

Trixie & Me

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01: Chained

Trixie lay in a fetal position, hugging her legs against her chest as she curled up on the floor, trying to stay warm. Her eyes flickered in the dark, taking in the soft glow around her. The ground was dirty, almost oily. Plant roots ran beneath her, crisscrossing the floor. A little warmth radiated through the leathery surface, coming up from the engines deep below, but it wasn't enough to stave off the chill hanging in the air. Her first thought on waking was that she was naked. Goosebumps prickled her skin. Her covering was gone, and that surprised her more than the alien environment around her. She felt vulnerable, alone and somewhat scared. Sitting up, she struggled to clear her thinking as she looked around, trying to make out where she was.

A soft hum rang in her ears. Things moved about her, scurrying around her, ignoring her. There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands. She wasn't sure if they were tiny machines or something that was alive. Either way, she didn't want to know. They were leaving her alone, and that was fine with her. She had no desire to change the arrangement.

Trixie blinked, her eyes taking in the soft light. The cavern was large, at least a hundred feet high, with irregular, curved walls spiraling inward toward each other, joining at a point high above. The walls around her looked like the inside of a hollow tree. The trunk was gnarled, the tree rotten. Faint specks of light ran up the twisted knots. Tiny pinpricks of red, yellow and green pierced the darkness, spreading throughout the cavern like ants climbing an ivy vine.

She could see Berry.

Berry hung in mid-air. He was suspended without any means of visible support, his feet just inches from the ground, his head drooped to one side. The soft, orange glow of a force field surrounded him. Like her, he was naked. His body puzzled her, she'd only ever seen him dressed, or, at least, that was all she remembered. The contours of his muscles, the hair on his chest, the stubble on his face, it aroused something primal within her, it was a feeling she didn't understand. Her thoughts were confused.

Something ran across her hand, its prickly feet dancing briefly across her fingers. She wanted to scream, but she resisted, pursing her lips so as to avoid making a sound. Slowly, she withdrew her hand from where she had been leaning, not wanting to arouse any inadvertent attention.

As Trixie got up, she felt clumsy. Her legs felt too long, her arms too lanky. As she moved forward, her fingers and arms splayed wide with surprise, helping her keep her balance. Stiff and sore, she pushed through the ache in her muscles. She stepped over a thick root and tripped, falling forward, landing on all fours, but her fall was slow, her landing soft. Gravity was reduced.

"Trix," Berry called out, seeing her in the shadows. "You've got to get me out of here."

Trixie shook her head slowly, watching her dark hair dangle in front of her. She got back to her feet, trying to shake the drugged lethargy of the moment, not sure what had happened to her. Was this a dream? A nightmare? Was any of this real? It seemed surreal. She was disoriented, detached.

"Trix, Honey," called Berry. "Come on, baby. You can do this."

Trixie heard him, but she wasn't interested. There were too many other strange and unusual things competing for her attention, too much she was curious about, things she wanted to understand. Something caught her eye, a colorful bracelet lying on the ground nearby. She picked it up, examining it closely. Trixie wasn't sure why, but she sniffed it. She wasn't sure what she expected it to smell like, but it smelt musty, almost familiar. Holding it, she looked at the petite woven threads. The rainbow strands of colors were dull within the dark chamber. It must have been pretty to look at in the light. A small bell hung from a silver name tag looped over the bracelet. It was pretty, she decided, even if she couldn't see it properly. She slipped the bracelet over her wrist. The bell tinkled softly as she moved. Trixie liked the sound. Her mind was struggling to comprehend what was going on, where she was, what had happened to her, what had happened to Berry. Deep inside, she wanted to block everything out, to ignore the bizarre sensations, and focus on the simple things, like the bracelet and the bell.

Trixie felt confused, afraid, but the soft ring of the bell was strangely comforting, and that made her feel better.

“We don't have time for this, Trix.”

Trixie walked slowly toward Berry. Roots and vines twisted along the ground. They climbed over each other, diving beneath the surface and then reappearing again. Stepping on the balls of her feet, Trixie moved gracefully, carefully, her arms stretched out on either side of her naked body, keeping her balance.

“That's it,” Berry said. “I know this is hard for you. I know. You're doing great. Get me out of here, and we'll get back to the *Swift* and get the hell out of this mess, but you've got to be quick, Trix. They'll be back soon. Do you understand?”

Trixie stepped up onto the ledge beside him. She'd heard his words, but she didn't understand them. His words seemed disjointed, like words spoken at random. She knew her name. She liked hearing her name, but the other words were a jumble of noise. *Swift*, mess, hell, quick – somehow she knew the terms, but their meaning was lost. They made no sense in a sentence. She stared at Berry, curious, her head turning sideways as she watched him slowly rotating within the force field.

“You've got to figure out how to disable this thing,” he said.

She reached out, her hand passing harmlessly through the glowing field, and ran her fingers through his hair, stroking his head gently. She ran her nails over his scalp. It felt nice to touch Berry.

“Not now, Trix. Look, you're beautiful, you're pretty, but I need you to focus. I need you to get me out of here. Do you understand?”

Trixie ran her fingers over his shoulders and through the hair on his chest, clawing at him, feeling the muscles beneath his skin. She was fascinated by Berry. She couldn't explain what was going through her mind, but to touch him felt good. Her fingers played with the hair on his forearm, fascinated by the sense of touch, the warmth, the soft textures.

Berry sighed, exasperated. “Trix. You can't do this. Trixie, listen to me. Bellatrix, please listen.”

Something resonated within her, she knew those names, all three. They were her names, she remembered that. Trixie pulled her hand away from the shimmering field surrounding him and stood back, looking at him coldly. Words, concepts, hormones and emotions, they bounced around in her head, conflicting with each other.

“The controls are over there,” Berry said, unable to move his arms but nodding with his head.

Trixie looked around the dark cavern, hearing his voice echoing in the void. Black shapes swarmed over the walls, soft lights glowing from beneath their shells. She felt drawn to them, her fear fading the more she moved around. As her thinking cleared, she found herself growing more curious. Trixie reached out to touch one of the small creatures scuttling past on the ground. She wanted to learn about it, to toy with it, to play with it like a child would with a pet. She picked up one of the insect-like animals by its shell. Its legs continued pumping as though they were still touching the ground. She turned the critter around, putting it down so it faced the way it came, and it scurried off, fighting against the current of the other creatures swarming around it. The tiny alien was mindless, which was surprising to her.

Another creature caught her eye. This one was segmented, with hundreds of spiky legs protruding from its various body sections snaking some six feet behind it. The creature was thin, barely an inch wide, and looked like a centipede, but without any visible head. Trixie put her foot down in front of it, blocking its path. The creature reversed its motion without turning around, moving backwards smoothly and climbing on top of an adjacent root that weaved along the floor at a slightly different angle. From there, the long, flexible creature straightened up and proceeded forward again, without turning and changing the direction it was facing. Trixie was fascinated.

“Trix, we don't have time for this.” Berry sounded exhausted, frustrated. Berry was no fun.

As Trixie moved over by the twisted wall, a holographic projection rose up before her. She'd stepped up on a slightly raised platform, activating the image.

“Don't touch that, Trix.”

Trixie was intrigued. The holograph sprawled before her, a three-dimensional image of a dense tree branching into millions of fine filaments, or perhaps it was a giant brain, or the growth of a coral head, whatever it was, it stretched some fifteen feet across through the air in front of her. The image was transparent, allowing her to see through to the various end points on the far side. As she waved her hand over the image it turned, rotating before her in response to the motion of her arms. Trixie laughed. She liked the pretty lights.

“Leave that alone, Trix.”

Naked, she lifted both hands above her head and the entire image turned upside down before her, turning over on the x-axis, exposing the single root from which the tree branched out in all of its complexity. The trunk was stubby, dividing in two, before those limbs split again and then further, diverging in hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of branches, each one blossoming and spreading out further again into thin veins covering millions of end points at varying depths. The tips looked like a sea of stars. Trixie felt giddy looking at the immense structure, all linked back to that single point at the base. She lowered her arms and the coral tree rotated down, showing the plethora of possible end points as a field of fine white dots floating in the air before her. One of them glowed red.

“Don't touch that, Trix.”

She couldn't help herself. Her sense of curiosity was overwhelming. Trixie wanted to play, not to run and hide. She had to touch it. There was nothing else she could do when faced with such a wonderful, beautiful sight. Her hand reached through the air, skimming over the sea of jewels as her finger touched the small, red terminal point. The image changed. The branching structure beneath the glowing red star lit up in a brilliant variety of complementary colors. The trail winding through the tree toward its base showed multiple alternate end points all branching off in different, lesser shades of red, slowly fading to orange and yellow on the fringes.

“Don't touch anything, Trix. Just step away. I need you to figure out how to turn that bloody thing off.”

Trixie heard him. She knew “don't,” but she decided, no. Looking at the fine filaments, she touched a point near the base of the upper junction leading to the pretty red star. She wondered what this marvelous machine would do, if it was a machine. It seemed organic, more alive than any computer could ever be.

Another image appeared above the branch, a set of human chromosomes. Twenty three pairs of chromatids floated in the air, each one looking like an earthworm, or a fuzzy caterpillar, all scrunched up, some pinched in the middle, others pinched together. Various sections of the DNA coiled within these chromosomes glowed, highlighting the genetic changes that had occurred since this last juncture in the evolutionary tree of life.

Berry screamed, crying out in agony. The muscles in his arm flexed as his head swung back in pain. Trixie was startled by his cry. She panicked. Instinctively, she leaped, with her only thought being to flee. In the low gravity, her muscles propelled her ten feet in the air, and she grabbed hold of one of the mighty branches twisting upward toward the specks of light above. Instantly, her body was pulled sideways against the wall, held there by the gravitational realignment within the alien vessel that made every wall a floor. It confused her. She looked back at Berry and the holographic image, they seemed to be stuck to the wall beside her, instead of below her. Berry's cries and the bewildering nature of her sense of down confused and scared her even more. She felt she had to hide from the raw power being unleashed around her.

The force field around Berry glowed, throbbing, pulsating with light. Trixie could see his form changing over the course of several minutes. Berry squirmed, trying to free himself from the invisible chains that bound him, but it was useless. His skin darkened as his head distorted, his cheekbones widened, his jaw grew larger, and the brow above his eyes thickened and extended slightly outward. Hair bloomed, covering most of his body. His back seemed to arch into a hunch, no longer straight.

Berry struggled in vain as his muscles gained bulk. His forearms and hands looked coarse and thick. Berry looked over at her, his eyes pleading. He grunted, unable to speak. The force field surged in intensity and Berry howled in agony.

Trixie had been bad. She should have listened to Berry. This was wrong. Even for her, this was too much. She shouldn't have played with the hologram, but she didn't know what would happen. She wanted to know what would happen, she was curious.

She wanted Berry back, her Berry.

With unusual grace, she sprang off the wall as though she were jumping from the ground, and twisted through the air. In the light gravity, she drifted before landing silently in a crouched position. Her sense of up never changed, but the vast chamber seemed to twist and distort around her as she landed on the floor of the chamber that, seconds before, had seemed like a wall.

Her hands were shaking. She hadn't meant to hurt Berry. She loved Berry. Her fingers trembled as she reached into the holographic image, carefully moving the glowing red star back to the outer filaments of the tree, hoping that would be enough.

Berry screamed again, but this time his cry was deep and chesty. His body shook in a continuous spasm as genetic changes were applied to the cellular structure of his entire body. Trixie watched in anguish as the minutes slowly passed. She was torturing him, but she didn't mean to cause him such pain. Trixie felt awful. At those points where she could no longer watch him writhing in agony, she hung her head in shame. The contorted, twisted look on his face slowly returned to normal. His skin lightened, his back straightened, the excess hair fell away, drifting lazily out of the force field and to the floor, his claw-like nails retreated. Insects swarmed over the ground and converged on the hair, whisking it away into the shadows.

As the pulsating field died down, Berry was left panting, gasping for breath. Tears ran down his cheeks. Blood dripped from his nose.

"Trix," he whispered. "Please."

Trixie didn't know what to do. She tried to speak, tried to say sorry, but nothing came out, just a hoarse croak. The cold around her seemed to add to her confusion. What could she do? She didn't understand, she couldn't understand. The holographic image rested before her. She noticed it emanated from a smooth silver disc set into the center of the platform. She hated the pretty lights. She hated what they had done. She wanted to be rid of the image, to destroy it. Trixie reached through the glowing filaments with her foot, hoping she was doing the right thing, and stamped on the source of the image, kicking at it, covering it. The cavern darkened immediately. Berry dropped to the ground.

"Oh," she cried, bounding over toward him in the light gravity and grabbing him, helping him sit up. "I, I'm..."

"I know," he said, catching his breath. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me. It's OK. I know you're sorry."

"Hurt, sorry," she said, repeating his words, grasping at their meaning.

Trixie pulled his head to her soft breast, wrapping her arms around him, holding his head close as she kissed his forehead and his hair. She didn't think anything of it. She relished the warmth of touch, the feel of life, the freedom and relief.

Berry got to his feet. Trixie grabbed at him, her hands running up and down his chest, fawning over him.

"Trix, don't."

His clothes were lying to one side. He tossed her a singlet, adding, "Put this on."

Berry slipped on his trousers as Trixie stood there holding the cotton singlet, wondering what to do with it.

"Raise your hands," he said. "Go on, it's OK."

Trixie complied meekly and Berry slipped the singlet over her arms and head, pulling it down over her breasts and covering her waist and the upper half of her thighs.

“Clothes,” he said. “They keep us warm.”

“Warm,” she replied, finding it easy to mimic his sounds, vaguely remembering these concepts. She knew the words, she'd heard them spoken so often before, but it seemed only now that they had any meaning. Now, they were anchored in her mind to tangible, real concepts.

“Yes, warm. Do you feel warm or cold?” he asked, rubbing her arms. He picked up his jacket and helped her put it on. It felt cold, but she smiled, appreciating his interest and kindness.

“I feel cold,” she said, intuitively realizing cold was the opposite of warm. It was a sentence. She was learning.

“We've got to get out of here, Trix.”

Berry turned and started walking toward the back of the cavern. Trixie stood there. She couldn't move, her legs wouldn't let her. This was all she knew, she couldn't leave. The thought of what else might be out there in the darkness terrified her. Here, there were bugs, branches, pretty insects that glowed like stars, images made from light, these were all things she knew, the only things she knew. Out there could be anything. Monsters waited in the shadows.

Berry turned back to her. He reached out, resting his hands on either side of her neck, gently caressing her shoulders before running his fingers up over her cheeks as he reached in and kissed her on the lips.

“Oh, what have they done to you, my darling? I am so sorry. I know this must be hard for you, but you're doing great. Just stay with me, OK? Everything's going to be all right.”

Trixie nodded, tears ran down her cheeks. Berry held her hand, pulling her along with him as they weaved between the vivisection platforms scattered throughout the dark cavern. A large hole in the floor loomed at the back of the cave, marking the corridor running through this section of the alien ship. The black abyss frightened Trixie, she remembered it. She remembered being caged. She remembered moving from corridor to corridor, before being brought into this cavern. And she remembered the strange feeling in her stomach as gravity realigned within the various tunnels winding through the ship. Shafts of differing sizes branched through the interior of the craft like veins, following paths of organic purpose rather than straight lines. Her memories were like a dream, a haze in the back of her mind, but she knew what to expect as they approached the broad hole in the ground. Thick roots lined the floor, like cables snaking into the shaft, tripping her on the odd occasion. At one point, Berry slipped on the damp roots, falling slowly to the ground.

