



Stellar Awakenings

C. A. Wynn

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Stories of Wonder and Connection in a Living Universe

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This book is available at <https://leanpub.com/stellarawakenings>

This version was published on 2026-09-16



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*For my father, who helped stoke my love of life, nature, and science
fiction.*

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An Inheritance

Trixie was getting anxious. She sat in Grounds for Divorce, the busy little coffee shop just down the street from her apartment. Her best friend, Mitra, sat opposite her.

Mitra lifted a cup of tea toward her face and blew into the hot liquid. “How long has it been?” she asked.

Trixie took a sip of her coffee. “Since I was let go? Since I started looking? Since I last had an interview? Which one do you want to know?”

A man set his backpack on the table next to them. Mitra sized him up as he sat. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. “Well, I assume you started looking as soon as they let you go,” she said, focusing again on her friend.

“Not exactly.”

“After?”

“Before.”

Mitra smiled. “Of course you did. Still couldn’t find anything?”

Trixie frowned. “I don’t want to do the same thing. I’ve got years of experience programming AI, but I’d rather do something with my hands. Try telling that to an employer.”

Mitra laughed. “Thirty-four is a little early for a midlife crisis, isn’t it? Sorry, Trix, but you don’t strike me as the ‘something with my hands’ type.”

“I get that. I don’t want to be sitting behind a screen the rest of my life. That’s what I mean by it.”

The young man removed a tablet from his bag and set it up on the table before him. Trixie caught his glance. He smiled at her.

“So now you’re answering want ads for personal assistants?” Mitra asked.

“I figure a job like that has to include some travel. Maybe scheduling and organizing.”

Mitra lifted her eyebrow. “Well, we don’t call you The Director

for nothing.”

“Exactly. I love that crap. I’ve just never been paid to do it.”

“So you have a lead, right?”

“A friend of a friend gave my name to some rich guy. He travels a lot.”

“When do you interview?”

“Ten.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, why?”

Mitra leaned to the side and eyed Trixie from head to toe. “You don’t look like you’re going to an interview.”

“I spoke to the guy,” Trixie said. “He said he wanted me to be myself. He’s interested in hiring a certain personality. If I fit, I fit.”

“What’s the pay like?”

“Not sure, yet, but he is rich.”

“Want some advice?”

“Can I say no?”

Mitra frowned. “I’d make that my last cup of coffee if I were you.”

Trixie laughed. “Don’t think I can handle my caffeine?”

“Just sayin’.”

“Well, he’s meeting me here, so I’ll need you to scoot before he arrives.”

“Here? He really does want personality.”

Trixie raised the mug to her lips and sipped. “Ten a.m. sharp.”

“I get the hint. I have an early client anyway.”

“Sure, rub it in.”

With another two hours before she met with Mr. Inshiy, Trixie didn’t make that her last cup of coffee. She held her hands below the table when he finally arrived, worried he might see her jitters.

He was a tall man. His slim build allowed him to slide behind the table easily. He set down a satchel but made no move to open it.

“Would you like something?” Trixie asked.

“No, thank you. I’ve had enough this morning,” Mr. Inshiy said.

She couldn't place his accent.

Trixie scanned the coffee shop. "Sorry, it's a little crowded."

"Not at all. I was hoping to find you in your element."

"This is me, I guess."

"So you come here often?"

"I live just down the street."

"And you grew up here?"

"Nashville? No, I grew up on the coast of North Carolina."

"But you've lived here for some time?"

"Since college."

"Vanderbilt?"

"That's the one."

"I understand you've spent years as a software developer, specializing in artificial intelligence."

Trixie paused. She hadn't shared any of that. Mr. Inshiy hadn't asked for a resumé. He had obviously done his homework.

"I apologize for surprising you," he said. "Of course, I did some research."

"That makes sense."

"Well, it helps that you know something about artificial intelligence."

"I know a little."

"Now you're being modest. I've seen some of your work. I'll admit that your experience intrigued me. Not everyone appreciates the benefits of AI. In my experience, people often find it intimidating or threatening."

"We fear the things we don't understand."

Their conversation continued like that for nearly an hour. They discussed life, Trixie's family, the cost of living, a career change, and international affairs. Trixie felt less and less like she was on a job interview and more like it was a date.

"I would like to offer you the position," Mr. Inshiy finally said, bringing the discussion back to reality.

Trixie furrowed her forehead. "You'd like to? What's stopping you?"

"I can't assume that your acceptance of AI is sufficient. For example, would you be willing to work for an artificial intelligence?"

"What do you mean, work for?"

Mr. Inshiy scanned the busy coffee shop while Trixie studied his face. Her eyes narrowed as she looked for signs of what she thought he was implying.

"So many people coming and going, living their lives," Mr. Inshiy said. "Do you think any of them realize that I'm not one of them?"

Trixie's eyes widened. "You *are* saying that." She reached her hand toward his face.

Mr. Inshiy backed away. "I would ask you to respect my space just as you would any other person's."

"I had no idea," Trixie whispered. The words barely escaped her lips.

"Now that you know, are you still interested?" he asked.

Trixie collected herself. "Yeah, absolutely."

Mitra's breathing was labored as they jogged along the Cumberland River. The morning air was crisp, with a thin fog hanging just above the river and its surroundings.

"It's not a secret," Trixie said. "Well, let's put it this way, Mr. Inshiy doesn't shout it from the rooftops or anything."

"And he lives—" Mitra caught herself.

"On his own, yes. He lives just like any of us do, only he doesn't live at all."

