

Womb 67

She awoke after 7.4 hours of sleep. High above the glass Womb that served as her home, sunrays streamed past the planet's dark outline. The season was changing, and the Quadrant she lived on was rotating toward direct sunlight, now only 20 sectors away--roughly 90 days' time. It was location of the groundbreaking John Hopkins School of Energy Physics, the first in space, and her suggested location on the planet was where the first Stabilizer was actually set. That was 19 months ago.

Regina had paid Amazstar handsomely for a package to make the 30-million-mile voyage from Earth in 30 days to Venus, but it was already three earth days late. She opened her eyes and pushed her cat off of her pillow. She either dreamed or heard something hit her starbox in the night. The package contained the ingredients for her third attempt at pregnancy, but this time it looked like she had missed the narrow window. Herman hissed at her, his good morning way of saying that he was hungry.

Getting out of bed, she noticed that she had forgotten to click off the Nocular after last night's conversation with her brother in Boston. He had something important to tell her, she remembered, just before he had to go. She flicked on the switch. Sam's hologram appeared in the room, life-sized and bushy tailed. He had on red sweatpants and a t-shirt that said *I'd Rather Be*.

"Put on some clothes," Regina said.

He was startled and looked over his shoulder.

"You scared me," he said.

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He stood in his kitchen drinking coffee in Boston's Back Bay. He was looking at real estate in Kauai on his HomeScreen. He had Holo'd himself onto the property and was in the middle of a showing with an attractive real estate agent. At closer look, Regina could now see the agent was older than she appeared, mid-forties at least. She had on cotton pants and a bathing suit top, a floppy hat covering her long blond hair. The agent saw Regina in bed with her cat.

"Hi there! Are you on Colony?" the agent asked, noticing Regina's locator.

"Sam, can you private us please?" Regina said.

"Sorry, Sis. Wasn't expecting you to be spying on me this morning."

"Well, I guess we both forgot to turn off our noculars last night, so not entirely my fault." She threw the cat off the bed.

"Yes, my brilliant sister Regina is on Colony, one of the Chief Engineers."

They both looked at Regina through their screens. "And this is Samantha who is helping me find property."

"Nice to meet you, Regina" Samantha said. "I've never spoken with anyone on Colony. May I ask what you do up there?" She thrust her chin upwards.

Regina sighed. "I lay carpeting."

Sam grimaced. "What my humble sister means is that she is one of the Chief Engineers for the flooring that will power the University. She is also a part-time warden since half her staff are inmates. Nice inmates, that is. No murderers. Just thieves and swindlers, right Regina?"

"Sure."

"How does the carpeting work?" Samantha asked.

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“People step on the flooring. The lights come on. Everyone’s happy,” Regina answered.

“Wow,” Samantha said.

No one spoke.

“Samantha, can we continue the tour this afternoon?” Sam asked.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Good luck up there, ma'am.”

Ma'am? I'm 36 years old, lady. You're the ma'am.

"I have another showing in about an hour so just let me know what works for you." Samantha offered. Sam's Halo stood next to her on the terrace of a Kauai home, the ocean in the near distance. The realtor pecked Sam's Halo on the cheek aloha style and grabbed both his hands. Three quick beeps sounded as Sam's HomeScreen went blank and the woman disappeared.

“She’s...friendly," Regina said, drawing out the word.

"It's Hawaii," he said, bringing the coffee cup to his lips. “That’s what they do. We’ve been Holo’ing a lot.”

"I wonder if she would aloha your wife in the same way." Regina gave a thin smile.

"I separate business from pleasure, Sis. That’s why I’ve managed to stay married for 12 years." But he was smiling. He flicked off his Halo and his full kitchen came into view on Regina’s HomeScreen. A canvas that Sam had started was visible, an abstract of flowers.

She could see outside his window in Boston and caught a glimpse of the tops of the trees in the Public Garden. The day looked bright and blue and lovely. She missed weather, any weather.

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“Have you been painting again, Sam?”

“Trying,” he said, touching the painting.

“I think the Johns Hopkins package may have arrived after we spoke last night. Something is in my starbox.”

“Well, good then,” he said. “I’ll hold on if you want to go check.” He made a sweeping motion with his arm as if inviting her to walk by. She ended up walking right through his Holo.

