

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.

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