

*A hospitality officer boards her first assignment. An exploration of the human condition through experiences with the in-human.*

The event was a big art show on Prisma Beta, a collaboration between several high-profile artists in the Federation, the biggest formal interspecies art collaboration to date. The whole crew was granted a day's shore leave, but the senior staff and a few other select officers were invited to the opening. She was *thrilled* at the prospect. Not to mention getting some fresh air land-side.

The venue was gorgeous, high ceilings and sloping architecture with large arched windows and an abundance of stained glass. Since she'd been one of the few non-senior members invited, she was meandering alone through the exhibition with a glass of wine when she felt a presence beside her.

"Hello, Doctor." It was Eli, catching her off-guard. "Is it common practice to hold a beverage at events such as these?" She tried to push down the little bit of shyness that threatened to overtake her.

"I think so. If you want to appear more casual or organic, it might be something to consider. Although if you don't plan on drinking anything you don't have to force it either, there's no need to pretend for our sake." *Don't*. "And please, we're off duty, please call me Heidi." He nodded.

"What are you drinking, if I may ask?"

"A white wine from Sedi VI. Most people think it's too sweet, but I like it. No use in letting something good go to waste."

"If I cannot enjoy it as an organic might, would it be considered a waste?"

"Can you taste things?"

"Yes, but perhaps not the way you can. I do not necessarily enjoy or dislike flavors, but I am capable of taste." She put her hand on his arm,

“Oh, frame it this way! For me, I’m savoring and relaxing. That’s one thing wine is for, but alcohol isn’t just a flavor experience, it’s a cultural one, an anthropological one, like art. Every region of every planet has different traditions and methods that express both the physical landscape and their cultural values. You don’t have to have an emotional reaction for its observation to have value.” *Shut up, shut up.* His expression denoted interest, though he quickly glanced at her hand on him. She removed it promptly. “I think it would be more than appropriate for you to take this opportunity to do some cultural research.” She’d noticed in a few of her interactions with him how he approached the world, and was attempting to frame it in a way that made sense to him. She’d also noticed how he took a tiny breath before speaking, remembering that he didn’t need to breathe.

“Perhaps you are correct. Will you assist me in my choice?” She pursed her lips to choke down her enthusiasm to appropriate levels.

“Of course.” In the end, they went with a red wine that was an exceptional regional example of Fortuna’s southern valley regions.

“It does have similarities to iron-rich clay,” he’d noted. “And Terran strawberries. Thank you for the recommendation.” She was going to peel herself away after that, but he asked her politely about her opinion on one of the large-scale paintings, which she happily rambled on about for some time. Eventually they ran out of art to discuss, and he asked her about her time on the ship.

“I’m just so thankful to get to be here. On the crew, I mean. Especially when it comes to getting invited to see such amazing events like this. I used to love going to the galleries and museums in Paris and Los Angeles while I was at the academy.”

“I have never been to Paris.”

“Really? But you went to the academy on Earth?” Eli offered only a very small, practiced shrug. “I had no reason to go at the time. I was still inexperienced and did not value cultural and artistic endeavors as I do now.”

“Tell me more.”

“In the early years after my activation, I was much more inclined to academic endeavors and to learning how to ‘fit in’ as it were amongst organics. I had no friends at the academy, and so extracurriculars were not a primary focus of mine.” Heidi couldn’t hide her frown.

“So you just did your academic work, I assume very quickly, and then...? What did you do with all your free time?”

“My free time was largely spent on reading texts from Earth and human history, my own experimental pursuits, and not much else. I did participate in many outside projects with faculty, however, and worked as a Teacher's Assistant for some time in multiple advanced physics courses.”

“No hobbies?”

“Hobbies are a new venture for me, and I still struggle to allow myself time for such things. On a ship that needs constant staff and maintenance, I need very little, and believe I should make myself available at all times for service for the good of my crew. Giving someone like me time off seems-”

“It’s not a waste!” She said, a little too loud. “Sorry.”

“Not as an argument, but as a curiosity, what makes you say so with such certainty?”

“How can you be a good officer if you aren't a good person? I mean, well, not a moral person but being good at *being* a person? What kind of captain would you be if you only cared about efficiency or duty? You already aren't *that* cold and calculating, you care more about individuality and experience than the ship's AI or the Automaton. I know you want to be useful, but even you have to devote yourself to personal development, if not for yourself then for your co-workers, superiors, and subordinates.”

“You believe I could captain a starship?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“I suppose it is. I have encountered pushback on the subject, however.”

“Then you have to think about what makes a good leader. Not just an efficient officer. You’ll prove them wrong.”

“I will take that into consideration, thank you. I appreciate your ability to answer questions. You gave a similarly thorough answer on Prisma station after your presentation.” She smiled.

“That was you in the audience? I loved that question. I still think about it. Maybe it’s something we could get into later—” She covered her mouth to stop any more words from stumbling out.

