

Everyone has this really bright picture of the surrogacy centers. They think they're jam-packed with women who are just so happy to put their bodies on the line for the good of the world. But there's more to it than people realize.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't going to be some horror story about the seedy underbelly of the surrogacy business. The people in charge of the centers genuinely want to help, and more importantly, they respect the people that work for them and treat them well. This whole business wouldn't work if it didn't.

But the surrogates are still *people*. True, a lot of them are there out of pure altruism. Others are there because they provide room and board and a whopper of a severance package. Put in a few years as a surrogate and you can be set for the rest of your life.

I fall into the second category. I had recently dropped out of college and didn't have much in the way of prospects. What I did have was a fully-functioning reproductive system. Signing on to be a surrogate seemed like an obvious choice.

The gene therapy procedures they put you through once you qualify are, not to put too fine a point on it, miraculous. Childbirth is one of the most arduous things a body can go through, and they've managed to streamline the process. There's little pain, not much more effort than you'd spend on a particularly arduous bowel movement, and once your body got used to it, the average time between labor and delivery is about three hours.

But no system is perfect. Evolution can be a shoddy process at times, and no amount of medical science can make any biological system completely foolproof. Which was why I had to spend the last month of my first pregnancy bedridden and have an emergency c-section afterwards.

I was fine, the baby was fine, and they told me that they would fully understand if I wanted to terminate my contract after I recuperated. No strings attached, they'd compensate me for the time I put in and give me a little bonus for my trouble.

I'm not sure why I said no. Maybe I'm just stubborn. In any case, I'm still here at Juno's Cradle. They insisted I wait a little bit longer before they stick a fresh bun in my oven. Surries usually go anywhere from two weeks to a month between pregnancies, but they insisted I wait at least three.

I'm not the first one to have a difficult pregnancy around here and I sure as hell won't be the last. But as it happens, my circumstances happened to coincide with one of the most interesting things to happen at Juno's Cradle since its inception, and for some reason or another, I ended up all wrapped up in it.

My name is Tori. I'm a skunk anthro, I'm 25 years old, I like classical music, football, and schlocky horror movies, and my best friend in the world is made of high-grade silicone.

This is my story.

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It began with a big announcement. There was a big conference room on the first floor of the center, usually used when one of the administrators wanted a word with the press, and at the moment, it was packed, not just with surrogates but staff too, along with a few faces I didn't recognize as either. I was one of the last ones in. A waving hand got my attention, and I saw a familiar otter beckoning me over. That was Stella for you. Bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and big-bellied as always. She made a point of befriending everyone there, and as much as I tried to resist, I got drawn in too. She was just so friggin' nice and enthusiastic that you couldn't help but like her. And she saved me a seat.

"Nice to see you up and about," she said brightly. "How are you feeling today?"

"Better, thank you," I said, as I took my seat. "Everything checked out at my last exam, but they want to give it one more week before my next implantation."

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Stella, giving my hand a squeeze. “You’re gonna bounce right back, I just know it!”

“Thank you,” I said. I wished I could share her optimism, but I appreciated her words. It always made the surries a bit uneasy when somebody had complications. It was an unpleasant reminder of the seriousness of our work. But Stella was having absolutely none of that.

The chatter from the crowds died down as a middle-aged goat anthro took the stage, front and center. She cleared her throat.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” she said. “Most of you know me, For those who don’t, I’m Dr. Moore, and I’m in charge around here.”

Of course, everyone here knew Dr. Moore. Even though she was the head of Juno’s Cradle and her duties were innumerable, she always took the time to have a one-on-one interview with every prospective new surrogate. So the fact that there were people in the crowd who didn’t had people wondering what, exactly, was going on here.

“Let me preface this by saying that we may be here for awhile, and I have some fairly important matters to speak of,” said Dr. Moore. “If any of you think you might be in labor, I’m going to politely ask you to excuse yourself.”

There was a pause. Two of the surrogates in the audience stood up and waddled their way out of the room. One of them rather conspicuously had a hand between her legs. There was a smattering of polite laughter.

“Now, with that settled,” said Dr. Moore. “I’d like to talk to you about what we do here. Our society as a whole is still reeling from the after-affects of the Empty Nest pathogen. But through the efforts of everyone here, and in other surrogacy centers across the country, we are recovering. We asked a great deal of those still capable

of bearing children, and we can never express enough gratitude to them for rising to the occasion. Thanks to them, hundreds of families nationwide got to have the children they'd never dared to dream of."

There was a brief round of applause. Some of the surrogates in the audience hugged each-other. I couldn't help but smile, myself. Sometimes it did feel good.

"But our work is never done," Dr. Moore continued. "The world still continues to move on as best it can. The surrogate programs are a solution, yes, but are they the only solution? People are continuing to explore other avenues for helping those in need."

"Now, before I say anything else, let me say that none of you are in danger of being out of a job anytime soon. Even today, so many generations later, the estimate is that over 80% of the population in this country alone still suffers from genetic infertility. We'll always have need of you. But we can only ask so much of you, and so people have started to ask themselves, what else is there?"

"Well, some people much smarter than me have been asking themselves that same question, and they've come up with an answer. Which is why there's somebody special I'd like to introduce you to today."

She stepped aside, and two people stepped out in front of the crowd. One of them was a short, tan-furred mouse anthro in thick spectacles and a lab coat, but she was very quickly overshadowed by the person walking beside her. Everyone fell dead silent. A few people gasped.

The figure was person-shaped. Two arms, two legs, a head. But most people were covered with fur, scales, feathers, something along those lines. Her skin was a faintly metallic green, with her chest and belly a steely grey. Her head had a draconian shape with pointed ear-like protrusions, but much of it was taken up by a shiny black screen, upon where LEDs in the shape of two wide blue eyes glittered.