“Like falling in a swimming pool, ain't it?” he said. “Not that you'd know too much about getting wet.”

“Water?” she said, making a connection deep in the recesses of her mind.

“Yeah,” Berry replied. “That's right. Swimming pools are full of water. And here, on this craft, gravity is weaker. It's hard for us, it's like fighting to move through treacle. You can't go as fast as you want to. It feels like you're being held back, but that's because our bodies evolved to move against the pull of one gravity, allowing us to rebound in a natural rhythm, but here, it feels like there's a lag, some kind of delay.”

“Treacle?” asked Trixie, struggling to piece together the rest of his sentences.

“Oh, you'll love treacle, Trix. It's sweet. Goes well with pancakes.”

“Pancakes?”

“Yeah,” replied Berry. “There's a lot you're going to have to learn about, Babe, but you'll like them, treacle and pancakes. Just keep talking, Honey. Try not to think about where you are. Try not to think about what's happening. Just keep thinking about treacle and pancakes.”

Although she knew what was coming, it was still a physical surprise to Trixie when down became forward and she realized Berry had walked her into the hole. Down had shifted. Down had changed, just as it had when she'd jumped up into the vines and branches on the wall. With her fingers, she pointed, trying to comprehend what had happened. The bell around her wrist rang softly. Down had been a concept she thought she understood. Her old down now lay in front of her, before her, and yet

down was still below her. Her mind struggled to grasp that she would no longer fall toward her old down as she once had, just minutes before. Berry could see the confusion in her face.

“Kind of trippy, huh,” he said. “Don't know that we'd ever get use to this, but it means our concept of upright has multiple meanings in just one room. Must be quite something, though, as it increases their usable space by a factor of six. These corridors are the worst, they're winding cylinders, like artery walls, so there is no right way up, all ways are right and all ways are up, all pointing in toward the middle. How the hell they do that without spinning the craft, I don't know. The techs on the *Rift Valley* would be impressed with this stuff, though.”

He let go of her hand, giving her some freedom.

The roots were larger in the spiraling corridor, reaching up to waist height and, in places, forming knots slightly over her head. Trixie touched one, feeling it pulsate. Berry seemed to know where he was going, so she pressed on behind him. Her bell rang as her arms swung beside her.

“We're going to have to lose that bell, Trix.”

She shook her head, a look of horror on her face at the thought. With her other hand, she silenced the bell.

“You can't do that forever, Trix. We've got to be quiet. We can't do anything that would give us away to these buggers. You're going to have to take that off and leave it here.”

“No,” she replied, fiddling with the silver tag and the bell. If she slipped the woven bracelet down her wrist, she could rest the metallic tag and the bell in the palm of her hand and hold them silent with her fingers.

“I know it means a lot to you, but I can get you another one.”

“No,” she repeated, defiant. It felt good to be assertive, to be herself, to express her needs in unambiguous terms. No was such a powerful word. It carried so much depth behind it, far more than warm or cold, pancakes or treacle. Trixie decided she liked no.

“OK, but you keep that thing quiet,” Berry said, his voice barely audible.

“OK,” she replied in a whisper. In the midst of the darkness, in the cold and danger, words became her refuge. She struggled to comprehend everything Berry would say, but that he would say something was a relief, a distraction.

Critters scurried past her in the dark, clinging to the tangled roots, scrambling along beside her. Centipedes and spiders, at least, that's what they looked like to her. It spooked her. She flinched, trying not to scream as one of them ran over her hand, its claws clinging briefly to her skin. As in the chamber, whenever she put her hand out to steady herself, it seemed one of these creatures would scurry across.

“It's OK, Babe. They're workers, not thinkers. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“Afraid,” she said, linking another concept in her mind.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” repeated Berry, edging forward cautiously, staying low. “They're cleaners, repairmen, mechanics, plumbers. They won't hurt you.”

“Won't hurt you.”

“That's right. They won't hurt you. They won't hurt me,” he said, pointing at her and then at himself.

“Won't hurt you,” she said, touching him in the center of his chest, before pointing at herself and adding, “Won't hurt me.”

“There. See. You're a fast learner. You and me.”

“You and me,” she replied smiling. Berry smiled back. She liked it when Berry smiled.

Berry turned and pushed on, following the contour of a large root with thick vines wrapping around it, seemingly suffocating the winding trunk. He whispered under his breath, laughing to himself as he said, “Here I am, stuck in a goddamn alien war-craft, giving English lessons to a newborn. We're screwed. We are so totally screwed.”

“Screwed?” asked Trixie, whispering as well, mimicking Berry in as many respects as she could.

“I’ll explain that one to you later. We’ve got to get the hell out of Dodge before they realize we’re on the run and turn us into a pile of eukaryotes or mushrooms.”

Trixie stole a look behind them as Berry paused at the intersection of six corridors in the heart of the craft, trying to get his bearings. As she looked behind them, she could see the point where they had entered the hole. Was it above them or below them, or just behind them? The notion of anchored spatial directions was meaningless within the alien craft. When they entered the corridor, up had been sideways. Down, it seemed, was always down wherever they happened to be as they curved around the inside of the vast tube. Trixie could see the central root they’d followed through the darkened corridor. It had twisted through three hundred and sixty degrees as it wound along the tunnel. They had gone upside down without realizing it, but then, there was no upside down here.

The curved veins running along the side of the massive root were teeming with workers, streaming back and forth, their phosphorescent bodies glowing with an oily iridescence, providing what little light there was in the cold darkness.

Trixie reached out, running her fingers over the rough surface of the root beside her. The bark, if it could be called that, was different to the smooth textures in the vivisection chamber. It felt stippled, raised up in hundreds of tiny lumps, like the surface of a basketball. She could feel it throb, pulsing beneath her fingertips with a sense of rhythm. There was a harmony to it, a sense of purpose, which she found perplexing. The organic nature of the alien space craft was a stark contrast to the sterile, lifeless structure of the *Swift*. Her memory was fragmented, with fleeting glimpses of the white, clean surfaces, the right-angle corners, the hatchways and corridors within their scout craft. They were such a contrast to the earthy tones and soft curves around her. She remembered the metallic smell of ozone from the CO2 scrubbers on the *Swift*, like the smell that hung in the air after a thunderstorm. Here, though, the musty smell of decay lingered around her, repelling her.

When she turned back, Berry was gone.

Panic swept over her.

Trixie went to call out his name, but thought better of it, not wanting to attract the wrong attention. She clambered forward over a large root, slipping and falling gently onto her back in a wedge between two of the main arteries. What seemed like beetles, centipedes, spiders and cockroaches scurried over her, filling her with a sense of dread, their spindly legs clawing at her arms, catching in her hair, clinging to her hands. She scrambled to her feet, shaking her arms and flicking the creatures from her. Although she knew they were nothing like terrestrial insects, the sense of dirt and decay overwhelmed her, filling her with revulsion. She was manic, grabbing at the creatures and tossing them to the ground. There had only been a handful of them, but she continued pulling at her hair, convinced she could feel more of them crawling over her skin, hiding beneath her locks. Try as she may, there was nothing she could do to rid herself of these apparitions in her mind. Even after they were gone, it felt like they were still crawling over her. Watching them scurry away, she knew they were just as startled as she was and just as glad to be rid of her, and yet she felt violated.

Trixie pushed on blindly, not sure where she was going, just wanting to get away from that junction, to be free from the terror of the moment. There was a dim light in the distance, glowing from within an open chamber at the end of a narrow, slowly curving corridor. Watching her steps, she crept forward, her eyes scanning the darkness for Berry. Every couple of feet, she paused, running her hands through her hair to reassure herself there was nothing there. She felt dirty, soiled. Her hair drifted around her, floating in front of her whenever she paused. The side tunnel was no more than fifteen feet in diameter, making it the smallest tunnel she had ventured into, at least, the smallest she remembered. When she stood, her head was within a couple of feet of the gravitationally neutral center of the tunnel, putting unusual stress on her body. Her feet felt anchored, pulled outward by gravity, but her stomach seemed to float slightly within her chest, while her arms and hair were buoyant. Trixie felt a little

giddy, so she crouched down as she moved toward the dim glow, trying to minimize the weightless effect, hoping she would find Berry in the chamber beyond.

Ahead, a vast, spherical cavern opened up before her, stretching out over several hundred yards. At its heart, suspended in mid-air, lay a seething ball of dust, swirling like a sandstorm. A dim yellow light shone from within the heart of the compressed sphere. It was diffuse, there was no clear boundary marking its outline, just the misty haze of dust fines growing ever denser toward the glowing center. Trixie watched as the creatures, or workers as Berry had called them, formed a living chain, reaching up from the surrounding vines and branches into the swirling storm. She coughed. The powdery dust coated everything, getting in her hair, her eyes, her nose, on her lips and in her mouth, leaving a sharp, sour taste. Trixie pulled her singlet up over her nose and mouth, using it as a filter to breathe as she watched with fascination. Several strands of living bridges stretched out into the glowing mist from equidistant points around the chamber, harvesting the fine dust, carrying it away for use elsewhere.

Trixie was curious, although, if asked, she couldn't have explained why. It was the inconsistency within the topsy-turvy alien world. Some kind of localized gravity caused the creatures swarming around her to stick to the walls as they wandered through the circular chamber, but the center of the chamber with its bulbous dust cloud didn't seem to be subject to the craft's gravity, it seemed to have its own pull, independent of the alien vessel, and that intrigued her. She had expected it to be similar to the shaft, weightless in the center, but it seemed everything in this vast chamber revolved around this dense cloud.

Trixie reached down and picked one of the smaller workers off a root, holding him by his shell as his feet splayed helplessly through the air. She tossed him on an angle, sending the creature across the chamber and not directly at the eddies swirling within the dust ball. The cockroach-like animal curved in an arc away from the chamber wall and down into the dust storm, disappearing from sight without having struck any visible surface.

"Having fun?" came a quiet voice from behind her. Trixie almost screamed with fright.

Berry placed his hand over her mouth, pulling her down into a gap between the roots. Trixie flinched, her heart leaping in her throat before the realization struck that he'd found her.

"Don't wander off like that," he whispered in her ear.

Trixie went to protest, wanting to point out that he had left her back at the intersection, when Berry whispered again in her ear, pointing off to one side.

"Thinkers."

There, on the roof of the circular chamber, was a black shape, much larger than several men huddled together. In the grainy half-light, Trixie couldn't make out much detail, but, like the bugs around her, there was a faint glow of phosphorescence emanating from around the edges of what appeared to be an outer shell. Trixie felt her heart racing. Her mouth went dry. She wanted to run. It was as though she could somehow escape from the alien craft if only she could run fast enough, run far enough. Her muscles tensed. Berry must have realized what she was thinking as she poised, ready to spring at the slightest sign of danger. He whispered softly in her ear, saying, "Easy, girl. Don't panic. Keep it together."

Trixie found herself breathing heavily, hyperventilating. It was irrational. Somehow, deep down, she knew that size was meaningless. Just because the creatures crawling past her were small didn't mean they weren't dangerous, it had worked out that way because of their function, not their size, and yet the imposing bulk of a thinker intimidated her. It seemed there was strength hidden there, coiled up in that dark body, with its crab-like feet poking out from beneath its shell.

"Come," said Berry, watching the thinker overseeing the extraction of the fine powder. "We've got to get back to the *Swift*. See if we can get her started and get back home."

"Home?" Trixie asked, a sense of loss in her voice.

"Yes. Home. Back on the *Rift Valley*."

Berry inched backwards down the shaft, keeping a wary eye on the thinker moving around within the chamber. Keeping to the dark shadows, the two of them moved back to the junction.

Trixie grabbed at his shoulder and his upper arm, not wanting him to move too far ahead of her. It wasn't the thinkers themselves that terrified her, it was the idea of being caught, the uncertainty about what would happen, the irrational fear of being brutally slaughtered by some inhuman monster. The bell on her bracelet chimed softly in the dark. Although it was soothing for her, Berry whipped around, holding his finger to his mouth, signaling for her to be quiet. Her lips dropped, her head bowed, and she gripped the small bell in the palm of her hand again.

After reaching the intersection, Berry picked his way slowly across the network of tunnels, defying gravity as they twisted around and over the ceiling into another major artery.

Berry signaled for Trixie to pause. Without turning back toward her, he reached behind, grabbing her shoulder and pushing her down as he crouched low. His eyes were focused on something in the darkness. A thinker scurried past, not more than ten feet from them, heading at a right-angle to their path. Trixie's heart pounded in her chest. They waited for a few minutes before continuing on in silence.

Further along the shaft, water pooled in the shallow gaps between the roots, some kind of slippery moss grew on the twisted vines winding around the roots. After ten minutes spent creeping along in the shadows, Berry paused, taking a rest.

"Look at you," he said softly, staring at Trixie. "You're covered in dust."

He reached out and brushed her shoulders and arms, knocking the dust off the jacket, but it was everywhere, on her face and in her hair. Trixie liked the attention. She liked wearing Berry's jacket. It was baggy, with the shoulders hanging down over her arms, but it was warm. Even with the cuffs rolled up, her hands barely poked out the bottom of the sleeves.

"Look at you," repeated Trixie, and Berry laughed.

Reaching up, Berry ran his fingers through his own hair and watched the flour-like dust settle around him. He smiled. "Yes, look at me too." His bare chest was coated in the fine white powder.

It took another forty minutes of creeping through the twisting main shaft before Trixie noticed any change in the textures within the tunnel. It had been a long time since she'd seen any more of the dusty chambers that seemed to be the focus of attention for the workers and thinkers in the heart of the craft. The roots began to get thinner, the side branches spread out in a variety of directions, none of them a right-angle. The bark had changed in texture. It flaked off easily, breaking into thin wafers, any loose scraps being quickly picked up by workers and squirreled away into the shadows.

"We're getting close," Berry whispered. "By my reckoning, we were easily two miles beneath the surface, but I think we're almost there."

A thicket of branches blocked one of the minor shafts further down the tunnel. Berry picked his way around the entrance, moving to what, moments earlier, had been upside down. He was following a trail of workers streaming in and out of the tangled mesh.

"They're repairing the damage," he said softly. "This is where they rammed my ship, absorbing it, trying to assimilate it."

"And me?" asked Trixie.

"And you," replied Berry. "You were there too. Do you remember?"

"No."

"You were there, Baby," he said, squeezing her hand, trying to reassure her.

"I don't ..."

"Don't remember?" asked Berry tenderly.

"Just ..."

"Just a little?"

"Yes," said Trixie.

Gnarled roots twisted before them, slowly sealing off the side-tunnel at an imperceptible rate. White, sticky sap oozed from their tips, coating the roots in a thick resin. Berry took care to avoid the sap, staying in the damp recesses of a root ball on the outer rim of the narrow tunnel. He tugged at the branches reaching up to cover the area, bending them so the two fugitives could squeeze through. On the other side, moisture condensed on the rough ground, and they found themselves clambering over the wreckage of the torn, shattered shell fragments of the outer hull. Their progress was slowed by the new growth, a thicket winding around them. Further down the darkened tunnel they came across the thin, semi-transparent skin of the outer hull. It had grown back over the impact site. Trixie rubbed the cold surface with her hand. It was still soft, barely a few inches thick. The leathery patch she rubbed clean revealed thousands of stars in the distance, tiny specks of light in the black void of space.

