



Nihil ante Coffeum

Worldline: DX-14,000,606-B

Location: The Standing Symposium of the Congress of Transchronological Psychohistorical Manipulation for Experimental Chrono-Manipulation (Class 5 Space Station)

Time: Indeterminate; The Standing Symposium has been in session for 1.7 U235 Half-lives

In a worldline where Earth itself had never quite coalesced, academia thrived without interruptions. The Standing Symposium of the Congress of Transchronological Psychohistorical Manipulation for Experimental Chrono-Manipulation—known in conversation simply as “The Timeless Congress”—was, as always, in session.

The symposium hall hung poised on the rim of the dust cloud between Luna and what should have been the cradle of life. Artemis Mizrahi Wu was the youngest post-doc on her research team and so was assigned to an unimportant session. As a self-confessed hunter of truth, she arrived early. It was her habit, and today it left her time to note the strange, simmering excitement among the crowd. Rooms here were never crowded or empty; the hall itself reshaped to always appear sixty percent full. Even so, Artemis sensed a tension unusual for such a minor session.

Surfacing from her initial impressions, she checked the schedule: **A Novel Approach to Enhancing State Duration through Impacting Availability of Adenosine Receptor Antagonism Vectors.** A title of stunning banality, promising dry neuroscience with a psychohistorical twist.

She settled into her seat, almost disappointed at the prospect of a routine, formulaic talk. A young Ph.D.—not much older than Artemis herself—took the podium. His introduction was a bog-standard recitation: the nature of time, principles of psychohistorical analysis, temporal inertia, and the inevitable historical snap-back. Artemis fought the urge to doze.

Then, as the presenter reached “On the selection of a spacetime locus for creating minimally ahistorical commodity exchanges for maximum impact,” Artemis’s attention sharpened. She toyed with her wrist computer, running the phrase through her linguistic and economic analysis software, and suddenly everything clicked into place.

She couldn’t help herself. She blurted out, “You introduced coffee to the Romans during the reign of Emperor Trajan!”

The presenter stopped and smiled at her, matching her curiosity with scholarly mischief. It was as if they were sharing a private joke. Inexplicably, Artemis’s heart fluttered. “Not quite,” he replied. “I introduced coffee *to* Emperor Trajan. From Arabia, he swung south and incorporated the Horn of Africa into the Empire, thus securing the source of coffee. Hadrian didn’t build a wall; he completed the conquest of Caledonia and Britannia Secunda. Antoninus Pius introduced labor and capital reform to ensure the supply of coffee for the Empire. Marcus Aurelius wrote how coffee changed the complexion of Roman society—who cared about bread and circuses when everyone was wired enough to want to do things? He worked coffee into Stoic philosophy.”

Bedlam erupted in the hall. Dozens of attendees popped out to confirm the findings. One was very near to Artemis. He popped back in less than five seconds later, but it was clear for him

considerable time had passed; he was unshaven and his silver academic attire was torn. He turned to a colleague and played a recording from his personal wrist holographer. "It's true! Behold the power of a fully caffeinated Roman Legion!"

Artemis turned back to the speaker. He was still looking at her with a broad, open smile. She risked another question. "When did you know you had overcome temporal inertia and the snap-back effect?"

If anything, his smile grew wider. "Adrianople. When the victorious Roman infantry successfully pursued a broken cavalry force, I knew the Empire was safe, and coffee was there to stay...." Artemis nodded and popped away. She had so many more questions, but the answers were in the paper and its terabytes of annexes.

She returned to her timeline determined to pour over the study. Rome had been propped up in so many ways before—gunpowder, early industrialization, antibiotics, Greek Fire. But coffee? Something that could have happened? This was groundbreaking in the depth of the effect and the subtlety of the cause. She spent a month on the paper. This was brilliance! This is why she had become an academic!

Apparently so many people were popping into the Q&A session that something almost unprecedented happened. The routing buffer was maxed out and Artemis had to arrive a full five minutes later than she had departed. The room was much bigger now, bigger than even the main lecture hall during the keynote. The lighting was subtly different; cooler coolers to dampen the frenetic buzz of the crowd. Competing offers for tenured positions, research funding, and named chairs were being shouted at the speaker. This was history of history making in the making.

A full-color holographic image floated over the hall, obviously intended as the walk-off: *In hoc Signo Vinces*, over a symbol. Not the Chi-Rho of many worldliness, but crossed stalks of the coffee plant in the style of a laurel wreath. The purple background, gold letters, green leaves, and red coffee berries threw colors across the hall.

The speaker held up his hand, and the crowd quieted down. He turned to Artemis and said, "Welcome back. I see that you have another question." Artemis suppressed a blush and a scowl — she had spent a month studying the paper but not a moment about the man behind it? He had a nice smile.

She snapped back to the present. Three questions from a lowly post-doc? Unprecedented, or at least unnatural. But how often is one part of something this epochal? "Yes. I understand the Roman Empire enduring, and even expanding, but I don't see why that led to the explosion of maritime exploration under Justinian. That doesn't seem to follow from the change you introduced."

"Exactly right!" The presenter beamed. "I introduced a second change, and you are the only one to have suspected it. I also introduced Emperor Trajan to chocolate. They then went without it for almost 400 years." Heads nodded throughout the hall.

He turned back to the crowd. "Please meet my new partner, Dr. Artemis Wu. Now, about the Newton Chair?"

Instead of a direct answer, a group of three people stood up and held their coffee mugs in salute. "*Ave!*" The presenter urged Artemis to join him on the stage. More people stood and held up their mugs, bulbs, and cups. The hall thundered. "*Ave! Ave!*"