“Good afternoon, everybody,” it said, in a feminine voice with a slightly electronic lilt, like it had been auto-tuned. “My name is Ersatz. I am very happy to meet you all.”

Nobody responded to that right away. They were still trying to figure out what to make of her.

Everybody there was *familiar* with synths, of course, but few had ever met one face to face. They were around, mostly doing industrial jobs and hard labor in conditions too dangerous for people made of flesh. They had been one of many inventions created to try and ease the population crisis.

Artificial intelligence research had advanced in leaps and bounds over the past few decades, but the intelligence that gave way to the synths had come about almost by accident. They were machines, but they were also people, fully sapient people with all of the rights that applied to that. They didn't think or act quite in the same way that people did, but they had personalities, they had senses of humor, they got happy and sad and had all the things that made a person... personable.

But they were still *machines*, and what's more, they didn't look quite like any other anthro. Their design cues were taken from something somewhat more mythical.

I, myself, had met a synth before. Their name was Mock, and they had been a classmate of mine. They had been very nice and polite with me and we still exchanged emails sometimes. Ersatz only resembled Mock in the most superficial of ways. Most of them looked fairly androgynous - which made sense, since they did not, strictly speaking, have sexes - but many of them identified as either men or women. Ersatz, in contrast, looked very, *very* feminine, with wide hips, long legs, and even tits. I had never seen a synth with tits before.

And she looked nervous. Very nervous.

The mouse woman stepped up to the mic and cleared her throat.

“Hello, everybody,” she said. “My name is Hannah. I’m sure you all are wondering what Ersatz is doing here. Well, I’ll tell you. She’s here to be a surrogate.”

The chatter almost immediately began to pick up again.

“A surrogate? Really?” gasped Stella, her tone tinged with wonderment. “Can synths even get pregnant?”

“I didn’t think so,” I said.

Hannah cleared her throat, and the room fell silent once again.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and I’m going to be to answer some of them,” she said. “Ersatz and I have been working together for the past year or so. I work at a lab that specializes in fertility technology. I’m sure you’ve all heard of uterine replicators, yes?”

There were a series of nods. Most everyone had. Growing babies in tanks? It had been the stuff of science fiction for ages. If we could do that, it would solve the population crisis in one fell swoop. But despite how simple it sounded, nobody had ever been able to make a functional one.

“The company I work for has been trying to develop them for over a decade now,” said Hannah. “But there’s always been something missing. I’ll spare you a whole lot of technobabble, but I had a theory. Lots of things can go wrong in a pregnancy, and uterine replicators are not free from that. Simply put, we don’t have the up-to-date feedback on how the pregnancy is progressing. So I thought to myself, what if the machine could give us feedback? And that was when I thought about synths. And that was when Ersatz here volunteered.”

Now it was time for Ersatz to speak up. She stepped to Hannahs side and nodded.

“I worked in Hannah’s lab as a hazardous waste disposal technician,” she said. “When I heard about her research, I volunteered to be the first test subject. And so, I was retrofitted with the experimental technology. In a way, I became a prototype for a new kind of synth. And so here I am.”

“That does kind of beg a question,” someone piped up. I recognized the voice. It was Laurel, another of my friends at the center. “Wishing no disrespect - you seem really nice, Ersatz! - what’s she doing here and not in a lab?”

“That is a good question,” said Hannah, smiling brightly. “As Dr. Moore said, Ersatz is not here to replace any of you. Rather, she’s here to supplement you. After all, it’s not guaranteed that your children will be born fertile. On the other hand, if this goes well, more synths can opt to become surrogates in the future.”

“In any case,” said Dr. Moore, cutting in, “Ersatz going to be carrying her first baby soon, and while they could keep her in a lab and monitor her the whole time, she wants to get some real-world experience.”

“That’s right,” said Ersatz. “Dr. Moore has given me permission to stay here for the duration of my pregnancy so that I may learn more about you. About what it’s like to be a surrogate. I look forward to getting to know all of you.”

There was some scattered applause, but mostly there was murmuring. People still weren’t sure what to make of her. Including myself.

“Oh wow,” said Stella, in a hushed tone. “She’s so cool. I can’t wait to meet her properly!”

For my part, I was too focused on myself and my own worries to think too much of Ersatz. Later that week, I was impregnated once again, and that’s what was going to occupy most of my mind.

At least, that’s what I thought. Things don’t always go the way you think they will.

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Things started getting interesting about three weeks after the initial press conference. I was seated at a table one morning, enjoying my breakfast and trying to ignore the nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had just recently confirmed that my newest pregnancy had taken hold, and that's what I was thinking about. My last one going so poorly had been a fluke, everyone said. It would be better this time, they said. But I was having a hard time internalizing that. Which is why I had basically zoned out while Stella is animatedly speaking to me.

"...so I heard she's going to be moving into a dorm today," I heard her say, and that snapped me back to reality.

"Who is?" I said, absent-mindedly taking a bit of my bagel sandwich.

"Ersatz!" said Stella. "I've never met a synth before! What do you think they're like? Do they have, like, super robot brains that can think about a billion things at once? Can she going to like, read books super fast and do super complicated math formulas and stuff?"

"Synths can't really think any faster than an organic brain," I said, rolling my eyes. "Their brains are basically CPUs, but the majority of their processing power is devoted to keeping them sapient. They don't think all that different from us."

"That is, broadly speaking, accurate."

Both of us jumped. We looked up and there was Ersatz, standing over us. She gave us a polite wave.

"Good morning," she said. "Would you mind if I sit with you?"

"Um, sure," I said, scooting my chair over a little to make room.

“Sure, sure!” said Stella. “I’m Stella, and this is Tori. Can I get you anything? Oh, wait, you probably don’t eat, right?”

“I do not eat, no,” said Ersatz, as she took a seat. “I simply wished to partake in your company.”