Berry pulled her on, ducking and weaving along the scars carved into the alien craft by their capture. Trixie got her foot caught between some of the roots. Slowly, but painfully, Berry helped her wriggle free. All the while, workers swarmed through the area like an army of giant ants. After what seemed like forever, Trixie saw the titanium hull of the *Swift*, the scout vehicle Berry had piloted through this particular star cluster. The craft had only been a hundred yards away through the new growth, but it seemed like miles. It had taken them less than twenty minutes to traverse the jungle of vines, but in Trixie's mind it had taken an eternity. Her hand ran over the smooth, shiny surface of the *Swift*, appreciating the stark contrast to the alien craft. Just to feel the cool metal beneath her fingertips, the straight edges and gentle curves, felt good. Somehow that sense of touch put her mind at ease. For the first time, she felt as though they were going to make it.

Vines wrapped around the *Swift*, growing from the roots crisscrossing the outer frame of the alien ship. The *Swift* was designed for traveling in space, and having been built in space, she lacked the sleek aerodynamics associated with planetary shuttles. There were no windows. There was no need for windows. The *Swift* was built for reconnaissance. It could see far more with its electronic eyes than any human eye could ever register within such a narrow band of the electromagnetic spectrum. Its smooth hull was intended to act as a Faraday cage, isolating the internal electronics from the sophisticated eavesdropping arrays extending out from the craft on its twin booms. A boom arm extended fifty feet on either side of the craft to allow for the surveillance of star systems considered potential targets for intelligent life. With an array of dishes and antenna jumbled together in a practical rather than an aesthetically pleasing manner, the *Swift* looked awkward. It was designed as a pre-contact reconnaissance vessel, intended to spy on any alien civilization detected by the large array on the *Rift Valley*. Small enough and nimble enough to evade capture by anything man-made, the *Swift* was considered the first option in close surveillance. It hadn't stood a chance against the alien war craft. The violent capture had snapped both boom arms, leaving the twisted wreckage of the arrays crushed within the superstructure of the alien vessel. Communication with the *Rift Valley* was impossible.

Berry ran his hand along the side of the *Swift* as he clambered over the vines. The airlock was back by the engines. Trixie could see the excitement flooding back into his demeanor. His face lit up. His stride widened. His arms found new vigor.

"I can't believe there are no guards," he said to her. "I guess they never thought we'd escape. Or they figure that if they caught us once, they can catch us again. But this time, things will be different. We'll forget about trying to outrun them, and use our lateral thrusters to out-maneuver them. This old hunk of driftwood must steer like a brick. We'll deploy mimic decoys, get them chasing shadows. I think we can do this, Trix."

Berry opened the airlock, a small circular hatch barely large enough to clamber through without a spacesuit, let alone while wearing one. He slid inside and opened the inner hatch, waving for Trixie to follow as he brought up the lights inside. It looked cramped, but, all things considered, it was better than being in the alien ship. Trixie climbed awkwardly inside, and Berry got her to close the hatch behind her. Twisting the metal hatch shut gave Trixie a sense of being trapped, caught in a metal cage again, but Berry didn't seem fazed by it.

The light inside the cabin surprised Trixie. It didn't bother Berry, but she found herself squinting in the neon glow, overwhelmed by the intensity of the light, surprised by how it reflected off the white surfaces throughout the spaceship.

Trixie looked around. The inside of the *Swift* seemed small, much smaller than she remembered. There were glimpses, flashbacks rippling across her consciousness, images of various parts of the interior, but she struggled to grab hold of them. Her memories were fragile, fleeting fragments. The more she tried to remember, the more distant they seemed.

The first thing Berry did on entering the *Swift* was to slip on a singlet. He climbed over the central console, wriggling down into the pilot's seat. Trixie watched, fascinated by how difficult it was to move about the small cabin, but the craft had been designed for zero-gravity, where such movements would be more fluid and natural. Berry grabbed a stick of chewing gum. He twisted around in the cramped seat, wedged in between banks of switches, computer holo-monitors and keyboards of various styles. After a few preflight checks, he started the core systems.

“Gum?”

Trixie had no idea what gum was, but she accepted anyway. If it was good enough for Berry, she would happily give it a try. She leaned forward, squeezing between the bulkhead and the navigation console just as Berry had, looking intently at the cockpit. She could see the joysticks used to make course corrections in flight, the holo-monitors arrayed like windows around the cockpit and the touch-screen interface exposing dynamic controls. Berry had a few personal effects dotted around his seat. A Bonsai plant in a shallow ceramic pot had been taped down on one side of the cockpit, its soil shrink-wrapped in clear plastic. Its tiny trunk and petite green leaves had been carefully sculptured to look like an acacia tree. Trixie wondered how long that would be kept around given the organic, tree-like structures within the alien spaceship and the horrors they evoked within her. She was sure Berry felt the same way. She couldn't imagine that well-groomed, miniature tree having quite the same appeal after this ordeal. There was a color photo of Berry and his cat on the other side of the cockpit, taped on the side of one of the monitors. The cat looked like it was a Burmese. Next to that, Berry had stuck a few cuttings of paper with quotes on them. The letters were ornate. Trixie wondered what they said, but she couldn't read them. The words looked like symbols, meaningless scribble carefully arranged. They were clearly important to Berry.

Berry tossed her a stick of gum. She popped it in her mouth and chewed, surprised by the burst of flavors on her tongue. She didn't recognize the taste, but her mouth salivated for more.

“Nice, huh,” Berry said, bringing the engines on-line.

“Yes. Nice.”

“A blast from the engines and we should be able to break free,” he added.

Trixie backed out, away from the cockpit and into the general purpose area. She wondered how they both fitted into such a small craft. There seemed to be barely enough room for Berry, let alone her. The general area, beside the airlock, was covered in small removable panels. A couple of them were open, revealing the complex subsystems that controlled the *Swift*. A sleeping hammock hung vertically beside her. It was oriented such that it would only work in zero gravity. Trixie was fascinated by the details around her. She was quite happy to let Berry figure out how to get them out of there, she wanted to explore the panels, to open all of them and see what lay behind them. She was intensely curious about her new, small world.

“Something is not right, Trix.” Berry said, looking at an image of workers swarming around the outside of the craft, ignoring it as they went about their business. “This makes no sense. Where are the thinkers? Why haven't they realized we've escaped? Why aren't they trying to stop us?”

Trixie could see Berry was hesitant about leaving and that surprised her.

“We go,” she said, a sense of panic carrying in her voice. “We run.”

She wanted this to be over with, to get away from the insects, to get as far away as possible.

“No. It's too easy,” replied Berry, his hand resting on the control panel.

“Go,” Trixie insisted, feeling she had a right to cast her vote.

Berry pushed off, sliding backwards out of the command seat, and twisting as his back slid on the navigation console. He turned around as he slid, so he could drop down gently beside Trixie, making it look easy.

“We can't go, Babe. Not just yet.”

He placed his hand gently on her shoulder. From the look in his eyes, she could see he wanted to explain his thinking, not only to her but to himself.

“It's a setup, a trap, it has to be. You see, Trix, for all of their mind-craft, their ability to tap into our thoughts and translate our thinking, they weren't able to find the *Rift Valley*. They know this is a scout ship, it's too small to be out here alone, so they figure there's a mother-ship somewhere nearby, but they don't know where.”

He laughed.

“They don't know where because I don't know where, so when they read my mind, there's nothing there. They must think I'm dumb. It must be so strange for them, so alien to have a pilot that doesn't know his way home, but that's not the way we work. We humans delegate complex information processing to computers, letting machines handle the navigation between galactic spatial coordinates. But these guys have no such concept. For them, everything is biological. It seems they never discovered the semi-conductivity of silicon and the ability to build complex logic gates into programmable machines. I guess they never had to, their prowess with biotech has meant they've never explored these mechanical possibilities. It must confuse the hell out of them to capture an explorer who doesn't know where he came from, so they're letting us go.”

“Go,” repeated Trixie, she'd struggled to follow his explanation, but she knew that word. She understood its meaning and she agreed. It was time to go.

“We can't go, Trix. They'll track us back to the *Rift Valley*, and from there they'll track the *Rift* back to Earth.

“Don't you see, they're pirates, strip-miners, conquistadors. They harvest the most precious commodity in the universe, life. They're after our genetic material, the knowledge of billions of years worth of Natural Selection stored within our DNA. And they mean to use it against us.”

Although Trixie was struggling to understand the concepts being described by Berry, she could see his eyes opening as his mind pieced the puzzle together.

“Trix, they're the reason for the silence. For centuries, we have stared at the sky and watched the heavens, listening to the stars, searching for even the faintest trace of intelligent life, but there's nothing, nothing but silence. We thought we were special, that we were unique, the first form of intelligent life to reach out into local space, but we're not.

“We launched the *Savannah*, the *Serengeti*, the *Rift Valley*, all to explore the cosmos, to find life, any life, but hopefully intelligent life, and finally we have. But it's a form of intelligence more brutal than our own. I know, because I've been inside their minds. They've already analyzed our DNA, using my DNA, your DNA, the DNA from the bacteria on our skin, from the microbes in our gut, from the dust mites in our hair, from the protein strands in our food, and they've pieced together not only our common ancestry, but our molecular rates of change to partially build our evolutionary tree of life. And they're hungry for it. For them, this is like discovering buried treasure.”

Trixie was lost in his words, mesmerized by his logic. He could see a glazed look in her eyes.

“We thought we were unique, Trix. The first to arise out of stardust, but we're not, it seems we're the latest, perhaps the last. You don't shout in a jungle, Babe. You stay quiet. But we have been blundering through the interstellar foliage making as much noise as we can, and that's dangerous. There are lions out there, leopards stalking in the dark.

“It's typical, really,” he continued. “We've always thought that creation was all about us, as though the universe revolved around humanity, but we're latecomers. We've arrived to find the party's already over. You see, intelligent life didn't flourish on Earth, it was suppressed, held back for

hundreds of millions of years by terrible lizards. Well, the name is a misnomer, but the brutal dominance of dinosaurs suppressed the rise of intelligence. A big old T-Rex didn't need intelligence to survive, just teeth and claws.”

Trixie got that. She bared her teeth and held up her hands, making claws with her nails, scratching at the air.

“Yes, that's it, Trix. Teeth and claws. So it seems the rest of the galaxy must have flourished around us, while we were silent, awaiting the rise of intelligent apes. And that was quick, we went from swinging through the trees in packs, to building campfires for a tribe, all within a million years. From there, we went from gazing at the stars in wonder, to plowing through the heavens at close to the speed of light, all within a few thousand years. And the silence we found was not emptiness, it was devastation.

“These guys are worse than any carnivore or any acid-dripping monster we've ever imagined. They're not after our lives, they're not after our resources, they're after our genetic past. They mean to steal our future, to harvest it, to exploit it.”

“We run,” said Trixie.

She didn't understand. He held her head in his hands, saying, “Oh, Trix. If we run, we risk everything. They want us to run, they're counting on it. If we run, everybody dies.”

“We fight.”

“Yes. We fight.”

Berry searched through the maintenance cabinets within the *Swift*, pulling out a portable welding kit, a handheld spotlight and some nylon cord. Trixie looked inquisitively at each object, realizing from their shape they held some specific purpose and would have to be used in a precise manner. She wasn't stupid, she was ignorant. Her intelligence craved understanding. She desperately wanted to soak up as much as she could from interacting with Berry. His every motion was the subject of intense scrutiny on her part, what he selected, what he chose to leave, how he handled each item, the way he checked items were in good working order. There were clues there for her, revealing the nature of these tools. She examined them quickly, making mental notes before placing them carefully on a bench beside her.

Berry handed her a pack of six acetylene cylinders, each no larger than her forearm, and she instinctively realized they contained something intended for consumption. Their identical brass-threaded heads indicated that they were interchangeable. Looking at the threads, Trixie could see how they would screw into something and immediately grabbed the portable welder, checking to see if they would fit into a similar brass fitting she'd observed on that device.

“Clever girl,” Berry said, watching her.

Trixie smiled, twisting the handle on the side of one of the cylinder heads. A viscous liquid bubbled up out of the neck of the cylinder, only it wasn't water. It was so cold it seemed to burn. Frost formed on the outside of the cylinder. Vapor and bubbles started seething as the liquid ran down the side of the metal cylinder, dripping on the floor.

“Oh, no. Turn that off,” Berry said, to which Trixie responded immediately, turning the handle back the other way.

“You've got no sense of caution, have you?” Berry mused aloud. “Smell that? That crisp, clean smell? That's dangerous, Trix. This stuff is heavier than air, so it pools low to the ground, at the lowest point. And if there's a spark. BANG!”

Berry clapped his hands in time with the word bang, and Trixie jumped in surprise, getting the message.

“Watch,” he said. Grabbing the welding kit he screwed in a smaller, blue cylinder, fitting it up inside the grip of the torch. “This is the pilot fuel. It's good for about an hour. Next you need a regulator.”

Berry screwed a small brass fitting into the bottom of the welding kit before attaching the cylinder Trixie had been holding.

“This regulates the flow of gas, controlling the rate at which the acetylene comes out of suspension.”

Trixie memorized every motion. Berry held the torch so she could see what he was doing.

“The trigger controls the flow of gas. This is the safety stop. Cylinder pressure shows up here. Green is good. Red means it's time to change cylinders. This button, on the side, fires the pilot light.”

Berry flicked the red button and a blue haze appeared at the tip of the torch. The sound of gas flowing excited Trixie, she could see how all the mechanical parts worked together to control something that seemed inherently uncontrollable and dangerous. Berry pointed the torch upwards, holding it out so she could see clearly as he squeezed the trigger. A burst of bright yellow flame shot out a foot above them, with black soot forming rapidly in the air as smoke.

“Oxygen rich. Makes for quite a show.”

“I like it,” said Trixie. Berry smiled, cutting the pilot flame and switching off the flow from the cylinder. Trixie's eyes were glued to his every movement.

“OK, let's see what else we have to work with,” Berry said, putting down the welding torch.

Trixie put the spare cylinders carefully next to the welder and waited eagerly as Berry continued rummaging through the various cargo hatches within the *Swift*, each one built to maximize any available space in the bulkhead. Berry pulled out a pneumatic rivet gun for repairing hull breaches and handed it to her along with some smaller green cylinders full of compressed air. Trixie looked carefully at the gun, noting how Berry held it by the grip, closely examining the trigger. It was similar to the welding torch. Even though it was smaller, it was bulky in her petite hands, being designed for use through the gloves of a spacesuit. She could see how the mechanics of it would work, with a belt-fed row of rivets passing up through the handle into an open breach. She couldn't imagine what it was used for, but she could picture how each of these rivets was intended to pass out through the barrel. Berry handed her a few more prepackaged strips of rivets.

