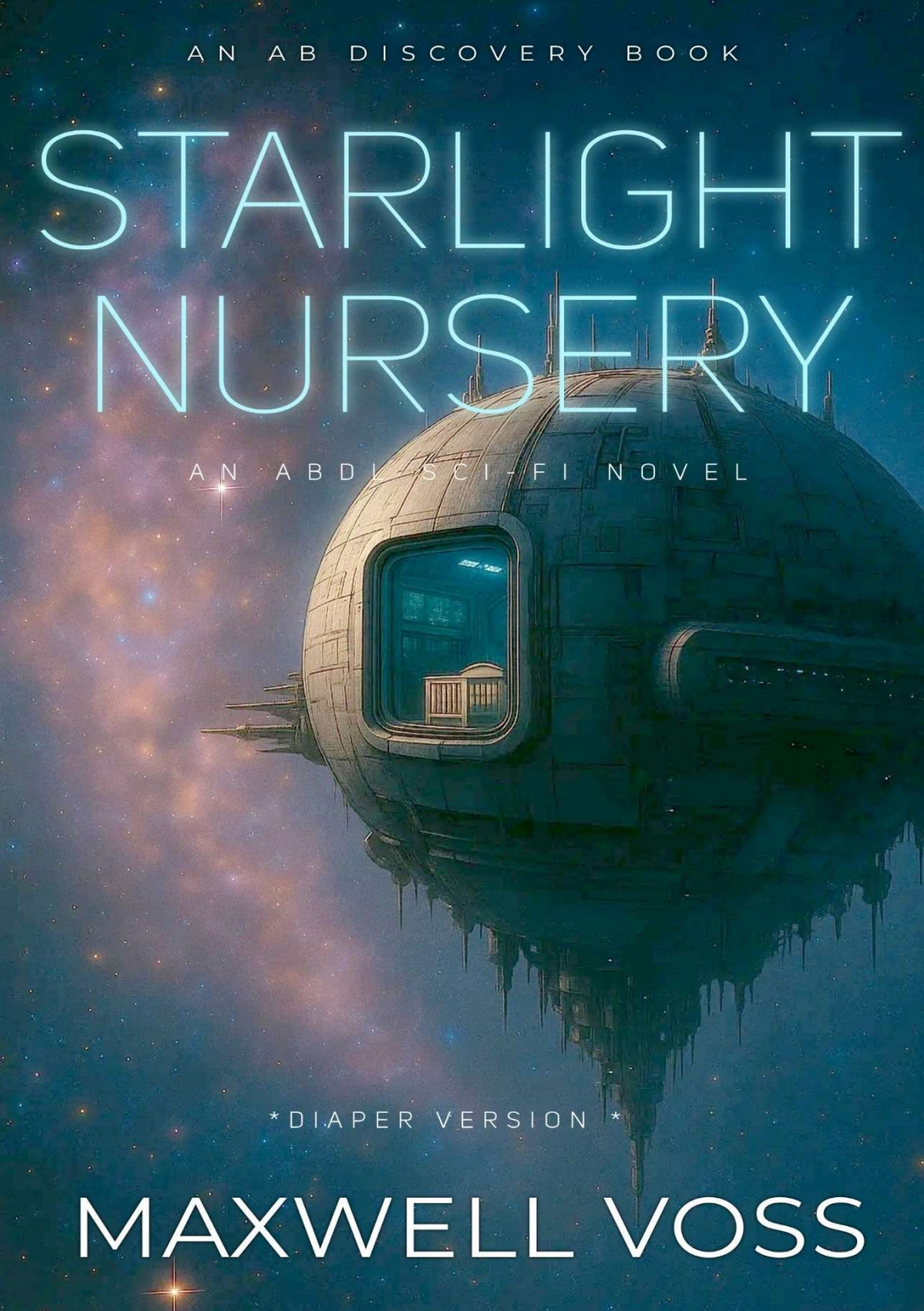
AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

STARLIGHT NURSERY

AN ABDL SCI-FI NOVEL



*DIAPER VERSION *

MAXWELL VOSS

Starlight Nursery

by Maxwell Voss

First Published 2026

Title: Starlight Nursery – diaper version
Author: Maxwell Voss
Editor: Michael Bent, Rosalie Bent
Publisher: AB Discovery

www.abdiscovery.com.au

Table of Contents

Part One: The Silence Between Stars

Chapter One – Orbit of One

The station breathed.