“Ouch,” he said, and she passed into the interval that connected her bedroom to the living space. The chamber was decorated with photos of mode-style musicians from the recent 2080s, many still alive now in 2094. The images gave her relief from the fabric of stars that stretched from every vantage point in her home.

She went into the prep room and looked in the mirror. At nearly six-feet tall, her frame was rigid, her face angular. No one had ever described her as pretty, or cute, but her body spoke of self-confidence and surety. Her nose was small and sharp, and she had the dark hair and complexion of her Italian ancestry. Exotic-looking was the best description she ever received, and she forgot from whom.

She walked into the living space and unlatched the door to her Starbox, taking the package in her hands. It read,

Ms. Regina S. Arnold, Chief Engineer
Womb 67
Geo-quadrant 11
Colony VNX-USA
Sender: Johns Hopkins In Vitro Labs, Washington D.C.

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Her hands shook as she held the package. She remembered the last delivery had been completely botched. It had come on a scheduled Supply-Transport through WorldForce, free to anyone on VNX as long as it did not exceed a certain size. It had ended up being delivered to an inmate who worked on her crew with a similar name, and she had received a package destined for him. How Supply-Transport could mix up Regina Arnold and Reggie Ancolade was just one more example of how screwed up things were with Worldforce.

While she had passed the package immediately to Reggie, he chose to open hers and rummage through the goods, which was fortunately just a dress and a gift from Sam for her 36th birthday, a Just-Add-Water flower kit.

“Sorry for opening your package, Ms. Arnold,” Reggie said, handing her the box just before Crew started for the day. “I was expecting something from...my girlfriend...and I didn’t look at the addressee.” He was smiling as he handed her the open box. He was not handsome. His nose was too big, his chin too square, and he was a full six inches shorter than she was. His dark skin spoke of European ancestry, but he looked younger than his 40-odd years. “Sorry,” he repeated. “Nice dress in there, though,” he said, smiling with thick lips. “Going to the ball or something?”

“None of your business, Reggie. By the way, it’s a crime to open packages that don’t belong to you. Something like that could lead to larceny. That’s way beneath you. Don’t you specialize in stealing money from investors?”

“Two sides to every story. Big misunderstanding. I told you,” Reggie replied.

“How you managed to get assigned to Colony, no one knows,” Regina said.

“Pretty simple arithmetic, Ms. Arnold. My time was cut in half if I came to Colony to work for Your Highness.” He bowed.

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“Wonderful. I get to play foreman for 50 sectors with a bunch of crooks,” she said with a smile. “My name’s Regina, so you can call me that.”

“Tell you what, Ms. Arnold, Regina. Next time I misbehave, I’ll let you have your way with me.”

“Reggie, it’s September back home, and by the time the Light comes to this Quadrant in what, 20 sectors, you’ll be boarding a transport back to Santa Fe where you’ll be a free man. So, let’s make a deal, shall we? I’ll give you the little blue star for good behavior and you promise not to screw up in your last 20 sectors.”

He looked at her and brought his hand to his chin. The lighting from the Field gave everyone’s skin a dull hue, but some of it caught the blueness of his eyes, and she was struck by the color. “Now, Regina, what I think you need is a couple of drinks at the Quarry Bar with yours truly.” He smiled and winked at her, pointing toward the pub in the recreation area of the Quadrant. His VNX USA T-shirt showed his powerful frame.

Regina cocked her head and looked away. “I don’t think so,” she told him.

“OK, Ms. Arnold. I promise I won’t...how did you say...screw up,” he said, winking at her. That was 4 weeks ago.

Now, she closed her starbox in her living space and walked the Amazstar package back to her bedroom. Herman trailed her.

“That it?” Sam asked.

“That’s it,” she replied, entering her password on the cube’s keypad, unlocking its contents. She held the container in both hands.

Sam sat down on a stool in his kitchen and looked up as his wife came into view. She headed for the shelf to get a mug for her coffee.

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“Can you walk the kids to school today?” Wanda asked Sam, filling her cup. “I’m late for the hospital. Planning meeting. Fun fun.” When Sam didn’t answer, she wheeled around. “Please?” she asked, and then noticed Regina.

