. He wondered what his companion would find.

Small hairs rose out of the back of his neck when he saw Brigitte2 sail through the hatchway. Something about her shape and tendrils as she floated lent her a ghostly aspect. Sam3 repressed his instinct to scream and run from the eerie vision. She rarely left her console, so he had seen her in this condition only a couple of times in the past. It had given him this reaction each time. He forced his eyes off her, drew some level breaths and dug through the crate. His hand latched onto a length of roped coil, and he pulled it out of the container. Sifting through the rest of the materials with his other hand he asked, "How – how big will it be?"

"She."

"Excuse me?"

"It – as you so tersely put in – will be a *she*."

"Yes, of course."

He paused, trying to choose his words more carefully. .

"She'll be a little larger than the average newborn, and, she'll grow quickly – what's going on? " Her entire body heaved as if shocked. She propelled herself toward the hatch. "What – what are you trying to do? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Sam3 said, "Where are you going?"

She yelled back at him, "The computer and I have been closely linked for years. Did you think I wouldn't know?"

Sam3 raced after her. He knew where she was heading.

They both reached the Bridge. Brigitte2 slipped in just ahead of him.

Anthony stood in the far corner, away from the console. He glared at her as she slid into the room.

As soon as Sam3 entered, Anthony began yelling. "Do you know what she did? You will not believe this!" He stepped closer, then shied back. Perhaps the memory of the last such attempt still lingered.

Sam3 raced to Anthony's side. "Calm down!"

"She switched it! She switched the hailing frequency! They probably tried to contact us...but we didn't get it!"

Sam3 swiveled and they both stared her down.

"I did no such thing."

"She did. She set it to pick up nothing but space static."

"Static?"

"No, it's not like that. They switched the station on me. I was only following orders."

"Famous last words." And with that, Anthony grabbed a length of coil from Sam3's hand. He kicked off the floor and ricocheted himself from the ceiling. He was so furious, it seemed to give him the strength of a well man.

Brigitte2 raced for the console, tendrils outstretched toward their slots. She was almost inserted back into it when Anthony descended on her. Hooking his foot beneath the console, he steadied himself behind her and caught her with the coil around her head. He forced it down over where a throat might have been. A little lower still. Then, he yanked it taut. Her eyes bulged. She flailed. He yanked it again.

"Stop it!" cried Sam3. "You'll kill the baby!"

"That's the idea, buddy!" He seemed to put all the last of his strength into holding her there by the coil. She pulled her arms from the slots and her tendrils flailed like hair blowing in a wild wind. "With no kid, she has no reason to make us stay out here!"

Sam3 grappled with Anthony, and was able to loosen his grip a little. "Listen to me! You can't choke her to death! She doesn't breathe like us, remember?"

"Then what are you worried about?" He struggled harder. "Maybe I'll just sever the neural connections between her brain and her...blob. Maybe that'll kill her."

"Listen, you don't want to kill her. I know you don't. Otherwise, you would have destroyed her battery packs."

"I was going to the battery closet next!" he yelled. "No bringing her back! No babies! If I have to die, so do they!"

Sam3 knew what he had to do. He released his grip momentarily on Anthony's arm and allowed him to yank her taut again. He pulled his fist back and roundhoused him with all his strength. Anthony dropped the coil and flew back while Sam3 watched. It was like an old movie's action sequence with the fight taking place in slow motion...almost. The force of Sam3's strike did not cause a slow motion response, but it did cause him to bullet across the room. Anthony coasted overhead and hit the far wall. He slumped against it, but didn't fall to the floor. Instead, he curled up and floated in that spot for a moment. He glared at Sam3.

Brigitte2 slipped a tentacle between the rope and her body and scraped it off. It floated near her face until she maneuvered it to a cabinet in her console. Zippp! It disappeared inside. She dug her arm-tendrils into their slots and immediately electrified the console. It hummed in a way that Sam3 had not heard before.

"Are you alright?"

"You-you tried to kill me!" she cried.

"He was just supposed to see if he could initiate some communications with Earth. He suspected that you'd tampered with it."

"She's right," Anthony whispered, "we need her dead."

Beeee...

"It won't solve anything. How can we get this ship turned around if she won't do it? Have you lost your mind?" Sam3 made his way over to Anthony. "I didn't really hurt you, did I?"

Anthony shrugged him off. "Get away from me."

BeeeeeeBeeeeee.....

"You moron! You can't steer this ship without me!"

"I'd have rigged something. I *am* an engineer, you know –"

BeeeeeeBeeeeee...

"What's that?" Sam3 swung around to Brigitte2.

The speaker box boomed her reply, "It's nothing. Just more static."

"That doesn't sound like static to me!" Anthony yelled.

BeeeeeeBeeeeee...

"Oh, my God." Sam3 hurried to the console, careful not to touch it. He asked, "It's a signal, isn't it?"

"There won't be a message behind it. Only the beeping. I told you, it's unreadable." She shifted in her seat.

"Try it," he coaxed.

"Fine."

She was right. It was nothing more than a series of repeated, evenly-spaced beeps. Perhaps Brigitte2 was right all along, and that these sounds would turn out to be nothing more than noise.

"Wait! It's not a message. It's a signal. A homing signal!" Anthony pushed himself to a standing position and made his way toward her. He touched his foot down on the Velcro strip, keeping a good distance.

BeeeeBeeee...

"That planet we just passed. Did either of you get a good look?" Anthony asked.

Sam3 shrugged. "I was too busy with our...discussion."

Brigitte2 said, "You know I can't get too close to an object with that much gravity. We came close enough for the kinds of observations we typically make."

"You mean, useless crap like measuring size and distance from its sun."

"That information is far from useless. Besides, the sound is not likely to be any kind of signal. We're the first out here."