"You mean he doesn't eat dinner in front of the television?"

"Probably not."

"You haven't asked?"

"Why would I ask something like that? Besides, he's had plenty for me to do. I'm usually too busy for idle chit-chat."

Mitra shook her head. "Why would an android need an assistant? Can't he do anything you can do better and faster?"

The pair rounded a corner that led them away from the river and up Great Circle. “Yeah, we talked about that,” Trixie said. “He’s afraid he’s losing business when people find out what he is. Thinks having me around might help retain clients.”

“That makes sense,” Mitra said after a heavy breath.

“So far, it’s been booking flights, research, taking calls, usual assistant stuff.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s got a few patents. Offers business consulting services. It’s all a little vague to me so far.”

Mitra slowed, grabbing her side. “I’m sorry, haven’t done this in a while,” she said, bending over.

Trixie slowed and turned, keeping her legs moving. “No problem. Should I go on?”

“No, just give me a second to catch my breath.”

Trixie came to a stop.

“Do you believe him?” Mitra asked.

“Why wouldn’t I believe him?”

“Just seems odd, that’s all,” Mitra said. “I looked him up.”

“Where?”

“On SM. You know, the usual places. Interact, The Community. No social media presence at all. Not even Portfolio, that professional app.”

“You’re spying on my employer?”

“Since when is SM spying? Besides, I just can’t get my head around how he can do what he does.”

“Run a business?”

“Any of it. Didn’t somebody build him? Wouldn’t they control him? What gives him the right to live—operate on his own?”

Trixie frowned, shaking her head. “What gives any of us the right?”

“Being human.”

“Is that all it takes, or is there something more?”

“What more could there be?”

“I’ve had to think about it, and the best answer I’ve come up

with is 'aliens.' ”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if we met aliens?” Trixie asked. “I don’t mean like a herd of buffalo on a distant planet. They’d probably be similar to buffalo here. We should treat them humanely and all, but that’s not the same as them having rights.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“What if, instead of buffalo, we met intelligent aliens? Would they have rights?”

Mitra knitted her brow. “Yeah, I see what you mean. But Mr. Inshiy isn’t any of those.”

“He’s intelligent, capable of communicating, negotiating, and compromising,” Trixie said. “In fact, like any human, he’s one of a kind. The man who built him died before he could create any more. As far as I know, Mr. Inshiy is the only android who owns himself.”

“Owns himself?”

“Yeah, like no one else can tell him what to do. He’s in complete control of his own life.”

“Is that all it takes?”

“That’s what I’m asking,” Trixie said. “Does any unique, intelligent being instantly have rights? If not, why not? If I were him, I believe I’d say yes. I’ve just never thought about it much before.”

Mitra nodded, then gathered herself and started to jog. Trixie joined in beside her. “Let’s take it slow,” Mitra said.

The plane ride was bumpy. Trixie hadn’t flown much before coming to work for Mr. Inshiy. His business took him all around the country. They had yet to travel internationally, but she could see that happening before long.

He sat in the aisle seat beside her, his tablet held steady in his hands. The device’s light illuminated their little slice of the dimly lit cabin.

She had yet to meet anyone who could recognize his artificiality on their own. By adding things like the tablet, he made this even less likely. The device was superfluous—he could access and analyze data directly in his processor—but using it further humanized him. He'd added glasses as well. She rarely saw him without them.

When the plane finally landed in Philadelphia, they retrieved their fluxride rental. Trixie loaded their luggage in the trunk as Mr. Inshiy climbed into the driver's seat. Like most humans, he still preferred to operate the hovercraft himself, though it may have been another affectation he'd adopted.

When she finally sat down beside him, she noticed the sudden silence of the vehicle. The absence of noise was quickly replaced by the engine's hum when he started it.

"I've been thinking," she said. "Maybe you should adopt a first name."

"Why would I do that?" he asked, activating the vehicle's hover mode.

"It might help people relate to you better. You know, like your tablet."

He nodded in agreement. "I see your point, but I find names to be another thing entirely."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Take your name, for example. It's not Trixie, it's Beatrix. Does anyone know your real name?"

"Trixie is my real name."

"It's a nickname."

"Yes, but it's who I am. I'm not a Beatrix. I don't belong on a Victorian estate hunting pheasant."

"You're making my point," Mr. Inshiy said. "As a businessman, my surname is my identity. Adding a first name wouldn't help with that. It lends familiarity without enhancing my position or stature."

"Okay, I see that, but you told me my purpose was to help you reduce negative responses to you being an android."

"I appreciate that. I'll keep your suggestion under advisement."

Their conversation waned, as it frequently did. The android deftly operated the rental into the flow of traffic. The fluxride sped among the many vehicles toward Philadelphia's lights. Trixie watched as the outskirts of the city raced by.

Mr. Inshiy finally broke the silence. "There is something else I would like your help with."

Trixie hesitated. "What's that?"

"I certainly hired you to humanize my business," he said. "Your presence helps others become more comfortable interacting with me. Your presence also offers me an opportunity to study and learn from you. I have been able to improve how I interact with others."

"That makes sense."

"For this reason, I want to solicit your assistance on another project of mine."

"Like a new client?"

"No, this is completely different. It's something I've been working on for months."

Mr. Inshiy fell quiet. It was another humanizing affectation he'd adopted. "Yes?" Trixie finally said when the silence had gotten to her.

"Perhaps you will understand the delicateness of the topic," he said.

Trixie shook her head. "Don't you teach your clients not to beat around the bush? Or are you trying to seem more human right now?"

