

When we were infinite

Beyond the here and now. By Wendy Nickel

The faster your ships, the smaller the Universe. The smaller the Universe, the more important it is to live harmoniously.” Inva weaves her digits together, invoking a picture of beings residing tranquilly side-by-side.

She smiles down at the digits – fingers, they’re called in this form – and imagines one of them representing her people, the Inva, and the ones lying alongside it representing those other beings within the Inva’s alliance: the Phillox, floating on the currents of their gaseous planet. The Zzi, dwelling among the lava floes of theirs. The Vrakna. The liu. She imagines dozens, hundreds, thousands more: planets upon planets, overlapping across all times and every space, so that she was with them. She is with them. She will be with them. Always.

Across the table, the Human ambassador clears her throat. The skin of her brow creases in a manner that Inva learns to associate with contemplation. The Human calls herself Rose, a designation that presents some initial confusion. Inva learns that this is a species with individual autonomy, rather than a hivemind; discovering one is new to Inva. New, now old. The knowledge is merged into her consciousness until it was always known. Always understood. Always true.

“You come in peace?” Human-Rose asks.

“How else would we come?”

Inva has struggled to convince Human-Rose of the Inva’s purpose; duplicity is a concept unfamiliar to Inva. (New. Merged. Now always known.) Sincerity, it seems, is a concept unfamiliar to Humanity, but one that softens Human-Rose’s voice and causes her face to bend into reluctant smiles.

“I need to warn you,” Human-Rose says. She runs her thumb along the timepiece on her wrist. It’s a strange contraption; Human-Rose tries to teach her to read it, but its tiny metal hands flicker and blur in Inva’s mind. “The human leaders have been growing uneasy. They don’t like this ship hovering over the city, and they aren’t satisfied with the information I’ve been able to provide about your people. They told me to ask you what it is that you want from us and how much longer you intend to remain here.”

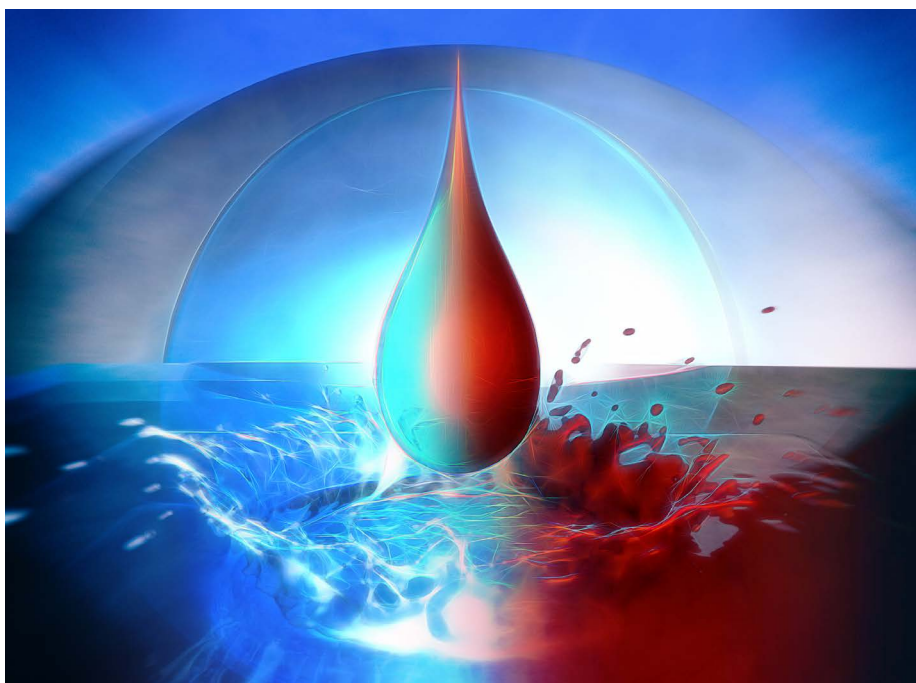


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Inva closes the lids of her ocular organs as she tries to find an answer that Human-Rose will understand. The Inva have encountered other beings with spatial and temporal constraints, but none so rigid in their use of it, with words like ‘now’ and ‘then’ and ‘here’. What does an OorIn, fixed in its bed of star plasma, care about ‘where’? What does a Xbo in its wormhole care about ‘when’?

A noise draws Human-Rose to the window. “Inva? What’s going on out there?”

The Inva are present. Inva can feel them, merging together physically as they are in mind. Inva knows duplicity, but Inva is not duplicitous herself, so she answers the only way she knows how: truthfully. “We only wish to gather among you, to declare our alliance, to gain your knowledge and offer you ours.”

“You mean those are other Inva ships?”

“Yes.”

“There’s so many of them ...” Human-Rose breathes. “Where did they all come from so suddenly?”

“They are here.” They were here, are here, will always be here, but Inva knows Human-Rose doesn’t understand that. This is not duplicity; it is merely the constraints of

Human-Rose’s understanding. Hers is a world of ticking time and map-marked space. A world of ‘here’ and ‘now’.

“Inva, I don’t think you understand.” There is fear in Human-Rose’s eyes as she turns from the window. “The Inva are all one in thought and purpose, but humanity is not. You can’t expect them all to trust you just because I do. I’ve tried telling you, humans are different from these other beings you’ve encountered. They’re distrustful of those who aren’t like them.”

“That’s why I’ve taken on this form.” Inva holds out her arm-appendages. She wiggles her finger-digits. It is part of the Inva’s process: listen, adapt, form the alliance. It is a process that works. Worked. Will work. Always. “I am like the Humans.”

But Human-Rose shakes her head, and Inva wonders why there are tears in the Human’s eyes.

Inva leads Human-Rose outside, balancing on the edge of the ship. The Inva ships spin around them, carrying wind and leaves and sheets of dead-and-processed tree pulp. Inva’s face shapes a smile to reassure Human-Rose, and she tells her: “We do this infinite times.”

“Not like this, you haven’t,” Human-Rose

Futures

whispers. “Inva, please ... Tell them to wait. Humanity isn’t ready. I need more time to prepare them.”

But it already is. The Inva file out of their ships. They gather upon the blocks of compressed gravel before the Human edifice. The Humans draw nearer. They wear synthetic fibre domes on their heads and carry polished sticks of steel. These are new. Now merged and known. The Inva, too, carry these sticks in their Humanoid hands. They point them outward, as the Humans do.

“No!” Human-Rose shouts, grabbing at the stick protruding from Inva’s arm.

“What is the matter? We are like you.”

Below, a human yells, “They’re armed! Fire

at will!” and, in a burst of light and noise, the Inva fall.

The Inva are gone. Were gone. Have always been gone. Never were.

In her office on the twenty-sixth floor, Rose stops work on the report she was writing, her fingers in mid-air over her keyboard, overcome by a sense of grief she can’t explain.

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