

3,839 words

Jealous of Men

2147 C.E. - Triton Alpha Research Station, Deep Neptune Orbit

The faint smell of salt and ozone flowed around her as Doctor Adria van der Made strode into the lab. She cast a cursory glance at the pair of glass tanks at the far end of the lab before her eyes came to rest on a man sitting at the console.

‘Ramsay, what’s our status?’ she asked as the lab’s door slid closed behind her.

Michael Ramsay sat on a swivel chair, his bare feet up on the console bench. As she came towards him, he lazily dropped them to the ground, slipped them into his flip-flops, but didn’t bother standing.

‘Morning Doc,’ he said and passed her a thin plastic tablet he’d picked up from the console. ‘Sensors around the female’s mantle show readings that could be brain activity. But Christ knows what it actually is.’

Adria gritted her teeth but said nothing. It was too early in her day to pick a fight.

She tapped twice on the tablet’s white surface and a screen illuminated with boxes containing live datasets. She touched one and scanned down the series of data points that appeared.

‘I agree, could be anything.’ She looked up. ‘Hopefully, something comes of it. Anything from the male?’

‘Mr Squid?’ Ramsay shook his head before waving towards the tablet. ‘It’s all in my video log. But spoiler, beyond a couple of bubbly farts from the top opening, there’s not much to report. I still reckon it’s the arse and not its mouth.’

Adria frowned and gave him a sidelong look, but he’d already turned away.

‘I’ll never understand why men are so fascinated with butts and expelled gases,’ she said.

He shrugged and yawned.

‘Men will be men, Doc.’

She let it go. It was something she was trying to do more, especially with a team made up entirely of men.

‘Any more of that leaking we noted yesterday?’ She moved towards the tanks. ‘I’m still worried about internal injuries.’

‘Nup, no new signs of anal leakage whatsoever,’ he said. He stood and collected his dressing gown from the front console. ‘On that note, I’m hungry, so I’m gonna grab a bite and head to bed.’

She huffed air out her nose and shook her head, refusing to be triggered. While Ramsay was good at his job, his ability to wind her up simply by being himself unnerved her. She thought she’d be used to it after all these month’s working with him.

‘I’ll wake you if anything changes.’

‘Nah, let me sleep,’ he said, and she heard the door slide open. ‘Nothing’s happened since we dropped them in that liquid atmosphere concoction of yours. And, I reckon nothing’s gonna happen while I’m sleeping. And if it does, I’ll see it later.’

‘Actually, Ramsay...’

‘Yeah, Doc?’

‘Stop at the control room on your way past and adjust the lab’s climate? Our guests may need a high ozone atmosphere, but it’s hurting my throat.’

‘Roger,’ he said, tapping two fingers off the side of his forehead.

When the door slid closed, she stood alone with the pair of creatures suspended in the tanks. As she had on each of the last few days, she stared at the alienness of them. Like squid, each had a long conical mantle with a rounded tip surrounded by three short fins. But, not far below, a pair of almost human-like arms grew, each ending in four long fingers. Below their mantles, long skirts of whitish cream skin hung motionless in the liquid. She’d had her staff

sling synthetic strapping beneath the arms to hold the creatures afloat at the centre of the tanks.

For the eight months Adria had been stationed out here, she'd done little more than study microbes in the Neptunian moon ice. Now, it would appear, she was about to lead her team in making contact with humanity's first alien race.

In Greek mythology, ichor had flowed like blood through the veins of the Gods. It was also what Adria was calling the thick clear liquid she'd found inside these alien creatures. Whatever the fluid was, it had kept them alive five hundred years in the ice. Ironic, as these creatures would have been considered Gods all those centuries ago.

Adria had spent much of the past few days studying the ichor. Still, for what answers she'd gleaned, more questions had presented themselves. Beyond the ichor, she had no idea where these creatures had come from, how their ship came to be buried in the ice of a distant moon, and if there were others out here. The only surety was their alien origin, but she didn't need her Biochemistry PhD to prove that.

