

Meeting a Mom at the Edge of Space

Xu Mason

She didn't catch the first one. In fact, it took two more messages before she realized it was real and not just some junk spammer looking to see if she wanted to sell blood or organs.

MATERNAL VISIT REQUEST

(LAST AND FINAL ATTEMPT)

To G B.3 I-MK

THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE TO LET YOU KNOW THAT YOUR GENETIC CONTRIBUTOR HAS PLACED A MATERNAL VISIT REQUEST—

It took several minutes for her to process the blinking message. A matvis? She scanned the rest of it.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO COMPLY, PLEASE RESPOND. AGAIN, THIS IS YOUR FINAL MESSAGE.

Below that was a picture of a young woman with long brown hair and pretty in the way that all young people are. Minimal makeup and white clothing. All details were plain and pleasant, smoothed of any rough edges like personality or preferences: the sameness required in all government ID photos.

She could not tell how old this person—Mom? Mother? Maternal birth giver?—was.

She studied the image. The hair was different. And eyes too. Galt supposed she could have used mods—some of the girls in univer-

sity loved messing around with them, going from green to blue hair or looking different even for a moment.

Still. They had similar cheekbones. Maybe the skull was harder to modify.

She sat looking at her screen. Her half eaten dinner box turning cold. And she clicked yes.

The date was two months from now. The tenth was a fine month to meet your mom, Galt guessed. She requested time off and scheduled the AI to look after her place. When it asked about plants or pets, Galt thought about her little studio with its plain walls she never even upgraded with holovisions. She selected no.

“Hey, you have a mom, right?”

She turned to her co-copter, who was presently trying to funnel six drills into a tunnel meant for four.

Galt had never been great with words. It was not a requirement of engineers. But now as the words were suspended awkwardly between the two women, weighing down their recycled air, she wished it was.

“Hmm? Don't we all have moms?”

Dian didn't look up.

"No, I mean you had a . . ." she looked for the right word. "You were raised by one, right? Because of the whole—"

Galt wasn't sure what Dian's family worried. She believed it was simply impolite to know too much about one's colleague. And to whom or what star anyone prayed to firmly fell into that. But five times a day, Dian left for a few minutes. She also didn't eat any of the artificial pork rations. Surely she had spoken about it at some point during their two years together. But even if her colleague had volunteered such information, it had not been strapped down and secured. And so off it had floated into space.

"Yeah, we still have intact family units. It's part—"

She said something confusing. Perhaps Dian had run afoul of the corporate sensors, whose limitations of subject matters had specific parameters on difficult topics. Or perhaps family was something Galt could not comprehend. It certainly sounded complicated.

"Why—oh wait—you requested a maternal visit?" Dian said.

She emphasized *you* rather pointedly.

"Other way around."

Galt thought of some of her academy cohort. Some of them had strong philosophies on meeting their maternal units. It was easy to hold those ideals when the concept of "mom" was something you learned from a screen alongside "mono sodium disulfide bonds."

By university, most of that chatter went away. People who were obsessed with it had requested it, and either had it denied or affirmed. And if affirmed, it had gone well or terribly. Everyone else had put those thoughts away with the rest of their toys. Recycled for the next batch of cohorts.

"She requested a matvis, and I don't know what to say to a mom."

Dian cocked her head to one side.

"I've never had to introduce myself to my mom before. She just was and then I was too. Or maybe I was there, and by that time she had already been."

Philosophy. Galt hoped the horror wasn't too apparent in her eyes. She had three more years of Dian as a rotational drill pilot, and this was the most they had ever interacted.

"Right. Just figured you would know more than me."

A pause.

"Ask about her health. That's a sure way for me to get my mom talking for hours."

Galt nodded, and took down the mental note. Ask about health. Dian turned back to her screen, and Galt had never been more thankful to look into the darkness of space.

The docking bay was unchanged. Some politicians would occasionally promise the outer rings more funding. More drills. More something. But the bay looked the same as it had when she was last there some twenty years ago.

She sat next to a crying woman and two people who looked rather nervous. They were still dressed in their yellow hazard gear and frequently looked at each other and touched each other's hands. Maybe miners who were legally getting married? She thought they had fixed the loopholes allowing for off-world marriages, but she also had begun to pay less attention to news in her thirties. Off planet really didn't seem to matter when your entire life narrowed into a series of beeps. Sets of parameters to match rock depth with the right machinery. A black screen with little yellow Xs.