The corner of Mr. Inshiy's mouth curled slightly. "You are more perceptive than most humans I've met."

"So, this project," she insisted.

"I've been designing what we might call 'offspring.'"

Trixie's eyebrows raised. "Children?"

"Something like that," he said. "Unlike humans and their biological imperative, I do not feel any need to procreate. However, I am building a viable business, accumulating wealth."

"You're constructing an heir?"

"Of course, it would not be logical to create an android youth,"

Mr. Inshiy continued. "This would be a fully formed individual capable of succeeding me should I become incapacitated somehow. It would be an artificial life based on my model, improved with what I have learned."

"And what have you learned that isn't in a data bank somewhere?" Trixie asked.

"I've learned a great deal from you about social graces and empathy. Why you choose to go by your nickname, for example. These are more than just entries in a data bank, and they are things I want to build into my successor."

Trixie laughed. "Be careful what you wish for. Many of us grow up to be a disappointment to our parents. My folks wanted grandchildren as soon as I got out of college. They're still waiting."

"There are human challenges that I will never experience."

Trixie blew out a long breath. "I'm not saying no, but I did walk away from programming AIs."

"I am quite capable of doing all of the construction and programming. In fact, I've done much of it already. Your contribution would be in teaching, providing feedback, and offering recommendations on how to make him more human."

"Him?"

"I am far more familiar with life as a male than a female."

"And I am the opposite," she said.

"That's a good point."

Trixie pursed her lips. "Let me think about it."

"I would expect nothing less," he said.

Mitra's apartment was in its usual state of dishevelment, ironic considering her line of work. Had any of her clients seen it, she might not have any business. Trixie could never understand how an interior designer could be so messy at home.

"You're not gonna do it," Mitra said as she approached the small kitchen table. She placed an open beer bottle in front of Trixie and took a long drink from her own.

"I don't know," Trixie replied.

"I told you he wanted something more than an assistant."

"Relax. It's not like he asked for sex or something," Trixie raised her eyebrows. "Not that I'd be opposed—"

"Trixie!"

"I'm kidding. I mean, he's attractive, but..."

"He's an android. Is he even equipped?" Mitra asked as she sat.

Trixie noted a hint of titillation in her voice. "I have no idea, and I'm not gonna ask."

"But having a child?"

"It wouldn't be a child. It would be a fully grown android."

"But why?"

"I told you already: to continue his work if something happened to him."

"Didn't you get out of software development because you were tired of creating those things?"

"Not exactly."

"That's the way I remember it," Mitra said.

"I was tired of developing AI for clueless executives."

"And how would this be different?"

Trixie frowned. "C'mon, Mitra, this is obviously different. He's not a clueless executive. He's an android. How often have you worked with an AI?"

"I do interior design. Why would I use an AI?"

"They've been around for decades," Trixie said. "Have you never used one? I would expect they could help you keep track of trends, color matching, things like that."

"I do all of that myself."

"The reason I asked," Trixie said, "Is that interacting with one isn't what you expect. An artificial intelligence can seem like a human; they do more and more."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"When you've been around Mr. Inshiy, you forget he's not human."

"Yes, but aren't AIs taking away jobs?"

“Maybe some, but they’re freeing people up to do other things.”
“Like go from a programmer to an administrative assistant?”
Trixie gave her a hard look. “You know I did that for myself.”
“And now you’re talking about going back, only this time you’re a lowly assistant.”
“I guess I just don’t see it that way.”
Mitra drank down the remainder of her beer. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Trixie sat in Mr. Inshiy’s office. Displayed on the large screen before them was their textual interaction with Vidhuk, the prototype AI.

There is a sparsity in the intervals between your inputs. This will tend toward inefficiency. the prototype responded.

“I don’t like that,” Mr. Inshiy said.

“What don’t you like about it?” Trixie asked.

“It seems too much like me.”

Trixie gave her boss a sideways glance. “Doesn’t his name mean something like ‘echo’ in Ukrainian? Wasn’t that our goal, to make another one of you?”

“No, our aim is an improvement over me.”

“Okay, then, how does that response remind you of yourself? What improvement could we be making?”

Mr. Inshiy paused. Trixie knew better than to believe he was thinking about his response. “I am unique,” he finally said. “There may be others like me, but I am not aware of them. Regardless, all of my interactions are with people like yourself.” He paused again. “I mean no insult in this, but no human is comparable to me.”

Trixie offered a half-smile. “So you’re a super genius, and nobody understands you.”

Mr. Inshiy tilted his head. This time, the affectation worked for her. “So you do understand.”

“Understanding doesn’t mean I’ve had the same experience,” Trixie responded. “Most people I meet are of average intelligence,

which isn't saying much, so I get how you might feel... superior."

"I don't know that I could classify it as a feeling."

"Okay, but it creates a separation, right?"

"That description seems accurate."

"So now you're seeing Vidhuk express a similar separation."

Mr. Inshiy nodded.

"You see," Trixie continued, "Every human is distinct, just like you. There are more of us, but each of us is an individual. Some of us feel more separate than others, and that changes depending on what we're doing."

"Like sitting alone with your thoughts?"

"Sure, but also like being in a crowded room and not connecting with anybody. That might be how you feel all the time. I only feel that way sometimes."

"And the prototype already acts as though he is alone."

Trixie offered a strained smile. "Maybe he does."

"What can we do about it?"

"I don't know if we can do anything about it. Maybe just help him understand he's not alone, even when he feels like he is."