She still seemed nervous. I could see why. Breakfast time was usually pretty animated around here, but there was much less noise than usual, and I could tell why. A lot of folks were giving Ersatz a wide berth. I felt a tinge of sympathy for her.

“You’re more than welcome to join us,” I said.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Ersatz!” said Stella, offering her a hand to shake, which the synth took with only a moment’s hesitation. “Can I call you, um... Eri? Satzy?”

She let out a cute little laugh. “I would prefer Ersatz, if it is all the same to you,” she said.

“That’s alright,” said Stella, blushing slightly. “Sorry, I just have so many questions, and you’re probably hear them all the time.”

“Ask me whatever you would like,” said Ersatz. “We are here to learn from each-other, are we not? And Hannah always says that there is no such thing as a stupid question.”

“I may be able to get you to rethink that,” said Stella, grinning. “So like, are you made of metal?”

“My internal structure is metal, but my outer dermis is mostly a special high-grade silicone,” said Ersatz, holding out an arm. “Go ahead and feel, I don’t mind.”

Stella reached out and wrapped her hand around the proffered arm. “Ooh,” she said. “It feels cool! Kind of like skin, but a lot more rubbery? Tori, you need to try this!”

I was a bit curious, I had to admit. I had never thought to ask Mock if I could touch them. Somewhat hesitantly, I reached out and grabbed Ersatz’s upper arm. “Oh wow,” I said. “You’re so warm.”

“That surprises a lot of people,” said Ersatz. “Because I am a machine, people expect me to be cold. Both figuratively and literally.”

“So can you, like, feel?” said Stella, poking her. As she did, Ersatz began to giggle. Holy crap, was she ticklish?

“I possess a full range of senses,” she said, gently pushing Stella’s hand away. “I can feel what I touch, I can detect temperature, and I am even capable of feeling pain.”

“Why would you be programmed to feel pain?” said Stella. “Pain sucks!”

“Pain is important,” said Ersatz, nodding. “Pain is the way that your body tells you that something is wrong. It is not quite the same as pain the way you know it, but when something is amiss, my body is given a signal that is quite difficult to ignore. It is somewhat like when you are playing a video game and it sets off an alarm to let you know that your health is low.”

“You play video games?” I said, cocking my head. Ersatz looked at me and smiled.

“I do lots of things,” she said. “Of course, one of the advantages of my brain basically being a computer is that I can do a lot of things internally. If I wish to read, for instance, I will typically just download it to my internal hard drive and peruse it internally.” She gestured to the back of her head, where there was, indeed, what looked like a USB port.

“So you could totally be playing a video game in your head when you’re supposed to be working?” said Stella. “Man, I wish I could do that.”

“I would *never* do something like that,” said Ersatz, but as she did so, one of those LED eyes flickered off and on. Did she just wink at us?

I looked her over, smiling as she continued to answer Stella’s endless questions. Even knowing that synths were something that existed in the world, it was always strange to deal with them. Sitting right next to me, while I ate a bagel sandwich, was a fully artificial lifeform. She was born in a factory and stamped with a serial number, but she was just as alive as I was. She had her own wants and needs and desires, and who knew what else?

Well, I *wanted* to know what else.

“...and when you were born - manufactured? - you always knew that you were a girl?”

“I suppose so,” she said, thoughtfully. “Being newly-activated is not like being a newborn organic. We have awareness and intelligence but no experience, no personality. We grow and are shaped as we learn. But even though there is no part of me that is programmed that way, I suppose I have always known that I am what I am. It felt right. There is still so much we do not know about artificial sapience, for all that you are sitting here and speaking to an artificial sapience.”

“This is way too heavy a conversation to be having over breakfast,” said Stella, shaking her head. “Issues this heavy need to wait for brunch, at least.”

Seeing my opening, I cut in. “So did they do it?” I asked. “Are you pregnant now?”

“I am,” said Ersatz, putting a hand onto her belly. “Just a few weeks along now, but there it is. I am carrying a fox embryo right now.”

“And here I was kind of hoping you were going to have a little baby synth,” said Stella. She and Ersatz both laughed.

“That would be an incredibly inefficient way of producing new synths,” said Ersatz, “though I suppose it would save on manufacturing costs.”

“How does it feel?” I asked, before Stella got her too side-tracked. “How do *you* feel?”

Ersatz hesitated on that for a moment. Her head tilted, and I could just about imagine that I was hearing a mechanical hum as she started to think.

“It is strange,” she said, running her hand in little circles on her grey belly. “I am aware of the extra weight and pressure in my womb. There was nothing in that space before, and now there is. I have a diagnostic app installed that keeps me apprised of the baby’s status, though I suppose it is not yet anything that could be called a baby. It is a cluster of tissue that lacks any sort of awareness or sensation. These are things that are objectively true. But as for how I feel...”

She trailed off again, and it seemed like she was having some difficulty coming up with the answer. I could definitely relate to that.

“You don’t have to answer that,” I said, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “I have trouble working out how I feel about things too.”

“Yeah, feelings are complicated, don’t worry about it,” said Stella. “So hey, the womb is new, but are those new too?” She gestured at Ersatz’s tits, and I felt myself blush. But Ersatz seemed to have no such shame.

“Those are a bit more recent,” she said, putting her hands under them and lifting them up. “But I was not built with them, if that is what you are asking. I had them installed later, just because it feels right to have them.”

“Atta girl!” said Stella, pumping her fist. “Live your best life!”

I couldn't help but laugh. Honestly, it was a good time for a change of subject.

“You want to watch a movie or something?” said Stella. “I mean, I guess you can watch all the movies you want in your head, but...”

“But then I could not watch it with you,” said Ersatz, beaming. “And I would love to do that.”

And so we did. Stella let Ersatz pick the movie, and we ended up watching an old slapstick comedy. Ersatz really liked the part where they stepped on a rake. I guess, organic or artificial, we really weren't so different.