“I believe that is a good idea. I would enjoy pursuing the matter further.” As many times as she tried to convince herself to break away out of self-preservation, she couldn’t help but stay sucked into her conversation with Eli. They were both so long-winded that no one else was eager to butt in, lest they get an earful. They ended up wandering the halls together discussing the merits of the aesthetic and cultural properties of art. As the evening wound down to a close, she attempted to make her exit as politely as she could.

“We should schedule our continued conversation now before you go, Doctor. Heidi.”

“Oh of course, yeah. And please, you don’t have to call me Doctor, it still doesn’t feel right, if I’m honest.”

“Even after all the work you put in to receive your degree?”

“Even after all that. When are you free?”

“I get off duty at 1300 on Thursdays and Fridays after I head the night crew.”

“You won’t be tired?”

“I am an android.”

“Right. Of course. I’m free Friday as well. Um.”

“Would you join me at the dining hall at 1300?”

“Sure.”

The thing she was *sure* was not a date couldn't come soon enough. It was all she could think about. She was so embarrassed to admit it, but she'd already developed a crush. Of all the people in the universe. Literally anyone else would be more convenient. This was the definition of a worst case scenario.

She was already sitting at a small table, knee bouncing, waiting for him to come through the doors. When he finally did he apologized for his tardiness, and she excused it, naturally. He asked her to continue elaborating on her thoughts about the necessity of humor in relationships both personal and professional. He took it all in, asking a few clarifying questions. He explained that there had been a time a few years ago when a few friends had attempted to illuminate him about humor, but it had failed miserably. She had a hard time not physically cringing when he relayed the story to her. It was embarrassing.

“Why did they feel the need to teach you?”

“I had asked.”

“I just think it's all so ridiculous. Humor is developed over decades of time and experience. And even some of the funniest people aren't actual comedians. That's like sending you to a dance teacher when you want to know how to dance at a party.” His expression indicated that he was in agreement. “How do you feel about it now? Personally, I mean?” His shrug was practiced, but she loved his mannerisms, and found them incredibly charming. She couldn't help but smile at the effort put into his non-verbal communication. When she spoke he was entirely focused on her, she was unused to it. His face was entirely unconventional, every angle and curve slightly unorthodox. At the event last week she couldn't help but notice his broad shoulders and narrow waist; paired his styled-back hair and elegant, strange features he

reminded her of men's fashion plates from the 1920's. She scrunched her eyes closed to sweep the thought away.

“I have since dropped the matter altogether.”

“Why's that?”

“At the time it seemed fruitless, and I had other parts of myself that I could develop with more success, and focus again on my work. But your approach to socialization has me reconsidering the pursuit.”

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Upon arriving at his quarters, Eli welcomed her inside.

“Heidi. I would like to introduce you to my daughter, Galatea.” Her mouth was agape as she tried to find words, but he continued right along, “Galatea, this is Heidi. She is a friend.” Friend. We're friends? I'm his friend? He has a daughter? Could synth's do that? Father? Into the room walked a diminutive android, she looked just like him and the others, but younger. As far as she knew synth's didn't age. “Please introduce yourself to the Lieutenant.” Her hand shot out roughly in greeting.

“My name is Galatea.” Heidi took her hand and shook it gently, still in awe but not wanting to make anything more awkward, not realizing that she was the only one in the room capable of feeling such a way.

“Galatea.” She flicked her eyes knowingly to Eli, who had an affinity for earth's mythologies. “That's beautiful. Are you an android?”

“I am. My father found me.”

“I see.” She looked to Eli for guidance and information, and maybe a little accusation. “Is this what you found on the dig?” He nodded and escorted them both to a place where they could all sit, surly for her benefit. He explained that Galatea was an android like he and his sisters, but that her make-up was different. She was built to

learn, and grow, and adapt similarly to them, but the wiring was more reflective of an organic structure. When Eli was found he was ignorant but fully formed, and already had a designation. He had named Galatea himself, and been given permission to oversee her development until they felt she was ready to go to the institute to speak with the specialists there.

“So socially, and developmentally, she’s maybe like a two or three year old?” Eli nodded in response.

“She will need to be ‘raised’ similar to the way my sisters and I were. But this is new territory. She is distinct from us.”

“I am five days old.” Heidi looked at the girl again, and couldn’t help but smile. She really was like a child, or a baby robin, flittery and sweet.

“I’m so glad to hear it.” Heidi took Galatea’s hand, and turned to Eli, “What are the next steps if she isn’t ready to socialize yet? Is there anything I can do to help?” He was ready with an answer.

“Before I tell you, please understand that you are not obligated to agree to my proposal.”

“I understand.”

“The reason why I have called you here was not only to introduce you to Galatea, but to ask something of you. I believe your areas of expertise will be integral in her next stages of development as she works to become sentient.” She was looking at Heidi’s hand still, and had a calm, pleasant expression. “If you would agree, I would much appreciate your assistance and care. You have also mentioned that you taught young children for a time.” Heidi was bewildered, hardly knowing what to do with what was happening. Did he trust her that much? Looking at him though, the idea of being trusted by him was such a good feeling. Being involved in his life. She had to agree. She also had to admit that what started as a crush was now wildly out of control.