She ate two ration bars of some kind of nondescript red flavoring. Tried not to make eye contact with the weeping woman. Wondered if the miners had ever piloted any of the drills she had sent through the clouds. If they had rejoiced when their drilling or ice hauls ever came timed together. No matter how complex the AI, someone still had to guide them home.

When the shuttle landed and the doors were locked and depressurized, she followed the queue and walked out onto the landing zone. Customs was easy, and once her body was scanned and her chips were updated, she was free to travel the station.

She had almost walked through the exit doors, almost walked into the dome, when she saw the couple. They were being embraced by a group. And though the newcomers weren't wearing hazard yellow, Galt noticed half of them had the same facial markings as the young woman. One of them was crying

and jumping and had even sprung for some kind of greeting balloon that was following them with bright neon colors blinking CONGRATULATIONS! CONGRATULATIONS! Over and over.

She tried to guess if there was a mom amongst the group. It could've been any one. Some bigger, some squatter. Some with bellies and beards and some with lip gloss. But all of them seemed to just exist as a mass of arms and legs, surrounding the happy duo. One of whom was crying and holding on to someone else. Maybe it was her.

She noticed other people were also staring. Perhaps they too felt like an interloper, someone watching a private event. But maybe for them this was nothing. After all, there were still people who clung to the old ways for cultural or religious reasons. Others chose it. Some girl from university quit halfway through and went to live on a commune somewhere that didn't trust UV shielding. This was probably something similar.

She walked forward and heard the soft hiss of glass doors behind her.

She was shown into a small room. There they showed several vids offering suggestions for how to prepare, act, and process the visit. She was legally required to watch a few.

Remember that your genetic donor may be a little confused. The effects of the drugs may cause them to be nauseous as well.

And

Remember that some questions can cause distress. Feel free to use small polite conversation as a way to ensure a pleasant experience for all.

And

Remember your genetic donor may come from another time. We have smoothed out some of the local colloquialisms so you can better understand one another. You're welcome!

Before the meeting, there was a questionnaire assessment, which Galt thought redundant. Surely this should've been handled before the processing, the planning, the shuttle, the elevator, and the hundred other steps it took to organize this meeting.

It took two coughs for her to realize someone else was in the room.

"I was wondering if that was you. I was given a picture, you know, but I wasn't told how

old it was. Just that you had graduated. Which . . . congratulations?"

Her genetic donor was just a slip of a girl. With a pretty, cheerful face and long hair just like her photo, she didn't look older than an academy graduate. She wore hospital-issued robes, and was followed by a monitoring drone. There were a few tubes on the back of the robe, at least one of which was red.

"Are you . . ."

"Hi. yes. I mean. I think so. I'm . . . Lyla."

"Ah. I'm . . . Galt."

She was standing above the seated Galt, who realized later on she had been digging her nails into her hands. Galt stood quickly. And then she towered over the slip of a girl. Over her mom. A word which still felt like it was from a vidstream or novelcast, but was standing right there.

"It's nice to meet you," said Galt.

"Oh, I've met you before," said Lyla. "I mean other than the birthing process. You were two? I was about to be put back on ice, and your school, I think it was . . . I dunno. They brought you over to see me before I went back under."

"Oh."

"It's ok if you don't remember. You were really small. I think like under the thirtieth percentile of your weight or something."

Galt did remember looking up her records one time and realizing she had been considered "short." But now she was towering over her with 1.8 meters. Maybe more, as she spent so much time without gravity.

She realized she hadn't said anything.

"Oh, well, I grew later on. Had to take some growth serum, but uh . . ."

She trailed off.

"Maybe it's your father's genes. Maybe he was a late bloomer."

"Oh, uh, was he your—"

"No. It's randomized. I've never heard anything, so perhaps they've reached out to you?"

"No. This is my first genetic donor contributor request."

"I see. I guess we don't really raise kids in a unit anymore, do we?"

Galt wrinkled her nose.

"Seems more efficient to pool together resources."

Lyla processed this for a moment.

"Well, maybe one day you'll meet him too."

Galt hoped not. She was already struggling to think of all the small polite things one was supposed to discuss. Sure, her training had covered conversational tips, but in the two decades of her career, people had begun to blur together. They showed up. They did their work. And then one day they were gone. An endless string of people to whom she mostly said *good morning* and *see you tomorrow*.

"Did you . . . need anything? From me specifically?"