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After that, Ersatz was simply a fact of life around the center. She typically didn't participate in things like group yoga (she didn't need to) or swimming (she was waterproof but also too dense to float), but she could be seen around, just generally socializing with people. A lot of them were still somewhat uneasy around her, but they were starting to warm up to her, especially since she was more than happy to listen to them talk about themselves. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how humble you are, everybody likes being encouraged to talk about themselves. When she wasn't socializing, she usually kept to her room. At first, I was a bit appalled to learn that it was about the size of a walk-in closet, but, as she explained, she didn't need to go to the bathroom, she didn't feel the urge to pace around or stretch, and she didn't need to lie down in order to rest.

That last one could be a little bit disconcerting. Rather than sleeping, she would go into “standby mode” at night, locking her leg joints and standing as stiffly as a mannequin. It gave me a fright the first time I came to check on her.

But that's what it was like, getting to know her. She was certainly friendly and eager to please, and it was all too easy to forget that she was a machine while you were talking to her, right up until you got a stark reminder that she was. She didn't need to eat, but she did need to charge periodically, and it wasn't uncommon to see her seated calmly by an outlet, a wire running from her neck to the wall. You'd mention some obscure bit of trivia you were wondering about ("Who was that actor in that one movie with the guitar that was also a sword?") and she'd politely excuse herself for a moment as her eyes unfocused for a few seconds, and she'd have the answer in less time than it took to pull out your phone.

"You don't have to do things like that for everyone, you know," I said, sitting with her at lunchtime. I wasn't the most sociable person there, so I usually preferred to have my meals with small groups, if not alone. Ersatz was easy to talk to, though, and she often accompanied me for meal times. We had taken to talking a lot over the past couple of months. When she started to show, I was the first one she came to, excitedly asking me to feel her silicone-covered bump.

"I like to be helpful," said Ersatz, shrugging a bit. That was another thing. She had body language, just like anyone else did, and part of me couldn't help but wonder if it was an affect on her part to seem more relatable to organics, or if it was something that was programmed into synths, or even if it was just another thing that arose on its own.

"You don't need to be helpful in order to make people like you," I said. "If someone only likes you when you're helpful, then they're not really your friend."

"I suppose that is true," said Ersatz. "I am sorry. This is hard for me. I did not get out much before. All of my friends were scientists and engineers, and I do not know if you know what they can be like, but they are perhaps not the best role models when it comes to social mores."

I laughed. So did she. At least she understood it. I could relate to her. I was really awkward growing up, too. Getting to know people was hard enough. Throwing in

the fact that most of the people you were trying to get to know had never met anyone like you before could only complicate matters. And I wanted to be helpful too.

“Would you like to go for a walk in the gardens with me?” I said quickly. This caught Ersatz off-guard somewhat, judging by her expression. They weren’t quite the same as organic expressions, but you got used to reading them.

“Get some fresh air and sunlight, you know?” I went on. “I mean, I guess you don’t breathe, but...”

“I do like sunlight,” she said, nodding. “My hide is photoreceptive and can store solar energy. It’s not as efficient as charging directly, but it feels a lot nicer.”

“Let’s go, then,” I said, taking her hand. We were both at about the same point in our pregnancies, and our bellies were modest, but prominent. I was beginning to feel somewhat fatigued from the extra weight, but that wasn’t a problem that she would have. Of course, I had no doubt that her progress came along with a host of other strange sensations to get used to. All the same, she was quite happy to help me to my feet and keep me steady until I found my equilibrium.

The center’s gardens were one of my favorite places. Some of the surrogates started little plots of their own, as something to do, but for the most part, there were gardeners on staff who took to maintaining the flowers and trees, and they did good work. It was a beautiful day for it, too. There was a big cherry tree that dominated the view, and it was just starting to blossom. We weren’t the only ones who were taking advantage of the weather. A couple of surrogates were tending to little vegetable plots. Others were splayed out in deck chairs, sunbathing. Most of them were nude. You got used to that sort of thing quickly around here. When you see people go into labor on the regular, the sight of bare breasts isn’t even worth a second glance.

As we walked through the grass, Ersatz spread her arms out and let out a happy little trill.

“What does it feel like to you?” asked. “Getting energy from the sun?”

“Warm,” said Ersatz, as she did a little twirl. “It feels like the warmth sinks right into me and I can feel it all through my body.”

“I guess it’s not so different for us organics, then,” I said, giving her a smile.

“I suppose not,” said Ersatz. “Charging up directly feels like... a pleasant little tingle. Are you familiar with the autonomous sensory meridian response?”

“That tingly feeling people get when they see people getting their fur brushed or watch Bobcat Ross videos, things like that?”

“I am incapable of feeling such a sensation,” said Ersatz, nodding. “But the way I hear it described, I imagine it is something like that. It is not unpleasant, but sunlight feels much nicer.” She put a hand on her belly, and added, “I would like to imagine that it feels nice for the baby too.”

“I’m sure that it does,” I said, and I couldn’t keep a smile off of my face. Ersatz always held herself in a slightly anxious way when she was going about her business. I think this might have been the first time I really saw her relax. And if she could relax, then surely I could too? It really was a perfect day outside. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the trees were sneezing...

Wait, what?

Both of us looked up to see a nude ocelot woman leaning up against one of the trees, dabbing at her nose with a hanky. She sneezed again as we approached.

“Bina, what are you doing out here?” I asked, folding my arms. “You know what pollen does to you!”

“I know, I know,” said Bina, waving a dismissive hand. “But I always get so stir-crazy when my due date starts creeping up on me!” She gave her swollen tum a light slap for emphasis. “Besides, the pollen isn’t really all that bad to... today... ACHOO!”

Me and Ersatz both flinched as she sneezed heavily.

“...You do you, then,” I said, shrugging. I wasn’t her mom. “Hey, have you met Ersatz yet?”

