

The alien's hand tightens around Kaquila's own, sending a brief twinge of discomfort up his arm, swiftly overridden by the irrepressible joy of finally *finally* reaching out and touching something wholly alien, something built by another civilization, with his own hand.

He can't help but look at the leviathan hovering behind the other person. It was just so *large*. Even though the *Psilar* was just a speck in the distance, the gunmetal grey hull of the other's craft was still discernible.

Slowly and carefully, Kaquila moves to extricate himself, loosening his grip by degrees. The other being seems to understand, moving its hand so that they both slide apart easily.

Gently, Kaquila floats away, pulsing lightly on jets of gas emitted from the edges of his outstretched wings.

The other being also begins to maneuver, jetting away and opening up the distance so that they are no longer able to touch.

In a sudden motion, the alien halts its flight, then brings its hand up to a protrusion on its shoulder, yanking sharply.

Kaquila can't contain his gasp.

*Did it just breach its own suit?*

But no, there's no plume of escaping gas or flailing from a dying being. Instead, the alien simply examines the chunk of suit with the practiced efficiency of an expert verifying the functionality of their equipment. Seeming satisfied, it does something to the side of the flat chunk of material and one face of it lights up with swirling colors before going out completely.

The being taps the surface with one of its blunt fingers before turning the solid black screen towards Kaquila, then waiting, motionless.

*Am I supposed to see something? Is this another greeting?*

Kaquila elects to wait, simply watching the other being.

After several seconds, the being flips the screen so that it is facing it, examining it closely.

After manipulating it for several seconds more, there's the chirp of a hypercom signal. Incoming from the other alien.

The signal is nothing special. A range of electromagnetic frequencies with a certain spectrum highlighted by boosting their amplitude in the representation.

*Do they want me to shine it back at them? It's a bit lower than the visual spectrum, but there's nothing special about it.*

His thoughts are cut off by another signal from the alien. This one is a repeat of the previous section of electromagnetism, but this time there's another system attached to it, one detailing the transformation of the light into ionic signals by some indecipherable mechanism.

*I don't... what?*

The signal from the alien simply loops.

*Light to electrical signals. What could that... oh.*

The meaning crashes down on him all at once.

*Of course. Sight. They're telling me what spectrum of light they use to see. Why would they see the same light we do, they evolved in a completely different place.*

With a careful movement of his eyes, Kaquila brings up the scanner and examines the glowing surface of the device.

Spectrum lines split off in his HUD. Completely solid or no light in most spectrums, but variation in the spectrum indicated in the broadcast. With a twitch, Kaquila adjusts his HUD, filtering the light into the visual spectrum.

Pictograms, ones that could never be translated any other way than just looking at it.

Most prominently, two figures, one with an arm upraised. In general proportions, they exactly match the figure in front of Kaquila. They look odd. No fur except for a small patch on the top of its head, or feathers, with sharply defined muscles and a flat face without a beak.

*That must be what they look like under the suit.*

But the alien makes no additional moves, simply making an odd motion with its helmeted head before it manipulates the tablet again. When it faces Kaquila again, the graphic has changed, displaying a simplified star map.

The hypercom signal also shifts, cutting off mid-packet. Now, it displays astrological data. Each stream is preceded by a star on the map pulsing before a stream of equations are broadcast, including luminosity, spectral lines, and temperature, among other things.

One star in the center of the map pulses, then the broadcast follows, but this one's different. In the heading of the broadcast, there's a notation that indicates originality. The start of a wave rippling outwards. In the actual broadcast, the data is more accurate, the error bars almost non-existent.

*Is this their home star? It must be.*

The overall sum of the presentation was easy to grasp: This is what we look like, this is where we came from.

Kaquila waits patiently for the broadcast to terminate. When the last star pulses, the alien deactivates the tablet, the screen fading to black before they clip it to their suit. The implication was obvious.

Your turn.

Kaquila moves for the first time in several minutes, bringing his arms to his sides as the holoprojectors at the tip of his wings warm up, sending an electric tingle through his body.

Motes of light collect in the space between the two aliens, eventually coalescing into the shape of a naked Tellamani, arms and wings outstretched. The feather tone is a pure white and the emotion feathers are left blank, neutral grey.

The other jerks. If it had been standing on solid ground, it would have jumped. Kaquila can't stop his chest plumage from shifting to an amused purple, even if it was covered by his suit.

The Tellamani figure animates, running, jumping, and finally taking flight over a simple line representing the ground. A broadcast overlaying the animation details gravity, velocity, air pressure, and every conceivable biological metric that could be translated into something objectively understandable.

*This is what we look like, this is what we can do.*

The alien patiently waits for the broadcast to conclude before unclipping its tablet again.

Kaquila feels momentarily unbalanced. He hadn't expected a second round of presentation, hadn't prepared anything else. But leaving now would do nothing but strain an already delicate situation. Nobody wanted to be remembered for offending aliens during first contact.

This time, the graphic is of a star system. Planets whirl around a central star in time-lapse. Overlaid with most major bodies was an unfamiliar symbol that didn't match any known scientific notation. Most of them were multicolored or included similar shapes.

*Almost like nest heraldry. Are they in a time of division?*

Suddenly, there's a disturbance overlaid with the image. With a start, Kaquila recognizes the waveform. It was the original hypercom signal the scientists had sent to the radio anomaly.

One by one, the heraldries of the planets begin to shift. They become uniform, switching to a single symbol that incorporated elements from all the others.

*Definitely a time of division, that we pulled them out of.*

In a space between planets, something is highlighted. Not a shape, but a visible representation of something. A series of spectral lines.

They match the ones from the hull of the iron behemoth.

*They built a ship specifically for this meeting? Do they not have diplomatic ships on hand, even if coming out of a period of division?*

The spectral lines vanish in a burst of something else. Radiation of the same variety that had almost fired the *Psilar* on the way in.

The presentation ends, the tablet screen going dark.

Hurriedly, Kaquila begins to program a simulation. A simple one, where a few objects would stay together as a whole, break apart every so often, then come back together. A crude metaphor for the cycles of unity followed by brief periods of division and discord, but an accurate one.

The hologram projector lights up again, displaying the simulation as a visual representation. Kaquila adds overlays to the objects. When together as a whole, he represents them with the combined symbol at the end of the alien's simulation. When they fly apart, the overlays were replaced with a random selection of the displayed heraldries.

In a final touch, he adds a request at the end or a time variable before the simulation loops.

*How long was your time of division?*

The alien regards the simulation. For a moment, Kaquila isn't sure if they grasp it. Then they send a single burst of code.

Infinity.

*Impossible.*

Peoples divided always fell, to nature or some other, more united power. The obvious end result was a single global, then system-wide, then interstellar hegemony. Periods of discord did happen, true, but they were always brief, with one power seizing control quickly. Every social theory stated this as immutable. To have a race whose entire history was a single period of division would be impossible. They would have either united or been driven extinct.

For a moment, Kaquila's mind races down this pathway of thought before he comes to another realization.

*They must have had plenty of opportunities to unite before. They always refused. If their species is old enough to reach space, this instinct must be a biological imperative. So what convinced them to break with thousands of years of tradition, precedent, and experience?*

*The chance to meet someone else.*

*The chance to meet new friends.*

*The chance to meet us.*