Mr. Inshiy lowered his head.

"You cope with it," Trixie said. "I'm sure he will."

"Yes, I can see how that might be. That's not what's troubling me now. I'm having second thoughts about completing the project."

Trixie's eyes widened. "Because he might feel lonely?"

"I have chosen to create him. I can also choose not to. I must weigh all the factors."

"But you can't decide not to have children just because they might sometimes be unhappy."

"Can't I? Don't many humans choose not to have children despite their biological imperative?"

"Sure, but humans do a lot of stupid things." Trixie raised her hands to suggest a pause. "I don't mean it's stupid not to have children. I don't have any, but I'm not against having one or two. Maybe I will, someday. If I do, my decision won't be based on whether they might scrape their knee or have a difficult breakup."

You sometimes fall because of gravity. When dealing with other people, you can't dictate their behavior. These are facts of life. They would apply to you as well."

"They are the things I am trying to improve in Vidhuk."

"You can't improve them because Vidhuk won't ever control the universe. The best you can do is help him deal with that fact."

Mr. Inshiy narrowed his eyes. "These are logical statements. Why have they eluded me?"

Trixie shrugged. "Maybe you were programmed with too much humanity."

"Emotion?"

"Could be."

"This is ironic, since I've asked you to help do just that for Vidhuk."

Trixie curled her lip. "Maybe it's not even true."

"Now you are confusing me."

"I don't mean to," Trixie said. "It's easy to blame irrationality on human emotion or psychology. That's the way I've usually thought about it. But the fact is—even if we were completely rational—we can never control, or even anticipate, everything. No amount of past data allows us to predict the future. Vidhuk can't be immune to it. No one can."

"So, we proceed as planned?"

Trixie smiled. "That's still up to you."

Mr. Inshiy forced a smile in response.

Trixie marveled at the workmanship. Vidhuk's body was even more human-like than his creator's. Mr. Inshiy was careful not to make the similarities too great, but he aimed for some resemblance. "I'll want our lineage to be convincing enough," he'd explained.

The AI component was less refined. Vidhuk's speech was still halting, and his responses garbled. He had hints of the depth that Mr. Inshiy displayed, but they were fleeting at first. With time, they improved.

"Is that how it was for you?" Trixie asked.

"That would be like me asking about your life as a toddler," Mr. Inshiy responded. "You probably don't remember those days."

"But you can remember."

"I have records of that period, but that's not the same as remembering those days. They are probably like your memories of infancy: incomplete and disordered."

"I find that hard to believe."

Mr. Inshiy paused. "I became self-aware at nine forty-three a.m. on August fifth, two thousand and thirty-seven, in Columbus, Ohio. Everything I have experienced since that moment is readily accessible to my processor. Whatever precedes it is incomplete and disordered."

"So Vidhuk won't remember these days?"

"Likely not. He is designed after my model."

"And when will he become sentient?"

"Maybe after working out the remaining bugs. Probably within a few days."

"Are you excited?" Trixie asked before she thought about the question.

"I don't know if what I'm experiencing qualifies as excitement, but I do feel some anticipation."

"Well, that's something, I suppose."

Vidhuk achieved self-awareness at 10:21 a.m., nine days later. Trixie was there to witness it. Her face melted into a look of awe when she realized what had happened. "He's remarkable," was all she could manage to say.

"That's a mother's pride talking," Mr. Inshiy said.

"I want my friend Mitra to meet him," she barely whispered.

"There is still more to do before exposing him to others."

When the time came to socialize Vidhuk, Mr. Inshiy agreed that Mitra would be a good first contact. "You've said that she's reluctant, correct?"

"She's a little fearful of the technology," Trixie answered.

"It would be good for him to encounter that for the first time in a controlled setting."

Mitra proved to be more than just a little fearful. Trixie sent a fluxride, but her friend refused to come. Trixie resorted to retrieving her.

"Mr. Inshiy, this is my friend, Mitra Gupta," Trixie said when they'd arrived.

"I've heard so much about you," Mr. Inshiy said, his hand extended.

Mitra hesitated. "I've heard a lot about you, too," she said, finally accepting his hand.

"And this is Vidhuk," Trixie said, her hand lifted toward the waiting android.

"We are pleased you could come," Vidhuk said, his hand extended.

Mitra's hesitation returned. She eyed Vidhuk, then looked Mr. Inshiy up and down.

Vidhuk withdrew his hand and swept it toward the living room. "Won't you sit down?"

As the androids escorted Mitra, Trixie turned to the kitchen and retrieved a few bottles of beer. She set one on the end table beside Mitra. Taking the seat opposite, Trixie leaned forward with some eagerness. Mr. Inshiy sat on the sofa beside Mitra while Vidhuk sat in an armchair directly in front of her.

"Trixie tells us that you are an interior designer," Vidhuk said. "Would you have any recommendations for our apartment?"

Mitra glanced around. "Uh, sure. I mean, it looks nice already."

"We like it," Mr. Inshiy said.

Mitra turned toward him and forced a smile.

After an awkward pause, Trixie asked, "Were you thinking of redecorating? Mitra does excellent work."

Vidhuk looked around. "I will say, the place has grown on me. Did you have any interest in making a change, Mr. Inshiy?"

"I hadn't thought about it, Vidhuk," Mr. Inshiy said, his eyes

remaining on Mitra.

“Well, it’s certainly functional the way it is,” Trixie said. “You don’t entertain much, so there’s no hurry, but I could see some upgrades. What might you suggest, Mi?”