“Oh, no!” said Bina, brightening up immediately and starting to offer a hand to her, before thinking otherwise. “Heard so much about you, though! So nice to meet you face to face!”

“The pleasure is mine, Bina,” said Ersatz. “Are you unwell? Do you require assistance?”

“What, this?” said Bina, pointing at her nose. “Nah, it’s nothing, just allergies. I guess you don’t get anything like that, huh? Lucky you! Allergies are just the worst.”

“That is true,” said Ersatz, nodding in affirmation. “But then again, I suppose you do not have to worry too much about suspicious email attachments. One time I downloaded a corrupted software patch, and the next thing I knew, I was seeing sounds and hearing colors until someone could sort me out.”

Bina burst out laughing. “Ha, that must have been wild!” she said, wiping at her eyes. “I can’t even imagine what it must be like to... to... ah... ahhh...”

“You might want to take a step back,” I said under my breath, and just in time too, as Bina broke out into a mad sneezing fit, over and over. It would have been hilarious if I hadn’t felt for her. After the eighth consecutive sneeze, she was bent over, catching her breath.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m okay. I think that was the last one.” She straightened up again and added, “So what are you up to today? Want to go get a smoothie or... or... oh no...”

Her nose wrinkled, her mouth opened, and Ersatz and me both stood aside as Bina sucked in a great breath of air before letting out an enormous sneeze, so loud that it caused a flock of birds to take off from the tree, and so intense that she nearly fell over. But that wasn’t all. Just as she let it out, her legs parted and a gush of fluid sprayed out from between them.

Bina blew her nose, then looked back up at us. “What?” she said. “What is it- ooh, beans!” She suddenly groaned, leaning back against the tree for support. “Here it goes!”

Ersatz’s eyes suddenly went wide. “Should we get help?” she said. “She has just gone into labor!”

“Someone’ll flag down a nurse, I’m sure,” I said, and sure enough, someone was already running inside. “But they’re not going to get here in time. Not for Bina.”

“It’s true,” said Bina, grinning as she leaned against the tree. “Mine never wait for very long...”

“Oh,” said Ersatz, who was now nervously rubbing her hands together. Bina wasn’t always the quickest on the uptake, but anyone could see how uncomfortable Ersatz was.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” she said. “Hey, have you ever caught a baby before?”

“M-Me?” said Ersatz, pointing curiously at herself. “N-No, I cannot say that I have...”

“Then this little runt can - nn! - be your first,” said Bina, beckoning her closer. “C’mon, it’s already starting...”

Ersatz looked at me nervously.

“It’s okay,” I said, patting her on the back. “Go ahead.”

Cautiously, Ersatz began to approach Bina, kneeling down between the ocelot’s spread legs.

“Ooh, here it comes!” said Bina, grinning. “It’s happening... gotta PUSH!”

Bina grimaced as she started to bear down, her nethers bulging open almost immediately.

“Ooh, that’s a good boy,” moaned Bina, her eyes unfocused. “Nice big boy, c’mon now, come to mama...”

Ersatz’s mouth was agape as Bina started to push again, holding up her hands as the head began to appear, stretching her open. She looked positively enraptured by the sight before her, and I thought to myself... is this the first time she’s seen a birth in person? True, you got kind of desensitized to them living around here. The more experienced surries tended to let loose wherever they happened to be when their baby came a-knockin’. But it wasn’t like it happened every day, either.

I remembered what it was like the first time it happened to me. I had been in the locker room after a swim, and one of the older surrogates - a sheepdog woman whose name I couldn’t recall - had delivered right there on the bench next to me. She’d asked me to hold her leg while she worked to dislodge a stubborn shoulder,

someone else was rubbing her shoulders, and everyone else in the locker room had just been going about her business.

I don't know if that's what life was like in other surrogacy centers, but here in Juno's Cradle, that was just Tuesday. But at the same time, there was always something oddly miraculous about it. It may have been routine to them, but they were still *bringing new lives into the world*. How could you not be amazed? And Ersatz certainly looked amazed.

Bina let out a long grunt as she pushed again, the head emerging completely and the shoulders not far behind, and with one last little effort, the baby slipped out into Ersatz's gentle grasp.

"Whew," said Bina, wiping her brow. "See? That wasn't so bad, hmm?"

Ersatz was speechless. Bina laughed and gave her a pat on the shoulder.

"You did great," she added. "You're a natural! Doesn't matter if you're made of metal or meat, if you've got the right stuff, you'll fit right in!"

"Thank you," said Ersatz softly, as a nurse came up to collect Bina and the baby. As they were escorted off, I knelt down besides Ersatz, rubbing her shoulder. I don't know if the gesture meant much to her. Her silicone-based musculature probably didn't get tense. But she leaned into it, at least, so I kept going.

"That was incredible," she said, and even though she didn't need to breathe, she sounded quite breathless.

"Yeah," I said, turning to watch Bina go. "It was, wasn't it?"

We just sat there under the tree for awhile, enjoying the weather and idly people-watching. But my thoughts couldn't help but wander.

I really hoped that my next birth would be as easy as that. Because otherwise, I didn't know if I would be able to handle it.

~*~

I was on an examination table in a dim room. The walls, inasmuch as I could tell, were white, sterile, and unadorned. My belly loomed large before me beneath the white surgical gown I was clad in, dwarfing the rest of my body. Everything hurt, and the pain was radiating out from my middle. The only sound I could hear was the steady beep of a heart monitor.

“Where is everyone?” I called out, my eyes darting wildly about the room. “Is anyone there? I need help! Please!” I reached out and mashed the call button, over and over, but nobody was coming. I felt a tight squeeze, like my body was locked in a vise. I wanted to get up and find someone, but my legs would n't respond. The pain was too much. I started to struggle, but to no avail. I couldn't move.

“Something has gone wrong,” said a hollow voice.