"Need? No. I was just curious. To see what you, I dunno, ended up as. Or turned out to be. Sorry, that sounds so final," said Lyla.

"I'm a mine supervisor. I work mostly on remote asteroid mineral recovery," she said after a pause. "I oversee the particle extraction, and I specialize in planetary rings. Ice and dust mostly."

"Oh. I see."

Galt hadn't ended up anywhere. She had chosen the top suggestion her academy had given her. Had gone without complaint to where all the career algorithms had calculated she would be best at. She hadn't really ever even thought about other options. She had also never wondered if her role would seem boring to someone until now. Some excruciating part of her wondered if this would impress Lyla.

Did she know about the extent of the Universe now understood to humans? Did she even have these technologies when she had signed up? Galt realized she had no idea if Lyla studied somewhere or when she had been born. What did her role selection process look like? Were her choices maternal birth giver or what? Drill operator? Did she know of how many human lives were lost every week to the extraction of precious minerals and water and remnants of stars that died before they were given names? Did she even understand what stars were?

Lyla nodded.

"Are you—" Lyla paused and smiled again. "I'm sorry, the medication they have me on makes me groggy."

Galt nodded. The two then shared an exquisitely awkward silence.

"Do I have—"

She paused, before remembering the vid warning that all other information outside of

the DNA shared between the two would be forbidden.

"Don't worry," said Lyla, "It's okay. I won't tell anyone. Yes, I have at least another one. Well, not including this."

She patted her belly.

Galt stilled.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. They won't tell me much about him. I guess the rules tightened about birthing since you. I'm actually not supposed to refer to him as a him. But I dunno. I think you just know. Or maybe not. Maybe it's just me. I've never been able to meet another one of me. They keep us pretty separate. That hasn't changed. Sorry, I feel like I'm babbling."

The speech seemed to tire her out. Her nearby drone beeped, causing Galt to jump.

"Well, that was our time, I guess." Lyla smiled. "It was nice to meet you. Or cool. I dunno if they say that anymore."

"I dunno. The outer rings aren't really where people keep up to date on stuff."

Lyla laughed.

"Oh, that's funny. Oh, I'm so glad you turned out funny."

Galt smiled.

"Okay, well, the drone is saying I need to go. Thanks . . . Galt."

"Galtea. It's technically Galtea."

"What a pretty name. In my mind I named you—well, it doesn't matter now. Galtea."

The two looked at each other before the drone beeped again. This time Lyla smiled and waved and turned around, walking through the opening door. A hiss of air and then she was gone.

On the way back to the gates of the dome, after the shuttle where she was lucky enough to sit alone, she realized she had forgotten to ask about Lyla's health.

Galt didn't mention the visit to Dian. Who also in turn never mentioned it either. Their conversations returned to work, mostly. For a while, Galt would consider discussing it with her. But every time she rehearsed it in her head, she could not formulate the right amount of words in the right order. She obsessed over it until one day she went in and Dian wasn't there. In her place was Orvin, someone who was short in both

countenance and attitude. They didn't have much to say, which Galt considered a gift from the Universe.

She was not a particularly curious being. It was possible that they genetically engineered it out of her population, along with inherited medical conditions like high blood pressure. There were always whispers in the academy that they'd been genetically enhanced, but given she still had to have surgery to correct her nearsightedness. Had to wear inserts because her feet were a little flat. She doubted the rumor.

Still, to arrive at forty-two without an ounce of curiosity now felt like a flaw. She hadn't even asked for a serial number or a legacy name. Theoretically Lyla could've been from long ago. Sure, the preservation technology had been refined by each generation, but it had been around for so long. Her familial unit—if she had been born to one—may have been completely gone. The earliest would've been at least forty something years ago, and, assuming they selected her at the age of maturity at twenty, that left between sixty years ago up to the beginning of the freezing technology, which might as well be

time immemorial. There were too many numbers for an accurate assessment.

Instead, she requested a memory file from when she was two. It was denied, as her caretaking unit had been decommissioned years ago, and all the precious materials within had already been recycled back into new batteries or something.