“There's not much to work with,” he said. “But it's all I have. The *Swift* wasn't intended as a military vessel. There's no armament as such, to avoid any provocation, and certainly no anti-personnel weapons, but we've got to do something. Anderson knows the first contact protocols. He'll have taken the *Rift* deep, powering her down to hide her electromagnetic signature. She'll be running on silent. That old dog is probably sitting in the outer debris field around that nebula, blending in with all the junk. I know I would. And if they don't hear anything from us, if we fail to arrive at the rendezvous, they'll assume the worst and expect hostilities. But what can we do?”

He was speaking rhetorically, not expecting an answer from Trixie. She looked content with her new toys so he was talking to himself. “We can't flee, but we have to warn the *Rift*.”

Berry scratched the stubble on his chin, thinking aloud.

“We can fry the fusion cells. Remove the safety. It'll take them about a day to overheat. When they go bang, it should have a yield of about twelve kilotons. It won't make too much of a dent in this thing, though. From what I could detect during the capture, it's the size of a small moon. And I suspect our newfound friends have already anticipated this as a possibility, as that would explain why they're sealing the tunnels and thickening the hull below us, but it will give the *Rift* something to work with. Our guys will spot the detonation, they'll recognize the radioactive signature, and they'll pick up on these monsters long before they're flushed out of hiding.”

Trixie was smiling, but she hadn't understood what Berry was talking about. Words were becoming clearer, taking on meaning, but he spoke so fast it was difficult for her to string the concepts together in her understanding.

“Boom, Trix. We'll make a big boom.”

She understood boom. The onomatopoeic nature of the word resonated with her. She could instinctively hear the meaning in the sound. As the word left his lips, Berry had gestured outward with

his hands, starting with them in a tight ball and flinging his fingers outward, mimicking an explosion. Trixie liked boom. Somehow she understood the violent turn being pressed upon her, and it didn't frighten her. She felt excited at the thought of taking the initiative.

“Oh, Trix. I am so sorry. Your brief light will be too quickly snuffed out. Yours is an intelligence that will never bloom.”

He kissed her lips softly. She liked the way his lips lingered for a moment, one that, for her, could have stretched on into eternity. The bell hanging from her bracelet rang softly around them. Berry smiled. The delicate, high-pitched ring had been there all along, tinkling as she'd handled each tool, but it was only now he appeared to notice it. For her, it meant life, and he seemed to understand that. She had no idea he was setting in motion her death.

02 Rift Valley

Anderson was worried. His coffee had cooled, untouched. Cream settled on the surface. He looked out at the star field before him wondering what lay out there, who was looking back? With his eyes, he knew he'd never see anything other than the dazzling cluster of stars lighting up the eternal night before him, but the act of physically looking seemed somehow important. Wisps of interstellar molecular clouds sat off to one side a mere five light years away. They stretched out for over forty light years, dwarfing the stars within the cluster. Gravitational forces were at work, forming a cosmic ballet played out over billions of years, as the cloud was drawn into the cluster and dissipated by its harsh electromagnetic winds. A newborn star on the edge of the dark cloud of hydrogen pushed back the bounds of the swirling gas. Ordinarily, Anderson would have been in awe of such a sight, but the thought of a hostile alien race hidden within the cluster worried him.

The darkness on the bridge of the *Rift Valley* was vaguely familiar. Although he'd never been in the habit of coming up here in the quiet of the evening, he knew others in his lineage had. He remembered those nights as clearly as if they had been his own memories. Having memories of a bygone age, of incidents he'd never witnessed, of events he'd never seen, was a little unnerving, but that was the nature of clones. It wasn't supposed to be unsettling, but, with the passage of time in his own life, Anderson felt it becoming harder and harder to distinguish his own recollections from those of his predecessors. Not every memory stuck, it was mostly the technical thoughts, a collection of facts and figures, theories and concepts, which Anderson found handy. But those memories associated with strong emotions also tended to hang around, clouding his mind like ghosts. And now it was his turn on the bridge at night. It seemed they all ended up here at some point, for one reason or another, as though it were the rite of passage for his clonal series.

Anderson leaned on the edge of a proto-plastic bench that automatically morphed into a usable surface, its artificial intelligence withdrawing the normal array of controls and holographic projectors, leaving it as a blank desktop. The section he leaned against softened subtly, providing him with a bit of padding while automatically calculating the optimum density so as to reduce the load on his skeletal structure and provide him with some comfort. He reached back with his hand, propping himself up as he gazed out of the clear dome surrounding the bridge. The bench stiffened that area of the tabletop, adjusting its angle so it provided an appropriate amount of support.

For Anderson, for this particular Anderson, it was the loss of five good men that had drawn him to the quiet of the main bridge at night. Engineering had the helm, operating from deep inside the maintenance bay at the rear of the craft, doing little more than watching as the *Rift* glided through the heavens. The Intelligence Group was monitoring the cluster from the science deck, leaving the bridge empty.

He'd sent those five men to their deaths. Not purposefully, but the effect was the same. And as they departed, they all seemed to know what was about to unfold. Their sense of uneasiness was almost precognitive. The goodbyes were personal, heartfelt, as they recognized this was not another training drill.

As commander, Anderson wasn't supposed to care. They were doing their duty. This is why they were there, to explore on behalf of mankind, and, if need be, to die to protect the human race. Their very presence this deep within the galaxy was a sacrifice, one chosen for them by others. It was a choice they never dared question. What was one more sacrifice? They would all die anyway, sooner or later, and when they died they'd be replaced like a burnt-out light bulb. They knew they were expendable, and they accepted that, they were ordered to accept that, they were clones. Any tears that were shed were a waste. It was like crying over a broken toy. At least, that's the way it was supposed to be, but after a thousand years of isolation, separated from natural-born humans, that distinction had faded. Their emotions had grown like their memories, becoming stronger with each generation that

passed. For Anderson, unspoken tension seemed to hang in the air around the crew, like humidity in the tropics, waiting for the dark clouds overhead to break into a storm.

Five good men. Dr. Phillips might be able to pull the same models off the assembly line, but she couldn't replace them. She might have scans of their memories, their personalities and interests, but it was an illusion. With the same bodies and the same experiences, their replacements might seem familiar, but they weren't. They were strangers, as far as Anderson was concerned. You couldn't replace experience, not real experience, not experience that had been earned through blood, sweat and tears in that particular lifetime. Perhaps his sense of defiance was personal, he wasn't sure. One day, though, he knew it would be his youthful facsimile standing here in the cool of the evening, a doppelganger, in every respect identical to him, in every respect except one, it wouldn't be him. He liked that, thinking of his successor as 'it,' depersonalizing and distancing the awful truth. Did clones have souls? Did anyone? And what was he? What was this sense of personal detachment from the atoms and molecules that made up his arms, his legs? What was this intimate sense of presence and perspective that defined his life? He was here. He was aware, and that meant alive. But as for the five? There was no heaven for clones.

The stars were content, the heavens were at peace, and yet, though they seemed settled, the appearance was deceiving. To him, the stars looked fixed, radiating with vibrant light, full of warmth in the bitter cold, they were beacons in the darkness. The reality, though, was that stars were seething cauldrons of superheated plasma, violent and explosive, flaring up in hellish outbursts, raging with fiery storms. Their benign appearance was a lie perpetuated only by distance. The sense of harmony and order they portrayed hid the truth, that they would crush, burn and consume anything that drifted too close. The stars, it seemed, were as much a contradiction as life itself.

Anderson ran his fingers over his temples and through his hair.

The *Serengeti*, the *Savannah* and the *Rift Valley* were mankind's furthest ventures into space, reaching far beyond the colonized zones. Whereas the *Serengeti* had gone north, above the galactic plane in search of intelligent life in other galaxies, the *Savannah* had been commissioned to explore the outer reaches of the Milky Way, charting the star-forming regions of the galaxy. The *Rift Valley* had been given the core. She had been named after the cradle of humanity, that narrow tract of land in Africa where *Homo sapiens* had first stepped out of the jungles and begun their journey to civilization. The *Rift Valley* was headed for the bulbous heart of the galaxy, the densely packed star fields that surrounded the center of the Milky Way. The *Serengeti* had the Hail Mary pass, being told to run long and deep, while the *Savannah* and the *Rift Valley* were barely over the scrimmage line.

The *Rift* had been tracking the faint electromagnetic output of a potential source of extraterrestrial intelligence for over three hundred years. Buried deep within a star cluster, some seven hundred light years from Earth, were three targets. The *Rift* had established that the point of origin for these radio waves was not stellar. They emanated from the proto-disc of a forming star, and from the outer planetary region of two other nearby star systems, one of which was a binary star group. Gravitational tides within the cluster tended to distort distant locations, but by circumnavigating a small portion of the cluster, the *Rift* had managed to lock down the coordinates to within half an astronomical unit, or half the distance from Earth to the sun.

Following first contact protocols, the *Rift* had been cautious, masking its approach by using line-of-sight stars and super-Jupiters, both before and aft of the craft, to mask its engine bloom when maneuvering, and then coasting rather than powering into the cluster. The *Rift* navigated the gravity wells surrounding these stars like an eagle uses thermals, gliding between interstellar Lagrange points, taking the optimal path rather than the shortest path and, in the process, covering its tracks. If Anderson had been navigating a mountain range on Earth, the equivalent would have been to stick to the ridge lines, moving from peak to peak and avoiding the valleys. Valleys weren't so bad to enter, but they were difficult to climb out of, and so the easiest course for the *Rift* was to follow the gravitationally neutral points between stars.

Three hundred years of playing cat and mouse across four generations was coming to an end. Anderson had launched scouts to conduct close surveillance and, potentially, make first contact. But, three months on, five scout ships had been lost, assumed destroyed. Four of them had reported nothing unusual. Their sensor arrays transmitting nothing out of the ordinary right up to the point static dominated the radio waves.

The fifth had detected something artificial at a distance of two astronomical units. The only reason this scout had spotted the unidentified object was because the pilot, a middle-aged man named James Berry, had been astute enough to look more broadly at the target system. When his array told him there was nothing unusual, he wanted to know what was considered usual and had idled away his time taking long-range photographs of asteroids, planets and planetoids as his craft plowed slowly through the far reaches of the system. In a series of shots taken of an outer gas giant, resplendent in its swirling patterns of emerald green, Berry caught a glimpse of something black occulting the background stars. A dark shadow passed in front of a portion of the planet like an irregular-shaped moon, and then out across the stars beyond, blocking them briefly from view. Nothing appeared on any of his sensors. His passive radar and thermal imaging suggested it was a low-density asteroid with a poor radar profile. Although the asteroid was large, there were none of the normal echoes associated with a nickel-iron core, ice, carbon or compressed rock, suggesting it was little more than regolith, a loose collection of dust and pebbles bound together by their mutual gravitational pull.

Berry was surprised by the phenomenal rate with which the object moved outward through the planetary system. It was moving too fast to be considered as having a natural motion, as it should have been flung apart before reaching what was an interstellar escape velocity. And its direction was wrong. It was being ejected from the system. Berry calculated that their paths would close to within a hundred thousand miles within a week. With complete autonomy and results streaming back to the *Rift*, Berry expressed his concern and made the call to withdraw and observe from a distance of ten astronomical units. Anderson agreed. When Berry changed his drift, firing his engines and actively pulling out of the gravity well surrounding the star, the alien craft realized it had been spotted and gave chase. It too changed course, arcing away toward the heliosphere as it raced to overtake the scout craft. Berry changed course again, realizing he'd be overrun within a matter of days. He tried to drive deeper toward the heliopause, the region of space where the solar winds from the energetic young star were halted by the turbulent, interstellar electromagnetic winds within the star cluster. He was hoping to hide his scout craft in the noise of the bow shock thrown up into space by this star as it orbited within the cluster. A day out from what the *Rift* calculated as the intercept point, just shy of the termination zone for the solar winds, number five went silent. Whether it was a countermeasure by Berry, trying to lower his electromagnetic profile and evade capture within the magnetic anomalies in that region, or whether the alien craft had jammed communications or possibly destroyed the scout, no one knew. But there were three things Anderson knew for sure. They weren't alone, they'd been spotted long before they spotted anything, and their counterpart's intentions were aggressive, probably hostile.

Anderson was worried.

Making out his report for Earth, he wondered who would read it, what they would make of it, and if it would cause more problems than it would solve. Space-time distorted everything. Man was ill-equipped to handle the vastness of space and the immense passages of time that transpired within even the simplest of interstellar interactions. They'd seen this already, with the colonists around Teegarden's star, a mere twelve light years from Earth. Even the simplest of requests could take the best part of someone's career to fulfill. With hundreds of light years between the *Rift Valley* and Earth, and over a thousand years difference in terms of elapsed time, Anderson wondered if he was sending a report to a dead planet, one that had already encountered this interstellar race and been driven to extinction. That was the fear, that any alien interaction would be as brutal as the Spanish conquest of South America, or the Japanese rape of Nanking in China, with atrocities comparable to those of the British in South

Africa during the Boer War. Perhaps, he considered as an alternative, the *Rift Valley's* intentions had been misinterpreted, misunderstood, their stealth having been mistaken for a threat.

Maybe this alien species had spread asymmetrically and had already made contact with mankind in other regions. They could have established diplomatic relations centuries ago, and neither he nor his alien counterpart would ever know. They could end up firing on each other like border guards on some long forgotten frontier, relics of ignorance and intolerance. Intergalactic space was big enough for everyone, both species could have peacefully coexisted for hundreds of years already, and so Anderson's warning would be a somewhat quaint and amusing artifact of this chronological distortion. The most likely scenario, though, was that this was a first contact, perhaps the first contact ever, and the exact nature of mankind's first interstellar relationship would take years to flesh out, maybe decades or even centuries before it resolved into its final form.

Would anyone remember those five that died in the initial foray? Would anyone care? Anderson cared. Apart from the crew of the *Rift Valley*, at least those who had known these men personally, no one else would ever see them as anything more than a byline in history. He'd sent them out alone, and they'd died alone.

Anderson peered at the vast molecular cloud below the *Rift Valley*, at least, it was below from his current orientation. Its dark clouds ignited with the solar wind streaming off a pair of newborn stars. The musty, brown cloud was the perfect place to hide, with its billowing tendrils reaching out over seven light years across, but that was precisely why Anderson hadn't taken the *Rift* into that region. It was too obvious. If this were his back yard, he'd be watching those clouds like a hawk. Any passage through the molecular hydrogen would leave a wake, while any powered maneuvers would leave an infrared smudge glowing behind them. Accelerating would be taxing, as the thick hydrogen would compress in front of the *Rift*, pushing their shields beyond design constraints. No, as tempting as it was to sit inert, drifting with the cloud, blending invisibly into the background, if they were sprung it would be disastrous.

Anderson understood his duty to the ship. It extended far beyond the four hundred men and women on board. It was an obligation to future generations, both onboard the *Rift* and back on Earth. He'd dispatched a second wave of three scouts, but only to observe the agreed rendezvous point for the first wave. They were to remain cold for a period of five months, silently watching, waiting, but he knew it was futile. The rendezvous was at a Lagrange point between three nearby stars, just shy of the molecular cloud. The scouts were to passively observe from at least forty astronomical units, entering a natural orbit around each of the stars so as to blend in with any far-flung Oort-cloud-like debris as they faced outward, looking toward the gravitationally neutral Lagrange point. The scouts were instructed to observe any survivors silently for at least a fortnight before making contact. At forty astronomical units, the distance between the scouts and any survivors would have been beyond the orbit of Pluto were they in orbit around Earth. Anderson hoped it was far enough, but his adversaries had already proven themselves adept in celestial warfare.