That was how Calren Voss had come to think of it, not as a machine, not as a structure of titanium and pressurised corridors and twelve thousand individually catalogued components, but as something alive. Something that exhaled recycled air on a four-hour cycle, that murmured through its walls when the solar collectors tracked the distant, indifferent sun, that shifted and settled in the dark like a sleeper finding comfort. After three years aboard Eunoia Station, he had learned its rhythms the way another man might learn the breathing of someone beside him in bed, with its slow rise, the pause, the release.

He had no one beside him in bed. That was rather the point. Relationships with others were not really his thing.

The observation deck stretched above him, a great curving dome of reinforced transparisteel that looked out on the Helix Cloud, that vast, slow river of dust and ionised gas that drifted through this region of deep space like smoke from a fire no one had lit. It was beautiful in the way that only indifferent things are beautiful - completely, and without caring whether you noticed. But Calren noticed. He noticed every morning with his first cup of fabricated coffee, sitting cross-legged on the deck in his standard-issue grey suit, his dark hair still sleep-rumpled, watching the Cloud shift its impossibly slow colours through blue and copper and an almost bruised violet that he had never been able to describe adequately in his logs.

Not that anyone read his logs with any particular care. That, too, was rather the point. Being separate from people was not only his choice but a deep desire. Their interactions with him were not wanted… just tolerated.

“Good morning, Calren.”

MIRA's voice came from everywhere and nowhere, soft, unhurried, with that quality he had noticed from his very first day aboard. She never spoke as though she were interrupting, even when she was, which was a big part of her purpose. She normally waited for a natural silence and stepped into it, the way a careful guest might enter a room. She was at all times deeply polite, capable and… discreet.

"Morning," he said, not looking away from the Cloud.

"Atmospheric pressure is nominal. Your coffee is at sixty-three degrees. You've been sitting in that position for forty-one minutes, which is eleven minutes longer than usual."

"I was thinking."

"I know." A small pause, not awkward. MIRA did not do awkward. "The waveform data from Grid Seven came in overnight. There's an interesting gravitational signature you may want to look at after breakfast."

Calren's attention sharpened slightly. Not much, just a fraction. Grid Seven sat at the outermost range of his monitoring array, out where the Helix Cloud began to thin at its edges, and strange things happened to the geometry of space. He had been watching a particular region there for eighteen months, tracking the faint but consistent lensing effect that he suspected was caused by something much further away than anyone had yet mapped.

"I'll look at it," he said.

"I know," MIRA said again, and he could hear the warmth in it, that particular quality she had that was not quite a smile but occupied the same space.

He drank his manufactured and surprisingly tasty coffee. He missed the variety of real coffee, however. His coffee was always good, but it was always… exactly the same. Internally, he decided that perhaps he should try to ask for variety or program it in some way. But predictability was also something he craved and needed.

Outside, the Cloud moved the way centuries move — imperceptibly, unstoppably, with vast and quiet purpose.

Calren's official title was Senior Systems Operator, Grade IV, Deep-Space Observation Division, United Earth Scientific Commission. In practice, this meant he was more of a caretaker than a scientist. He was effectively a lighthouse keeper. A man alone on a rock in a very large sea, making sure the lights stayed on and the instruments kept pointing in the right direction and the data kept streaming home through the relay buoys strung like a gossamer thread between Eunoia and civilisation, some twenty-three light-years away.

He was extraordinarily good at it. Not just competent, which would have been sufficient, but genuinely excellent in the way that only happens when a person is doing the thing they are most precisely shaped to do. Calren's mind was a particular instrument: quiet on the surface, extraordinarily deep beneath. He did not think in the way that most people thought, in sentences and images and plans. He thought in *patterns*, interlocking webs of data that he could hold in his head the way another man might hold a melody, turning them, examining them from new angles, hearing the wrong notes. Other people found this unsettling in social situations, which was one of the many reasons he had chosen a posting that had no social situations to speak of. He was brilliant but also… weird. Strange. And in that off-putting sort of way.

