

The team gathered for lunch around a long, narrow metal table on the observation deck of Station 49-Beta. Light streamed in through thick tinted, plate glass windows. Through the glass, the corner of Saturn's belt glinted in the distant sunlight.

I took my plate of food to the table. The reflective surface of the table revealed muscular arms in company overalls and a pointed beard. I brushed back long, greying locks with one hand. Grabbing salt, I liberally covered it. Synthetic food supplements again for lunch.

Tall and graceful, Nomen sat down beside me, shifting her short, cropped hair behind an ear. "I want to have a baby," she said to no one in particular.

That got our attention. Futura's brown eyes widened, fork frozen in mid-air. Hogarth stared. Sirius' head abruptly surfaced from his hologram. The rest of the team sat in stupefied silence.

I watched her from the corner of my eyes. Nomen eyes sparkled, that impish grin on her face. Her hair bobbed around her face as she looked around the table. I sincerely doubted the crew knew what she meant.

We both emerged in the late twenty-third century when concepts like birth were not such a distant memory. Now conception was genetically engineered and the resultant fetus grown in a birthing tank until it was time to emerge. Each tank contained a group of twenty.

"What's a baby?" asked Tranquilus confirming my suspicion.

"You don't want to know," I said, stabbing my fork at his meat supplement. "Not while you're eating at any rate."

Nomen banged her fist on the table. The plates jumped. "I don't understand," she said. "Why is it such a big deal?"

"It's not that it's a big deal," I said. "No one has done it in eons, that's all. Physically we're quite different from our ancestors."

"I think it's a splendid idea," said Mazlo. She always secretly admired Nomen, though lacking her spontaneity. Nomen was the rebel. She was not. Together they ganged up on Sirius and anyone else who got in their way.

Sirius' lip curled up in a grimace, revealing pearly white incisors. "It's disgusting," he said, figuring it out. "Why would you even want to, Nomen? I mean it's so bestial and primal."

"Shut up, Sirius. The rest of you are just as bad." She got up abruptly leaving her plate for the others and stormed from the table. I let her go. There was no sense talking to her now. She would have to cool down first.

I sighed, watching her go, then turned my attention to Sirius. "You shouldn't have said that. You know how sensitive she can be."

He waved a calloused hand at her empty seat. "She's always throwing fits. Last year she said she wanted to be a Christian, remember."

"I know. She's difficult. We just have to be patient, that's all."

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Once dinner was over, I followed her to the observation deck. It was her typical haunt when she was upset. Something about the view of Saturn calmed her.

The deck was the closest place to solitude we had on the station. As I approached the doors hissed open in front me. Inside there was a split level. Rising up on the left were the tiers of seats where we watched holomovies and company broadcasts from earth on the holodeck below. Usually, it just displayed the planets rotating the sun.

"What do you want?" Nomen must have heard my footsteps because she didn't look away from the window. "I wish I was born in the twenty-first."

I stood beside her looking out. "No, you don't. You wouldn't like it. All that squalor and overcrowding. They nearly killed Mother Earth with their foolishness."

"Sure, they had weaknesses. But they had something else."

"What could they possibly have had that we don't have?"

"Humanity. Mortality." Her deep blue eyes turned on me, piercing. "Babies. Regis, they made love. They grew old and died. This science delusion has led us further from the truth, that life is our defining reality. We don't need science to create life. Our ancestors didn't. We don't. All this technology—what's it for—profit and to what end. For every problem science solves it reveals yet another even bigger problem. So we can ever more quickly race from ourselves."

"But you mentioned all bad things. Think of the good things science has provided."

"Like what? What must it have been like to live before genetic synthesis? Life was short but full of passion. There was family. Parents. Freedom. Intimacy. Life partners. We could have been partners."

I smiled.

She reached over and put her hand over mine.

"But what about all the problems? Just think about the birth defects. Think about everything genetic synthesis eliminated."

A shuttle whipped over the ring belt on route to Enceladus. Both of us watched it disappear behind the planet.