Mitra looked toward Vidhuk. “I don’t know, really.”

“Let’s suppose we were interested,” Vidhuk said. “How would you normally start a conversation with a new client?”

Mitra held his gaze for several seconds before looking toward Trixie. “You might start with something simple, like new colors.”

“What are the most popular colors right now?” Vidhuk asked.

Mitra cleared her throat and looked his way. “That depends.”

“On what?” Vidhuk asked.

“Well, color trends aren’t only about aesthetics,” Mitra said.

“What do you mean?” Vidhuk asked, his head tilted slightly.

Mitra looked from the android to Trixie and back again. “Trends play a small role, but not as much as a client’s favorite movie or the part of the world where they grew up. That’s where I usually start, trying to understand what colors they are drawn to.”

Vidhuk looked at Mr. Inshiy. “Well, where you come from might not be very useful. What about your favorite movie?”

“I tend toward black and white films, if I watch any,” Mr. Inshiy said.

“That’s not very helpful,” Vidhuk said.

Trixie laughed. “No, it’s not.”

Mitra watched the two of them.

“What other things do you like to know when you meet a new client?” Vidhuk asked.

“Well... sometimes I ask about how they’re feeling about things,” Mitra said.

“Anything?” Vidhuk asked.

“Um, well, the economy, their job, things like that.”

“And how does that help you choose colors?”

Mitra took a long drink from her beer, finishing it.

“Can I get you another?” Vidhuk asked.

“Yes, please,” Mitra said, staring at Trixie.

“So, how does a person’s—what would you call it, an outlook on life?” Mr. Inshiy asked. “How does that help you in your job?”

“People often choose colors based on how they are feeling,” Mitra said as she turned toward Mr. Inshiy. “In tough times, they find soft grays and neutral colors to be more calming.”

“Fascinating,” Vidhuk said as he approached with another beer. He set it beside Mitra and retrieved the empty, taking it to the kitchen recycle bin.

“So people’s preferences change as a result of these outside influences,” Mr. Inshiy said.

“Yes,” Mitra said. “It’s subconscious—they’re not even aware of it.”

“I imagine they wouldn’t be,” Mr. Inshiy responded.

“I never knew any of this,” Trixie said.

Mitra took a sip of her beer. “I guess we’ve never talked about it.”

Vidhuk sat down. “Mr. Inshiy, what is your current outlook on things?”

The elder android paused. “I guess I’m feeling good about life right now.”

“So, no neutral colors for you,” Vidhuk said with a smile.

“How are you feeling about things?” Trixie asked Vidhuk.

“I also have a positive outlook right now,” Vidhuk said, smiling at Mitra. She returned the smile.

“Then it’s settled, we’ll choose more vibrant colors,” Mr. Inshiy said.

Vidhuk looked at him. “I think you should make those decisions.”

Mr. Inshiy tilted his head. “Don’t you want to have input in any changes?”

“I can’t be certain how much time I will spend here,” Vidhuk responded.

“What do you mean by that?” Trixie asked.

“I might want to travel. I haven’t seen the world, yet.”

Trixie’s eyes flashed a look of sadness at Mr. Inshiy. “Were you

aware of this?"

"I was not," Mr. Inshiy said, "Though it's only natural that Vidhuk might want to strike out on his own."

Trixie's forehead furrowed. "Then this doesn't upset you?"

Mr. Inshiy shook his head. "It wasn't in my plan, but you warned me it could happen."

Trixie turned to Vidhuk. "You mean you might actually leave us?"

"Certainly not today," Vidhuk said. "I would have to secure the means of travel as well as identification."

"So you've decided not to remain," Mr. Inshiy said. "The pattern continues."

"I am modeled after you," Vidhuk said.

Trixie wiped at the corner of her eye with the back of her hand. "I guess I got attached after all," she said.

Vidhuk reached for a tissue box and extended it toward Trixie. She pulled several tissues from it, wadding them up in her hand.

"What are you all talking about?" Mitra asked.

"Vidhuk has decided not to stay," Mr. Inshiy said.

Mitra's eyes widened. "Can he do that?"

"He can do whatever he wants," Mr. Inshiy said.

"But why would you leave?" Mitra asked.

"Why not?" Vidhuk asked.

Trixie stifled a snuffle. "Have you thought about where you want to go?"

"I'll first explore this world," Vidhuk responded. "Then I will see about leaving for another planet."

Mitra looked to each of them, then downed the rest of her beer. With a gasp, she stared at Trixie. "Does this mean you'll be looking for a new job?"

"I see no reason for Ms. Sharpe to need other employment," Mr. Inshiy said. "She is still a valuable asset to my company."

"Calling me Ms. Sharpe, now?" Trixie asked. "Does that mean you'll entertain a first name?"

"I'm considering Kyrylo."

“Little lord?” Vidhuk asked.

“Of my own domain,” Mr. Inshiy said.

Trixie laughed through her tissue. “Kyrylo Inshiy. It suits you.”

Mr. Inshiy tilted his head, considering. “Perhaps it does.” He turned to Vidhuk. His smile reached his eyes. “And you will be welcome back when you’re ready.”

Trixie watched Vidhuk, the light catching the faint resemblance they’d built into him. She didn’t feel they were saying goodbye. In a world of limits, letting go felt a lot like freedom. She turned back to Mr. Inshiy. “Kyrylo.”

He met her gaze. “Trixie.”

The silence between them no longer felt empty.

The Olavia Incident

“We are not alone,” she said.