Anthony drew a little closer to Brigitte2 and said, "What if – over the past few years – they found a way to travel faster than us? What if they actually beat us out here?" He added, "We need to go back."

"No. We can't."

BeeeeeeBeeeeee...

"Think about your future on this ship, Brigitte. Do you really want to be trapped in this ashcan with us if you don't go back?"

Sam3 felt certain that if she could, she would have scowled.

She said, "Even if we somehow made it back to Earth, I'd have to report you for attempted murder, you slimy bastard."

Anthony laughed. "Murder? You'd have to be human for that! It's more like *destruction of government property*."

"Sam3 raised his hand. "That's enough, guys. It's over. Let's work together for once!"

She hesitated. "I can't go too close. It's unhealthy for me."

"Then, just get us as close as you can. We need to take a better look at that planet."

She sighed, and then moved her tendrils around in their slots. "Done," the voicebox boomed.

Sam3 and Anthony made their way to the far wall. They peered at the approaching planet through the viewport. It was still at quite a distance.

BEEEEEEEEBEEEE...

The signal grew more intense.

The ship slowed and the planet remained distant.

Anthony glared back at her.

Sam3 said, "We need it closer."

She answered, "No, you're both trying to kill me."

Sam3 noticed something in her eyes that seemed decidedly...feminine. For the first time in all their years together, he saw her as a woman.

"No. I won't hurt you."

"He will."

"I won't let him hurt you, either." He nodded to Anthony.

"Speak for yourself," Anthony said.

"She's only trying to protect her young. Any woman on Earth would do the same."

"Don't compare her to a woman."

"Why the hell not? She's a mother protecting her child. Get used to it!" Sam3 gripped his shoulder and leaned in close to his face. "If you hurt her or the baby, then it'll be true. Humans will have no right to be spreading our hate and our crimes out here. No right, at all. Not in *any* form of us – clone, hybrid, or natural born."

Anthony slumped back. He stood silent for a moment. "Fine," he said.

Sam3 turned to her. "I need you to trust us. We...need you to trust us." He reached out to her. "Just a little closer...please."

She paused, then said. "Have you considered one other possibility?"

Startled, both men glanced up at her.

She continued, "What if – what if those messages aren't, aren't from us? Y'know...human. What if they're from someone else?"

It took a moment for Sam3 to understand her meaning. He realized she was truly frightened, which seemed out of character for her. She did, after all, have *space explorer* coded into her genes. Perhaps the pregnancy had caused some unforeseen alteration.

"Well," he began. "I suppose it's possible. But don't you think they'd be friendly because they're trying to contact us?"

She moved in that sort of shrug once again. Brigitte2's eyes darted from one man to the other. "I'm just saying that it could be dangerous. That's all."

"Well, danger is part of the game here, isn't it?" Anthony spoke up, surprising Sam3. He continued, "I mean, I'm already in terrible danger of dying, right? There isn't anything these guys could do to me that the time in space isn't already accomplishing. So, to me...it's worth the risk."

Sam3 took the opportunity. "We need to save him. Saving him is saving ourselves. Don't you get it? If you let him die, just because you're afraid of some phantom in your head, then you deserve all the phantoms space has to offer. We all deserve it. In this place, right here, we have the chance to prove ourselves. We have the chance to prove that we're worthy of spreading our kind – our kinds – around the universe."

Anthony turned his face away. He seemed uncomfortable to be in need of Brigitte2's compassion.

His embarrassment was not important to Sam3. "If we don't make ourselves into friends, now – if we don't find some way to create something between us – then what's all this for anyway? And should we be throwing away opportunities to connect with other people?"

Brigitte2 answered, "That's my point. They might not be *people*."

"You mean, they might not be from Earth. But when you think about it, even if they are from Earth, would we recognize them?" Sam3 asked. He paused for a moment, and then said, "It's likely they considered losing communications with us a failure of our team. Would they blame our genetics? So, in the years we've been zigzagging around space, how might they have redesigned our species? Humans might be something totally unrecognizable to us, now?"

Anthony nodded slowly. He said, "Totally...*alien*. More so than life forms from other planets could be."

This seemed to upset Brigitte2. Waves of flesh rolled along her midsection. "What will we do?" she asked.

Anthony said, "We'll say hello."

"– and we'll ask them to help us," added Sam3.

Brigitte2's voice sounded weak when she asked, "You think they'll do that?"

"If they deserve to be here, they will," he said.

"I still can't bring this ship too near a planet. Even if I were willing to die, it would mean sacrificing my child, as well. That's asking too much."

"Let's worry first about whether there is anybody to contact." Then, against her lingering silence he added, "Do you honestly think I'd allow her to be hurt?" He moved toward the console and placed his hand on it. There was no electric shock. Sam3 rested his case.

A wordless sound emanated from her speakers. Once again, the ship moved nearer.

They established a remote orbit. Twin moons orbited as well from a distance.

Anthony gave a quick nervous laugh. "We could be fighting over nothing. What if it is just space noise? What if we really are alone out here?" What if there's *nothing* on these planets? He sighed. He laughed again. "Well, then. Send my regards to each other, because that's all you'll have...I guess."

"We'll do whatever we can for you, Anthony," said Brigitte2. "I – I'm so sorry about all this –"

Anthony stopped her. "Yeah, I know you will."

As they circled around for a view of the largest continent, Sam3 walked over to Anthony, glanced beyond him and gasped. He and Anthony pressed their faces to the viewport. He could not believe what he saw.

Tears streamed down Anthony's face.

Instinctively, Sam3 reached up and tapped the Plexiglas with his index finger. Then he let out a roar of laughter. He steadied his gaze again and choked out, "Look! Lights..."

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