The hunt was on. The game was afoot.

03 Offensive

Trixie stood before Berry, twisting on the balls of her feet, her knees crossing slightly as she squirmed. Berry hadn't noticed, and she wasn't sure how to describe it to him, but his eyes suddenly registered and he seemed to know what was going on.

"I'm sorry, Babe. Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

He squeezed past her as he added, "Do you need to relieve yourself?"

Trixie was silent. She wasn't sure how to respond. She wanted to say, yes, but she felt an overwhelming need for privacy.

Berry opened a hatch on the side wall within the *Swift*, and twisted a unidirectional seat around so it faced their current gravitational orientation. He pushed on the soft, molded plastic until it locked in place.

"Here you go," he said. "Sorry, there's no curtain or anything. But you can wipe yourself with these damp cloths. They're sterile, anti-bacterial. Get recycled over and over again. Not that you'd ever know it."

Trixie stared at the small seat with a hole in the center, and noted the bowl beneath it. Already, there was the soft sound of suction forming a draft within, ready to draw down any liquids. She looked back at Berry, getting the general idea.

"Go on. It's OK."

In the light gravity, it was easy to spring up beside him and land on the fold-away toilet. She turned around, squatting down with her feet straddling both sides of the seat.

"No. You sit down on it," Berry said, seeing her starting to pull her singlet up to her waist. He pointed at the seat. Trixie batted his hand away, signaling for him to turn around and face the other direction.

"OK, OK. I won't look," added Berry, turning toward the airlock. "I was just trying to help. If you sit down, you'll be more comfortable."

Berry whistled as he rummaged through one of the storage lockers with his back to her. Trixie wasn't sure if he was pretending to look for something or not, and she'd never known him to whistle, so he seemed nervous, more nervous than when they were clambering through the bowels of the alien ship. This was the closest she was going to get to privacy within the cramped confines of the scout craft so she sat down on the seat as Berry had suggested, and felt a sense of relief.

"I might use that after you," Berry said, without looking. "So don't flush. Although, you probably don't know how to flush, do you?"

"No," said Trixie after a few seconds. Apart from the soft ring of the bell on her wrist, these words were the first sound she'd made in the whole episode, which surprised her. These were new feelings, the need for personal space and privacy, and she was struggling to adjust to them.

She finished up, impressed by the warm, moist towelettes. She and Berry swapped spots in the narrow bulkhead of the *Swift*. Berry said, "No peeking."

Trixie was happy to oblige. She mimicked Berry, looking through the lockers and pulling out anything interesting.

"That's hydraulic oil," said Berry from behind her. She placed the shiny silver can on the ground and looked in another locker. There was a machine with a touch-screen flat panel inside the waist-high compartment.

"It's an organic constructor. Not much in the way of supplies, though, so it can only do the basics. Are you hungry?"

Trixie turned, surprised by the whoosh of air and water as the toilet flushed. Berry tucked in his singlet and tightened his belt.

"Say, protein bar," he called out, seeing her curiosity at work.

“Protein bar,” repeated Trixie and the organic constructor whirred to life. Seconds later, the door popped up and a warm, sweet smell wafted through the air.

Trixie grabbed the bar and bit into it, holding it with both hands and biting through the middle. The door to the constructor closed automatically.

“Normally, you start at the end,” Berry said. “Can you get one for me?”

“Protein bar,” said Trixie, and the machine whirred to life again. Another bar of compressed protein popped out. Trixie tossed it to Berry as she again commanded, “Protein bar.”

Berry laughed as the machine complied a third time. “Well, if we're going to go out fighting, it might as well be on a full stomach.”

Trixie ate the second bar, enjoying the meaty flavor.

Berry handed her a bottle of water. She looked at it suspiciously, sniffing it.

“It's water,” he assured her.

Berry took the bottle from her and loosened the top. Raising it above his head, he drank a few large gulps. Trixie copied him, spluttering as the water splashed around her mouth.

“You've got to swallow, silly.”

She tried again, but it seemed too quick for her, too unnatural. Water dripped down her front, wetting her singlet, so she changed tactics and drank slowly, taking small sips.

“Oh, we're in a right pickle, Trix. What a mess!”

The water washed away the fine dust on her neck and upper chest, revealing her natural coloration beneath the chalky dust.

“Yes, what a mess,” said Trixie, laughing at herself as she looked down at her wet shirt. Seeing her clean skin highlighted just how dirty the two of them were from the fine dust within the heart of the alien craft.

The *Swift* rocked slightly. The sound of claws scraping on the metal hull echoed around them.

“I'm so sorry, Trix. I wish there was another way,” said Berry. Tears welled up in his eyes. In the low gravity, his tears formed large drops in the corner of each eye. As he blinked, they slowly ran down his cheeks.

But Trixie didn't notice. She was rubbing her fingers together, surprised by the smooth feeling between her thumb and forefinger as she rolled the fine paste around. The water and powder had combined to form a slick, oily film. Berry reached over and took some from her.

“Trixie, you beauty. There's some kind of refined hydrocarbon mixed in with this powder, perhaps even a form of petroleum. The water is causing it to separate. Do you know what that means?”

“Of course you don't, it means that dust ball we saw is flammable. It's no wonder they hid them within the belly of their ship, they're some kind of fuel reservoir, they're weak spots. From the outside, we couldn't make a dent in this thing, it's dense network of branches and roots would flex and absorb the energy of an explosion. Given the size of this ship, even a nuke would be confined locally, but set off even a small spark down inside that dust storm, and boom.”

“Boom,” added Trixie, copying his previous example, using her hands to mimic an explosion.

“Boom,” repeated Berry, smiling, raising his eyebrows. “The oxygen mix on this craft is about 30%. It's way more than we need, which is why even when you're jumping around the place you're barely breaking a sweat. Their metabolisms must burn through the stuff at an amazing rate, but that will work in our favor. Any flame will spread like wildfire.

“And that dust storm, it's one of at least four others I've seen in this section alone, all linked together. There must be hundreds of them throughout the ship, maybe thousands given the size of this craft. That dust is so fine it's going to have a massive, diffuse surface area relative to its volume. This is chemistry 101. Small volatiles in suspension are capable of rapid expansion, rapid reaction. In that confined space, it would make a huge chemical explosion, a big boom.”

Trixie liked that. “Big, big boom.”

“Yes. Big, big boom. From the inside out, daisy-chaining throughout the interior of the ship, from one chamber to another. If we can set off one of these things, it's going to be like a detonator for the others, setting off a chain reaction.”

“BANG!” cried Trixie, clapping her hands together as Berry had done previously. The bell on her bracelet rang as she clapped.

“Oh, yes. These are the kind of fireworks we want to see. This would tear their craft apart, splitting it open.”

Berry was biting his lip. It surprised Trixie. Something was up.

“Trix, Honey. You need to leave your bracelet here on the *Swift*.”

Trixie grabbed at her wrist, hiding the rainbow bracelet and the small bell beneath her hand.

Berry held out his open palm.

She dropped her eyes, looking at the ground sheepishly.

“It'll still be here when you get back.”

Trixie was silent.

“Trix. This is hard enough as it is. We need to avoid any noise that would give us away.”

She didn't say anything. For her, this simple piece of jewelry was a connection with her misty past, it was something that defined her, anchored her. It was irrational, she knew that, but emotionally it was the hardest thing she could do.

“Trust me,” said Berry.

She looked at him with tears in her eyes. Her mouth was turned down. Her lips quivered. She wasn't sure why she felt this way, but the feeling was real. In the midst of the craziness of being trapped on an alien space craft, the bracelet gave her hope. But she trusted Berry. She had to. Apart from the bracelet, he was all she had. She slipped it off and dropped it in his hand. Berry leaned in and kissed her on the forehead.

“You're doing well, Babe. Hang in there. Just stay with me. We're going to make it through this.”

He placed the bracelet on the engine cowling.

“It'll still be here when we get back. OK?”

“OK,” said Trixie. Already, she felt better. Trusting Berry helped her confidence grow. He was strong. She could be strong.

“All right. Let's see what we could use around here.” Berry rummaged through one of the cabinets. “We could use the acetylene from the welding rig, that would be a good fuel source.”

Berry fired up the portable welding torch. Trixie liked the flame. It was both pretty and powerful. She stepped back, watching closely, intrigued by the flickering blue light. With his left hand, Berry ran his fingers through his hair, shaking loose some of the dust from the cloud they'd seen within the heart of the alien ship. Flashes of light crackled, dancing on the blue flame as the dust drifted through the air.

“That'll work,” he said. “Big boom.”

Trixie clapped her hands with excitement.

“We need a fuse,” he added. “Something to delay the blast and give us time to get back here to the *Swift*.”

Berry lit the end of the nylon cord and watched, turning off the torch with a crack as the gas stopped flowing. A flame flickered at the end of the cord for a few seconds, melting the nylon, but it soon went out. Berry cut the end off and tried again.

Trixie was intrigued. She dropped down on her haunches, her elbows resting on her knees as she crouched there, watching Berry intently, absorbing his every move. She was hungry for more than imitation, she wanted to understand his reasoning, to think like he thought.

Berry picked up the silver can of synthetic hydraulic oil.

“This stuff doesn't burn very well,” he said, explaining his thinking. “But maybe that's what we need, something slow burning.”

He soaked part of the nylon cord in the oil, making a mess on the floor. Sealing the can, he wiped his hands clean on a pair of overalls, and lit the welding torch again. This time, the smoldering nylon kept burning, slowly eating up the cord. Drips of burning oil and molten plastic dropped to the floor.

“I think that will work,” he said, stamping out the flames. “A couple of yards should give us a good ten to twenty minutes, long enough to clear the area. We'll use two separate fuses to give ourselves some redundancy, because if this doesn't work, there's no going home.”

Berry tossed Trixie a backpack. Instinctively, she knew what to do, and started loading the spare acetylene cylinders into the bag. Berry fed the nylon into the oil can, allowing it to coil inside the metal container and handed the sealed can to Trixie. He tore off some duct tape and stuck two extra cylinders to his welding rig. Berry tossed the tape to Trixie. It barely touched her hands as she swung it straight into the backpack.

Trixie picked up the rivet gun.

“You like that, huh?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling.

“OK, when firing, you need to keep the guard pulled down or it's going to jam. The guard is hardened steel, designed to cause the rivets to mushroom. I don't know how well the aluminum compound rivets are going to go against those shells, but it's better than fighting with bare hands. Try to aim for soft spots, gaps around their shells, eye stalks, antenna, things like that.”

“OK,” replied Trixie, feeling quite confident with the bulky machine in her hand. She picked up a couple of spare compressed air cylinders and taped them together the same way Berry had, making sure she put the tape back in the bag.

A red warning light started flashing in the cockpit.

“Fusion cells are heating up,” said Berry. “At least if we don't make it back, we'll leave them with a nice surprise. It's now or never, babe. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Trixie, with a look of intense focus on her face, her lips pulled tight, her muscles tense.

Berry opened the inner hatch and climbed into the airlock. He clambered past the extravehicular suits hanging on the wall and started opening the outer hatch. A readout on the side of the airlock showed the pressure outside, including the mix of gases, and warned him the inner airlock door was still open. With his welding torch leading the way, its soft blue flame flaring in the oxygen-rich atmosphere, Berry crawled forward out of the outer hatch. Trixie followed behind him, shuffling the bag in front of her as she wriggled through the airlock.

Outside the craft, the thinkers had gathered. Their thick leathery carapaces glistened in the soft light as they surrounded the *Swift*. Workers scurried away from the burning light of Berry's torch. He opened the pressure regulator on the welding rig, twisting it beyond the safety mark, and squeezed the trigger. A burst of acetylene flared out in the light gravity, spraying in an arc through some twenty feet around him as he turned. The thinkers pulled back, biding their time, watching, observing, calculating. Fire roared, crackling in the dry honeycomb of branches that made up the inner hull.

Trixie crawled out of the airlock behind him. Flames licked at the darkness. Branches glowed in soft orange and yellow hues as they smoldered in the darkness.

Workers scurried in to control the fire, spitting fluids on the flames. Trixie slid down the side of the *Swift* and came up beside Berry, the backpack slung over her right shoulder. She pulled down on the guard of her rivet gun, readying herself to fire, not sure what it would feel like or how easy it would be to aim. Adrenaline surged through her veins, exciting her. Her eyes adjusted from the bright lights of the *Swift* to the darkness of the alien craft, and she was shocked to see how many thinkers sat off in the distance. Sets of four dark eyes, arranged in a crescent, reflected the glowing fires in front of them. She

tried to count them, turning and looking around her, above her, below her, but they were several layers deep, stretching back into the tangle of black branches beyond. There must have been hundreds of them.

“It's a Mexican stand off,” Berry said, making his way around the front of the craft. “I don't think they expected this. Come on, we need to move quickly, keep them guessing.”

He dropped down into one of the gouges left by the crushed antenna array. Thinkers followed close behind. The regrowth in the groove carved into the inner hull was thinner than the treetop-like path they'd followed back to their ship, allowing them to move easily toward the network of tunnels within the alien craft. Ducking and weaving through the limbs and branches, they hurried forward. The small worker beetles, normally moving with such purpose and precision, were in chaos, darting to get away from them, fleeing from the danger. Berry turned a couple of times, unleashing a burst from the welder, lighting up the darkness. Thin branches caught fire, flaring in the oxygen-rich environment.

“Hopefully, this will give them a few more headaches to worry about beyond just us.”

Through it all, the thinkers kept their distance, hanging back. The giant bugs were taking multiple paths as they followed Berry and Trixie. Some of them were directly behind the two fugitives, tracing their steps through the undergrowth, while others moved up high through the vines and branches that braced the superstructure.

Trixie slipped, her feet falling through the undergrowth, and she found herself dangling above the superstructure of the craft. She dropped the bag. It caught on a lower branch. Berry grabbed her, pulling her back up and helping her to her feet. He leaned down and picked up the bag, tossing it over his shoulder. Firing a burst of acetylene, he pressed on, pushing forward through the branches, heading toward the tunnels that twisted back into the heart of the alien craft. Ahead, just above them, Trixie could see the thin outer hull, the point at which the *Swift* had been captured.

“I don't get it,” he cried. “They're letting us run without a fight. Something is wrong.”

With that, they cleared the thicket and emerged in a narrow tunnel leading to the broad network of roots and vines that traced their way into the heart of the alien craft. Several thinkers scrambled in the distance before them, scurrying away from them, fleeing down through the tunnel. Berry pushed on. Trixie held back, fiddling with her rivet gun, clearing some debris from the nozzle. Holding the guard down, she fired at a thinker closing in on them from the rear, before pushing on after Berry. The lack of reaction from the menacing creature confused her. The thinkers weren't trying to catch them, they were directing them. Berry seemed to come to the same conclusion as she joined him in the constricted tunnel.

“They're herding us,” he said. He too had been thinking about the way the thinkers had flanked them, pushing them toward the small tunnel. “They're directing us to where they want the battle to occur. Quick, go back.”

As he spoke, workers swarmed in from either end of the side-tunnel. Climbing over each other, they formed a series of spindly arms that reached through the air, like branches cutting across the narrow tunnel, sealing the two of them in the cramped conduit.