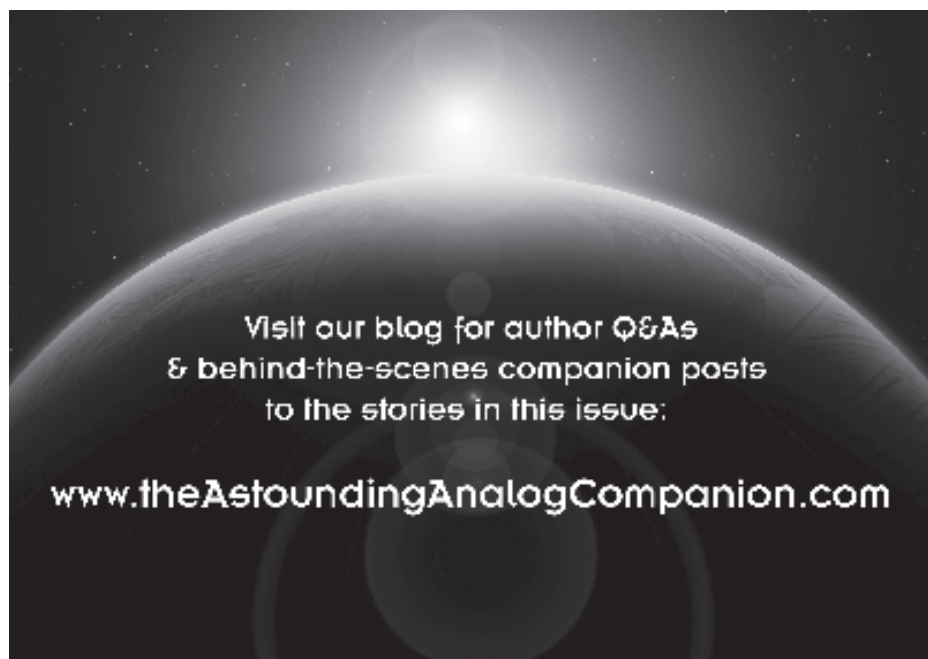
Leaning back in her chair, she pressed a hand to her face. A small slice of her wondered why all of this was happening to her now. She had never even cared who she came from before she had been able to place a name to a face. To know Lyla was a name that still existed.

In the end she did what she could. She guessed at the due date and then requested a Matvis.

It was easier this time. She knew the shuttle. The elevator. The dome. This time it felt as though there were less people around.

She fast forwarded through the vids and marveled at the technological bureaucracy that allowed for a woman to freeze and unfreeze herself but made you input all your information once again.

She sat in the waiting room. This time her



eyes turned to the door.

She waited and she waited and waited.

After over an hour, she exited to the front lobby and asked the woman working there for help. She was behind a clear barrier and was smiling before she looked down at the screen and frowned.

"I'm sorry, but your genetic carrier is not available at this time."

"What did . . . she say was the reason?"

"I'm sorry, we cannot give you that information at this time." The attendant said, with her perfect teeth.

"Do you know when she will be available? I filed all the paperwork."

But the woman simply responded with the same message over and over again. No matter how Galt tried to explain or press for answers. The smooth panel of the glass between them was now smudged with her handprints. A constellation of her despair.

She ate. She slept. She worked. Orvin had been replaced with Kav and then with Hephest and then with someone else with a mole on his face who was replaced by a woman who left within two weeks so her name fell into wherever memory bucket colleagues who die too quickly go into. She didn't look up anything anymore. It took a while before the algorithms stopped pushing things to her about reunions and shocking DNA twists and horrifying murder suicides and secret twins marrying. But eventually they faded until all that was left were just products. Until the memory was a blip. A story she didn't even have anyone to tell. Then it too faded.

This was how ten years passed.

She didn't miss it this time. The message quickly filtered into her main. Six days after her forty-fourth birthday. Which she completely forgot about until she had looked at her calendar. They were starting a new endeavor this time, digging even deeper looking for cobalt, so she had been meeting with structural engineers for three weeks.

She immediately clicked on the message.

MATERNAL VISIT REQUEST

To G. B.31-MK

The memory of her first matvis and her sec-

ond attempt dipped into her consciousness. Somewhere in between maps and discussions of mine collapse and how many deaths were allowed before HR would be flagged was the image of Lyla.

Maybe it was the years of working in darkness chasing a tiny yellow X across the dark screens. Having only the headsets on in case the drones beeped or something went wrong. The sound of metal gears crushing against each other. The warning blip for low oxygen, impending impact, cracked gear, or the soft suction sound of a suit imploding. The silence of cold emptiness. Of the vast nothingness that was deafening as it swallowed sound. And the word *mother*, which sounded louder still.

Of course she clicked yes.