She stood and stretched, raising her arms above her head as she yawned. She picked up the plastic tablet, sitting ignored beside the chair and tapped the screen twice. As she made her way across the room, she scrolled through the data collected over the past hour. The possible brain activity was still there, but little else had changed. She slid the device onto Ramsay's console nearest the door.

All this waiting made her hungry, and it was during these times she dreamed of chocolate. Such luxuries were rare out here at the edge of the solar system, four and a half billion kilometres from the Earth, but she missed it. She took lethargic steps to the small cooling unit in the corner and took out an apple. She bit into the pinkish green skin, and it gave way with a crisp, satisfying crunch. It wasn't chocolate, but it was one of the better

things grown in the station's hydroponics bay.

She was ambling back to the console, her teeth buried in the apple when she noticed sensor data spiking on the tablet. She snatched up the device and saw the activity on all sensors had risen to almost three times higher than before. Her head swivelled towards the glass tanks to see one of the creatures moving.

The slightly smaller of the two aliens watched her with large inky violet eyes surrounded in pools of yellow chrome. Adria tore the rest of the apple from her mouth and tossed it onto the console. With tablet in hand, she ran across the room, her rubber soles squelching on the shiny floor.

'Hello, there,' she said, her mouth parted in what she hoped was a welcoming smile.

The creature swayed, its skin skirts flowing with a smooth motion as if treading the liquid. The small gap of the creature's mouth moved, and it struggled against the synthetic strapping, attempting to unhook itself.

'You're not a prisoner here,' Adria said, her hands up before her. 'The strapping is for stability, nothing more. I can release them when you feel strong enough.'

The creature's irises dilated a little, and it ceased its struggle. The skirts flowed faster, the edges whisking high enough to show a series of red and yellow patches beneath. The colours, like those across its mantle, were in distinct contrast to the creamy white of the slightly larger creature in the other tank.

Adria noted how the creature's mouth continued moving, and it even brought its fingers up before the small gap. Was it trying to speak?

'I can't hear you,' she said, shaking her head. Then, after a moment's thought, her shoulders drooped. 'Come on, Adria,' she said and raised the tablet.

Several swipes found the option she was looking for, and she tapped it. There was a crackle from hidden speakers across the lab's ceiling followed by the eerie sound of being

underwater.

‘You...’

Adria cringed as the computer-generated voice boomed around the room. She dragged a finger across the screen, and the sound reduced.

‘You speak...language of Lhrrrkhhk?’ the voice came again, this time at a more reasonable volume. When it did, the creature’s eyes twitched as if it struggled to keep them open.

‘No, it’s a translator,’ Adria said. ‘Your language has a similar construction to some of those from Earth. We were able to derive the language from messages we found in your craft’s communications system. It probably won’t be perfect, but it should be enough.’

The creature appeared to smile, or at least Adria hoped that was the case. It’s skin skirts swirled around it, and again it moved in the tank. It rose under its own strength for a short period before sinking back into the grasp of the strapping.

‘Your...your people much ad...vanced since...since came to system.’

‘Yes, our society was primitive when your craft crashed, about five hundred years ago.’

She paused a moment before tapping herself on the forehead.

‘I’m sorry, where are my manners? My name’s Adria van der Made, and I’m the lead scientist here on the Triton Alpha Research Station. Welcome to Earth’s solar system.’

‘Hel...lo, Adria of...the Earth. I...Srrlllp. My form w...weak, need s...sustenance. Atmosphere l...liquid nature contain no Sslrrkssk...to osmose, consume.’

There was a pause as the creature closed its eyes and the skirts sagged. But after a few moments, they again began to flow, lifting it a little in the liquid. Inky violet eyes opened again slowly.

‘Inje...inject...injectors rear chamber of flight...ship release Sslrrkssk...osmose,

sustain.’

‘I’ll get someone working on that,’ Adria said and swiped to the communications screen. She sent an alert before looking up to see Srrrlllp peering about the room.

‘There...there another. My mate? He...did survive?’ the voice of the translator echoed throughout the room. ‘There...importance.’