“What's wrong?” I asked, feeling myself panic. “What's wrong with the baby? Why won't anyone tell me what's going on?” I tried to get up again, but I was strapped to the bed now flat on my back, my legs propped up in stirrups. I raised my hand, and I could see figures in medical scrubs and surgical masks all around me, their eyes blank and lifeless. The one in the forefront had a scalpel in his hand, and the rest of them carried clipboards.

“Something has gone wrong,” the one in the lead said.

“Something has gone wrong,” the rest of the assembled doctors chorused.

“Please, let me out!” I yelled. “I can't go through this again! Please, help me! I need help! *Please!*”

“Something has gone wrong,” said the lead doctor again, and he began to slowly lower the scalpel towards my belly. I started to scream.

“Tori! Tori, it is okay! You are okay!”

I felt myself jolt back to reality. I was in my bed. I was drenched in sweat. And there were a pair of illuminated eyes looking at me in the darkness. I fumbled around for the light switch, and when it came on, I could see who was now standing over my bed.

“Ersatz?” I said. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

“You are in your bed,” said Ersatz. “I am sorry, I did not mean to intrude, but I happened to be nearby and I heard you crying out.”

“Oh,” I said. “Wait, wasn’t my door locked?”

Ersatz wasn’t capable of blushing, but she looked sheepish all the same. “I may have broken your door slightly,” she said. “I apologize, I panicked.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s okay,” I said. I scooted over in my bed and patted it, indicating for her to sit. “What do you mean, nearby? Don’t you recharge at night?”

“I actually only need an extended charge once a week,” said Ersatz, sounding embarrassed. “But that tends to put people off somewhat. It reminds them that I am not like them. So normally I just stay in my room and read or play games until people start to wake up. But sometimes I get restless, and so I get out and walk around a bit.” She looked down at her belly. We were both just starting our seventh month, and our bumps were quite large now. “It has been happening much more frequently since my pregnancy began, in fact. I feel a lot of things that I have never felt before.”

“Yeah, pregnancy is like that,” I said, leaning back in my bed.

“But I did not come in here to talk about me,” said Ersatz. “What were you yelling about?”

“Oh,” I said, and it was my turn to feel embarrassed. I really hoped that I didn’t wake anybody else up. “I was just having a bad dream.”

“Oh,” said Ersatz. “I do not dream. I understand the concept, but I have often wondered what it is like.”

“Huh,” I said. “Well... this one felt really real. Lots of them do. It’s only after you wake up that you start to realize what was so unrealistic about them, but when you’re having them, they’re like the realest thing you can think of.” I groaned a little as I felt my baby begin to stir, and put my hands on my belly to calm them.

“May I?” asked Ersatz, holding out a hand. I nodded, and she began to gently and rhythmically rub my belly. It always felt much nicer when I had somebody else to do that for me.

“Could I ask what you were dreaming about?” asked Ersatz. “I am sorry if that is too personal, but it seemed to cause you some distress. Perhaps talking about it would help.”

I sighed. “This is my second pregnancy,” she said. “My first one... didn’t go great. There were some complications. They had to perform a C-section to deliver it.” I looked down at my bare belly. My fur had long since grown back to cover the scar, but I could still feel a little shiver as Ersatz’s hand ran over it.

“Oh no,” said Ersatz, her features softening. “I was not aware that those still happened.”

“They’re really rare, especially in surrogates, thanks to the gene therapies,” I said. “But nothing’s perfect. Things still go wrong sometimes. And I know it’s rare and I know the odds of it happening twice as astronomical, but... *fuck*, part of me is still terrified about it happening again.”

Ersatz looked like she was lost in thought. Was she... trembling?

“Hey,” I said, “we can talk about you a little if you’d like. I mean, it’s not like you’ll have to go through anything like that, right? They’ll just... take the baby out of you, won’t they?”

Ersatz shook her head. “That is an option, yes,” she said. “But ideally, I will give birth the same way an organic would. I am fully equipped in that regard.”

“Oh,” I said. I wasn’t sure what to say about that. “So it’s... you can... that is to say, synths can...”

“Synths can have sex, yes,” said Ersatz, and she sounded amused. “I have a fully functional reproductive tract, and when the time comes, I will go into labor and give birth. Just like any other surrogate.”

“Holy crap,” I said. “I had no idea.”

Ersatz nodded. “I am unique,” said Ersatz. “A synth has never done what I am doing before. Everyone is looking to me. Not just Hannah and the other engineers, but other synths, too. If this goes well, I will be the first of many synth surrogates. And if it does not, then... then I do not know what will happen.”

I had to admit, I had never thought about it in those terms before. We were all told that Ersatz was unique, and yet, at the same time, we didn’t think about how she felt about it. I wasn’t sure what to say now. So I decided to try something besides words. I leaned forward and pulled Ersatz into a tight hug. Her eyes widened for a moment, then she relaxed.

I had been wrong before. She *did* get tense. She really was like any of us.

“It’s gonna be okay, Ersatz,” I said, giving her a tight squeeze. “You’re among friends here.”

“Yes,” said Ersatz. “I am. Some of the surrogates are still a bit nervous around me. But many have made me feel very welcome. I am glad that I came here instead of staying at the lab. I do not know what I would have done on my own.”

And neither did I, I reflected. The surrogacy centers could be strange, but there was no place I’d rather be. After my C-section, I was shown nothing but love and support by the other surries. And that, I think, is why I had the courage to try again.

“I suppose I should get back to my room. Thank you for your time,” said Ersatz. But I didn’t let go.

“...Or I could stay here?” she suggested, giving me a shy smile.

“I’d like that,” I said. “I don’t know if I could go back to sleep on my own. And you’re very warm and very soft.”

