

APPETITE

'I just don't understand why you think about sex so much!' exclaimed Robbie.

'I wouldn't expect you to, you soulless brute - but I'd like to know why you're so interested,' replied Charlie.

'Yes, well I suppose, somewhere I feel maybe I'm missing something.'

'Too right! Anyway, why are we sat in half a space ship literally in the middle of nowhere talking about sex?'

Robbie reflected. They were both getting a bit light-headed.

For several months, they had been working off Callisto, the outermost moon of Jupiter. Punching holes through Callisto's ice with the 2-gigawatt laser, they had been trying to find out what lay beneath the glittering surface of the planet-sized moon. They had steadily been amassing data when, three weeks ago, the incident had happened.

'Hey, Robbie, look at this!' Looking out of the nose window there was the inspiring but now familiar sight of Callisto's diamond-white pock-marked surface almost fully illuminated by the distant sun.

'Yes?' said Robbie. 'It's Callisto, so what?'

'No, there, at the edge of the moon. Don't you see?'

Robbie looked and now immediately saw a bright turquoise-blue tinge to the edge of the moon. As he looked, the field of blue spread rapidly over the dazzling surface and became a great iridescent plume covering more than a third of the moon. The plume glittered in the sunlight and now he could see it was made up of brilliantly coloured droplets - but how? It wasn't on the moon at all - it was coming from their own ship!

'Christ!' shouted Charlie. 'That's liquid oxygen. Must be a leak in the tanks! Robbie, get back there and see what's happening!'

Robbie moved towards the bulkhead between the front and the rear of the ship. It was hot. He imagined the overwhelming heat of oxygen-fuelled fires burning behind it. 'It's on fire back there!' he shouted. 'If I open that door, it's the last thing I'll ever do.'

'OK, belay that. Let me have a look.' Charlie came over and gingerly felt the door - hot, but could be hotter. 'Provided the seals hold, we'll be OK.'

The seals did hold, but life rapidly became much harder...

'So, the rescue team should get here in about another week, you reckon?' asked Charlie.

‘They should have picked up the signals from the beacon as soon as the fuel tank blew - it’s about 4 weeks from Ganymede right now - so, yes, about another week.’

At least the beacon was still working - their radio antenna had been a victim of the fuel leak. As had their supplies. There was plenty of water from the recycler but not much else. The last five days had been hellish. Both of them were quite literally starving. Charlie was skinnier than a fashion waif and could hardly move. Robbie’s energy levels were so low he could see himself seizing up before too long. There seemed nothing they could do. Robbie caught himself sizing up Charlie’s body again. Imagined the body carved into joints - arms, legs, torso, head. Yes there was still a lot of nourishment there. But that would be a last desperate measure. He had made his plans and fashioned a heavy knife out of Charlie’s sight. But he wasn’t quite there yet. Just another week - surely there must be some other way.

Suddenly they were thrown into silence. Rapidly their ears adapted and noted the comforting background hum of the cabin’s environment system. But what had suddenly gone missing was a sound they had become inured to over the last three weeks - the low repetitive beeping that meant the beacon was signalling their distress and showing the way for the rescue party. If the beacon had stopped, they were a pin-prick in the sky.

Charlie groaned. ‘You got the energy to get out there and see what’s happening? The beacon’s outside - it’s a self-contained unit with its own power supply. It’s not far away from the hatch in here. I can show you on the schematic.’

Robbie took the schematic over to where Charlie was lying. She was so skinny it was difficult to believe she’d been one of the most flirtatious and sought-after women on the base. Robbie doubted he had the energy left to climb outside the space ship and endure the terrifying cold of space, but was there a choice? No beacon, no rescue.

Once outside, Robbie immediately felt the cold leaching the energy out of his body. He found the beacon quickly and undid the access hatch. He flicked the self-diagnose switch next to the long-life battery and the little plasma screen lit up. After a few moments, it came back with the message. ‘Unit operating correctly. Possible alarm failure.’

‘Fucking machines!’ he screamed to himself, feeling the last remnants of energy draining from his body. ‘Give me strength!’ The robot thrust his hydraulic arm into the beacon, pulled out the battery and jammed it into the socket in his side.

Warmth returned as power seeped through his system.

Robert Miller, 07 May 2007 (857 words)

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