“Oh, hi Regina. Didn’t know you were on.”

“Yeah, well neither did Sam, so good morning to the both of you.”

“You know, Regina,” Sam said. “You don’t have to do this alone. You are only 36 years old, and there is still time to find someone, and then everything can be on your terms.”

Wanda held her coffee in both hands and nodded her head in agreement. They both turned their heads toward Regina.

“Like whom at this point?” Regina said. “Up here it’s just married-to-the-Worldforce guys and career criminals.” The cat jumped on her lap. “And, of course, Herman.”

Wanda was ready for work, dressed in a tight black suit and a colorful scarf. She had long black hair that disappeared into her outfit. “There’s still time, Regina. You’re very young!”

Regina looked up through the Womb at the awesome display of stars. She began her little game, counting to ten and looking for three shooting stars that granted a wish. Two came up.

“Sam, you got the looks in the family. I got the brains. I took this gig for 14 months, and by the time I return, I’ll be pushing 38 years old and finding someone is just, well, not in the stars. Dating and doing the whole break-up, get-back-together routine has never worked for me, and in a couple of years’ time my ovaries will be dried apricots,” she said. “This box is all a girl needs in a man.”

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Sam continued, “Your life is not an engineering project, Regina. You have no idea who you will meet, or how long it will take. I’m just saying, this is not your only option.”

“Technology is amazing today, Regina,” Wanda offered. “You of all people know that.”

“Yes, I know that. Don’t forget I chose this strain after a ton of research, all kinds of backgrounds, eye color, even demeanor.” She held up the sealed, refrigerated box that held the injection. “Here lies the perfect guy.” She laughed, holding her palm out flat.

“You’re a regular Stephanie Hawking,” Sam said, sipping his coffee. “But there are a lot of men on Earth who would love to be with you. For instance, my friend Beets, I’m telling you he’s a great guy who....”

“See that Herman, my big brother says you have competition,” Regina said, grabbing the cat’s face.

“Well, Beets has always had a thing for you. He thinks you are exotic looking.”

“That’s why I’m on another planet. I’m not going to marry a 45-year-old piano player with crooked teeth,” Regina said, remembering the coffee date they had. She mimicked Beets’ toothy smile.

Sam did not laugh. “Well, he is a pretty well-known musician, decent looking and he makes good money,” Sam defended.

“Thanks for looking out for me, big brother.”

Suddenly Regina’s nephew and niece came flying into the kitchen in a rush. “Hi, Aunt Regina!” they both yelled. “Bye, Aunt Regina!” They disappeared out of view.

“Hi guys, bye guys!” Regina followed. “Have a great day at school!”

Regina surveyed the New England scene with the autumn sun streaming through their window.

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“Thank you, Sam, and thank you Wanda for caring about me. But I know exactly what I’m doing and it’s all going according to my plan.”

“My sister,” Sam said, motioning toward her. “Always the scientist.”

Wanda nodded at Regina and waved goodbye. She grabbed her purse off of the kitchen counter and left. Regina heard the front door slam.

Sam stared after his wife and took another sip of coffee. He looked directly at the screen and was silent until he heard the front door close.

“I found out yesterday that she’s screwing the head of her department,” he said, matter-of-factly. His image began to flutter with an electrical disturbance. “I’m not even sure I care.”

In the distance, Regina heard 19 soft chimes, like church bells in a small village. Colony had now passed into the next Sector.

The Light was getting closer.

Regina had been doing yoga in her living space when the emergency alarms went off. She stopped her breathing exercise and leapt up, knocking over a mug of tea. Herman jumped out of the way.

She dressed and entered the tubelike corridor that connected the other wombs with the work area. A few dozen of her colleagues made their way down the tube, sleepy and unprepared.

Sirens blared and red lights flashed on the walls, indicating a fire somewhere on Colony. At the end of the corridor, the Quadrant’s ceiling started to come fantastically

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into view. Above the structure, a cataclysm of stars encircled the enormous glass building. Yellow mountains and dried ravines dotted the outside landscape. Huge boulders stretched endlessly into the horizon. It reminded her of a play world for some giant baby.