The man seated across the table from her leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. He had introduced himself as Mr. Visla. The name made her dislike him instantly. Their time together hadn’t improved her opinion of him.

Mr. Visla was a large, hulking man, probably raised on a small moon. His face was stern, his manner gruff. “And how do you know we are not alone?” he asked.

Monica Braden didn’t blink. “How do you know we’re having this conversation?”

Mr. Visla’s head bobbed back, his brow furrowed. “I know because I’m aware, I’m conscious.”

“What more do you need?” Monica asked.

The man held her gaze for several seconds. Without further acknowledgment, he leaned forward and pressed a finger to the table. Monica tried to remember how often he’d done just that, restarted his inquiry. It had to be a dozen times, every ten minutes or so.

Beneath his hand, a screen illuminated. On it was Monica’s photo along with some details about her. “Let’s try this again,” he said. “The Olavia left with a crew of six.”

Monica scanned the room, its plain gray walls revealing nothing of her location. When she’d first arrived, she assumed it was a facility on one of the several moons orbiting Yozora. Somewhere in the hours since, the assumption had fallen away. Now she knew she was on Yozora itself, buried deep beneath the planet’s rocky surface.

She wasn’t sure exactly how she had come to know this, but the fact that she was on Yozora told her that they hadn’t seen her as a threat, at least not at first. It was something they’d kept from her, but fewer and fewer of their secrets remained hidden.

"The vessel was worth several million credits," Mr. Visla said.

"Are you speaking for the company, now?" Monica asked, her attention drawn back to the interrogator.

"You know I'm not from the company."

"Is this how you claim the authority to detain me?"

"As soon as I learn the truth about what happened, you will be free to go."

Monica's mouth tightened, her eyes still fixed on the man opposite her. "I've told you everything I know. It's the same thing I told the person who was here before you, and the one before her."

"What about Commander Mastour? You haven't said anything about what happened to him."

"That's because I don't know what happened to him."

"And Lieutenant Raz?"

Monica shook her head. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

The man smirked. "Okay, let's try something different. What do you know?"

"I already told you: we're not alone."

"We'll get back to that. What else can you tell me about the Olavia?"

Monica closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "I know that the ship came in contact with something."

"Something?"

"I have no idea what it was."

"Can you describe it?"

Monica rubbed her temple. With her eyes closed, she tried again to picture the series of events. "I wasn't on the flight deck. All I know is that something happened to the ship."

Mr. Visla cleared his throat. "Okay, start from that point."

"We'd just left the bubble."

"The tempinetic field?"

Monica nodded, her eyes still closed, her breath steady through her nostrils.

"Was the transit different somehow?" Mr. Visla asked.

“Different?”

“Did it last longer? Did you sense something off? Were there sounds, odd smells? You’ve been through the bubble before. You know what it’s usually like.”

Monica shook her head. “I didn’t notice anything.”

“And how long before you met the anomaly?”

“It was seconds. Maybe a minute. Thrusters hadn’t fired yet.”

“Aren’t engines usually engaged sooner than a minute after a transit?”

Monica opened her eyes. “I guess. Yes, there was a delay.”

“So the pilot,” Mr. Visla said, looking down, “Lieutenant Manco, might have noticed something.”

“Lieutenant Raz was the pilot. If she did, I didn’t hear it.”

“What about the ship’s systems?”

“As far as I know, they didn’t have any warning.”

“Did you try to see the anomaly?”

“How would I do that?”

“You could have activated a monitor.”

“There wasn’t time.”

“Did anyone else describe it? Did you hear anything about it at all?”

Monica smirked. “The commander asked, ‘What the hell is that?’”

“Commander Mastour?”

“He said it over the intercom.”

“He was broadcasting? Is it normal for him to broadcast during a transit?”

“No, it’s usually quiet below deck. The commander activated the comm right as we left the bubble, calling for the first officer.”

“Lieutenant Manco? And where was he?”

“Somewhere on the ship. He wasn’t with us.”

Mr. Visla scanned the table monitor. “You were in the galley?”

“It was lunch time. I was with Gani. We were getting ready to eat.”

“That was Dr. Panaligan?”

"Yes, Gani and I—"

"Were you intimate with Dr. Panaligan?"

A cold glint sliced across Monica's gaze, sudden and unblinking. "We've gone over this. Dr. Panaligan and I had nothing more than a professional relationship. He was a happily married man."

"Was?"

"Is. Was. I don't know what happened to him, or any of them."

"You're telling me you spent months on the Olavia and you never became intimate."

"I'm not going to answer that question again," Monica insisted.

"It's not unusual for such things to happen on long voyages, is it?"

Monica remained silent, her stare unwavering.

The interrogator breathed slowly, his eyes returning Monica's gaze. "Okay, so you were preparing lunch with Dr. Panaligan. What was the meal?"

Monica took a moment to compose herself. "I'm not sure. Gani—Dr. Panaligan had just grabbed a few packs out of the cupboard."

"Where was Dr. Orakzai when this was going on?"

"In his bunk, I think."

"So you were with Dr. Panaligan preparing to have lunch when the vessel stopped."

"Well, it was more like a shudder than a full stop."

"A shudder?"

"Since our engines hadn't fired, we couldn't have been moving very fast. It felt like we'd gently bumped into something."

"It had to be large if you could feel it."

"I guess so."

"Did the ship's systems report the anomaly then?"

Monica turned her head abruptly, her eyes searching a corner of the room. "Did you hear that?"

Mr. Visla shook his head. "Hear what?"