‘Yes, your mate is here.’

Adria moved towards the tank where the less colourful of the two hung motionless in the pool. Srrrlllp’s skin skirts swept about at a more frantic pace, in what Adria guessed was an attempt to move in the tank. The alien female dragged herself to face her mate and stared at him for a time until her eyes went limp.

‘My...my...my mate...must live.’

As the voice trailed off and her eyes closed, her body drifted to face the front once more.

‘Srrrlllp?’ Adria attempted to say the name that was more a sound than a word. ‘Are you okay?’

The alien’s eyes came open a little, blinked several times before the translator let out a deep sigh. ‘Sustenance,’ she said before her eyes again closed.

There were a pair of staccato beeps from the tablet.

‘Adri? What’s up?’ A male voice belonging to her head engineer blared from the device.

‘Gav,’ she said. ‘Meet me at the alien craft as soon as you can, we’ve got work to do.’

The sharp buzz of the communications console dragged Adria from the depth of her sleep.

‘Console, answer,’ she said, her voice croaking.

The console acknowledged with a dull beep as she lay there rubbing a hand across her face.

‘Doc?’

‘Ramsay?’ Her eyes fluttered open, and she sat up. ‘Sorry, what’s our status?’

‘Squidwoman’s awake,’ he said, ‘and keeps repeating your name. Doesn’t say anything else.’

‘Okay, I’m coming.’ She swung her legs off the side of the bed, fingers rubbing her eyes. ‘How’s she looking?’

‘Better, I guess,’ he said, ‘it’s hard to tell.’ She then heard the crunch of him bite into something.

‘Right, stand by, I’ll be there in five minutes. Console, end.’

When she arrived in the lab, she found three of her staff gathered around the two tanks. Away from the others, Ramsay sat at his console, half-eaten apple in hand, wearing the same grubby jumpsuit and flip-flops from the day before. Her eyes went straight to Srrrlllp, who had hauled herself around to face away from the men.

‘What’s going on?’

‘She’s been awake about fifteen minutes,’ Ramsay said, finally looking up from the console. ‘She said your name and then dragged herself around like that. She ain’t made eye contact or spoke since other than to repeat your name.’

Adria looked at each of the other men in turn before peering up at the alien female. She noticed Srrrlllp’s furtive glance at her before again averting her gaze. Adria scooped up one of the white tablets from a console and used it to turn off the room’s communications.

‘Everyone out,’ she said without raising her voice.

All the men, even Ramsay, gave her looks somewhere on a spectrum between disappointment and offence. One, whose name was Dimitri Antonovich, stood before the

others with his arms crossed and a dry smirk on his face. Adria gritted her teeth. Dimitri had only been on the station a handful of weeks but had few qualms in questioning her decisions. And what was worse, the other men seemed to rally behind him.

‘Doctor van der Made,’ he said in his thick Ukrainian accent. ‘I would speak for us all when I demand an opportunity to get to know our guest.’

She took a deep breath and tried to let her shoulders relax.

‘I understand you all want to be a part of this first contact scenario,’ she said, her hands up before her. ‘And, I have no objections to that, but we need to be a little delicate here. We know nothing of Srrlllp’s nature or her culture and should be a little more sensitive to her needs. Right now, she appears overwhelmed by the attention. Let me find out what’s going on before we rush her into something she may not be comfortable with.’

There were collective mutterings among the three men near the tank, but it was Dimitri who again spoke.

‘We understand, but should not there be one of us here?’

She fixed her eyes on his and spoke in a smooth, quiet voice.

‘Give me time to figure out what’s going on, all right? Then I’ll make a decision. Until then, you’re all free to watch from the communications room.’

Dimitri blinked before giving a slow nod. He turned to the others, and together they hustled towards the door without another word. Ramsay, at the console, shrugged, collected his robe from the chair and loped after them. When Adria was the only human left in the lab, she resumed communications and slid the tablet onto a console.