The frames of the classrooms, dormitories, research labs, and entertainment spaces came into view, still under construction. At the top of a staircase in the distance, a group of workers were scrambling. The stairs themselves were emitting what appeared to be a halo of liquid, and a thin stream of smoke was snarling from them.

She began to run toward the commotion and was stopped halfway by the Worldforce Police, Emergency Division with emblems on their sleeves, faces hidden from their hoods and goggles. She noticed that the architectural team had also joined the rescue team, including her friend Alicia, who stood with her colleagues. S.B. Hudson, the chief designer for the Quadrant, joined the group.

“How did it start?” Regina asked anyone.

Hudson answered. “A sunspot hit the trajectory rod,” and he looked up. “Kicked off an electrical charge through the Quadrant.” Alicia and Regina followed his gaze but saw nothing but the glass enclosure and stars. Both women continued to stare skyward, then toward the workers trapped at the top of the stairs.

Firefighters were now rushing toward the ignited stairs holding extinguishers that flashed from red to green as they approached. They created a semicircle around the base of the fire. At the top of the stairs, another stream of smoke began to snake skyward, just yards from the trapped group.

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The group began to scramble and push in both directions. Their screams were muffled by the sudden and deafening air purifiers that clicked on in the enormous structure. Sirens continued to blare, torturing everyone's ears throughout the Field.

Everywhere, exchange students, planners, researchers, inmates ran in random directions as the smoke gained in intensity. All wore jumpsuit uniforms with solid colors according to their function on Colony.

"Regina, we should stay away," Alicia warned and slowed her pace. "This is not our department."

"I'm not sure there is a department for this. I know something about energy, and you know something about buildings, so we're going in."

The fire brigade now began to shoot an antitoxin from their extinguishers and the staircase began to visibly cool with smoke that smelled like sulfur. Some of the liquid was accidentally sprayed on a woman at the top of the staircase, and she screamed and fell to the ground. Her colleagues tried to revive her, but they ended up trampling her instead.

The fire brigade, now with a lift, began to spray the offending smoke that began to engulf the top of the stairs. A fireman began to rush the stairs and two of his colleagues tried to hold him back. He pushed them aside. His sturdy, sure movements seemed familiar.

The Fire Chief yelled out orders. "Let things cool a minute and we'll extract the victims from the lift."

The fireman who had rushed the stairs looked back and forth, as if wrestling with the chief's orders. He was dressed in a protective suit that offered unrestricted movement. He ascended the 20-odd stairs as they hissed beneath his feet. Upon

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reaching the landing, he made his way over the woman who was now convulsing from exposure to the poison liquid. Firefighters were now on the lift spraying the upper fire with the antitoxin liquid.

The firefighter picked her up in his arms as if she were no heavier than an empty crate. He made it down the offending stairs swiftly, and the woman was immediately handed off to medics who whisked her away in a Field Transport normally reserved for building materials.

The fires out, the emergency personnel now began to ascend the stairs to escort the frightened workers--seven men and six women--down the stairs to safety. The alarms ceased and Alicia joined her on a rest bench that had been placed on the Field.

She looked over at the man who was being reprimanded by the Fire Chief with a pointed finger. He concluded by patting the firefighter on the back.

Regina and Alicia approached the man. "Someone's a hero," Regina said.

"You do what you have to do," he replied. "Kind of like working for Ms. Arnold," he added, addressing Alicia. His face was flushed, and she noticed that his large nose added an intensity to his face, like a boxer. It gave him a distinctive, masculine look.

"I didn't know you were a fireman," Regina said, noticing his T-shirt wet with sweat.

"I didn't know you cared."

He was down on one knee. His brow was perspiring from activity. She instinctively wiped away a drop of perspiration just above his eye with her thumb, then quickly drew back her hand.

"Sorry," she said, pulling away.

He grabbed her hand and released it a moment too long.

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“Ms. Arnold, would you mind allowing me to...present you with an idea of mine sometime?”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Just an idea. A better way to lay the carpet that I think could also help grow food,” he said. “I’m an engineer myself, you know. I have my own lab in Santa Fe.” He stood up and came within inches from her face. “Okay?”

She could feel his breath on her cheek.