Ersatz nodded, gently pushing me aside as she slipped into the bed. The beds here were all large enough to give people who were frequently in an advanced stage of pregnancy lots of room to get comfortable. They could very easily support two people with room to spare, even if one of those people was a six-foot robo-dragon. Ersatz curled up behind me, wrapped her arms gently around my belly, and pulled me to her chest. It felt... nice.

I don’t know if she went into standby mode or what, but it wasn’t long before I fell asleep. And I slept very, very well.

The next morning, I called someone to come and fix my doorknob, and when they asked what had happened to it, I played dumb. My mom didn't raise no snitch.

~*~

Month number nine loomed large before me. Early on, a doctor came to me and said they could try and induce me when my due date came close, but I declined. If I was going to do this, I wanted to try and do it with as little intervention as possible. It was still a little rough. I woke up with cramps a couple times, but mostly it had been false alarms. I still had a week and change before my due date.

I hadn't seen Ersatz around as much the past couple of weeks. She was mostly keeping to her room. I couldn't help but worry about her a bit, but she assured me that she was fine. But still. Friends worried about friends.

The day when everything happened started out innocently enough. It was a dreary, rainy day outside, and nobody felt like doing much of anything, so the center was unusually quiet. I woke up with my stomach in knots again, and didn't think anything of it. The last two times it had happened, I'd rushed straight to a nurse's station only for it to be a false alarm. I didn't want to jump the gun again, so I just tried to go about my day as best I could, despite feeling like an unmoored blimp.

The cramps got better as the morning went on, but never completely went away. I was tense all day, and maybe I should have told someone, but instead, I just played it off. It wasn't my due date yet, things would be fine, I shouldn't worry so much.

It was much later that night when I got a knock on my door, and Ersatz came in, holding her belly.

"Thank you for knocking this time," I said.

"Good evening, Tori," said Ersatz. "I am in labor. May I come in?"

It took me a moment to compose myself, but I invited her in.

“Don’t they have a place set up for you to deliver in?” I asked. I remembered hearing some of the nurses talking about it.

“They do, yes,” said Ersatz, rubbing her belly nervously. “But I... I...”

“Go on,” I said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. Ersatz shook her head.

“I do not want to give birth in a lab or an examination room,” said Ersatz, gripping my hand. “I want to give birth someplace comfortable. Someplace private.”

I took a deep breath, ignoring the pain in my gut. “How long have you been in labor?”

“Thirty-seven minutes,” she said quickly. She tapped her head, and added, “My systems knew exactly when it was starting. I do not need to worry about false alarms.”

“Lucky you,” I said, peering out the door and shutting it. It was fairly late in the evening and a lot of the other girls were probably settling down. “Stay here and get comfortable,” I said, giving her hand a squeeze. “Do you have any idea how long it will take?”

“I cannot know for sure,” she said. “Machines made to mimic biological processes can never be truly perfect, because biology is, by its very nature, imperfect.”

“Then I’ll just stay with you as long as you need,” I said, as we both sat down on my bed. “Would you like to watch a movie?”

“That would be very nice,” said Ersatz. “Would you please rub my belly, though? It helps with the pain.”

I didn't need to be asked twice, and as I started to rub, I could feel subtle vibrations beneath the skin. They didn't feel as intense as an organic body's contractions. Or at least, they didn't on the outside.

We settled down and threw on one of Ersatz's favorite movies, occasionally taking turns rubbing each-other's belly, and I tried my best to ignore the growing discomfort within me. Ersatz needed me right now. There would be time enough later to deal with my own issues.

We were about an hour into the movie when Ersatz started to whine. "Something is happening," she said, scooting up and spreading her legs. "I hate to ask, but could you please examine me?"

"Of course," I said, kneeling between Ersatz's legs as she opened them up. At first, there was nothing between her legs but bare silicone, but before I could ask, a section on her groin morphed apart, and there was... well, there was no other word for it, there was her pussy. It was made of silver-grey silicone, but aside from that, it was no different than mine, all of the bits right where I'd have expected them to be.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be looking for down here," I said.

Ersatz let out another high-pitched whine, visibly wincing as she spread her legs apart, and a gush of fluids spilled out onto the bed. They were green-tinged, and had a slightly chemical smell to them.

"Oh dear," she said. "I think... I think it is time, Tori..."

"Just tell me what you need me to do," I said, giving her thigh a reassuring pat. "I suppose telling you to breathe would be kind of pointless, huh?"

She laughed despite her discomfort. Then she groaned, rubbing her belly again as the surface visibly tightened.

“It is happening,” she squeaked. “My cervix is fully dilated and I can feel the baby beginning to emerge from it and soon it will make its way into my birth canal! The urge to bear down is now extremely difficult to resist!”

The extremely precise commentary was a bit disquieting, I’m not going to lie, but who am I to tell a woman in labor what coping mechanisms to use? “Then don’t Ersatz!” I said. “Push!”

She let out a shrill whine as her belly tightened up. Things were now happening quickly, as her belly began to rhythmically contract and relax, almost like clockwork. With every contraction, she bore down once again, and slowly, I could see the shape of her belly change. Soon, I could see her bulge open, and just for a second, I saw the head of the baby, still encased in a clear film, before it slipped back between her folds and she took a moment to rest.

I tried my best to focus on her and to keep her calm, but that was becoming difficult for me as well. Just as her baby began to peek out, I felt a tightening sensation deep in my guts.

Oh no, I thought to myself. Not now, not now, please please please not now...

But as I felt my belly lurch, my muscles tighten, and a sizable gush of fluids burst outward from behind me, the answer was reasonably clear: *Yes, now.*

The treatments that the surrogates went through optimized their bodies to give birth quickly and efficiently, and when our water broke, it meant that it wasn’t going to be much longer. Still, I had to hang on. Ersatz needed me.

“Come on, Ersatz, you can do it,” I said, reaching up to squeeze her hand. “You were made for this! Literally!”