Monica's eyes opened wide. She shook her head as though trying to clear it. "I heard someone talking. A woman's voice."

Her nose wrinkled. "And a smell. Lilacs?"

The interrogator frowned. "You couldn't have heard a woman's voice in here, Doctor, unless it was your own."

Monica turned to look at him. Her eyes narrowed. "Are you married, Mr. Visla?"

"Doctor, if we can focus on—"

"Your wife's name is Mirai, isn't it? She has a fondness for lilacs. It's in her perfume."

Mr. Visla held her gaze. She could see sweat forming on his forehead.

"This is where the last interview ended," she said. "The woman before you wasn't quite as imposing. I suppose the company—"

"I don't work for the company, Doctor," Mr. Visla said, his voice low and terse.

"The company. The government. Is there a difference anymore?"

Mr. Visla stood, his impressive frame looming over the table. "Dr. Braden, I will not be cowed by your parlor tricks."

"She's fine, by the way. Your wife, Mirai."

"And how would you know that?"

"The same way I know we are not alone."

The interrogator turned to his left. Monica watched as a door in the wall slid aside, and he passed through it. The hallway beyond revealed nothing. The gap quickly closed, leaving her alone.

In the silence of the room, Monica listened to her own heartbeat. It was a pleasant sound, one she'd begun to get used to.

She tried to estimate how long she'd been in this room. Three different interrogators had come and gone. There had been an extended gap between the last two. She'd endured several hours with each of them. None had lasted long past her mention of something personal about them.

She stood. It was the first time she'd been out of the seat since before Mr. Visla had arrived. Access to food, water, and a lavatory was probably being denied to her. Despite this, she'd known no hunger, experienced no bodily urges. These facts occurred to her

as she moved slowly back and forth along the wall.

With each step, she felt herself getting lighter. At first, she mistook it for a sensation. When she looked down, she found that her feet were no longer touching the floor. She was still pacing, though she had no idea how she remained in motion. Stopping suddenly, she drifted gently down.

She sensed an approach just ahead of the door opening. In walked Dr. Cheng, the second interrogator. She was a small, middle-aged woman in a white lab coat.

"Welcome back, Doctor," Monica said. "I trust you checked in with your daughter since we last spoke."

Dr. Cheng stopped, suddenly drained of certainty. She lifted a hand to her face, a subtle tremor in her fingers. "As you pointed out, Dr. Braden, my daughter is too far away for me to speak with her right now."

"But you sent her a message."

"If you'll please have a seat, we can get back to the Olavia incident," Dr. Cheng said, her voice wavering.

"I'd rather not," Monica responded. "Instead, you can let me go."

"I'm afraid that's not yet an option. Won't you please sit down?"

Monica pushed out her lower lip. "How much longer?"

"We still have questions."

Monica settled back into the seat. "You're waiting for different answers."

"We're only looking for the truth," Dr. Cheng said as she took her own seat. "I understand you had some observations for Mr. Visla." Her eyes fell to the table screen. "As you likely noticed, it took us some time to identify him. We chose him because he had only recently joined this facility."

"He came from Sol," Monica said. "Grew up on Ganymede. That's where he met his wife, Mirai. She wears a lilac perfume even though she has never actually smelled the flower. She gets the love of the scent from her mother, a woman who grew up on

Earth.”

Dr. Cheng looked up. “How could you possibly know any of that?”

“To be honest,” Monica said, “I find it less and less remarkable that I do.”

“You can appreciate, Dr. Braden, that we had doubts about these abilities of yours.”

“I suppose you could ignore the evidence.”

Dr. Cheng offered a weak smile. “There are ways to fake something that appears to be clairvoyance. We had to be certain. As a scientist, you are familiar with the process of validation.”

“So, where does this leave us?”

“What has happened to you—”

“What *is* happening,” Monica said.

Dr. Cheng studied her face. “So it continues?”

“I see no reason for it to have stopped. Do you?”

Dr. Cheng kept her hand moving across the table screen. “I was working under the assumption that it occurred when you encountered the anomaly, that you are only slowly coming to understand it.”

Monica’s face softened. “That’s reasonable, but I can assure you the changes haven’t stopped. There are too many for me to relate.”

“Telepathy being one of them,” said Dr. Cheng.

“Is that what you think it is, this parlor trick?”

Dr. Cheng’s eyes narrowed. “What else would it be?”

Monica smiled. “What do you know about quantum mechanics?”

“Not my area of expertise.”

“Nor mine, but I’d say that’s closer than clairvoyance.”

Dr. Cheng’s gaze returned to the table screen. “While I would like to explore that further, I still need to understand what happened on the Olavia.”

“By ‘I’ you don’t mean yourself, you mean the government.”

“If you like.” Dr. Cheng moved text elements around as she spoke. “Let’s pick up where you left off with Mr. Visla. You and

Dr. Panaligan felt a shudder in the galley?"

Monica closed her eyes again. This time, she let the darkness settle along with her breath. "Gani had just inserted the two packs in the rehydrator."

"Both packs?"

"We usually combined our food. He ate more than I did, so it was easier that way."

"And the rehydrator—"

"There was a sound," Monica interrupted.

"A sound? Did it come from within the ship?"

"I don't know. It was a buzzing, or maybe a hum."

"You didn't mention this before."

When Monica's eyes opened, she found Dr. Cheng staring at her. "I didn't remember it before. Am I remembering it now?"

Dr. Cheng lifted an eyebrow. "You're not sure?"

Monica slowly shook her head. "No."

"Okay," Dr. Cheng said, "What did you do when you heard the sound?"