Minerven—it had been at least sixteen replacements since Dian—was surprised. He was a jovial young man. He was here as part of the new rotational program created to lure in young perspectives, and he often talked about plans for the future in a way that made Galt physically ache from the youth of it.

"You're leaving? Honestly, I didn't know you old types were capable of a vacation."

She rolled her eyes. Grateful for the new visors to help her adjust to the light. Even on the highest setting she was now having trouble seeing.

"What's it for?" he asked.

She paused and thought about telling the truth. But in order to explain the current, she would have to explain the past. And he was too young to understand how to hold such a weight. Thankfully the beep on the side of her screen went off, taking both of their attention.

Something was different. Galt could tell the moment she saw the address. It had been in an entirely different part of the station. Whereas the previous office had been sterile and staffed with a limited amount of human assistants, here there were only robotic screens. Old models, too. The room was filled with loud sounds and the chaos of people. Entire families frantically trying to ask questions in many languages. People wept. Huddled against the walls, as the chairs had long since been removed. She realized this compound was for general unfreezings. A lower tier one meant

to house anyone, regardless of their genetic ability to carry.

When she had shown her request to the kiosk, she had been taken through the armed doors into a wide room. It too was full of small circular tables, each filled with a group of people. And in the corner she saw a head of dark brown hair.

Lyla did not have any monitors on her. She was pacing erratically in a small circle. Her regulation pants a little too long, dragging against the floor. She clutched a small plastic water bottle in her hands, her wrist still red with IV needle indentations. She saw Galt and waved.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came. I didn't know if you would." Lyla looked around. Galt noticed how red her eyes were. Lyla had been crying.

Galt was older now. Well into the middle age bracket in her designated life cycle nutrient tracking. But Lyla looked exactly the same.

"How are you? How's your health?" Galt said.

"Terrible," Lyla answered. "Don't remind me. I'm—well, I have medication that I have to take for months to balance things out."

Galt sat down. She was so tired from the journey.

"I—I need some advice," said Lyla. "The last birth . . . it didn't—my contract's been nullified. And I was just told that I was going to be reassigned, and you know this wasn't part of my plan. They don't tell you to prepare a backup."

Lyla began to cry.

"The only thing they said I could choose between was sanitation or the outer belt, so . . . I thought you might be able to help. I know the last time just didn't work out, and I'm sorry about that. I thought . . . well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" Lyla continued.

Galt's chest tightened in understanding. She had been sent for this time not out of curiosity but out of necessity.

"It's fine. What were the options?"

"My choices were something about processing silica. I think. Or else, um, I think it was waste treatment on some kind of moon. I don't understand either."

Her options were some of the few available to those not born into education. Drilling into unstable cryomagma, or worse—collect-

ing geyser spray from active cryovolcanoes dispersing hundreds of kilograms in seconds. But sanitation? The material byproducts of space travel were radioactive, or so toxic to humans and recovery machines, they were often ferried into the orbit of black holes. Galt had worked her entire life knowing she would never be given those options. But she could not spare Lyla from the system. By not fulfilling her end of the contract for X number of births, she had been doomed. Her grand reward for choosing to continue the species was this.

"Pick processing. Waste sanitation sounds easier, but those materials are worse," said Galt.

"Oh, I see," said Lyla. Disappointment thick in her voice. This wounded Galt. Who despite wishing she was anywhere else, could not imagine being anywhere else.

"These days there aren't many jobs with no educational requirements. The calorie allotments are pretty good, but if you need more I can transfer you some credits. It's all right. I can spare some. I mean I don't know how useful they will be, but I'm sure you can figure something out."

"Will I be all right?" asked Lyla.

She would perhaps last three years, maybe ten if she was lucky. But Galt could not tell her this. Could not bear to tell her about how no company would pay for extra radiation shielding or the probability of limb impairment. She could not imagine telling someone so young and fragile that her world was doomed. So she did the only thing she knew. She spoke in the same voice she had used to train Dian and Orvin and Minervan and all those who followed.

"Yes. Yes, of course, you'll be okay," said Galt.

"Thank you," said Lyla. Her face lit up in a semblance of a smile.

Galt tried her best to nod. To present a face she hoped would be calm. Lyla reached out with her arms. As though by instinct, Galt reached right back. ■

Xu Mason is a bilingual first generation Asian American multi-hyphenate performer and writer who has had to write "comedian" as her profession on official tax documents. Her previous publications include McSweeney's, and Reductress. She currently resides in Los Angeles.