“This way,” cried Berry, turning and making a run for the main tunnel.

Berry let out a burst from the welding torch as the creatures formed a mesh across the mouth of the tunnel. Flames licked at the insects. Workers screamed, their bodies burning, their innards boiling. The heat fused them together, turning them from a chain of living links into charred bars, blocking the path.

Another swarm of workers closed in on them in their thousands from the rear of the tunnel. Trixie fired her rivet gun in rapid succession. The wheeze of the pneumatic breech cycling through the tiny, needle-like rivets resounded through the air, but it was useless, there were too many of them and they were too small. Anything she hit was by accident. The workers were being orchestrated by the thinkers. In the confines of the tunnel, they only had to contain two ends to control the battle. Berry hacked at the smoldering remains of the workers blocking the exit. The butt of his cylinder chipped

away at the charred mass as more workers swarmed around his feet, climbing up his legs and tearing at his clothes, but the fused shells he struck out against were like iron bars.

Trixie screamed.

Berry struck at the creatures in vain, swinging with his arms, trying to knock them off his body, but their numbers were too great.

Normally, the workers glowed with phosphorescence, but they had doused their biological lights, attacking in the dark. Like a swarm of centipedes, spiders, cockroaches and beetles, the workers clambered over Trixie's legs in their hundreds. She jumped, twisting as she sailed through the air to the roof just a few feet above her, sending the alien insects scattering down the tunnel. The roof instantly became her floor, but workers teemed over all sides of the tunnel. They assailed her, pinning her down with their sheer weight of numbers. As she thrashed with her arms, she caught sight of Berry, upside down on the roof, relative to her. His outline was barely recognizable. He fought, lashing out with his arms, but slowly sank under the swarm. The last thing to disappear beneath the sea of tiny creatures was his right hand, still clinging to the welding torch. The blue pilot flame flickered briefly before the tunnel was plunged into darkness.

At the end of the tunnel, a solitary thinker watched from outside the bars. It seemed calm, pleased. Trixie fought to raise her rivet gun, fighting against the horde to bring the barrel to bear on the thinker. Whether it knew what she was trying to do or not, she didn't know, but it was content to watch her futile struggle against the horde of workers. The thinker's beady, black eyes were barely visible in the half-light. With all her might, Trixie struggled, but the workers clambered over her face, scratching her cheeks, tearing at her forehead and clawing at her neck. Panic overwhelmed her, fear surged through her veins. She dropped the rivet gun, suffocating, gasping for air under the crush. She choked, frantically pulling at the bugs, trying to fling them away, but her arms felt like lead under the weight. Workers bit at her fingers, cutting into the soft flesh. With her eyes shut tight, she swung her head, trying desperately to free herself as tens of thousands of spindly legs pricked at her body.

Darkness overwhelmed her.

Again.

04 Awake

The darkness gave her no reason to wake.

Trixie's body ached. Her right shoulder was in agony, the muscles sore and stiff. Spasms of pain shot down her arm, throbbing close to the bone. She moved, arching her back only to have her body rebel against the surge of pain, and so she folded back in on herself, curling up in a fetal position yet again.

Lying there was strangely familiar, almost comforting in the midst of the pain. These were her first memories repeated, the dust on the ground, the roots uncomfortably winding across the floor beneath her. This time, though, she was dressed. The torn jacket kept her upper body warm. Dried blood had caked on her face. She brushed it with her hands, feeling the thin cuts still raw beneath her fingertips. Fresh blood oozed from the wounds on her neck, hundreds of small bites formed painful welts. Her fingers brushed against them, feeling the raw bite marks and scratches.

She opened her eyes. That simple act reinforced something she hadn't expected. She was alive.

Beside her lay the backpack, its contents strewn across the ground. Cylinders lay scattered haphazardly against the roots throughout the chamber. Her rivet gun was there, as was Berry's welding torch, but the gas cylinder had been removed and lay idly to one side, just a few feet from her. Dents and scratches marred the cylinder, making it seem much older than it had appeared under the bright lights of the *Swift*. The creatures had vented their frustration on these strange instruments from another world. She wondered if they understood them. She didn't. She knew how the torch worked, but she didn't know why. Perhaps it was lost on them as well.

In the darkness, Trixie could hear sounds, clicks, grunts, along with tapping on wood, or, at least, the alien equivalent of wood. Workers raced past ignoring her. They seemed to have more purpose than she'd ever seen before. The phosphorescent glow lining their shells cast a soft light along the roots within the vivisection chamber. She knew exactly where she was before she rolled over to see Berry suspended in a force field again. It was the smell. The stench of rot filled her nostrils, only the smell was slightly different. It was sharper, crisper than the pungent odor she'd woken to last time. It seemed to be a contrast of different odors, confusing her.

Two thinkers stood before Berry, their hunched shell-backs towering over him. An array of long, thin, crab-like arms extended from below each carapace, allowing them to manipulate objects like humans would with their hands. Trixie had never been this close to a thinker. There must have been hundreds of arms extending down what appeared to be the thorax, slowly thickening into a cluster of legs near the ground. Their carapaces were different to those of the workers, with more of a matte sheen than a shiny shell. Their backs were thick, rough, like worn leather. The closest thinker turned toward her and she froze, somehow hoping she was invisible. Its cold dark eyes didn't betray any emotion beyond a sense of clinical detachment.

"She doesn't know anything," cried Berry, seeing Trixie was awake. "Leave her alone."

Trixie got to her feet and started backing away as the thinker moved toward her, its sea of legs carrying it smoothly off the vivisection platform and down toward her.

"No," she cried, terrified by this vision of the night. Given its size, it could have swallowed her whole. In the darkness, its black limbs danced before her like shadows.

Trixie went to turn when she felt thousands of needles piercing her skin, running from her lower back, up her neck and across her skull. A flash of pain cut through her like lightning. Her body broke in spasms as she was caught from behind by another thinker.

Zzzzzht Xxxxxht Ccccht.

"Don't let them in, Trix," called Berry.

Vvvvht Bbbbhht Nnnnht.

Trixie moaned. A searing pain stabbed at her forehead, as though someone had jabbed a razor-thin knife up behind her right eye and into her brain. The world seemed to narrow. Her torso twisted

with involuntary muscle contractions. Her legs felt as though they were disconnected. The right side of her body, from her lips and cheek, to her arm, hand, leg and foot all trembled, shaking in a quiver.

Mmmmht Kkkkkht Llllht.

“Be strong,” cried Berry. “You can do this, Trix. Keep these bastards at bay. Don't let them inside your head.”

It was too late. Trixie didn't know what they'd done or how, but the bizarre sounds shouting within her skull fell quiet. Slowly, they formed into words. Whereas before she had thought for herself, speaking within her head, articulating her feelings for herself alone to hear, now others did the same, thinking for her.

Does she know?

She does not know.

How could she know?

The terms were coarse, the words broke with staccato inside her mind, but they made sense.

The female is weaker than the male.

He is the thinker. She is the worker.

She is his play-thing, his pet, his toy.

“Oh, Trix,” cried Berry, seeing her eyes rolling into the back of her head. She could hear him, but she couldn't respond. Her mind and her sense of consciousness seemed to be separated one from the other, so that she could observe herself but couldn't act for herself.

She does not know where the star-wander resides.

They are pathetic. They know nothing. Their thoughts are so shallow. They have no concurrency and they process thoughts sequentially, so slowly. How have they been able to traverse the stars?

He pilots his ship, but he knows nothing of where he goes or where he came from. How is that possible? Who would have a pilot so stupid?

“Fight it, Trix. They push their way in, but you can push them out. You've got to focus. You've got to think about something else, anything else. Crowd them out.”

Can we burrow from her mind to his?

Maybe he lies. Maybe he knows but he buries.

We shall link them, drain him and examine his with her.

For a moment, the thinkers relaxed, and Trixie slumped in the arms of her captor. She watched as the thinker on the platform reached through the force-field as Berry struggled.

“Stay away from me, you spawn of hell. Stay-”

Tears ran from her eyes. Berry's head lashed back as he struggled to resist, but his efforts were brief. Her thinker renewed her interrogation and Trixie felt herself propelled back into the depths of her mind.

Cross them, dump them.

She shall see, then we shall see.

She is weak. She will reveal all. She will tell us what he knows.

Her mind flooded with thoughts, visions, sounds, colors, smells, words.

Trixie found herself standing on the broad deck of the *Rift Valley*. The flight deck was sparse. She was surprised by its size. Everything she'd known since she first awoke on the alien craft had been cramped, claustrophobic. Even the vivisection chamber, with its high ceiling, wasn't that wide, but the hanger deck on the *Rift Valley* extended for hundreds of yards around her. Thick lines painted on the deck directed the motion of construction craft and starships in broad curves, being designed for the safety of the engineers and mechanics. Exclusion zones were marked with thick stripes of yellow and black, sectioning off various portions of the floor. Couplings and valve handles lay level with the deck, covered with transparent Perspex. Hatches and access ways lay just below the surface, hidden by steel grates.

Commander Anderson stood before the small group of pilots, addressing them informally before they departed on their reconnaissance mission. He shook each man's hand, smiling as he spoke. Five craft sat in the launch bay, their hulls floating just a few feet from the ground. Each of them was slightly different, individually crafted, with their antenna boom folded up prior to launch. Trixie didn't recognize the *Swift*, but Berry did, and that sense of recognition excited her mind. She beamed with pride looking down at their lifeboat. But where was she? She wanted to look around, to turn and look behind, but Berry hadn't looked behind so neither could she. Mechanics poured over the *Swift*, making last minute adjustments, triple checking systems. Anderson was talking with Berry, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. Berry, it seemed, couldn't recall the exact words to mind.

Still he fights, still he resists.

We must break him down, make him reveal.

They are sensitive. They feel damage as a physiological response. We can exploit this.

Suddenly, Trixie was standing in the hydroponics bay in the mid-decks of the Rift. Leafy green plants swayed in the artificial breeze around her. It was humid, she was sweating, Berry was sweating. As Berry turned, she turned, she could see orchids, resplendent in their colors, she wanted to look more closely at them, but Berry walked past them and she floated on with him. Trixie could smell frangipani, the sweet fragrance wafted on the breeze. A hand reached out from before her, but it wasn't her hand. It plucked a red apple from a tree and bit into the crisp fruit. Juice ran down her chin, but it was his chin, and he wiped it, she felt as though she had wiped it. Her mouth salivated for more, but it was a memory, not reality.

A cat wound its way between his legs, its tail wrapping lightly around his calf muscle for the briefest of moments as it peered up at him. Berry reached down and scratched the cat on its head. Trixie could feel the soft fur beneath her fingertips. Something moved in the bushes. The cat went still. Berry seemed to be amused, he knelt down, watching as the cat stalked off into the undergrowth, its black hair disappearing in the shadows. It was the cat in the photograph, from the cockpit of the *Swift*, thought Trixie. A bird took flight, its colorful wings beat at the air as it alighted, flashes of green, red and yellow pumped as it escaped into the branches of a tree. The thinkers may have taken charge of his mind, but Trixie could see Berry was choosing his memories, steering his thoughts, trying to tell her something, but she wasn't sure what.

It is their storehouse, their vault.

They consume some, they admire others.

The diversity is vast. Our Masters suspect there must have been billions of permutations to reach this time. We will harvest. We will trace and rebuild, explore the branches.

Trixie blinked and found herself sitting in the cockpit of the *Swift*, at least, she thought she'd blinked, she wasn't sure, but the cockpit looked as real around her as it had just an hour before. The photo of Berry and his cat was in a different spot, squished up against a control panel to the left. The Bonsai was smaller. The screen wrapping around the cockpit showed the image of a comet, its frozen tail breaking up the darkness, flaring behind it in a stream of white and pastel blues, soft greens and browns. Berry was adjusting the image, examining the comet at various wavelengths. In some, the comet appeared transparent, a rocky core with jets of gas streaming from its sunlit surface before peeling off behind it in the tail. In others, the blur of various colored overlays meant nothing to her. As quickly as that thought had occurred to her, she'd understood what she was looking at. Images ranging from ultra-violet to infra-red. Somehow, she understood these concepts, concepts she had no previous understanding of were now clear. She perceived the notion of wavelengths, of the small band that dominated the visible spectrum, of the emission lines that indicated various chemicals and molecules. The comet was comprised of water ice and frozen carbon dioxide. There were trace elements of fundamental organic compounds, basic sugars used in the formation of DNA, like Ribose and Glycolaldehyde. She understood all this, but she wasn't sure how, and yet, in her mind there lay an unbroken chain of realizations, linking these carbon molecules to the instructions for life. It didn't mean

there was life, but it meant the building blocks were present. This was Berry's understanding, and now she perceived it too, admiring the comet for far more than its aesthetic beauty.

Music was playing in the background, but it sounded muffled, distorted. Berry was eating a protein bar, she recognized the taste, but the lack of sound alarmed her. On the Rift, she couldn't hear Anderson speaking even though he was barely a foot or two away. In the garden, the cat never meowed or purred, even though she could feel its skull resonating beneath her fingers. The bird, taking flight, had done so in silence. And onboard the *Swift*, the music was dull, barely recognizable.

She sees how he fights.

She knows the value of oscillations and waves transmitting ideas between them.

She sees him blocking all. Let them talk. Let us learn.

And Trixie found herself again in the cold of the alien craft. Again, the stench flooded her nose. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dark. Her eyes had contracted with the memories, involuntarily adjusting to the bright light she never saw. Berry still floated in the force-field. The thinkers stood back, watching.

"We were never going anywhere, babe," said Berry, blood running from the corner of his lip. "It was a ruse, a con. Our escape was never real. They played me for a fool."

Trixie bit her lip, fighting back more tears.

"Don't be afraid of dying, Trix. We all die. It is the lot of man. Run as we may, there are some things from which we cannot escape."

Trixie sank to her knees.

"They're going to kill us, Trixie. Oh, I am so sorry I brought you into all this."

"No," she cried, the corners of her mouth pulled down in anguish. She was barely able to speak. Her lips quivered.

"I'm not afraid of dying, Bellatrix, my beautiful star. Everyone dies, each star fades at some point. At least I get to choose how. I get to choose to die protecting those I love. I will not betray the *Rift*."

"I don't want to die," she said, surprised by the coherence in her voice. The mind-tunnel had flooded her perception with so many concepts. Death was a waste, of that she was sure.

"You smell that?" asked Berry. "That smell. It's the smell of fear, the smell of death."

The thinkers edged closer, wanting to know what had been said.

"That smell, Trix. Remember the smell."

Trixie barely moved as the thinker's razor-like claws dug into her spine and neck. She was numb to the pain.

"Remember, Trix," cried Berry, as a thinker loomed over him. "I'm ready to die."

Her sight faded as her body fell limp, unable to fight the mind control.

They talk about detecting trace-chemicals in suspension within the atmosphere, but why?

They have sensory organs for this, but they are almost vestigial. The broad sinus cavity inside their skull functions, but only in a rudimentary way, at a fraction of what we calculate for other allied species.

This smell is not a means of communication. Their primary communication is through the oscillations in the air, then through sight, what can this mean? It is more lies. We shall make him suffer, force him to reveal all.

He wants to die, but we shall keep him alive, even at the extreme.