Thick strands of her hair fell over her eye. They faced one another squarely.

“You're cute,” he said.

“And you're a criminal.”

“I thought I was a hero a few minutes ago?”

Regina looked into his eyes and then turned away. “Okay, you can stop by and we can...have coffee, maybe tomorrow. I live in Womb 67.”

“I know,” he said. “I get your mail sometimes,” and backed away smiling.

Throughout the Field, inspectors buzzed about in grey uniforms. Students dressed in light blue followed supervisors checking screens. Inmates, dressed in yellow, mingled in a collage of functionality with the various chiefs of the departments, dressed in red.

The Quadrant went back to work.

Months passed and the Light was edging upon the Quadrant. The carpet was close to being finished and the first semester of students was due to begin classes in less

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than 100 sectors, under six months. The brightness was beginning to stream everywhere, ceaseless. The stars were now harder to see, and they dotted the sky with uneven intensities.

Reggie had become became a frequent visitor. They cooked dinner in Womb 67 and discussed physics, mode style music of the 80s' and how distance affected friendships. It wasn't serious, and it wasn't not serious. She enjoyed his company, and the relationship had an exciting secrecy to it since employees were not supposed to date the inmates. But those rules were in a handbook somewhere back at earth, and the social interaction of everyone on VNX was a book in itself. Even Hermann liked Reggie.

Regina lay in bed one morning as Herman walked over her growing belly. A chime sound indicating a request for the Nocular to be turned on. She checked her HomeScreen and saw that Sam was trying to Holo. She pulled the covers over her body and clicked on her Homescreen. Sam's Holo appeared. He was at a beach bar.

"Where the hell are you?" Regina asked.

"In Kauai. Say hi to Samantha." She lifted a drink and toasted Regina.

"Hi," Regina said, waving.

Samantha turned toward Sam. "I'll be right back," she said and walked toward the end of the bar. Regina waited until she was out of earshot.

"And where is Wanda, and the kids?"

"It's all good, Sis. Maybe for the best. I'm painting again, finally. Strange how things turn out. How's the pregnancy going?"

"I met with the doctor a few days ago, and everything's on track."

"When are you coming back home?"

"I need to be here for another 12 sectors and then I'll take the Transport home."

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“And then?”

“Then, we’ll see. I might come back here for another assignment, or I might take some time and travel, hit the Southwest, maybe Sante Fe. Always wanted to go there.”

“Regina, I’ve been meaning to ask. Which strain did you end up selecting? The one you told us about?”

Regina laughed and sat up in bed. She could see Samantha playing with Sam’s hair, drinking a beer.

“Actually, no. I ended up opting for one of Johns Hopkins’ random mixed strains, Caucasian, North American, but the highest potency. I got pregnant immediately.”

“Random huh? How very unlike my big Sis? Strange how things turn out.” They both gazed at one another from their different planets.

“So, what’s next for you, after you have the baby?”

“The great S.B. Hudson asked me to come back to Colony for another 100 sectors.”

“And you are thinking about it?”

“I can see myself coming back here if I can work out the childcare thing with WorldForce. Day care is part of the plan.” She rolled over on her side. “But I might go visit a friend in Sante Fe first.”

"Regina is going with the flow? What gives Sis?"

Herman jumped onto her lap, and she petted him as the sound of footsteps were heard in the interval between the living room and the bedroom.

"Gotta go," she told Sam, clicking off the Nocular.

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“Look who’s up?” Reggie said, entering the bedroom, sipping coffee from his favorite mug. “Did you get your 7.6 hours of sleep, Ms. Scientist? I counted eight, not including keeping each other up all night.”

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked, pulling him into the bed. "Not that its much of my business, but how’s your girlfriend back home? Looking forward to seeing her next week?" She forced a smile.

He pointed in the vague direction of Earth. “We’re on different planets." He paused, took a sip of coffee. “In more ways than one.”

Regina tilted her head, and he caressed her chin.

"I think that if you came to Sante Fe, we could come up with a few recommendations on how to make Colony more efficient. I think you will love my lab. It’s open-air to the desert.” He kissed her on the forehead, his lips now tender and inviting.

Outside, she noticed that the darkness was now almost completely gone from the planet.

The End