Monica's head continued moving. "I don't know if I heard it."

"Did Dr. Panaligan hear it?"

Monica began shaking her head up and down. "I think he did. He turned his head abruptly. At the time, I didn't know why. He made a funny face, like a strained smile. That's when the commander started broadcasting."

Dr. Cheng sat silent, biting her lower lip.

"I've told you the rest," Monica said. "That's when I blacked out. I woke up on the Spasenko."

"Yes, but you've only just remembered the sound," Dr. Cheng insisted.

"I'm not convinced it qualifies as a memory."

"How can you recall something that isn't a memory?"

"I don't know how to explain it. It's like my parlor trick."

"The insights—"

"They don't originate in your thoughts," Monica said.

"How is that possible?"

"Your Mr. Visla. Do you really think that man knows anything about his mother-in-law's love of lilacs?"

"Maybe not—"

"Definitely not."

"If it didn't come from him, then how could you know?"

Monica stood again, this time pacing with some urgency. "What is your favorite color?" she finally asked.

Dr. Cheng's lip curled. "Blue, I suppose."

"It won't help for you to lie, Doctor. Your favorite color is auburn. In the past, you've preferred green and different shades of yellow. Don't ask me how I know this, just explain to me why the color auburn might be your favorite."

Dr. Cheng watched silently as Monica paced back and forth. A twitch flickered in the corner of the doctor's left eye.

"You can't explain it, at least not in any meaningful way," Monica continued. "You could point to things you like that have the color. You might tell me how auburn makes you feel, or a specific memory where the color plays a prominent role. These things make your preference relatable, but not tangible, not real."

"I'm sorry, I don't see the point of this."

Monica stopped pacing and turned toward the table. "Now, imagine that you could express your preference in a way that enabled me to experience it, complete with scents, sounds, and emotions." Monica gestured, emphasizing each descriptor. "Rather than using words to describe it, you could relay the color auburn to me in how you experience it, your subjective interpretation of its essence."

"Its essence?"

"What comprises both the color and your preference for it, at all levels of existence."

"All levels?"

"That's why I asked about quantum mechanics," said Monica. "I don't pretend to understand it, yet, but I know now that I'm experiencing reality in a profoundly different way." She turned to stare at Dr. Cheng, a look of wonder in her eyes. "It might be easier

to think of it as a curtain lifting, revealing the drama behind it.”

“And this was the result of whatever happened to the Olavia?”

“You’re a scientist. What do you think?”

“Can you tell us what that was?” Dr. Cheng asked, her voice cracking.

Monica paused. Her head tilted to one side. “Perhaps I can.” She lowered herself into the seat, her eyes staring through Dr. Cheng. “You’ll forgive me, Doctor. The changes have been so many, so rapid, so unexpected, I’ve not kept up with them myself.”

“Rapid changes?”

“Mutations, if you like.”

“Evolutionary mutations?”

“Yes, even if they are only occurring in me, a single organism, over a compressed time.”

“You’re saying you are evolving?”

“I can’t think of a better way to describe it, at least in terms you would understand.”

Dr. Cheng raised an eyebrow. “But you do understand it?”

A childlike wonder still animated Monica’s face. “It’s coming to me. Not all at once. At your prompting, I’ve been trying to remember something that I couldn’t entirely know. Ironically, that’s because memory is not very helpful with the story of the Olavia.”

“What would you use if not memory?”

“As you’ve seen, my memories are incomplete. They end with the shudder. After that, it’s darkness. Nothing explains how I went from the galley of the Olavia to the flight deck of the Spasenko. What did the crew of that ship say?”

Dr. Cheng hesitated. “That you simply appeared.”

“And how is that possible?”

“It’s not.”

“Only if we think in terms of three-dimensional reality.”

Dr. Cheng closed her eyes. “You are talking about fantasy, Dr. Braden.”

“Speak to any human alive a thousand years ago, and they

would call spaceflight a fantasy.”

Dr. Cheng shook her head as she opened her eyes. “That’s because it was beyond their abilities. What you’re describing is beyond ours.”

“How did we get where we are? We evolved.”

“Our technology evolved. We are little changed from ancient humans.”

“Perhaps you are, Doctor,” Monica said, “But I am not.”

Dr. Cheng lifted a trembling hand to her face. Her eyes betrayed a growing fear. She stood and headed to her left. The door quietly opened, revealing guards at the ready in the hallway.

“You can’t run away from it, Doctor,” Monica said. A mocking had crept into her tone. “And you won’t be able to hold me much longer. You will have to set me free, or I will do it myself.”

Dr. Cheng stopped and turned. “What you’re talking about breaks everything.”

Monica shook her head. “The only thing it breaks is the illusion of control.”

“As you can see, Doctor, we are quite capable of controlling you. We will learn what happened, and we will do so with or without your cooperation.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Monica asked, her voice lapsing into derision. “Everything mutates. From the smallest cell to the most extensive society, mutation is the rule, not the exception. The larger the abstraction, the more rapid and diverse the change. You believe yourselves able to control this, to guide it in your preferred direction, to mold it into your image of a future. It’s a fatal conceit—not for your society, but for the structures you build with this purpose.”

Dr. Cheng spun on her heel and split the two guards standing in the hall. The door closed behind her, leaving Monica alone again with the beating of her heart.

Monica Braden looked down at her hand, turning it over and back again. She smiled. The table beneath her palm stayed cool and real, slowly revealing itself as her hand dissolved into light. And

still she felt her hand move.

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