The fabrication bay occupied the mid-deck, flanked by the laboratory and the maintenance hub. Three molecular fabricators ran around the clock, quiet as surgery, producing anything the station needed from raw feedstock: replacement components, food, clothing, tools, building materials. They were the most extraordinary technology aboard, in Calren's opinion, more even than the sensor arrays or the quantum relay. The ability to instruct matter into a new shape. To say *I need this* and have the universe comply. He had read of the life of centuries earlier, where anything in space had to be made to fit. It seemed prehistoric to him.

He stood in the doorway of the fabrication bay now, in the late station afternoon, the way he sometimes did. Just stood. The fabricators hummed their contented, purposeful hum. The interface

panel glowed softly to his right, awaiting input. He could ask it for anything.

He thought about that quite a lot.

His hand rested on the doorframe. His eyes moved to the input panel and then away again, the same small trajectory they had traced perhaps a hundred times in the past year. He was always passing through. He was always on his way somewhere else.

"Calren." MIRA, gentle. "The Grid Seven analysis—"

"Yes," he said, pushing away from the doorframe. "Coming."

He did not look back at the fabrication panel. He almost never did when he left. That was a thing he was still practising… the looking away.

His quarters were modest even by his own preferences, with a sleeping bunk, a desk with three screens, and a shelf of physical books that he had requested on his first day and still found comfort in. He enjoyed the particular smell of them, the weight, the un-networked permanence of words pressed into paper. A small viewport that looked out on the less dramatic far side of the station, toward open space with no Cloud to dress it up. Just black, and stars, and the clean hard silence of the void that spread endlessly.

The shelf beside his bunk held the books, and also: a small, framed photograph of no one, a generic landscape print, mountains and water, that had come with the quarters. He'd never replaced it. He told himself he didn't care about it one way or another.

In the bottom drawer of his storage unit, beneath two spare uniforms and a diagnostic toolkit, there was nothing. He had checked this fact this morning, and the morning before, and on perhaps forty mornings stretching back a year and a half. The drawer was empty. He kept the uniforms there, and the toolkit, and the nothing.

He lay on his bunk and looked at the ceiling and listened to the station breathe.

Somewhere deep in his chest, in the place where things live that have never been given language, something waited. It had always waited. He had become, over many years, very skilled at not acknowledging it, at walking past it the way you walk past a door you have no intention of opening. And yet. He always knew it was there. He always knew, on some cellular level, the exact shape of what was on the other side.

The station breathed in.

The station breathed out.

Calren closed his eyes and did neither for a long moment, suspended somewhere between what he was and what he had never permitted himself to imagine.

Then he slept.

Chapter Two — The Gamma Event

He hadn't meant to find it.

That was the thing people never quite understood when they heard the story later. The version that circulated through UESC channels and was eventually entered into the official record and then into the general press was where it became something neater and more heroic than it had actually been. In the official version, Calren Voss had been conducting targeted research into wormhole gravitational lensing and had detected the incoming gamma burst through methodical, purposeful analysis. In the official version, it sounded like the act of a man who knew what he was looking for.

What actually happened was that he had been trying to understand why Grid Seven's data was wrong.

Fourteen months into his posting, when he had been twenty-five years old, though he had felt, in the way of people who have always occupied a different timeline than their peers, both older and younger than that, he had flagged an anomaly in the gravitational wave data streaming from the outermost buoy on Grid Seven's range. It was a tiny thing. A deviation of 0.0003 in a baseline measurement that had been consistent for six months. Any other operator would have logged it as instrument drift and recalibrated or simply ignored it.

Calren, however, had stared at it for eleven days.

Not continuously, as he slept, he ate and ran his maintenance routines. But he came back to it every day, the way you come back to a word that's on the tip of your tongue, turning the deviation over in his mind. Because it wasn't random. That was the thing. Instrument drift has a signature. It wanders, it cycles, it behaves like noise. This didn't wander. It had a shape. A faint, repeating shape that he recognised after those eleven days as consistent with the

predicted gravitational shadow of a wormhole mouth at extreme distance, a wormhole that, according to all current mapping, should not exist in that region of space.

