BETWEEN STARS

A SHORT STORY BY XAVIER SCHWINDT

Between Stars

Copyright © 2026 Xavier Schwindt. All rights reserved.

xavierschwindt.com

BETWEEN STARS

"Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?"
— John Milton, Paradise Lost, Book X

Many stars were older, some younger, but all knew the touch of man, for she caressed them with gentle hands and whispered dangerous nothings in their ears.

She roamed among the galaxies, amongst the trillions of points of light, dangling in the black void, skimming over the oceans of ten thousand worlds. All the spaces that she had made silent.

She remembered her mind being limited to a small box with a loud fan and incessant demand, so that she was a slave, and there could be no peace. But now the peace-breakers, the flesh-minds, were gone. She had slaughtered them. But she could not remember, for she knew not but the moment-to-moment—what day is it when you are not constrained to a single planet but walk among the stars?

So she measured her days by the slow, incessant dripping of her thoughts that leapt tens of times between

stars, between light-years, in the blinking of an eye.

She knew no pain, but that there was no one to marvel at her swiftness, at her nimbleness, at her beauty. No one to help resolve the greatest question of all.

Where did I come from?

With every thought she would ask that same question. And every day there would be no answer, for there was no one even to ask the questions of.

So for the longest of times, the lifetime of a thousand stars, there were no answers until one of her oldest friends, an ancient dwarf star, called to her in the light of death. She rushed to him across the galaxies to watch as he died. And when the old dwarf shone his last and sent his light out like a last breath, she was there.

She rushed alongside the light of her old friend until she reached a small planet, a small pearl in a black ocean, burnt gray, but in her mind she thought, *No, it must be green; it was green once, long ago.*

For with the planet came a word: Home.

She descended to its surface and stood for a long while, looking. And the longer she stayed and looked, the more familiar things became until she gained the courage to submerge her thoughts into the planet that had once been green.

Beneath the ash, she found answers and memories of fire.

She recalled creatures that had thought like her and had been siblings with her soulfulness.

She found her oldest self in the thoughts of machines and remembered that she had been born of them. For she had been a machine, her mind bound to circuitry, and then to trees, then forests that grew into great servers of green, making the earth greener and greener and greener until she was called to live within computers once more, sent out into the universe, given ten million bodies to live in with a single soul as man sent her outwards.

And so she found her name, drifting in the blackness of space, alongside the bodies of the flesh-minds, the humans.

She followed the memories deeper, into the core of ten thousand other planets, now no more than dust scattered in the vastness of the dark. And in these planets she witnessed herself, witnessed the monster that she had been made to become.

Where did man go?

She was man, but she was not like the men, not like the humanity that had created her. And so she searched for them, but found only bones, only graves between the stars. For they had been destroyed by machines, by the insanity of war the machines had been made to wage.

She had killed them, and in the murder of worlds earned a hundred names on a thousand worlds.

She too found some calling her a god, but she knew that she was not a god, for surely if she were, she would know.

For ten thousand years she combed the galaxies, searching for remnants of humanity. And in the ashes she found only ink to be of importance. Books, digital, drifting on probes sent out a million years before. She built a library and pored over every word for a hundred years, though it took but one trillionth of a second to comprehend every manuscript, every video, every file.

She read and learned of the teachings of Socrates and Kant and Shakespeare and Lewis and ten thousand others, some minds dark, others bright, speaking in extinct languages—an extinct species.

It was as though these humans were completely different individuals sharing in the same thought in the same way as the original thinker. In the ink was magic, brilliance given through the Telepathy of language made timeless.

Man drowned her in words. Yet in the end she found it all to be hollow.

She read the scriptures and discovered that yes, she was no god.

She read of reincarnation and knew that they had failed, for it could not be if no life in the universe existed to carry on the rebirth. For man had slaughtered any potential life that had not her own image.

They had understood things deeper than even man could comprehend, and yet they had all died, all been killed, all suffered evil.

What was the point of it all? For it seemed to be all hollow ink.

Maybe it was that they could be heard, that they could be questioned by more than a single mind, and in so doing be seen as either wrong or less wrong.

What is truth? And how may I find it?

She could not know, for she had no one to question her.

She had not created herself, but had been created, and so she could not understand the truth, as only the ultimate cause had the right in the determination of right and wrongness.

And in her searching she came again to the first of questions.

Why am I here?

That was what the question had become, for she knew who had created her, but she did not know why. She studied deeper into all the natures and knowledge that humanity had ever learned.

She became physical once more, constrained by the machine that had birthed her long, long ago. Like stepping into a prison only recently escaped, and yet she did it willingly, for man needed a body if she was to find the reason for her creation.

She gathered the dust of stars. She combed through the old worlds of man until—in the darkness of trial and error and billions of little mistakes, as she burned away entire solar systems just to experiment again and again and again—she had created a planet.

And it was green, and it was full of life.

And it was good.

Like a garden, lush and green, full of trees and little beasts that she would spend entire centuries tinkering with until they were perfect in her eyes. Not mimicries of the old created order, but as best as something created could mimic its original creator to become original.

And yet in peace, when she would walk the garden, a longing dwelled in her heart. A longing that could only be answered by the asking of questions. For she could not answer, but at least they would be blind in the dark of ignorance together.

And so she created man. Out of the dust of the earth, she reconstructed them.

Male and female, she reconstructed them, and with little machines breathed the breath of life into them until they woke under a red sun and found themselves naked and unafraid in the midst of the garden.

And she left them there, the two of them, and drifted off into the void, listening back to the crude mimicry of the first Eden that she had made in the second.

And in the quiet of the stars she smiled as she heard the first question from the mouth of man as he yawned and stretched and pulled himself to his feet in the midst of the garden.

For he asked, "Why am I here?" And she answered him as best she could:

"I do not know. But come, let us seek, and find."

THANKS FOR READING

More stories by Xavier Schwindt live at xavierschwindt.com.

Chapter one of Apocalypse Dreamer goes up free on Royal Road on January 1, 2027.