"Think Regis." Nomen's voice was soft, aching. "Imagine giving birth to another human being. Imagine the pain, the agony, the glory. A tiny life created. Not fully grown in some vacuum tube. But from my own body."

I felt shaky and hot under the collar.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course I am." She gripped the guide rails.

"Because if this is a joke..."

"It's not."

Her shoulders hunched, eyes darkly ringed. Even her short locks looked wild and unkempt.

We sat in silence watching the rings. Far to the left, the Pioneer Orbiting Station came into view. I know Nomen well enough to tell when she's serious. We attended Goddard College on Mars together, where Nomen was always a bit weird. When most of us spent a few hours in the cyberscope, she spent days, emerging in a daze. She went everywhere and denied her mind nothing. I never liked to go too far back, but she had spent cyber weeks in the twenty-first century, roaming the slum conurbs. I never saw the appeal.

"Have you been in the cyberscope a lot lately?" I rested my elbows gently on the guide rails.

"Don't be such a pain." She turned to face me. "If you're my friend, help me."

My voice quavered. "Help you with what?"

"This dream." She stared back into empty space.

"Nomen be serious. It's impossible." I thought of my own shriveled genitalia. "We haven't used those parts in centuries. It would require an operation, at the least. Or a genetic variation that's never been created."

"There must be a way."

"I doubt very much the meditechs on Pioneer could do it." Forgetting for a moment how ludicrous the whole thing was. "Maybe Mars. You'd probably have to go to Earth."

"Would you come with me if I went to Earth?" She turned to me with wide eyes, taking my hands.

"Be reasonable. That's a six-month round trip."

"I know how long it takes. Would you come?"

I leaned forward, narrow-eyed and looked squarely in her deep cosmic eyes. "I don't know."

She dropped her hands and looked away.

Maybe this was another fad of hers and would pass.

The next few weeks were so busy I completely forgot about Nomen's nonsense. A bigwig from Earth who had been staying on Pioneer visited. Most people from Earth really bugged me. They had such an insular attitude like nothing ever happened in the outer systems. But he was high up in the company, so I had to show him respect. His distractions and the operational duties displaced Nomen's problem.

I should have known it wouldn't be long before it cropped up again.

Two weeks later, Maslo informed me Sirius teased Noman unmercifully. Nomen took to eating in her quarters, not socializing with the others. It was with some trepidation that I stood outside her quarters now. We had been happy until this, almost like what the ancients called a family.

So I went to her quarters and hesitantly knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" said Nomen.

"Regis."

"Come in, I suppose."

Darkness filled the quarters, illuminated only by two needlepoints of flame on either side of her.

"What's that smell?"

"It's wax. The ancients used it for illumination. It reminds me of their era."

From her faint silhouette, I could see she sitting lotus position in the middle of the room.

"I am meditating," she said. "It's an ancient earth ritual."

I felt my pulse slow and my breathing calm, and without thinking, I sat on the floor in front of her.

"You know Nomen you haven't socialized with the others in weeks. What's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong."

"The baby thing." I sighed.

"I told you I was serious."

I groaned. "Oh Nomen, are you sure you want to do this?"

She nodded.

We plunged into momentary silence. It isn't a fad. It isn't going away. She really wants to do this. I heaved out a breath. "I suppose there's a cruiser leaving Pioneer in two weeks."

Nomen threw her arms around me in a hug so tight it knocked the air out of my lungs.

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After that, I decided to tell Sirius first, the most cynical of us all.

He blinked dumbly at me.

"You're going where?"

"Earth. With Nomen so she can have this baby thing."

"Right, but why are *you* going? Let her go on her own."

I didn't have an answer for him, at least not one I could put in words, except that Nomen was a friend. I would do anything for them all. And there was more. A long-forgotten word. Love?

Later I found the others lounging in the rec room.

"Can I come, too?" asked Maslo.

"No. I need you to help the others run the facility while we're gone."

The others said nothing.

"She'll never shut up about it." I wasn't sure why I felt the need to explain.