What about the breeder? This female?

She is a joke. She is harmless. Without him, she is nothing.

She is for our sport. We shall play with her.

We will feast on her before our Masters.

Trixie found her self flung to the ground. She felt weak, drained of energy. Beside her lay a couple of cylinders, the welding torch, the rivet gun and the backpack. Several other cylinders lay

scattered haphazardly beside the platform. The acetylene cylinder that had been screwed into the torch hissed softly beside her. The valve was damaged, the cylinder was leaking.

“It's the smell, Trix. The smell of death.”

And then she knew what he meant, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't kill him. Her hands were trembling.

A thinker straddled his body, reaching out with its claws through the force-field. It made a small incision at the base of his neck, cutting down to his groin. Berry screamed in pain. With meticulous care, the thinker cut beneath the skin, separating the subcutaneous flesh from his rib cage, and opening up his abdomen. Berry howled. Behind him, another thinker cradled his head in its claws. Berry moaned, flashing in and out of consciousness as they tormented him, probing his mind and his body. He was reeling in shock.

Trixie whimpered.

The thinker leaning over Berry peeled back the skin. It seemed particularly interested in the defunct arteries leading to his severed belly button, examining them closely. Berry trembled, calling out incoherently. Sweat broke out on his forehead despite the cold. He was panting, struggling. The thinker probed his exposed diaphragm, observing how it controlled his breathing. Berry screamed.

“TRIXIE... TR...IX... IE...”

Trixie curled up in a ball, paralyzed by fear, unable to move. She wanted this to end, for the nightmare to go away, but it wouldn't. She could close her eyes, but she couldn't shut out the noise, the screams as Berry called for her.

He was hyperventilating, unable to break through the pain. Blood dripped on the floor with a constant rhythm. He steadied his breathing, puffing his cheeks to catch the outbound air and slow down his distress and panic. His eyes stared straight ahead, as though he were looking past the thinker blocking his view, peering through the dark creature at something in the distance. He fought to compose himself, fighting to block out what was happening to him.

“Trixie... please...” he pleaded, his head turning toward her. “Please, Honey. You know what to do.”

His voice was calm, almost soothing amidst the cruelty. She looked into his eyes and started crawling forward, over near the vivisection platform.

“Thank you, Trix.”

The thinkers were preoccupied, examining Berry's kidneys and liver in close detail. The principle thinker leaned back, his claws grasping Berry's side, opening up the view. Trixie hadn't noticed it before, but there were hundreds of thinkers within the chamber, lining all four walls, each one aligned by local gravity so they could watch what was unfolding on the platform as though they were staring at something on a distant wall. The pyramid-like shape within the chamber afforded four equally advantageous viewpoints above the operation. Tapping and clicking resounded through the chamber, but it was resonating through the roots and branches more than the open air. She could feel the micro-pulses beneath her fingertips as she crept forward.

Trixie opened the valve on the cylinder leaning against the platform. Without a regulator, the viscous acetylene flowed out as a liquid, seething and bubbling as the gas came out of suspension. A fine mist hung low to the ground, drifting among the roots. Workers streaming past along one of the main roots became agitated, they swarmed in, trying to clean up the spill, capturing it in silken bubbles extending from their abdomens, before carrying it away. As they scurried off, Trixie noticed some of the transport bubbles contained rich, red blood, cleaned off the floor above her. The workers seemed incoherent, spreading out through the chamber rather than all heading in a single direction.

Berry was panting, chanting over and over again under his breath, “Do it, Trixie. Do it. Set me free, Babe. Set me free.”

Trixie looked up at the thinkers on the platform, keeping her gaze on them as she backed away, over to another cylinder lying to one side. They ignored her. Without breaking her eye contact, she

reached down, feeling with her hands and twisting the valve on the cylinder. Liquid acetylene began to flow slowly. Again, workers streamed in, trying to contain the liquid as it seeped out on the ground and vaporized into a gas. The heavy acetylene soaked into the gaps beneath the roots, following the course of least resistance. A fine fog spread across the dark ground.

Moving slowly, stepping backwards over the tangle of vines and roots, Trixie made her way to the backpack, keeping her eyes firmly on the vivisection platform. Berry was unconscious. The thinkers were excited, their tapping was in unison, the pulses through the roots held a steady rhythm, like a crowd chanting in union.

Trixie wanted to slip a couple of spare cylinders into the backpack, but the thought of metal clanking on metal scared her. She picked up the welding torch along with one of the cylinders, tucking it under her arm. Moving slowly and deliberately, she opened the valve on the closest cylinder to her and left the rest where they lay. Silently, she tiptoed over toward the tunnel as the thinkers reveled in their torture. They must have had some success in breaking into Berry's mind, she figured, as the phosphorescence glowing from beneath their shells rippled with color and excitement, lighting up in a variety of patterns sweeping throughout the chamber.

Trixie had seen Berry do this twice before. She knew how to light the pilot flame. Trixie tripped the ignition switch, flicked open the safety catch, and gently squeezed the trigger. Even without an acetylene cylinder attached, a flare of blue flame erupted from the tip of the torch. Its soft glow went unnoticed, as did the hiss and crackle in the air. With her eyes still locked on the thinkers, Trixie reached down, holding the flame just inches from one of the roots. The thin fog, hanging low against the ground, caught fire.

The flame spread rapidly, curling over the roots as it raced throughout the chamber, spreading out in a circle. But it was soft, muted, barely the glow of a candle burning in the dark. The thinkers turned, seeing the flame racing out in a broad front. They chattered with their legs. Workers arched up around Trixie in response, climbing over each other to form into branches reaching up to surround her. She'd seen this before, in the narrow tunnel. Trixie lashed out, swinging the cylinder with one hand and striking at the column of workers. They flexed, absorbing the blow, and swung back in place. The tiny creatures were forming a prison around her. Within seconds, she would be trapped.

The glowing flame resounded out within the chamber like a ripple in a pond, reaching the first of the cylinders and the pool of liquid acetylene flooding a root ball beside it. Flames burst into the air, curling up toward the ceiling. With temperatures in excess of three thousand degrees being reached within the fiery pool, the cylinder ruptured, exploding, releasing a fireball that enveloped most of the chamber. The air compressed in front of Trixie, knocking her and the workers backwards as the radiant heat scorched her skin. Trixie fell, falling into the tunnel where gravity realigned and she found herself having moved onto a different plane. It seemed like she was now sitting beside a fiery pit, with flames curling in the low-gravity, licking at the roots framing the chamber, setting them alight.

Workers scattered, fleeing from her, their connection with the thinkers severed. Within the chamber, several more explosions erupted as cylinders ruptured. The oxygen-rich environment fed the flames. Trixie could hear the crackle and pop of shells bursting open in the heat.

She staggered away from the opening, further down the darkened tunnel, away from the searing temperatures within the chamber. Trixie watched as the flames behind her pasted the vast, twisting tube before her in flickering bursts of yellow, orange and red. Her hands were trembling. She dropped the cylinder. Flicking the ignition switch, she cut the pilot flame on the welding torch and let it slip from her fingers. Falling to her knees, she sobbed. The hair on her arms had singed, her eyebrows were burnt, the hair curled. The smell of smoke and death hung around her.

Workers streamed past in a futile attempt to contain the fire raging within the chamber.

Trixie cried. Tears streamed down her cheek. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Berry was dead. She'd killed him. There was no other way, she told herself, but that was no comfort. She hated what she'd done. Sitting there, she knew she should have been pushing on through the maze of tunnels,

weaving her way back to the *Swift*. It was wrong to collapse here in self-pity. The autopilot would take her home. How did she know that? She remembered the autopilot, but she wasn't sure how. Then it dawned on her, the thoughts flooding her mind were a mixture of her memories and his. Somehow, she still remembered things he'd seen, thoughts he'd had. She shared his desire to escape, to warn the *Rift Valley*, to protect the crew. Yet those thoughts were cold. Although they were in the depths of her mind, they felt alien, as strange and foreign as the roots entwined around her.

She couldn't run. As much as she knew Berry would have wanted her to, she couldn't. It didn't feel right. The reality of what had happened stunned her. She was in shock. Her arms felt numb. There didn't seem to be any purpose any more, not now Berry was dead. How bittersweet her escape had been. She could run, but to where? To the *Rift Valley*? The only conscious thoughts she had of that spaceship were his. And what awaited her there? The only man she'd ever known was dead. Nothing would ever change that.

A dark shadow loomed over her, blocking out the glowing fires beyond. Trixie looked up. Through her tears, so large in the low-gravity, she saw the distorted outline of a thinker looming over her. She should run, escape, try to get away. But it was all too much. Why postpone the inevitable? Why fight? There was nothing left to fight for.

Trixie sat there defeated, looking up at the imposing alien. The thinker staggered forward, its multitude of legs stuttering as it crossed the roots. Smoke rose from its back, drifting in the breeze. A cluster of long, spindly arms stretched down either side of its shell. They waved back and forth in various patterns and combinations, as though their symmetry was a reflection of its thoughts within. It seemed to be looking right through her. Trixie didn't care. She wasn't afraid. There was nothing to be afraid of. She was already as good as dead. There was nothing more to lose. She stood, facing the creature defiant.

“Why?” she yelled. “Why would you do this?”

The huge beast swayed before her. Its cold, impersonal eyes as black as coal. Its silence intimidating.

“Was it worth it? Is any of this worth it? We live. We die. And for what? For this?”

A sense of rage swelled within her. She grabbed the cylinder.

The thinker reached out with its arms, trying to touch her. Trixie lashed out, swinging the cylinder around and bring it down like a baseball bat on the side of the animal. She struggled to hold the cylinder with both hands, determined to transmit as much force as possible with each blow, each time crying out, “Why?”

The thinker fell on its back, its smoldering shell-casing lay across the roots. It made no attempt to defend itself. Trixie pounded it, using the butt of the cylinder and driving hard at the creature's eyes, hoping its brain was somewhere deep within.

“Why? Damn you. Why?”

Dark body fluids ran from the open wound and crushed eye stalks of the thinker, but it never fought back. Slowly, Trixie's thumping softened. Black fluids marred her hands and clothes. She tossed the cylinder to one side, looking at the pathetic creature lying before her. Was it mercy it craved? Was it absolution? Was it understanding? Why should it expect any, when it had shown none? And she realized these were her thoughts, her feelings, projected onto this alien creature that seemed to have no recognition of any such concepts.

She couldn't kill it.

Looking at her black stained hands, she felt pity. Killing this creature wouldn't bring back Berry. Nothing ever would. She touched the creature's arms, running her soft fingertips over its hard exoskeleton. What had it seen in its life? What would be lost with its death? Did these creatures have any concept of individual consciousness? Did they realize the pathetic waste of death? A sense of tragedy and loss overwhelmed her. Life should not be so, she decided. Life should be lived above death, it should not perpetuate the misery that all creatures endure given time. And yet, neither she nor

Berry had brought this fight. These dark creatures had. She had no desire to kill, she had a desire to survive. She had to survive, and if that meant the alien's death, then it had to be so. There was a confusion of thoughts in her mind, some of them hers, some of them Berry's, but that realization gave her a renewed sense of reason.

Trixie stepped back from the creature, picking up the bloodied cylinder and the welding torch as she started down the tunnel. After a few feet, she stopped and looked back at the pathetic creature that had once held so much power over her. She remembered the interrogation, the pain as her mind was jacked, the humiliation, and yet she still felt sorry for them. They were brute beasts. For all their intelligence, they had succumbed to the base ideals of conquest and exploitation. These were new concepts to her, but Berry had understood them, and now she did too. The irony wasn't lost on her, that to reach such heights as interstellar conquest and yet to be driven by greed and power was a waste of intelligence. These had been Berry's thoughts, but she embraced them as her own. For her to survive, they had to die. It was no longer personal, it was her primeval survival instinct kicking in.

Trixie reached the junction where she'd lost sight of Berry on their first escape. From here, it was a dog's leg back to the *Swift*. Several hundred yards further on, she had to cut back on an angle of 120 degrees, and then straight on to the surface a couple of miles away. These were Berry's thoughts. She knew that because she hated dogs. Carefully, she screwed the cylinder into the welding torch, preparing to use it as a flame thrower, in the same way Berry had.

The workers scurrying around her had gone dark, switching off their chemical lights, leaving the intersection in darkness. A soft yellow glow appeared down one tunnel, and she remembered Berry's plan, but the makeshift fuse Berry had built had gone up in the inferno.

Stepping out of the intersection and into the narrow tunnel, Trixie noticed her hair drifting in front of her again, bouncing softly as she walked, just as it had several hours ago. Walking around the circumference of the tunnel, she found she could turn to what had once seemed to be upside down while always staying upright, always experiencing that giddy sensation of weightlessness around her head as she edged down toward the massive ball of dust in the far chamber. Trixie stopped half way, thinking, realizing she could use this effect to her advantage. Were these her thoughts or Berry's? They were hers, she decided, as it seemed all they shared were memories. If this worked as Berry had suggested, she might just destroy them.

Trixie unscrewed the cylinder, taking the regulator off. She held the cylinder parallel to the ground, with its brass-threaded end facing her, and lifted it up slightly above head height. Letting go, she watched as it floated in zero-gravity, defying the sense of pull she felt at her feet. Within the confines of the narrow tunnel, it was stable, floating freely between the circular walls. Trixie opened the valve, making sure she was off to one side. Globes of liquid acetylene leaked out, floating in small spheres, bubbling as they released their gas. Trixie gave the cylinder a gentle shove, propelling it down the tunnel toward the glowing sphere of dust. She watched as it disappeared into the haze. Moving back to the intersection, she followed the stream of slowly shrinking bubbles drifting in the opposite direction. As they reached the intersection, they became subject to differing gravitational strengths and fell into the roots. Trixie lit the pilot flame on the welding torch and held it up to the gas stream in the mouth of the narrow tunnel. A pulse of fire flashed down through the tunnel. Trixie threw the welding torch down the tunnel as well for good measure, before darting back and up out of the intersection.

Her heart was racing. Time seemed to slow. Nothing happened. Maybe Berry was wrong and that powder wasn't flammable after all. Maybe the flame never reached down into the heart of the swirling dust storm. Maybe the dust storm smothered it, starving the flame of oxygen. Maybe a thinker or a bunch of workers had smothered the flame. Trixie charged along the main artery, remembering Berry's warning that, without disabling the ship she could never leave. All of a sudden, leaving was important. The idea of escaping was now real. The cloud over her mind seemed to lift with the prospect of freedom.

A flash of light broke around her. The air compressed, throwing her down through the tunnel as a wall of fire erupted behind her in the intersection. The noise of the roar deafened her. Getting back to her feet, she had a newfound sense of excitement.

In the low-gravity, it was difficult to move as fast as she wanted to, so she leaned forward, almost falling over, and used her legs to propel herself along at a rapid pace. Grabbing at the roots and vines in front of her, she used her hands like a monkey, guiding her motion, correcting her course as she charged through the tunnel.

Explosions rocked the alien craft as the fire billowed through the interior, ripping through the interconnecting tunnels between the swirling balls of fine, almost gaseous particles. Trixie had a rhythm, a sense of cadence allowing her to cover the distance to the *Swift* in under fifteen minutes. She was moving much faster than she had with Berry, when they felt their every move was being watched. Now, she didn't care. She wanted to go as fast as she could, as fast as her legs and lungs would carry her. With each bound, she could feel the artificial gravity wavering beneath her, and she wondered how long it would last.

