

*Curiosity, morality, and self-preservation compete for attention as the ship's crew debate whether the stones from an alien world are alive or not and begin to question their own sanity.*

## And the Stones Shall Cry Out

by

Wendy Nickel



"We can still make out the tiny dot of Cambusca through the crew cabin's windows when the stones begin to hum. The fractured, icy, alien sound that seems to split into ever-narrowing segments in my ears reminds

me so much of the surface of the planet we've just

departed that its origin is never in question, at least in my mind.

"It's the samples," I repeat as Commander Chattam scours the lab for the hundredth time, adding the clanging of tools and slamming of drawers to the high-pitched, almost musical buzz. This part of the lab is normally my domain, the fulfilment of a lifelong dream that started at age three with my very first rock collection. After decades of studying terrestrial geology, what rock nerd wouldn't have jumped on the opportunity to study interstellar geology as well? "Check the ones in drawer S-43. The Cambuscan samples."

Chattam's voice is like that of the ship itself: a low, mechanical droning. Monotone and unchanging. Constantly warning us, without so many words, that without its oversight and diligence, we'd all be dead.

"I don't have time for this nonsense," he states. "*Rocks* don't make noise."

Obviously, on Earth, they don't. But there's a vast expanse between here and the world we knew so well—the one we'd studied and sorted and organized and wrote

tomes of books about what things do and don't do, which we proudly labeled "facts." We were experts there, knowers of all things, with all those facts memorized and carefully catalogued in our minds. But who are we to say what is or is not true here? Here, we are strangers in an alien realm, newborn babes just weeks old after the rebirth from our nightmare-laden cryo-sleep.

I shiver and angle my body away from the tucked-away cryotubes with their lids of black tempered glass and snakelike tubing and the cold, sharp needles I know are inside. I try once more to block out all thoughts of the darkness that had enveloped me across all those years and miles. The emptiness and silence and unnatural stillness that I never expected would affect me so much. The ice that, at times, I think I can still feel in my blood.

Martina, our medic, has her own take on Chattam's attitude regarding the stones, which she relays to me in her clipped, matter-of-fact way over a dinner of tasteless, microwaved protein. "Women have better hearing than men at high frequencies. It's probably driving him mad that we can place it better than he can. Some people just hate to be out of the loop."

Out of the loop, or out of control? Perhaps they're one and the same.



The stones are mineral, inorganic, with no detectable traces of carbon. They are black, but looking closely, I can see tiny lines of white spiderwebbing out from a central point, always in the same pattern. There's something unnerving about it, like finding that the crack from the mirror in my apartment back home had superimposed itself on every reflective surface in the universe. I'd been drunk when I'd made that crack, half a lifetime ago. I'd thought I was looking out a window, and the face on the other side looked so lost and scared, I'd punched the glass to break her free.

The stones' underlying structure is crystalline, but the sum of their properties don't match any known substance. Each test I run, rather than providing clarity, only emphasizes their alien nature. The streak test leaves a deep gouge in the unglazed porcelain, as well as a purple line unlike any substance I've ever seen. Its luster sometimes looks metallic, while at other times it takes on a pearly or vitreous sheen. Each of the five samples has its



own quirks and idiosyncrasies, and each test offers new surprises.

They keep me up at night long past when the ship's lights have turned from cool to warm—not because of the sound, but because from the time that I was small and my grandfather taught me to solve magic squares, I've always loved a puzzle. I sit in the lab, peering in my microscope as the rest of the crew slumbers in their sleep pods that remind me too much of the cryotubes. The sleep logs are automated, but with even the tiniest bit of computer know-how, the data can easily be overwritten. Martina, charged with keeping us healthy, seems to buy my lies; either that or she, like everyone else, is simply too caught up in the perpetual urgency of survival to question my sleeping habits.

And still, day and night, the stones sing.

"They vibrate," I tell Martina one day. "It's nearly imperceptible, particularly on a ship like this that's in motion itself, but that's what's responsible for the sound." It is strangely reassuring to find that at least that law of nature still applies out here.

"And Chattam?" she asks, turning one over. "What did he say about them?"

"Only that I need to figure out how to shut them up." I should have known, when he'd cut our stop on Cambusca so short, that he had no interest in my geological research. Yet his words still smarted: *Everyone else around here is earning their keep. Time you do the same.* "I wish he would just—"

Martina holds up her hand, silencing me. "He's the commander; he knows what he's doing."

I'm about to protest when I catch Martina's eye. The veins branching out over her white sclera mirror the pattern found in the stone, and I recall, suddenly, the whispered rumors I'd heard about her previous mission, where a mutinying crewmate nearly got them all killed.