"We know," Futura said. "It's just... you were always so good at talking her out of these ideas before."

"I think it's different this time. She's serious about this."

"If successful, it will be the first natural birth in five hundred years," Tranquilus said. He always seemed to know things.

Nomen was a demon possessed—heaven sent to quote the ancients. She emerged from her quarters cheeks flushed red with personal pride and certainty. Sirius was forgiven, and she resumed her rightful place as the social epicenter of our little world. She promised Maslo a detailed account of the whole baby thing who had developed a deep fascination with Nomen's planned motherhood.

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On the appointed day we said our goodbyes promising to holoscope regularly. A shuttle came to pick us up and brought us over to Pioneer.

From there we caught the cruiser. I had some savings and time-off, initially planned for a holiday on Oberon. I didn't tell Nomen that though. Our cabin was big and spacious one near the bow. No sense in skimping on our home for next three months. We went everywhere together holding hands. She was always in form, and she laughed and joked and shared many anecdotes from her studies of earth history. Her laugh was infectious. No medications could ever give such a transformation. Even the staff on the cruiser responded too.

I didn't believe someone over three hundred could look that youthful. She never complained once. Evenings we spent in our cabin, and she laid it all out for me. Where we had gone wrong as a species. How we lost touch with our biology in our desire to be immortal.

We sat side by side on the bed sometimes holding hands, sometimes silent arm in arm – two anodyne humans with no tangible proof of ourselves or our biology.

“You see Regis,” she whispered. “We’ve lost our connection with posterity – a terrible crime has been committed against nature.”

Along the way, we found out someone in the solar media got hold of the story about Nomen and her mad crusade. It caught like wildfire.

A doctor on Earth sent a transmission, offering to perform the operation free. The media on Earth were agog with excitement.

I saw a different side of Nomen, one I should have recognized long ago. To me, she was oceans of depth. She was my teacher and my guide. In her eyes and her words I sought and found a timeless quality.

Our cabin was shaped with a curved roof. Through the windows, the stars whizzed by as we traveled through space. I was on my computer and Nomen was reading some religious document called the Bible.

"You know the scientists are wrong about so many things," she said putting down her book.

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, the ancients had a concept called a soul."

"That's a religious idea," I said, trying to be knowledgeable.

"Humans are only part matter. Sure, we're made up of atoms and molecules. Even the ancients knew that. But there's more."

"If you're talking about consciousness, I've got you there. The brain is just a sophisticated computer, a collection of neurons."

"What about God?"

I blinked. "That's just primitive superstition."

She said no more, turning her attention to her book, lips thinned. Still, her questions troubled me. Some part of me felt a little... off. I couldn't put my finger on it. With her, there were no limits or constraints. I felt I was a disappointment to her sometimes.

This was her journey undeniably but me being here was part of mine. To share the closeness and now I was beginning to see why things were very wrong and things were not the synthetic regularity of the software I was editing.

Babies. Souls. God. Either Nomen was going mad, or I was.

When we made Earth's orbit, I was relieved. The cruiser docked at Alpha Station, a ramshackle, rundown place. Alpha, based in Earth's orbit, consisted of a vast interconnecting web of modules and panels. To this structure cruisers from deep space docked and unloaded passengers and cargo. It was nothing like Pioneer. Some of the modules were nearly seven hundred years old. One even dated from the late twentieth.

From Alpha Station, we took a shuttle down to Mojave. When we landed, we walked down a metal gangway, and I helped Nomen get on a small monorail to take us to the arrivals hall. As soon as we entered the vaulted ceiling of the hall echoed to the sound of cameramen and reporters. We were besieged on all sides by reporters.

"There's speculation here on Earth that this baby is naturally conceived," said one particularly aggressive reporter as we made our way to the terrestrial departure lounge.

"Don't be disgusting," I said, hurrying Nomen along.

When we were out of earshot Nomen squeezed my hand. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"I can't explain it," I said, watching ahead. "But part of me wanted to. And not just as a friend."