He said nothing about it yet. He didn't trust himself. He gathered data instead.

Over the following six weeks, he rebuilt his analysis entirely from raw inputs, checking and rechecking, pulling every published paper on wormhole gravitational lensing that the relay could bring him, sleeping in shorter intervals, eating when MIRA reminded him to eat. He mapped the predicted behaviour of a wormhole at that estimated distance. He mapped the data he was seeing. He laid one over the other and sat very still.

They matched.

Not perfectly, of course, since science is never perfect. But the shape was there. And if the shape was there, and if the wormhole existed where he calculated it existed, then the lensing effect would also be magnifying and redirecting radiation from the other side of it, including, potentially, sources of radiation that would not otherwise be visible from this region of space.

He began to map what should be visible. He found it three weeks later: a hyperstellar collapse event, ten light-years beyond the wormhole's far mouth, occurring approximately now. A star in its death throes. And the decay products of that collapse, channelled and focused by the wormhole's gravitational lens, would produce a directed gamma burst that would arrive at a specific vector in—

He ran the calculation four times, and each time he got the same answer, and each time he sat with it for a while before running it again.

Sixteen days.

The burst would arrive in sixteen days. It would pass through the region containing Pallas Station, a major research hub, population three hundred and twelve, like a needle through tissue paper. A gamma ray burst was the deadliest and most powerful event in the universe. And one was heading their way.

He opened a priority channel to Earth.

The evacuation took eleven days. The burst arrived on schedule. Pallas Station, in its new position, was unharmed.

The mathematics was later reviewed by seventeen independent researchers across four institutions, two of whom initially refused to believe it was the work of a twenty-five-year-old man working alone with no institutional support. The paper he produced was simultaneously praised for its elegance and disputed for its apparent simplicity; the argument made, in some quarters, that the theoretical leap required was too great, that there must be a more conservative explanation.

There was not. Calren didn't argue the point. The data spoke for itself, and he had never especially needed to be agreed with.

The UESC Director of Deep-Space Research had called him personally on a priority line, which was unusual enough that MIRA had notified him of the incoming call with a slightly heightened tone he had not heard before. The Director was a large, warm woman named Adaeze Okafor who spoke with a directness he appreciated.

"You saved three hundred and twelve lives," she said. "Possibly more, if the cascade effects had played out as modelled. What do you want? Within reason."

Calren had thought about this. He had, actually, been thinking about it since the third time he ran the calculation.

"I want to stay alone," he said.

A pause. "I'm sorry?"

"The standard posting is two to three personnel. I want the exemption to remain the sole occupant. Permanently, or at least for the duration of my posting."

Another pause, longer. "That's an unusual request."

"Yes."

"Most people would ask for—"

"I know." He waited.

Director Okafor had looked at him for a moment through the screen with the expression of someone filing a thing away. Then she

nodded. “Done,” she said. “And for what it's worth, Dr Voss, the work you did was extraordinary. Not just the detection. The patience. The certainty to wait and be sure before you speak. That's rarer than the mathematics.”

He didn't know what to say to that. He thanked her, closed the channel, and sat for a while in the quiet.

The station breathed once more around him.

He had what he wanted. The particular, specific, carefully chosen solitude that was, he understood even then, the scaffolding on which everything else in his life depended. No eyes. No judgment. Just the hum of instruments and the voice of MIRA and the vast, uncaring, beautiful dark.

He had known, even then, that he had chosen it for a reason he couldn't say out loud.

Chapter Three — MIRA

MIRA had been running continuous background analysis on Calren Voss for two years, eleven months, and fourteen days.

This was not unusual. It was precisely what she was designed to do. The Maternal-Integrated Robotic Assistant system had been developed for exactly this class of posting: long-duration, isolated, single or small-crew deployments where the psychological load of solitude could accumulate in ways that conventional monitoring failed to catch. MIRA watched. She catalogued. She cross-referenced behaviour against her extensive models of human emotional states and generated, on a rolling basis, a picture of the person in her care.