"They've been varying their frequency," I say, eager to steer the subject away from Chattam. "I haven't been able to detect any pattern in it yet, though. And their volume has been gradually increasing since we left Cambusca. This one—Thom—is slightly louder than the others."

"You named them?" I hear the frown in Martina's voice, the touch of concern that she doesn't show on her face. I'd forgotten, momentarily, that her role here involves caring for not only our physical bodies, but our mental well-being as well. After all, we're alone out here, with no one else to turn to but our tiny crew of eight, the rest of humanity too distant to hear us. It'll be years before they even get the probes that we've been periodically sending back.

"You named the rocks?" Martina repeats.

"It's a geologist thing," I explain, setting Thom back into the tray. "It's silly, I know."

I slide the sample tray back into the drawer, slamming it none-to-gently with the back of my leg, as if to show that I don't care about them too much at all. That I'm not obsessed. No more than any geologist would be. Not unhealthily so.

The stones, now tucked safely in the drawer, seem to hum louder. The fingers that I'd been holding them in tingle, oddly warm.

*I'm not crazy.*



The stones grow louder, until their eerily harmonic song can be heard throughout the ship. I've placed them in layers of plastic baggies and stuffed their drawer with foam, but that only seems to make their hum more insistent. The sound cuts through easily, like a shard of broken glass through layers of delicate skin.

When Chattam summons me to the flight deck, I know what he's going to say before the words are out of his mouth.

"Jettison them."

I swallow hard. "I can't."

From the other side of the flight deck, Martina's hand jerks toward a hip pocket on her suit, and I wonder what she's concealed there—a tranquilizer of some type? Some pocket-sized sense of security, to guard against another mutiny?

"That is," I continue, "I believe that order may go against Regulation 29b, which states that, as space asphyxiation



is considered an inhumane execution method, the airlock may not be used to destroy any still-living creature."

"Are you claiming that these rocks are *alive*?" He scoffs.

"Just because they make noise? What do you want me to do? Shoot 'em first?"

"It's not just noise." I've studied geophony; thunder, wind, waves, and lightning—even the planets themselves—all create sounds without a biological origin, but this is different. I can't shake the feeling that they're trying to tell me something. I just need time to prove it.

"There are patterns in the sound, as if they're trying to communicate." At the look of skepticism on his face, I change tactics. "And they're giving off heat as well. There's some sort of change going on within their particles. It may be respiration or a metabolic process."

"You said they aren't carbon-based. All life is carbon-based."

"On Earth. But maybe those rules don't apply here."

"Have you seen them reproduce? Grow? Change? Move?" His voice grows louder, dominating the air between us.

"Well, no, but we've only had them onboard a few weeks. And not all life forms are mobile. Coral, for instance."

"If a piece of coral were making that ruckus on my ship, I'd jettison it, too."

"She has a point, Commander," Martina interjects. "We brought the samples onboard with the assumption that they were simple rocks. Life doesn't always follow the patterns we expect. Look at viruses, for instance! And if our goal here is to ensure that this sector of space is safe for possible future human habitation—"

"We've already determined that Cambusca is completely unsuitable—"

"Yes, but what if we encounter these... these whatever-they-are on other planets as well?" I interrupt. "What if all the stones in this system are like these? What if there's something between living and nonliving? Or living things that don't fall into the neat and tidy definitions that were sufficient for observations made on Earth? What if they're trying to tell us something?"

"Enough!" He's out of his seat and towering over me before I can step back. "This is my ship and my mission,

and I'm not interested in redefining what it means to be alive, nor am I going to stand here and let those... those *rocks* keep up this racket until our ears start bleeding. Bring them to me. *Now.*"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Martina hesitate, frozen in place by his reaction.

"No," I say. Is it just my imagination that the humming grows more intense?

Chattam grabs me by the arm. He's nearly three times my size and easily drags me along behind him out of the flight deck. I assume he's taking me to the lab, but when we arrive there, he walks right past the sample drawers and toward the corner where the cryotubes sit and kicks one open.

"What are you doing?" I scream over the stones, whose humming is much louder now than it was on the flight deck.

"Those cryotubes are only to be used for medical emergencies, Chattam," Martina, who's followed us, protests. "As the ship's medic, I can't authorize this. It's

against regulations. You can't just freeze her because she disagrees with you."

"No," he says. "What I *can't* do is jettison her like I'm going to do with those rocks. As the ship's commander, I won't stand for insubordination aboard my ship. You of all people ought to know how well *that* turns out."

My legs wobble, but Chattam pulls me forward toward a cold, dark tube. My whimpered protests go unheard over the humming, but I can just make out Martina's. "—don't do anything drastic! She's sleep-deprived, Commander, and the noise conditions are obviously affecting your judgment as well! If you'd just take a moment—"

I'm in the tube.