Explosions continued to resound, although they were deep, far away from her. The branches and roots around her flexed and groaned. Ahead, she could see the main artery narrowing as it began splitting close to the surface of the craft. She recognized the charred remains of the workers that had been scorched by Berry in the recess of the narrow side-tunnel leading back to the *Swift*. In her mind, she felt electrified. Thoughts of Berry seemed so distant. The charred bars had been pried open, probably when the aliens had dragged them unconscious to the vivisection chamber. Trixie came up to the entrance and froze. There, blocking her way, was a thinker.

She backed slowly around the main tunnel, away from the entrance as the thinker moved out to face her. She was powerless, helpless. The thinker seemed to be sizing her up, not rushing to any one action or another. Trixie noticed the workers in this region. They aligned themselves on the sides of several roots, ready to spring in her direction. Explosions continued to resound in the distance. The whole structure of the craft vibrated.

The thinker advanced on her, as though it were trying to corner her rather than attack her. Trixie felt the gravity fluctuations becoming more extreme. Whereas before they had put off her cat-like jaunt through the tunnel, now they caused her to sway back and forth, as her center of gravity shifted in response to the surge of gravity around them.

With her arms in front of her, Trixie determined to go down fighting like a wild animal. The thinker seemed to feel the fluctuations. If anything, they made him more cautious, wary of what she might do, and she realized she held an unforeseen advantage. They feared her. She had killed hundreds of them. She had set their craft alight. They thought they knew her, but they had underestimated her. She decided to test her theory. Rather than backing away, she lunged forward, bearing her fingers like claws. The thinker and the workers reacted, pulling back, clearly not knowing quite what to expect. Perhaps the thinker was thinking too much. Maybe it thought she could spit out flames. She lunged again, being more aggressive, baring her teeth and yelling with all her might. The thinker flinched, turning partially to one side as though it were expecting to be struck down. It was stalling, blocking, buying the aliens time. But the bluff was on both sides. She could no more hurt a thinker with her bare hands than she could breathe fire. The bulk of the creature, reaching up almost two feet above her, was intimidating.

Gravity surged.

The downward compression, pushing outward against the tangled roots, increased rapidly. Instead of feeling light and buoyant, Trixie suddenly felt as though lead weights had been strapped to her shoulders, arms and legs.

The craft was coming apart. Its environmental controls were starting to fail. Waves of heat surged up through the tunnels. Trixie crumpled under the sense of weight. Even her cheeks felt heavy, sagging down, her jaw being pulled open. She knelt down, her hands spread, trying to take the weight

with her bone structure. The massive surge in gravity made it hard to breathe. Lifting her head to look at the thinker came close to straining her neck muscles, but she wanted to see it, to know what it was doing. Could it cope with these extremes? The workers were nowhere to be seen, having slipped into the cracks. The thinker lay face down on the roots, pools of dark fluid seeped out around the dead creature.

As suddenly as it had come, local gravity rebounded, returning to the soft level she'd become accustomed to before swinging wildly in its orientation again.

Trixie dug her hands into the roots, holding tight as her feet flipped out from beneath her and she found herself hanging from the ceiling. The dead body of the thinker fell to what now seemed to be the floor of the tunnel below her. A few seconds later, she was lying on her side before being dragged over to the other side as the gravitational direction fluctuated, gyrating around the main tunnel. The body of the thinker rolled around the tunnel with each gravitational pulse. Finally, gravity aligned to what had been the horizontal, and the tunnel she had bounded through just a few minutes earlier became a deep shaft, a well dropping away beneath her feet. The thinker fell into the distance. Hanging from the side of the tunnel, Trixie looked down for several hundred feet, looking at a small kink in the winding passageway that had now become a landing. The falling body of the thinker struck the landing with a thud. Dark fluids sprayed out from within the dead creature.

Trixie's inner ear was spinning. A sense of vertigo swept over her at the counterintuitive view below her. Moving hand over hand, digging her feet into the gaps between the mesh of roots and branches lining the shaft, she moved slowly around to the side-tunnel. Her footing slipped, and she thought she was going to fall to her death. Grabbing hold of loose branches was dangerous, each one felt firm at first, as though it would hold her weight, but they could easily pull away from the side of the shaft like loose vines. The thick roots were hard to clamber over, their smooth husks gave her little to hold on to, and she struggled to reach around them for handholds. With the muscles in her arms burning and her legs weary, she made it into the side-tunnel where there was a sense of gravitational normality. Inside the cramped tunnel where the thinker had lain in wait, gravity still pulled in only one direction, down toward the heart of the ship, but she had a thick mat of vines and branches to crawl upon. Within thirty feet, the side-tunnel petered out, dissipating into a thick cluster of new growth. Clawing her way through, Trixie pulled at the fresh tendrils, climbing between them, trying to make her way back to the *Swift*.

She was lost.

The alien superstructure looked entirely different. The tracks carved into the inner hull were gone. Were they overgrown, or was it that she had taken a wrong turn? Perhaps she had started tearing through the undergrowth at a slightly different angle, and after several hundred yards was off course. In the darkness, she could pass within a few feet of the hull and still not notice the *Swift*. She began to panic, retracing her steps, second guessing herself. Nothing looked familiar. She pressed on, sure she was going to miss the craft when suddenly there it was, right in front of her. Her heart leaped as her hand touched the smooth metal.

Trixie clambered over the hull, searching for the hatch. The *Swift* had been moved, being drawn deeper within the alien craft. It had been turned over on its side, forcing Trixie to drop down beneath the ship and climb in through the hatch from below.

Lights. She never thought she'd be so glad to be blinded by lights. As she secured the outer hatch, the lights within the airlock came on automatically. On entering the main cabin, she could see the pilot's chair above her instead of out in front of her, as it had been before. Something caught her eye on the ground. It was her bracelet, the one Berry hated. It was so pretty, with its woven, colored threads, like the bands of a rainbow. The silver disc glistened in the light. The bell rang softly as she picked it up, the sound was soothing, comforting, but she wasn't sure why. She slipped it over her wrist.

"Computer," she called out, remembering how Berry had called the ship by this name.

"Online," came the electronic response.

“Computer. Get me out of here.”

“I’m sorry, you will have to be more specific.”

Trixie clambered up, over the engine cowling, past the navigation console and into the pilot’s seat, lying on her back as she squeezed her legs up in front of her. She’d seen Berry in this position, so it seemed like the right thing to do.

“Take me home,” she called out, tears welling up in her eyes. “Please, take me home.”

“I’m sorry, I do not know where home is.”

A red light blinked next to the picture of Berry and his cat.

“Computer, what is...”

“Fuel cells at 2500 degrees Celsius. Containment will suffer a catastrophic failure in approximately fifty minutes. Computer recommends...”

“Yes, yes,” cried Trixie. “Shut it off, or turn it off, or do whatever you have to.”

“Safety protocols reactivated,” replied the computer. “Coolant is circulating.”

“Please, take me away from here.”

“Where do you want to go?”

Now that she was in the pilot’s seat, a holograph appeared before her. Several stars glowed within the image, along with a series of razor-thin lines that looked like they described contours, marking gravitational strength rather than the height of land. The flat tabletops were interstellar Lagrange points, reaching up above the valleys in which each of the stars were set. The rendezvous point showed up in soft green. Trixie reached in and touched the glowing light and the computer acknowledged.

“Plotting a course for the agreed rendezvous point.”

Trixie felt the roar of the engines coming to life. The craft surged and pulled, fighting against the dying ship that held it captive. Trixie held onto the straps looped over the seat. She could hear the sound of metal scraping against the toughened roots and limbs outside the craft. The *Swift* shuddered, shaking as it inched forward. Finally, it broke free, punching through the outer skin of the alien craft in a ball of fire. The metallic craft shot out into space, dragging its shattered communications boom with it. Immediately, Trixie felt her sense of gravity shift. The *Swift* was accelerating, so she had a sensation of being pushed back in her seat.

Trixie quickly learned she could control the view in front of her with a series of simple hand gestures, and waved her fingers in such a way that she had a view of the alien craft as the *Swift* receded, pulling rapidly away from the dark warship. From without, a few specks of light were visible on the alien vessel, highlighting those areas burning close to the hull. The alien craft lurched, turning slowly. The craft was splitting, coming apart. Debris floated in the cold vacuum. Zooming in, Trixie could see fragments of the hull coming loose and creatures being sucked out into the void of space. Within minutes, though, the *Swift* had moved so far away that she lost sight of these finer details.

The engines on the *Swift* cut as the computerized autopilot spoke.

“Calculating burn times and burn orientation based on the strength of the current gravitational well. Please wait.”

Trixie drifted forward in zero-gravity as the acceleration slowly ceased. She smiled. Although she only had a vague recollection of what the computer meant, and that recollection wasn’t hers, she knew she was going home. Home, it was such a foreign concept for her, just a sentimental attachment Berry once had for the *Rift Valley*.

For the first time, she relaxed. Her eyes closed. The nightmare was over, and yet the vision of Berry caught in the force field still flashed before her eyes, images of him being transformed into some primitive beast, writhing in agony.

Her teeth clenched as her muscles tightened.

She breathed deeply, trying not to think about anything, wanting to let go and move beyond the horror. The tension in her muscles slowly gave way and her arms drifted up as she floated just inches

from the pilot's seat. The bell on her wrist rang softly each time she moved, and that familiar sound soothed her soul, comforting her against the sense of loneliness and loss.

The cockpit was cramped. Trixie opened her eyes as she drifted softly into the overhead console. She wanted someone to talk to, there were so many questions floating around in her mind. The *Swift* was small. The cockpit only held one seat. Where had she sat? And there was only one hammock. Where had she slept? And why had Berry given her his clothes to wear? Where were her clothes?

All she had of her own was her bracelet. With her left hand, she pulled at it, looking closely at the dirty fabric. It needed to be washed, as that would restore its brilliant colors, she thought. She slipped her fingers beneath the cord, running them around under her wrist, fascinated by this tatty piece of jewelry, but without understanding why.

The photo of Berry and his cat caught her eye.

She pulled the photograph off the control panel and smiled, looking at Berry in happier times. He looked content. His hair was messy. His blue shirt had grease stains on the sleeves. He was laughing, holding the cat close to his face so it would make it into the photo. The cat was pretty, with black hair like hers. The eyes looked warm and friendly. A cute collar sat around the cat's neck, hidden slightly by its dark fur. Strands of a rainbow-colored cord were visible, as was a silver tag hanging from it, and a shiny metal bell. In her mind, Trixie could hear the bell ringing even back then.

There were words written on the photo. She couldn't read them, she didn't know how to read, but she instinctively knew what they said, months before someone on the *Rift Valley* confirmed it for her. They explained everything, they told her all she needed to know. They read, *Trixie & Me*.

The End

Afterword

During the 1950's, Physicist Enrico Fermi was renowned for asking hypothetical questions over lunch at the Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos. One afternoon, [Fermi casually asked](#), "Don't you ever wonder where everybody is?" The scientists present, including George Gamow and Edward Teller, immediately knew what he was talking about, and a discussion started in earnest about the prospect of intelligent life in outer space.

The basis for Fermi's question was the realization that the technical advent of interstellar travel would allow an intelligent alien race to colonize the entire galaxy in roughly a hundred million years, following the law of geometric expansion. This would be a mere afternoon in cosmological time. With mankind going from drawing cave paintings of the moon to walking upon the lunar surface in roughly ten thousand years, it is entirely possible that humans will have mastery of interstellar travel within the next millennium and begin their own conquest of the Milky Way. Such a conquest, once technically feasible, would expand rapidly, branching throughout the galaxy until all the habitable systems had been identified and colonized.

Fermi's paradox was, why hadn't some other intelligent species beaten us to the galactic rim? Given the sheer time available so far in the history of the universe and, presumably, the numerous opportunities there would be for intelligent life to emerge in our galaxy, why aren't the stars teeming with signs of intelligent life?

Fermi's paradox has matured into [a variety of possible explanations](#) about the prospect of intelligent extraterrestrial life, and is the basis of [SETI](#), the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence. As a short story, *Trixie & Me* poses one possible reason for the [Rare Earth](#). Rather than being the first to emerge into the interstellar environment, we may be the last, or at least the latest. Given the length of time it took for intelligence to arise on Earth, numerous other civilizations may have arisen and gone extinct long before we first stepped out onto the Savannah. It could be that we inhabit a celestial graveyard, with only the remnants of previous burnt-out civilizations still clinging to existence.

Recently, Stephen Hawking popularized the notion that [one should not shout in a jungle](#). His point was that we are being rather loud, clumsy and naive about the prospect of alien intelligence, assuming aliens either don't exist or that they would be benign. In a [documentary for the Discovery Channel](#), Hawking stated his thoughts:

We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet... I imagine they might exist in massive ships, having used up all the resources from their home planet. Such advanced aliens would perhaps become nomads, looking to conquer and colonize whatever planets they can reach... If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the Native Americans.

Rather than being paranoid, Hawking is encouraging prudence. We only have one planet, one opportunity to emerge into the galaxy.

Is it likely that a hostile alien race would seek to exploit resources on Earth? Probably not, for a number of reasons.

Our current electromagnetic footprint is so small as to be insignificant. Given the size of the Milky Way, our radio wave emissions extend less than a hundred light-years from Earth, barely 0.1% of the one hundred thousand light-year span of our galaxy. We have made barely a ripple in this pond. In light of this, and the immense distances involved with interstellar travel, only a local alien civilization, existing in the same portion of the spiral arm as our solar system, could ever possibly

discover and contact or reach Earth. Given that the speed of light imposes what appears to be an iron-clad limit on travel, even if someone close to us was to discover our presence and mount an expedition, it is unlikely to reach us any time soon.

If alien civilizations are subject to the same economic realities we observe both in commerce and in nature, we can assume that any alien race undertaking such a voyage would probably do so for scientific rather than exploitive reasons. There are just too many other, easier ways to gain resources than flying zillions of miles through space to our tiny planet. The only reason for such a journey would be to sample life, and not for conquest. It's a case of investment versus return. To mount such an undertaking would require a vast investment of time and resources for any alien race, and would only offer a minor return, one that was centuries removed from its initial point of investment. Therefore, the only plausible reason for such an action would be for the scientific exploration of exotic life on Earth. In this novella, I've portrayed hostile intent, but this is highly unlikely.

When it comes to the concept of alien conquest, it's interesting to consider the evolution of life on Earth. Within nature, we see a food chain, but we also see numerous species coexisting peacefully, occupying different niches so as to avoid direct competition for limited resources. In the same way, any alien species that were to discover life within our solar system, and wanted to move into the neighborhood, would probably be more interested in one of the other planets than Earth, simply because their biological origins probably came from a highly different environment, perhaps one closer to Neptune or Titan.

The cover art for *Trixie & Me* is from the [NASA Spitzer Space Telescope mission](#), and is used in accordance with the [NASA JPL policy on image reproduction](#).

My thanks to fellow science fiction writer [Brian Wells](#) for his assistance in developing this short story.

I hope you have enjoyed this speculative science fiction short story. Please take the time to provide a review, avoiding spoilers.

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