A jet took us from Mojave to the Southern Hemisphere, a province the ancients called Brazil. Dr. Vulgate met us in a conurb called Rio. He seemed very kind.

"So you're the famous Nomen. I've heard much about you," he said raising bushy eyebrows. "And you're Regis if I'm not mistaken. Nomen is the talk of the solar system. Something about what you're doing has struck a chord. I'll tell you that much."

He led us into his corner office. It was spacious and brightly lit. Two of the walls were tinted glass. Ancient artworks adorned the other walls. He gestured us to plush seats as my feet sank into the beige woven carpet. Outside, faintly audible, the steady hum of hover cars whizzing by as the ancient city pulsated with life.

Dr. Vulgate walked to the window and looked down the 44 floors to the city below.

"Look at it," he said, beckoning to us to come over. "What do you see? A finely tuned machine and we, humans, are the raw materials."

He turned to Nomen. "You are not alone. I and others like me have also studied the traditions of our ancestors. This is partly why I offered to help you. A growing number of people believe we have lost our way. In putting all our faith in science, we have neglected other voices. More ancient voices. Not just superstition but other spiritual voices within that speak of a world beyond our physical world. We need a symbol. A standard around which we can rally everyone. What better symbol than a human child. A symbol of all the promise of humanity."

I thought about that and color rushed to my neck and face. "Nomen's not some mascot for your pet cause."

Nomen rested her hand on my arm. "It's okay, Regis. He means well."

Dr. Vulgate claimed he found a way to accelerate what the ancients called pregnancy. In the past it took nine months, now it only took minutes. I could hardly believe it, and I didn't like the idea of Nomen deformed for a long time.

As he led Nomen into another room, I took a few steps toward the door, hesitated, and started to pace. I needed to be there to protect her from what I didn't know. It overwhelmed me.

"You can wait out here if you wish," said Dr. Vulgate. He looked away at his screen bringing Nomen's Bioscan up.

I felt a flush of anger and rage rise inside me. "No way. I'm coming too." I said following them into the room. I brushed past him and waited for Nomen.

He made no comment and followed with some scans and readouts.

"This won't take long," he said, handing Nomen a pill once she laid on the table.

"What's that?" I said taking a step closer.

"It's a genetic supplement. It will reconfigure her genes for the pregnancy."

He placed the pill in a plastic glass of water and handed it to her. Nomen swallowed it down and lay back on the bed, closed her eyes and seemed to be asleep.

"How long does it take?" I asked.

"A few minutes. The genetic transformation has been accelerated."

I watched Nomen while Dr. Vulgate's pill took effect. Something changed inside me, too, as I took in those features I had known for so long. Nomen swelled up rapidly.

"What's happening doctor?" I said gripping tightly to the side of Nomen's bed. My eyes widened, my breathing was rapid.

"Don't be concerned. The drug is taking effect. She will give birth any moment now."

He spoke softly into a device on his wrist. A door opened on the other side of the room.

"My assistants," he said.

Nomen's eyes fluttered open.

"Regis?" Her breathing was shallow and rapid. She looked around her dazed and rubbed her eyes. "Give me your hand."

"Are you alright?" My voice quivered.

"I feel weird. Like I'm being inflated like a balloon."

"Stay calm, Nomen," said Dr. Vulgate, watching the monitors after connecting a device to her stomach. "I need you to do exactly as I tell you."

It was hard to say what happened next. I remembered Dr. Vulgate telling Nomen to push. I remembered I nearly fainted. When the little creature came out, my heart almost stopped. I turned to look at Nomen, who was but triumphant. Words couldn't describe her. A long forgotten word we never used to describe people drifted to the surface. Beauty. Nomen looked beautiful.

"Nomen you may take your child." Dr. Vulgate's voice brought me back. He handed her a small, squealing bundle of life.

Suddenly, my heart went out to Nomen and her child. All those unclear feelings I had for her in the past came back but tenfold, a hundredfold. I leaned over and did something I still can't explain.

I kissed Nomen.

And for the first time in my long but sterile life, I felt content.