Srrlllp immediately looked less agitated. She let the strapping turn her to the front, her eyes not leaving Adria’s.

‘I’m sorry, Srrlllp,’ Adria said, still struggling with the precise sound. ‘You must forgive my staff for their excitement.’

‘I understanding,’ the voice said over the translator, and to Adria, it sounded stronger. ‘Female of species permitted not attention male other than mate. I wish not harm with offence. When mate awaken, they learn of him.’

‘They will be fine,’ she said, trying to sound calm.

She didn’t agree with the sentiment of someone, no matter the species, being unable to do something because she was female. But what could she do about it?

‘It would be good to learn more about your customs, so we may understand your species better,’ she continued.

‘Adria of the Earth, many intelligent species Lhrrrkhhk met, yet only you have speak with I. It excite me as do you, although feel strange a little.’

Her skin skirts moving rapidly, Srrlllp again dragged herself around to face her unmoving mate. As before, Adria saw the red and yellow colouring beneath. The spots seemed somewhat brighter today, more golden red, and larger in size.

‘Sometimes jealous I of males,’ she continued, her fingers reaching up to caress the glass as if it was his skin. ‘It my place not, but much more would have self do in life.’

Adria clenched her teeth before replying, ‘Men hold a higher place among your species?’

‘Not place higher.’

Srrlllp turned to face Adria, but before she could speak again, her mantle began to shudder. She coughed, a bubble of ichor belching from her mouth.

‘Male...male live longer by much...much...much time and do all can.’

Srrlllp’s eyes rolled in different directions, her eyelids blinking rapidly. All strength seemed to drain from her as she sank into the strapping, her body convulsing, ichor continuing to drift from her mouth.

Adria brought her hands up, her eyes darting around the alien woman. She knew too

little of their physiology to be of any real medical help but refused to watch the first alien she'd met die. On one of the consoles was a tablet. She dashed over and with a double-tap saw the sensors showing notable changes in activity. But she wasn't sure exactly what to think, something wasn't right.

'Srrlllp, what's going on?'

Srrlllp shuddered, convulsions wracking her body several times before it all ceased. The alien female hung in the strapping for some time unmoving until a slight twitch rippled through her skirts.

'Srrlllp?' Adria said finally, realising she'd been holding her breath.

The alien female's eyelids fluttered a little as she opened them. 'My...my status poor, Ad—' She gave another small shudder. 'Ad...ria of the Earth. The Ssllrkssk...old, dead...system reject.'

'We are already working to grow something suitable as a replacement. Do we have time?'

Srrlllp nodded, her eyes drooping. She hung in the strapping, drifting a little to the side and shaking her head as if to remove fog. She forced her eyes open.

'Time, some, yes, but...require to rest. There importance...Vrrrl awaken. He must...live...for young.'

Her eyes closed, and the movement of her skirts reduced to near nothing.

'Wait,' Adria said, as she watched unconsciousness flood over the alien female.

'Young? What young?' But, other than her own heartbeat, the room remained silent.

If Srrlllp was with child, why hadn't she said so earlier? She thought for a moment before turning to look up at one of the cameras.

'Ramsay? Meet me in lab two,' she said, 'we need to grow as much of that synthetic variant we've been working on as we can.'

There was a pop from the speakers, and his voice echoed around the room. ‘Roger, Doc. On my way.’

‘What would you have the rest of us do?’ Dimitri’s voice followed.

‘Everything,’ she said. ‘Everything you can.’

Adria sat at her console, looking at her own image in the tablet, it had felt like a long couple of days. With a deep breath, she tapped the record button on the screen before her.

‘After my analysis and several hours of research, I have determined the spores are similar to those found in many of Earth’s water bodies. But, while they appear related to the Ascomycota fungi, at a mitochondrial level, they are as alien to the fungal spores as the aliens themselves are to squid. We have, however, been successful in growing a small quantity. I hope it will be enough.’