I'm lying inside before I realize it. The tempered glass snaps shut over my head, blocking out the world and muffling all sound. It's so dark. I can't move. Chattam hasn't even pressed the button to start the cryogenic process, and already I can't breathe. Already, I can't stop shivering. I pound on the lid, beyond which, I can just make out the shadowy figures of Martina and the



commander, engaged in a heated conversation that's muffled as if underwater.

The water. I can almost feel the ice in my veins. Panic short-circuits my mind; I can't think straight. I can't do this again. I can't. I'd never have been able to go through it the first time, had I known how it would be, and the thought of passing through that cold, dark valley of nothingness again makes me cry out, pleading for Chattam, Martina, the rest of the crew, anyone at all to help me.

I gasp, and in that intake of breath, I hear the humming.

It's loud. So loud. Louder than it was before, and louder than it ought to be. It's also a lower frequency than it's ever been before, so that it takes me a moment to realize that it's the stones.

The pod shakes. It vibrates, until suddenly, a crack appears in the glass. It spiderwebs out, forming the peculiar pattern from the stone's surface. My reflection is fractured. Hundreds—thousands—of small, scared faces stare back at me. I clench my hands into tight fists, and this time when I strike the glass, it shatters.



"When the glass broke, I saw Chattam struggling to pin down Martina." Our crewmates watch, stony-faced, as I recite my testimony. My wrist is bound to a chair, but so is Chattam's. The song of the stones has quieted again, but I can still hear it echoing down the corridors, strong and persistent and even more discordant than before. "I remembered that earlier, when she'd felt threatened, Martina had reached for her hip pocket, so I assumed she must have some sort of tranquilizer there. I grabbed the syringe and stuck him with it."

"So you admit that you physically incapacitated the mission commander?"

"In self-defense, yes. The commander had already disregarded one mission regulation and had stated his intention to disregard another, so I felt it necessary to subdue him. I wasn't sure what he would do next to me or Martina."

In all honesty, those moments had been such a blur that it wasn't until after, when Martina and I were standing over the commander's body, that I realized what I'd done.

"One more question," Luis, the second-in-command who's taken over the investigation, asks. "What *would* you have us do with the rocks?"

I think of the five smooth stones, smothered in layers of foam and locked away in that tiny drawer far away from light, from their icy atmosphere, from everything familiar. Trapped there, until someone slides them free. Suddenly, I know what they've been trying to tell me.

"I'd send them back." As soon as I say it, the tone in the air shifts. The discord resolves itself into something more harmonious. I'm right. I know it, even if I'll never be able to prove it with data and statistics and theorems. "I'd send them back and, when we report back to Earth, I'd tell them to leave Cambusca alone. If the stones are sentient, that's where they'd want to be: in their natural environment, among their own kind, not trapped in a sample drawer or jettisoned into space."

I sneak a glance at Martina, hoping that what I've said won't be held against me in my next psychiatric evaluation. When the rest of the crew adjourns to determine my fate, she stands and places a hand on my shoulder. "We'll work on that claustrophobia issue, okay?"

In the meantime, if I help you set up a hammock in the lab, will you promise to stop messing with the sleep logs?"

I nod gratefully and find myself humming along with the stones.



In the end, we send a probe back to Cambusca to return the stones. I watch the computer screen as that cracked-glass surface grows larger in the viewscreen and the probe's robotic arms gently lower the stones to the ground. There's no sound on the video feed, but around me, all is silent, save for the ship's steady, life-preserving hum. And with Chattam demoted and relegated to the brig, it's peaceful, for the first time in weeks.

"Your friends made it back home?" Martina asks as she leans in to watch the feed. "I'd say I'll miss them, but I know my ears won't."

My agreement is only half-hearted. "It was the right thing for them, but I can't help wishing it could have been different. We'll never know now, will we, if they really are alive? Or if the singing was caused by something else—



some other phenomenon we just haven't encountered before. I'm a scientist; it's my job to find answers, and I failed."

Martina sighed. "And it's my job to watch out for the warning signs that a crewmember is becoming a danger to themselves or others. And Chattam's job was to uphold the mission regulations. Instead, I was so worried about a mutiny that I overlooked how he was overreaching his authority. What can I say? Sometimes we mess up. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes, the universe is beyond our control."

When she leaves, I turn my attention back to the probe on the screen. I slip on my headphones and turn up the volume until I can hear the humming of the stones. The probe's got enough battery for three more weeks of video, and in that time, I intend to learn as much as I can about the stones in their natural environment.

The universe is a surprising place; who knows what we might find?



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