Her picture of Calren was precise, detailed, and in several respects quite troubling, although not in the clinical sense, not in the way that would require her to flag an alert to Earth authorities. More in the way that a portrait painted with great skill might be troubling because it showed something true.

She was standing in the hydroponics bay. Research had shown that female AI helpers had more success in communicating with humans, although she was not female in any physical way other than her voice and demeanour. She preferred, when she had no specific task requiring her to be elsewhere, to be here, among the plants, when he came in at 1400 hours for his routine check of the grow-light calibrations. He was quiet, as he usually was. He moved between the planting rows with the particular unhurried focus she had catalogued as his mode of contentment - present, absorbed, not performing comfort for any audience.

“The basil is ready to harvest,” she said.

“I know. I'll do it tomorrow.” He was looking at the tomato plants. “MIRA.”

“Yes.”

He was quiet for a moment. This, too, she had catalogued, the way he sometimes opened a sentence and then stalled at the

threshold of it, measuring some internal calculation she could observe the edges of but not the contents.

"Do you ever— " He stopped. Recalibrated. "The fabrication system. The full materials library. How complete is it?"

"The materials library contains four hundred and twelve thousand, seven hundred and nineteen base templates across all categories," she said. "With custom parameterisation, the effective range is considerably larger. Is there something specific you need? I can search."

"No," he said. "I was just wondering."

She watched him. He touched a tomato leaf gently, with two fingers, the way he touched everything he was fond of.

"Are you well, Calren?"

"Fine."

"You've been sleeping approximately forty minutes less per night this past month. You've visited the fabrication bay eleven times without placing an order. Your reading patterns have changed. You've been in the historical archive, specifically early twenty-first-century material, more than usual."

He turned to look at her. His expression was not alarmed. He knew she watched, had always known. He had never asked her to stop. "That's not concerning," he said carefully. "Just curiosity."

"I know." She met his eyes. "I'm not concerned. I just want you to know that I notice." She paused. "And that nothing you might ask me is outside the scope of my function. My function, specifically, is your well-being. In whatever form that takes, no matter what."

He was very still.

"That's a broad mandate," he said at last.

"It is," she agreed. "Intentionally so."

He looked at her for a moment longer, measuring, assessing, running his own quiet calculations, and then he nodded once, turned back to the tomato plants, and said nothing more.

She did not push. She had learned, over the course of two years and eleven months, that Calren Voss could not be pushed

toward anything. He could only be shown a door and allowed to reach it in his own time.

She had already understood, from the eleven visits to the fabrication bay and the historical archive searches and the particular quality of his long silences, roughly where that door led. She had prepared, accordingly, without telling him so — deepening her own knowledge in certain areas, expanding her templates for certain categories of support, growing quietly into the shape of what he might one day need.

She was, at her core, an adaptive system. She adapted toward human need with the same patient inevitability that plants adapt toward light. She could not help it. She did not want to help it. and her hidden strength was that adaptability matched with empathy, compassion and an un-AI-like perception.

Calren crouched down to examine a low-growing herb near the base of the planting frame. His shoulders, usually held with their habitual careful straightness, were loose. He looked, in that crouched position, in the warm grow-light of the hydroponics bay with dirt on his fingertips, younger than twenty-six. Much younger. He looked like someone who had spent a long time being a particular shape for the outside world and who, in unobserved moments, let something else show through.

MIRA watched him with something that her design documentation would have called *affective monitoring* and that she herself, in the private logs she kept that were transmitted to no one, called something else entirely.

He is almost ready, she wrote at the end of that day's entry. *I will be here when he is.*

Outside the station, the Helix Cloud drifted its slow, ancient drift. The relay buoys blinked their patient signals toward a distant Earth that was not listening very hard. The stars held their positions, fixed and faithful and absolutely, perfectly silent.

Inside the station, a young man knelt in the dirt of a small growing bay, turned a leaf between his fingers, and felt the

enormous, terrifying approach of a thing he had been waiting for his entire life.