She tapped the screen to pause the recording and lay the tablet on the console. She nibbled the inside of her cheek as she stared at a point on the wall between the tanks, Srrrlllp’s last words still rumbling about in her mind. If the alien woman was with child, why was it so important the male survive? Women were better at raising and bonding with children, what could the father do that the mother could not? As she continued her thoughts, weak movements in one of the tanks drew her attention.

‘Srrrlllp?’ she asked, walking towards the tanks. ‘How are you doing?’

While Srrrlllp appeared to be awake, her skirts barely flowed.

‘Ad...ria of...the Earth,’ the alien woman’s words came very slowly. Adria could almost feel the effort used to say each one. ‘Sus...tenance suitable, but...weak, drained.’

The skirts flared a little more, just enough for Adria to glimpse the spots beneath. They were a more defined fiery red atop golden yellow now, in contrast to Srrrlllp’s skin which was washed out and dull.

‘At least you’re awake,’ Adria said, with a brief smile. ‘You still don’t look well.’

‘Young...grow fast...unexpected,’ Srrrlllp said. ‘Vrrrrl yet...awake?’

‘The sensors show little change. I hope he’s as strong as you.’

‘Males of Lhrrrkhhk...more capable than female...can endure,’ she said, her words continuing to drift. ‘He...survive, must.’

Adria forced herself to maintain a balanced appearance while inside she felt a little riled.

‘We humans found an uneasy equality more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Our women can do anything a man can do and more.’

‘No equal...there is in Lhrrrkhhk. I, female, only...live carry young.’ Srrrlllp quivered for a short time, her arms shivering at her sides. ‘I...I not know...spawn carried. Vrrrrl must raise...sustain.’

Adria’s lips curled a little. She looked away from the alien woman. ‘Does that not make you little more than a vessel? Shouldn’t there be more to life?’

Srrrlllp’s head sank a little, the eyes in the surrounding pool of yellow chrome struggling to remain open. ‘Offence...you take at this...how we are, Adria of the...Earth...but is way Lhrrrkhhk species.’

Adria knew she had no right to judge Srrrlllp based on her own internal struggle, but she couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

‘Females treated high regard,’ the words came stronger. ‘Great honour have young grow within.’

‘But you’ll die before they’re born?’

‘Yes.’ Adria could almost detect peace in this creature’s fading eyes. ‘To pass outside...spawning, or to...not spawn, bring...sadness.’

‘And if Vrrrrl doesn’t awaken, what do we do? Will the spores sustain the young?’

Srrrlllp's head lolled to the side, the words coming very slowly now. 'Young not osmose nutrients...until birth...in days many. My form...sustain allow grow, without, not survive.'

'They eat you?' Adria raised a hand to her mouth. She'd studied animals that sacrificed themselves for their young, the octopus coming to mind. But Srrrlllp wasn't an animal, she was a sentient being.

'It way of...of...' Srrrlllp shuddered, her entire body moving in the liquid. '...species. If...if he...not—' She coughed, a thick glob of ichor belching from the thin gap of her mouth. 'You help...them must. In sh...ship, know...ledge.'

Srrrlllp's eyes wilted, the irises quivering. Her entire body shuddered again, this time for an extended period. Adria watched on helpless to do anything. When it subsided, the skin skirts drifted up to show a patch of vibrant colour beneath and a small sac at its centre. She guessed each of the patches had one similar. Srrrlllp's eyes opened again, staring into hers.

'If he not awake...it m...must you...Adria of t...the Earth.' The last words coming out at little more than a whisper.

As her eyes again closed, she slumped into the strapping and hung there without motion, ichor drifting from her mouth.

Adria collected the tablet and watched the sensor data cascade slowly towards the baseline. She realised that even now, the young drained their mother. The ichor that had sustained her, she gave for their survival. Once it was gone, Srrrlllp would be little more than a shell, all else devoured.

Now, it was up to her and her team. If the male did not awaken, they must do whatever they could to ensure the young's survival. Without Srrrlllp, the role of the mother must now fall onto her, and she would not allow the alien female's sacrifice to be for nothing. Equality aside, Adria would play whatever part she must, until the end.