She let out another squeaky laugh before she started to groan and whine again, and as she pushed, I could see the head of a little gray fox cub beginning to take shape properly.

“It’s coming, Tori!” Ersatz called. “I can feel my vaginal opening stretching! I believe the head is beginning to crown!”

“Cool, just keep up the good work!” I said, groaning as I felt my belly tighten more and more, trying to work through the pain. I was starting to feel the urge to push, but I couldn’t. Not yet. Not when Ersatz needed me. “Push, Ersatz! You can do this!”

Ersatz’s face screwed up as she pulled her legs back, and with a long, pronounced grunt, she began to push as hard as she could, her nethers stretching open more and more and more as the head was fully delivered. She barely had a moment’s rest before her contractions started up again as she started to push on the shoulders.

“You’re almost there, you can do it!” I repeated, trying to keep up my encouragement even as the pressure built up inside of me. I needed to push so badly, I felt like I was going to burst! But no, not yet, *not yet...!*

Ersatz started to grunt again, pushing harder and harder, slowly forcing the baby’s shoulders out, until finally, with an emphatic cry, it slipped out onto the bed.

“It is done!” she cried out. “I have just given birth to a healthy baby girl!”

“That’s... great,” I moaned, rubbing my belly. “I’m happy for... *owww!*” That was it. I felt myself slip off the bed and land on my knees as I felt *something* give inside of me. The baby was no longer going to wait for me to cooperate. It wanted out *now*.

“Tori?” said Ersatz, as she scooped the baby up into her arms. “What are you--”

She let out a shriek like a burst of static as she saw what was happening. I was on my hands and knees on the floor, and I could feel the baby starting to come out of me. They always said that the more babies you had, the easiest it got, but sometimes I wondered if the first one really counted in my case. Right now, it didn't feel like it did.

Ersatz was saying something, but I couldn't parse it. All I knew was that I had to push, and push I did. I could feel it started to move. It was going slowly, too slowly, but I couldn't stop now, and soon, I could feel a burning sensation as the baby began to make its way out of me.

"Ersatz!" I cried. "What's happening? What do you see?"

Carefully, Ersatz squatted down at the floor, right behind my backside.

"Do not panic, Tori," she said. "But the baby is coming out feet first. You are having a breech birth."

"*What?*" I cried. Of course I was. Why should anything ever go my way. It was going to go badly again, it was going wrong, I can't do this, not again, not again-

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and when I looked up, my eyes met Ersatz's. Despite the fact that her eyes were images on an LCD screen, there was a soulfulness to them that was just as deep as any organic person's eyes.

"Everything is going to be okay, Tori," she said. "I believe in you. Do not force the baby out. Relax, take a deep breath, and push when it feels right."

I took in as deep a breath as I could and nodded. I could feel a contraction building again, and I started to push, much more gently than before, and Ersatz took up a position behind me.

“There you go, easy does it now,” she cooed. “The baby is coming. You are doing very well. You have already birthed the hips, and... yes, here come the feet, keep going...”

Ersatz continued to urge me on as I pushed and rested, pushed and rested. My progress was slow, but steady.

“The baby has almost been born now,” said Ersatz. “All that is left now is to birth the head, so on the count of three, I want you to give me a nice big push, okay? One... two...”

And on three, I did as she told, pushing as hard as I could. I felt a flare of pain as the head made its way out of me, but it was brief, and what followed was the most immense sense of relief I have ever felt in my life. Carefully, I slumped down to the floor and rolled over, looking up to see Ersatz with a newborn in each arm.

“You did it, Tori,” said Ersatz. “You did it.”

“Yeah,” I said, struggling to sit up for a moment before resolving to lie back down. “I did.”

“I have already taken the liberty of calling for a nurse,” Ersatz added. “He will be with us shortly.”

“Cool,” I said. “I’m just going to stay here for now.”

~*~

Both of our babies turned out to be healthy. Ersatz’s in particular was exceptionally normal. As far as everyone was concerned, a synth could be a surrogate just as well as anyone else could, and rumor had it that others were inspired by Ersatz’s example.

Mostly I wasn't too concerned about that. All I knew was that I was ready to do this again and again, and so was Ersatz. She was, of course, under no obligation to continue serving as a surrogate, but she wanted to, and there was no dissuading her. We remained close all throughout our next pregnancy, as well as the one after, and soon enough, Ersatz was just another surrogate. She was one of us.

And of course, she still came to visit with me on mealtimes. Which was why I was a bit concerned one day when she didn't show up for lunch. When you literally had a clock in your head, it was hard to find excuses for tardiness. But before I could call her, she did show up, and she wasn't alone.

There were two other synths with her, both more-or-less identical to her, save for a few minor differences in detailing and color. One of them had a dark maroon hide, the other a muted gold.

"Good afternoon, Tori," said Ersatz. "I would like you to meet Gosei and Breige."

"It is nice to meet you," said the maroon one, their voice light and musical.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said the gold, his voice a low, masculine rumble.

"Charmed all around," I said, waving at the both of them. "What can I do for you? I suspect you don't want to join us for lunch."

Gosei and Breige shared a sheepish look. Ersatz started to giggle.

"Go on, tell her," said Ersatz.

"We want to be surrogates too," said Gosei, "and we were hoping that you would put in a good word for us!"

“Everyone knows you and Ersatz are friends,” said Breige. “You’re all she talks about. So we were hoping that you could help vouch for us.”

I couldn’t help it. I started to laugh too.

So that’s how things are now. There might come a day when seeing a pregnant synth walking down the street and think nothing in particular of it. That day’s not quite there yet, but it’s coming. They’re not afraid about it or worried about it, and neither am I. I’m contracted with Juno’s Cradle for ten pregnancies, and after that? Well, I’ll see what comes next. But I’m definitely going to stay close to Ersatz. Because matter how you’re made or what you’re made of, your difficulties are always easier to handle when you have someone to share the load.